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TO : GEN WHEELER CJCS  
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By isa, NARS, Date 5-11-84

1. (TS) I HAVE RECEIVED YOUR MESSAGE WHICH RAISES THE OLD SPECTRE OF "WHY DO WE FIGHT THE ENEMY NEAR THE BORDERS?" I WELCOME THE OPPORTUNITY TO STATE MY VIEWS AGAIN ON THIS SUBJECT, BECAUSE IT GETS AT THE BASIC ISSUES OF HOW THIS WAR MUST BE FOUGHT.
2. (TS) THE ENEMY HAS CHOSEN TO CONCENTRATE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF HIS NVA FORCES ALONG THE BORDERS IN QUANG TRI, KONTUM/PLEIKU, AND NORTHWESTERN III CTZ SO THAT HE CAN LAUNCH MAJOR ATTACKS AGAINST SVN TO GAIN A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL VICTORY, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME RETAINING THE BEST HOPE OF DISENGAGING WHEN DEFEATED. HE HAS DEMONSTRATED THIS STRATEGY BY HIS RECENT INCURSIONS NEAR CONTHIEN, DAK TO, AND IN THE LOC NINH/SONG BE AREAS. IN EACH OF THESE BATTLES, THE TARGETS OF THE ENEMY ATTACKS, AND THE BIG CHANCE FOR AN EXPLOITABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL VICTORY, WERE THE CLOSEST MAJOR GVN/US POSITIONS TO THE BORDER AND THE POPULATED AREAS SURROUNDING THEM. IN THE NORTH HIS TARGETS WERE MARINE AND ARVN POSITIONS AT CON THIEN, GIO LINH AND DONG HA AND THE POPULATED AREAS OF QUANG TRI. IN KONTUM IT WAS THE POSITION AT DAK TO AND THE WHOLE OF THE POPULATED VALLEYS ALONG ROUTE 14. AT LOC NINH AND SONG BE IT WAS THE DISTRICT AND PROVINCE HEADQUARTERS AND THE POPULATION CENTERS NEARBY--AS GRAPHICALLY DEMONSTRATED BY THE GRISLY ATTACK ON THE VILLAGE OF DAK SON WHERE THE MURDER OF CIVILIANS WAS ABOMINABLE.
3. (TS) WHEN THE ENEMY MOVES ACROSS THE BORDERS WE MUST STRIKE

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HIM AS SOON AS HE IS WITHIN REACH, AND BEFORE HE CAN GAIN A VICTORY OR TYRANNIZE THE LOCAL POPULATION. WE CANNOT PERMIT HIM TO STRIKE THE CONFIDENCE OF THE SVN PEOPLE IN ULTIMATE VICTORY OR TO BOLSTER HIS OWN MORALE WITH SUCCESSES. TO DO OTHERWISE WOULD BE TO DELIVER TO HIM, WITHOUT CONTEST, THE VERY OBJECTIVES WHICH HE SEEKS. HOWEVER, WE DO NOT STAND ALONG THE BORDER AND CATCH THE ENEMY AS HE ENTERS. RATHER, WE TAKE EVERY STEP TO MEET HIM AND STOP HIM BEFORE HE REACHES HIS OBJECTIVES. THE RECENT BATTLE OF DAK TO IS A GOOD EXAMPLE. WE KNEW THE ENEMY WAS ON THE MOVE TOWARDS DAK TO AND HIGHWAY 14. WE MOVED FORCES, NOT TO THE BORDER, BUT TO DAK TO, FROM WHICH WE COULD BASE OUR OPERATIONS SO THAT THE ENEMY COULD NOT OVERRUN ANY PORTION OF THE POPULATED AREAS OF KONTUM, AND AT THE SAME TIME MANEUVER AGAINST HIM. IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT OUR MOST RECENT HAMLET EVALUATION SURVEY SHOWS THE 84.3 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF KONTUM PROVINCE IS UNDER GVN CONTROL. IF WE INTENTIONALLY LET THE ENEMY DEEP INTO KONTUM PROVINCE, WE WOULD BE TAKING A MAJOR STEP BACKWARDS. TIME PEOPLE (IN THAT PROVINCE) COULD FEEL, JUSTIFIABLY, THAT THEY HAD BEEN LET DOWN, THE REFUGEE PROGRAM WOULD BE ENORMOUS AND THE FIRST STEP IN TOTAL EROSION OF OUR POSTURE IN THIS COUNTRY WOULD HAVE BEGUN.

4. (TS) IN ADDITION TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF A WITHDRAWAL POLICY, IT IS ALSO UNSOUND FROM A MILITARY STAND-POINT. IF WE LET THE ENEMY INTO SUCH PLACES AS KONTUM, HE WILL BE IN A POSITION TO ISOLATE GVN POSITIONS (WHICH MUST BE MAINTAINED TO PROTECT THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND), INTERDICT THE ROADS AND FORCES US DEPLOY AND SUPPORT OUR FORCES ENTIRELY BY AIR. THIS IS A VERY DIFFICULT TASK, AS WAS PROVEN IN 1965 IN THE HIGHLANDS WHEN THE ENEMY SUCCEEDED IN CUTTING ALL ROADS AND ISOLATING ALL TOWNS. ALSO, ONCE THE ENEMY GETS ESTABLISHED IN SVN PROPER, HE IS NOT NECESSARILY AN EASIER TARGET TO DESTROY. IN FACT, THE OPPOSITE IS THE CASE. IF,

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FOR EXAMPLE, WE HAD TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY ALONG THE POPULATED VALLEYS OF KONTUM, RATHER THAN IN THE DIFFICULT (BUT UMPOPULATED) TERRAIN SOUTHWEST OF DAK TO, WE WOULD HAVE A MUCH MORE SERIOUS PROPOSITION. WE CANNOT APPLY OUR FIREPOWER WITH AS MUCH FREEDOM, WE PERMIT HIM TO GET AT POTENTIAL SOURCES OF FOOD TO SUSTAIN HIS FORCES AND WE GIVE HIM MORE MANEUVER ROOM, ALSO I AM CERTAIN THAT, IF WE DID NOT FIGHT THE ENEMY AT CON THIEN OR NEAR DAK TO, IT WOULD HAVE COST US AT LEAST TWICE AS MUCH IN MILITARY CASUALTIES (NOT TO MENTION CIVILIAN CASUALTIES) AND WOULD HAVE TAKEN AT LEAST TWICE AS LONG TO DO THE JOB. WE HAVE HAD PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE IN FIGHTING NVA DIVISIONS THAT HAVE GOTTEN ADRIFT DEEP WITHIN SVN AND IT IS NOT AN ATTRACTIVE PROPOSITION. TO SURROUND AND DESTROY SUCH AN ENEMY IS MOST DIFFICULT. THE 2D NVA DIVISION GOT INTO QUANG TIN PROVINCE LAST YEAR AND WE HAVE BEEN FIGHTING IT EVER SINCE. WE HAVE HAD AN ALMOST UNINTERRUPTED BATTLE IN THAT AREA SINCE MAY OF THIS YEAR, IN WHICH WE HAVE INFILCTED APPROXIMATELY 7,000 CASUALTIES ON THE ENEMY, AND HAVE SUFFERED NEARLY 1,000 KIA ON OUR PART. THE 3D NVA DIVISION HAS BEEN IN SOUTHERN QUANG NGAI AND NORTHERN BINH DINH FOR OVER A YEAR. AND, THE 1ST CAV DIV HAS HAD ITS HANDS FULL IN SEARCHING THEM OUT AND DESTROYING THEM IN THAT HIGHLY POPULATED AREA. IN ADDITION TO FIGHTING NVA DIVISIONS IN THE POPULATED AREAS WE HAVE PLENTY OF EVIDENCE THAT FIGHTING COMBINATIONS OF LOCAL FORCES, MAIN FORCES AND GUERRILLAS IN SUCH PLACES AS HAU NGHIA AND TAY NINH IS NOT A FAST, CHEAP ROAD TO VICTORY. SINCE MAY 1967 THE 25TH US DIVISION HAS BEED DEVOTED ENTIRELY TO THIS TASK IN OPERATIONS KOLE KOLE, BARKING SANDS AND DIAMOND HEAD. DURING THE PERIOD 11 MAY - 7 DEC THE DIVISION HAS SUFFERED 324 KIA, WHILE KILLING 1,686 ENEMY. THESE FIGURES ARE REMARKABLY COMPARABLE TO THE DAK TO FIGHTING--EXCEPT THAT THE HAU NGHIA-TAY NINH FIGHT KEPT A WHOLE DIVISON TIED DOWN FOR SEVEN MONTHS WHEREAS DAK TO TOOK THREE WEEKS.

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5. (TS) IF WE DO NOT VIOLENTLY CONTEST EVERY ATTEMPT TO GET NVA UNITS INTO SVN, WE PERMIT HIM TO EXPAND HIS SYSTEM OF BASES IN-COUNTRY. HE IS IN A BETTER POSITION TO SUPPORT THE LOCAL FORCES AND THE GUERRILLAS IN THE VITAL BATTLE FOR THE PEOPLE. CONVERSELY, THE MAIN FORCES ARE IN A BETTER POSITION TO LEVY TAXES ON THE PEOPLE, TO GET THEIR RICE AND TO PROVE TO THE PEOPLE, VISIBLY, THAT THE NVA IS VERY MUCH ALIVE IN SVN. WHEN WE ENGAGE THE ENEMY NEAR THE BORDERS WE OFTEN PREEMPT HIS PLANS AND FORCE HIM TO FIGHT BEFORE HE IS FULLY ORGANIZED AND BEFORE HE CAN DO HIS DAMAGE. ALTHOUGH SUCH FIGHTING GETS HIGH VISIBILITY IN THE PRESS, IT HAS LOW VISIBILITY TO THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH VIETNAM SINCE IT IS NOT BEING FOUGHT IN THEIR FRONT YARD. THIS IS HOW THEY WOULD LIKE IT TO CONTINUE.

6. (TS) THE IDEA THAT WE CAN'T FIGHT THE ENEMY ALONG THE BORDERS WITHOUT SERIOUSLY DIVERTING FORCES FROM THE POPULATED AREAS IS NOT ENTIRELY SOUND. AGAIN, LET'S LOOK AT DAK TO. WHEN THE BATTLE STARTED TO SHAPE UP WE HAD ONE BATTALION IN KONTUM. AS THE ENEMY MOVED, WE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF OUR MOBILITY AND RAPIDLY BUILT UP OUR US FORCES TO NINE BATTALIONS, DRAWING DOWN FROM SELECTED AREAS FOR MINIMUM PERIODS OF TIME. WE HAVE ALREADY RETURNED THE TWO 1ST CAV BATTALIONS TO BINH DINH. ONE WAS AWAY FOR ABOUT TEN DAYS, THE OTHER FOR ABOUT ONE MONTH. TEMPORARY DRAWDOWNS OF THIS NATURE DO NOT RAISE HAVOC WITH THE PACIFICATION PROCESS, BUT THEY DO CONTRIBUTE ENORMOUSLY TO THE DEFEAT OF THE ENEMY IN THE AREAS WHERE HE ELECTS TO CONCENTRATE. IN GENERAL, I KEEP MY RESERVES IN THE POPULATED AREAS (ALONG THE COAST IN II CORPS) WHERE THEY CAN BE PRODUCTIVELY EMPLOYED TO GRIND DOWN THE ENEMY WHILE AWAITING OTHER MISSIONS.

7. (TS) AS TO THE IDEA THAT FIGHTING NEAR THE BORDERS CREATES PRESSURES FOR ESCALATORY ACTION AGAINST THE OUT-OF-COUNTRY SANCTUARIES, I FIND THIS REVERSE REASONING. THE FACT THAT THE ENEMY

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IS GAINFULLY USING THESE SANCTUARIES FROM WHICH TO MOUNT HIS ATTACKS IS WHAT STIMULATES OUR DESIRE TO STRIKE THEM. IF WE ELECT NOT TO PROTECT THE BORDER PROVINCES, THE ENEMY WOULD STILL USE THESE SANCTUARIES TO AVOID THE ATTACKS BY FIRE THAT WE CAN APPLY TO IN-COUNTRY BASES. WE WOULD STILL BE FACED WITH THE DECISION OF ATTACKING OR GRANTING IMMUNITY TO THESE BASES. BY CONTACTING HIM AT THE BORDERS AND THEREBY EXPOSING THE FACT THAT HE IS MAKING TACTICAL USE OF THESE SANCTUARIES AS A PART OF THE BORDER BATTLEFIELDS, WE ARE SIMPLY PUTTING THE SPOTLIGHT ON A HARD FACT OF LIFE WHICH CANNOT BE IGNORED BY THE TACTICAL COMMANDER, DESPITE A FULL REALIZATION OF THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. WE HAVE HAD A HARD TIME IN THE PAST CONVINCING THE WORLD THAT THIS WAR WAS AN INVASION. BY FORCING THE ENEMY TO FIGHT ON THE BORDERS, FROM HIS SANCTUARIES, WE BRING FRONTIER DEFENSE INTO SHARP AND REALISTIC FOCUS.

8. (TS) I CAN SEE ABSOLUTELY NO PSYCHOLOGICAL OR MILITARY ADVANTAGE TO A STRATEGY THAT WOULD INTENTIONALLY INVITE THE WAR EAST TOWARDS THE COAST. IT WOULD BE RETROGRESSIVE, COSTLY IN CASUALTIES AND REFUGEES, AND ALMOST CERTAINLY PROLONG THE WAR.

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