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LITERALLY EYES ONLY

February 14, 1968

Bob --

This is the paper the President
wished you to have and handle in the
way he indicated.

W. W. Rostow

Honorable Robert S. McNamara
Secretary of Defense

~~SECRET~~

Memo
Subject: Khe Sanh

WWRostow:rln

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E.O. 1356, Sec. 3.4(b)
White House Guidelines, Feb. 24, 1983
By SDH, NARA, Date 4/23/96

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February 11, 1968

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Authority JCS 1tr 10/2/78

By PLW/111RG, NARA, Date 2/15/96

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Khe Sanh

I know that Khe Sanh is very much on your mind as it is on mine. It may be too late to do anything about the situation; if so, we should put all doubts behind us and prepare for the fight. On the other hand, if there is still time to exercise a useful influence, we should move quickly.

I have reviewed what General Westmoreland has said about Khe Sanh in his recent messages. To paraphrase his cables, he points out that the original occupation of the position was justified by the need to establish a forward operating base to permit operations against the key infiltration routes in Eastern Laos. More importantly, he also considers that its occupation has blocked the route of enemy advance into Quang Tri and has kept the fighting away from the populated coastal belt of I Corps. He concedes that Khe Sanh has not had much effect on infiltration from Laos and it is not clear whether he regards the role of blocking the Quang Tri approach as of current or of past importance.

Thus, General Westmoreland does not appear to argue strongly for the defense of Khe Sanh because of its present value either in relation to the infiltration routes in Laos or in the defense of major areas of the northern provinces. Although he mentioned to General Wheeler in a telephone conversation his belief that the maintenance of our position in the Khe Sanh area would offer us the opportunity at some time of dealing the enemy a severe blow, he has not amplified this point and, in his cables, he stressed rather the difficulty of getting out of Khe Sanh at the present time and the adverse psychological effects of a withdrawal upon South Viet-Nam and upon the American public.

My review of Westy's cables does not convince me of the military importance of maintaining Khe Sanh at the present time if it is still feasible to withdraw. Whatever the past value of the position, it is a positive liability now. We are allowing the enemy to arrange at his leisure a set-piece attack on ground and in weather favorable to him and under conditions which will allow us little opportunity to punish him except by our air power. The latter can be neutralized to some degree by the favorite Communist tactic of closing tightly around our positions in areas which our air forces, particularly the B-52s, can not attack with safety to our own forces.

General Westmoreland recognizes the difficulties of air supply of Khe Sanh and indicates an intention to open Highway 9 to provide an overland line of communication. To do so will require a large number of troops to keep Highway 9 open in the face of the intermittent road-cutting operations which can be expected from the enemy.

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My present opinion is that Khe Sanh probably can be held but that it will be at a heavy price in terms of casualties and in terms of other ground troops necessary to support and reinforce it. I have real doubt that we can afford such a defense in view of the limited reserves which General Westmoreland is likely to have in the time frame during which these events may take place.

I make the foregoing comments in full realization of how wrong one can be at a distance about a military situation such as this. I have the utmost confidence in General Westmoreland and am sure that he sees possibilities in the situation which are not visible from here. Nonetheless, I would feel greatly relieved if ~~Westmoreland's guidance~~ would contain some of the following points:

"In view of the strong likelihood of a heavy enemy attack along the DMZ and against Khe Sanh, accompanied possibly by other attacks in the cities and along the Kontum-Pleiku border, we wish to provide the following comments for your guidance (i.e., General Westmoreland's). They are impressed with the many tasks which you may be called upon to perform concurrently with limited reserves and appreciate your problem in establishing priorities among these tasks as they arise. To assist you in making your decisions, they wish you to understand that, in their opinion, you should not hesitate to give up terrain in remote areas in order to meet the enemy on ground favorable to your scheme of maneuver, in favorable weather and under conditions offering you the opportunity of inflicting decisive blows upon his main forces.

"In this connection, Khe Sanh appears to us to be an exposed position difficult to supply by air and expensive to supply overland in terms of lines of communication forces. Khe Sanh has already well fulfilled the purposes which you mention in your cable MAC-02018 of impeding infiltration from Laos and closing the northwest route into Quang Tri. However, it is less clear that its present value now justifies the cost of an all-out defense.

"While we recognize the adverse psychological consequences of a withdrawal which you mention, the effect of a costly defense absorbing forces badly needed elsewhere could in the end be far more disadvantageous to our cause than a withdrawal now. Indeed, the latter could prove to be a useful stratagem nullifying the laborious logistical build-up of the enemy around Khe Sanh and upsetting his winter-spring schedule.

"We are not prepared to assess the feasibility or the desirability of a withdrawal at this late date but wish you to know that ~~they~~ will support you completely if you decide to pull back from what may prove to be a disadvantageous position. They will support you equally in a decision to defend Khe Sanh."