

Tuesday, October 10, 1967  
3:25 p. m.

MR. PRESIDENT:

At your instruction, I evoked these two letters  
from Bob Komer on a strictly private basis.

You will find them worth reading.

W. W. R.

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*Pres file*



EMBASSY  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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October 4, 1967

Dear Walt:

Enjoyed talking with you. I was concerned because your 23 September letter asking my "quite urgent" views didn't arrive till 3 October. But I am replying in writing as you confirmed was wanted.

We are busting a gut out here to get a positive picture on the record. I convinced Ellsworth to put Zorthian practically full time on this. But we need repeated needles from you know where--and of the type you do so well. *We also should have gotten Kaplan out here, as I repeatedly proposed.*

Continued bombing of the North--especially LOCs--is so critical to a successful 1968 that we should pay more attention to justifying it. Our own ambivalence about the bombing has done a lot to keep the critics going. Hence the time has come for clearcut linking of bombs on the North to success in the South. Saigon can help explain this, but the real job must be done in Washington. McNamara has to do it most of all, because he's caused half the doubts himself.

There is no new way to win this war. Nor can one guarantee definitive results in 1968. But I am more than ever convinced that by pushing harder along present lines we can at least show gathering success by July 1968 at the latest. To the trained eye, this picture is already visible. But this war is so terribly fragmented--so much a mosaic of ten thousand little pieces--that the outsider can only see a fraction at any given time. This causes a large part of our press problem too.

ARVN is getting much better, but not yet better enough fast enough. Washington should ride this harder privately to back our hands. There are a dozen sticks you could use to beat us.

As for pacification, it's getting seriously underway at last. Frankly, there was no US leadership in Saigon on this problem--nor management either--until the new team got out here. Putting it under Westy helped a lot too. Now he backs me to the hilt--we collaborate instead of competing, as Porter did with Westy.

But pacification is 98% Vietnamese, and there's where the frustration lies. Thang's taking over RF/PF is our white hope for a revitalized territorial security effort--the key to pacification.

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NJ 94-456

By CLJ, NARA, Date 4-5-95

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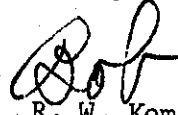
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After a year's work on this, I finally see fruition around the corner if only Thieu doesn't muck things up by insisting he run the show and then not taking any decisions.

I know I've been lax in writing Washington, but remember I'm in a quite different position out here. Bunker and Westy, who'll do anything for me, don't like anyone going over their heads. They suspect Gene Locke of doing it, and aren't happy over that. Anyway, I'm sure you realize how much I'm getting done out here that never shows--and by no means just in pacification either. This depends on close personal relationships which I must not jeopardize. So assure the Boss that I'll keep after things across the board, and that it's helpful to hear from home occasionally.

Warmly,

  
R. W. Komer

The Honorable  
Walt W. Rostow  
The White House  
Washington

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DECLASSIFIED  
E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4  
NIJ 94-456  
By CL, NARA, Date 4-5-15

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October 4, 1967

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Dear Mr. President:

Herewith, at your request, my urgent and literally eyes only assessment of what more we can do to "accelerate" the war. I suspect you are aware why, despite your earlier invitation, I've been reluctant to write directly. Westy and Bob McNamara are rightly sensitive on such matters. Besides, I feel that I can best serve you out here by producing results rather than reports.

To put things in context, let me say first that what I've seen in the last five months reinforces my long-held view that at long last we're forging ahead in Vietnam. Neither the trouble along the DMZ (where the poor Marines provide the shield behind which we're gradually cleaning up the rest of SVN) nor the perennial teapot "crises" in Saigon should be allowed to obscure this fact. Southern VC strength keeps declining, and Hanoi seems unable to replace it with sufficient NVA. So as more US troops arrive--and ARVN gets both bigger and gradually better--the force ratios are changing steadily in our favor. Our combat effectiveness is increasing too, as his declines. This shows not only in 1967's better kill and weapons ratios, but in a hundred little ways throughout the countryside. The whole trouble with analyzing this peculiar war is that it is so fragmented--so much a matter of little things happening everywhere--that the results are barely visible to the untrained eye. Also, enough things go wrong each week (and get sedulously reported) to obscure the larger number that go right.

Nor am I alone any longer in my optimism. Intelligence officers are by nature conservative, but Westy's new J-2 General Davidson (now here five months too) is equally convinced that we're grinding the enemy down much more rapidly than he can recoup.

I could expand on this for pages, but will cite only one key equation. Through 1965 this was a VC war, fought most intensely in the Delta. There were only about 10,000 NVA down here. Today it is more and more an NVA war, fought mostly in I Corps at the opposite end of the country. Today almost half the organized enemy units are North Vietnamese regular army. Since the Americans arrived, Hanoi has had to feed in ever more NVA to

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compensate for growing VC losses. But for many reasons Hanoi has been unable to maintain more than about 50-60,000 men in the South. We now think VC/NVA "main force" strength peaked out last November, and has declined somewhat since (from 126,000 to 117,000). VC guerilla strength has almost surely dropped much more. Thus, while McNamara is right that we can't stop NVA infiltration, somehow we have been able to clamp a sort of ceiling on Hanoi's ability to replace VC/NVA losses in the South.

A major reason, though no one can prove how major, is the bombing of the northern transport routes from the Chinese frontier right down through Laos. Another is the way we've forced Hanoi to shift from the easy seaborne supply route to the much more difficult overland one.

Hanoi's emerging strategy in South Vietnam also tends to validate my thesis. We out here see an evolving pattern of VC/NVA generally evading contact in most areas but northern I Corps, and partly breaking up into company-sized units in III and IV Corps. This ties in to Giap's 14-16 September articles which seemingly call for a protracted struggle, i.e. maintaining enough of a threat-in-being in the South to deprive us of early success. "Preserving our force" is Giap's new theme. All this suggests that Hanoi thinks its best bet is to wait us out through 1968. This would be all the more tolerable if he could get us to quit bombing the North.

Nevertheless, if we get our reinforcements and keep up pressure on the North, I am more convinced than ever that by mid-1968 at the latest it will be clear to everyone that we are "winning" the military war. We'll show solid progress in pacifying too. This is even harder to demonstrate convincingly, being even more fragmented than the big unit war. But you can depend on it.

With the election validated, I also foresee a period of relative political stability. At least we should do better than the last two months of political jockeying and electioneering. The real problem now is less one of stability than of getting Thieu off his duff and doing enough to convey a sense of GVN movement.

Now for what more we can do to frustrate Hanoi. Even though we are on the right track at long last, pushing yet harder on certain fronts would maximize our chances of early visible results:

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A. Improving ARVN even more. Westy is now really hot on this. He's well aware that he's probably getting his last major US reinforcements. So he has Abrams full time on ARVN. He'll produce a better ARVN, but the next step must be to get all of it out fighting more. So keep prodding us. One good theme is how high US casualties are in proportion to ARVN/RF/PF. You might personally write not only Westy but Thieu as well. At a guess, we could get 25% better ARVN results in six months if we really went all-out.

B. Get some more ROKs and Aussies. Even one more ROK brigade and Anzac battalion could make a significant difference if we could get them soonest. Given the lead time needed, why not hit Pak and Holt personally right now?

C. DOD slowness. I'm appalled by the slow response time of the US military machine--not the time it takes to train and ship troops or buy and ship equipment but the interminable decision-making process. For example, we're still waiting for final Defense OK on US military advisors that McNamara approved in July. The justification and re-justification process MACV must go through--with CINCPAC, the Services, and finally DOD level--may save money but doesn't help win wars quickly. Protect me on this as Bob McNamara will shrewdly suspect whence it comes, but Bob himself may not realize how long it takes--and how many man hours--to get even piddling requests approved.

D. Don't stop bombing the North--even for Tet. No one can prove it conclusively, but I am flatly convinced that the bombing helps greatly in keeping a lid on NVA ability to fight in the South. We need it for at least another six months--without the pauses which Hanoi utilizes so well. Why not get it ratified by the next Summit? A strong US declaration that we intend to keep bombing till Hanoi stops infiltrating would also clear the air (and maybe even cause some critics to lay off agitating the issue as futile).

E. Do more about Cambodia and Laos. Bunker and Westy make great sense on small ARVN raids into Laos, especially since the barrier seems to be delayed. When you see Souvanna, just convince him we're winning and he'll be a lot less edgy. As for Cambodia, State has been fudging for a year even on a psywar campaign to clue Sihanouk that we're on to him--and that he's foolish because we're winning. State will plead not guilty, but ask what they've done in a year. We might also use a little carrot and stick on Sihanouk--promises of goodies if he behaves better plus a few steps to worry him (such as delays on Mekong convoys). Only if you prod on this will we get anywhere. And I'm not advocating high-risk enterprises--simply enough action to help minimize enemy use of these invaluable sanctuaries.

*Thieu is critical, Mr. President.*

F. Last but not least, exert much greater pressure on GVN to perform. Now that Thieu is solidly in the saddle--legally too--his passivity is our greatest obstacle. Thieu is no Ky. So if a bright, shiny new-model GVN is essential to attract the people, we have to work a lot harder at it than before. Bunker is superb (a great choice on your part), but needs more personal backing of the sort I used to draft for you to send Lodge. I know you'll take Thieu up on a mountain at the Summit, but a few private messages beforehand would help mightily. Thieu needs a dynamic program, top quality cabinet, and above all a little decisiveness. I'd almost say categorically that the GVN will do almost nothing into which we don't push it. Hence I'm breaking eggs out here (and may get in trouble because of it), but it's the only way to get reasonably prompt results.

Walt says you also want my views on Abrams. From what he says there may be some concern lest Westy lacks "military imagination in pressing forward to get definitive results." I now feel able to size both up, having lived with them. Both are exceptional generals--either could in my judgment complete the job of grinding down the VC/NVA. Their styles are quite different, and Abe is a bit in Westy's shadow. He's more direct and less prideful than Westy. Once Abe made up his mind, he would doggedly work away at the goals he'd set.

But I don't see Abe as any more dynamic than Westy, and certainly no more imaginative militarily--in fact probably less so. Indeed, he doesn't seem quite as flexible as Westy in adjusting to changing situations. Equally important, Westy has an intimate relationship with the ARVN leadership that I doubt Abe could duplicate. In a way, they respond better to a MacArthur type than to a solid no-nonsense soldier. Westy may coddle ARVN too much, but he really runs them more and more behind the scenes. Also, while Abe would be every bit as responsive to "political" guidance as Westy, he strikes me as more narrowly professional and likely to show less skill in dealing with the ARVN generals on political matters than Westy. Bunker now relies on Westy a lot to help out in this field, and rightly so. Lastly, Westy's experience seems to me invaluable. With Abe and me here now, Westy's less tired than he was and better able to focus on the big issues. In sum, he still nets out to me as the best man for this particular job, even on grounds of flexibility and imagination. But Abrams could unquestionably do the job well too.

All this is in haste, because Walt said to reply quite urgently. I won't attempt to polish my rambling prose, and will follow up later with any more ideas. You can depend on my candor as always, despite the dangers.

Respectfully,

*R. W. Komer*  
R. W. Komer

The President  
The White House  
Washington