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DE WTE 380FROM: WALT ROSTOW
TO : THE PRESIDENT
CITE: CAP80337

TOP SECRET

DECLASSIFIED

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By SPW, HARA, Date 4/23/96

JANUARY 13, 1968

FROM WALT ROSTOW
FOR THE PRESIDENT

BUS WHEELER ASKED WESTY TO COMMENT ON TWO DIFFERING VIEWS OF THE SITUATION IN THE KHE SANH AREA: (1) REACTING TO AN ENEMY ASSAULT IN THE KHE SANH AREA BY A COUNTER-OFFENSIVE INTO LAOS; (2) A COMPLETE WITHDRAWAL FROM KHE SANH.

HEREWITH WESTY'S COMMENTS (WITH WHICH BUS CONCURS):

QUOTE 1. I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM A VISIT WITH GENERAL CUSHMAN DURING WHICH WE DISCUSSED CONTINGENCY PLANS FOR REINFORCING KHE SANH AND THE I CORPS TACTICAL ZONE. GENERAL CUSHMAN HAS TWO US MARINE BATTALIONS IN KHE SANH NOW AND CONTINGENCY PLANS FOR AUGMENTING THIS FORCE WITH AN ADDITIONAL MARINE BATTALION ON EIGHT HOUR NOTICE, FOLLOWED BY A SECOND BATTALION ON TWELVE HOUR NOTICE, AND BY MARINE SPECIAL LANDING FORCES. ADDITIONALLY, AND AS A RESULT OF THE ABOVE DISCUSSION, I HAVE DIRECTED HIM AS A MATTER OF FIRST PRIORITY TO ALERT A BRIGADE OF THE AMERICAN DIVISION TO MOVE INTO THE HUE/PHU BAI AREA. THIS CAN BE DONE QUICKLY WITH FIXED WING OR ROTARY WING AIRCRAFT.

2. AS A SECOND PRIORITY WE ARE PREPARED TO REINFORCE I CORPS IN THE HUE/PHU BAI, DANANG, OR CHU LAI AREAS IN THAT PRIORITY WITH ANOTHER BRIGADE, EITHER FROM THE 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION OR FROM THE 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION.

3. ADDITIONAL ACTIONS UNDER WAY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

A. AS THE KOREAN MARINE BRIGADE MOVES INTO THE DANANG TACTICAL AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY, ELEMENTS OF THE 1ST MARINE DIVISION ARE BEING RELEASED FOR DEPLOYMENT NORTH OF AI-VAN PASS. THIS IN TURN IS RELEASING ELEMENTS OF THE 3RD MARINE DIVISION FOR MOVEMENT INTO QUANG TRI PROVINCE. TWO BATTALIONS OF THE KOREAN MARINE BRIGADE HAVE COMPLETED THEIR MOVEMENT AND FOUR BATTALIONS OF THE 1ST MARINE DIVISION ARE NOW NORTH OF AI-VAN PASS. THIS MOVE WILL BE COMPLETED BY 31 JANUARY WITH FOUR KOREAN BATTALIONS IN THE DANANG AREA AND FIVE 1ST MARINE DIVISION BATTALIONS NORTH OF THE PASS.

B. THE VIETNAMESE JOINT GENERAL STAFF HAS AGREED TO DEPLOY A TASK FORCE OF TWO AIRBORNE BATTALIONS TO I CORPS ON OR ABOUT 15 JANUARY 1968, BRINGING TO FOUR THE NUMBER OF VIETNAMESE AIRBORNE BATTALIONS IN I CORPS.

C. WE ARE DEVELOPING PRIORITY TARGETS IN OPERATION NIAGARA FOR A SUSTAINED B-52 CAMPAIGN, AUGMENTED BY TACTICAL AIR, BEGINNING NOT LATER THAN 18 JANUARY. WE PLAN TO CONCENTRATE ON TARGETS IN VIETNAM PRIOR TO TET WITH APPROXIMATELY 75 PERCENT OR MORE OF OUR TOTAL EFFORT. DURING AND FOLLOWING THE TET CEASE FIRE, WE WILL STRIKE TARGETS IN LAOS. IN CONJUNCTION WITH OUR SUSTAINED B-52 CAMPAIGN, I AM REQUESTING (BY SEPARATE COMMUNICATION) A FURTHER STEP UP IN THE B-52 ACCELERATED PROGRAM NOW SCHEDULED TO BEGIN 20 JANUARY.

D. WE ARE ALSO REQUESTING THAT A CARRIER BE ALERTED TO BE BROUGHT IN TO AUGMENT TACTICAL AIR, AND THE PROMPT RETURN OF THE MARINE SPECIAL LANDING FORCE FOR COMMITMENT TO EITHER THE 3D OR 1ST MARINE DIVISION AREAS.

E. MAXIMUM NUMBER OF NAVAL COUNCIL MEMBERS

B. THE VIETNAMESE JOINT GENERAL STAFF HAS AGREED TO DEPLOY A TASK FORCE OF TWO AIRBORNE BATTALIONS TO I CORPS ON OR ABOUT 15 JANUARY 1968, BRINGING TO FOUR THE NUMBER OF VIETNAMESE AIRBORNE BATTALIONS IN I CORPS.

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E. MAXIMUM NUMBER OF NAVAL GUNFIRE SUPPORT SHIPS WILL BE CONCENTRATED IN I CORPS.

4. REGARDING VIEW (1), ABOVE, MY CONCEPT FOR OPERATIONS IN LAOS IS OUTLINE IN OPERATION EL PASO, PROPOSED FOR OCTOBER 1968. A COUNTER-OFFENSIVE INTO LAOS IS NEITHER LOGISTICALLY NOR TACTICALLY FEASIBLE AT THIS TIME. SIGNIFICANT CONSIDERATIONS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

A. TO BE EFFECTIVE, A LAOTIAN ASSAULT SHOULD BE LAUNCHED IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

B. WITH THE NORTHEAST MONSOON UPON US, LAUNCHING AND SUPPORTING THE MAGNITUDE OF FORCE ENVISIONED IS NOT WITHIN OUR CURRENT CAPABILITY. AN AIR LINE OF COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL AND FLYING WEATHER IS MARGINAL. ADDITIONALLY, OUR AIRLIFT CAPABILITIES ARE INADEQUATE TO SUPPORT BOTH THIS CONCEPT AND AN ACCEPTABLE TACTICAL POSTURE IN OTHER THREAT AREAS AT THIS TIME.

C. WE ESTIMATE SIZABLE ENEMY FORCES TO BE IN THE TCHEPONE AREA AND TO THE NORTH THEREOF; THUS A BRIEF SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN THERE MAY NOT BE POSSIBLE.

5. REGARDING A WITHDRAWAL FROM KHE SANH, I CONSIDER THIS AREA CRITICAL TO US FROM A TACTICAL STANDPOINT AS A LAUNCH BASE FOR SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP TEAMS AND AS FLANK SECURITY FOR THE STRONG POINT OBSTACLE SYSTEM; IT IS EVEN MORE CRITICAL FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT. TO RELINQUISH THIS AREA WOULD BE A MAJOR PROPAGANDA VICTORY FOR THE ENEMY. ITS LOSS WOULD SERIOUSLY AFFECT VIETNAMESE AND US MORALE. IN SHORT, WITHDRAWAL WOULD BE A TREMENDOUS STEP BACKWARDS.

6. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SOME IN NON-MILITARY CIRCLES WHO FAVOR THE CONCEPT OF RETREATING INTO ENCLAVES, I MUST REITERATE THAT SUCH A STRATEGY MERELY RETURNS THE CENTER OF VIOLENCE TO THE MIDST OF THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE IN THE POPULATED CENTERS. ON THE OTHER HAND, A MASSIVE ASSAULT INTO LAOS IS NOT FEASIBLE IN THE NEAR TIME FRAME.

7. IN VIEW OF THE ENEMY CAPABILITY TO INITIATE A MAJOR OFFENSIVE IN QUANG TRI PROVINCE BEFORE TET, I WOULD PREFER TO DEFEND WITH FORCE DEPLOYMENT AND COMBAT SUPPORT AS INDICATED ABOVE. I WILL SUBMIT ADDITIONAL SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS SEPARATELY FOR B-52, CARRIER AND NAVAL GUNFIRE SUPPORT. END QUOTE

W. W. ROSTOW COMMENT: I CONCLUDE THAT WESTY HAS KHE SANH ON HIS MIND AS MUCH AS WE DO.

DTG: 13/1707Z JAN 1968

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