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Tuesday, Nov. 7, 1967
1:10 p. m.

MR. PRESIDENT:

Herewith General Taylor volunteers an interesting paper on the alternatives facing Washington and Hanoi in the months ahead.

I recommend that you turn the paper over to Nick Katzenbach's Viet Nam group and ask them:

- Do you agree?
- If not, how would you state the choices and make your recommendations?
- What new actions flow from your recommendations?

W. W. R.

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NIJ 86-166
By rip, NARA, Date 1-26-88

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THE WHITE HOUSE

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WASHINGTON

November 6, 1967

Mr. President:

As an outgrowth of our group discussion of Vietnam in the Cabinet Room on November 2, I am attaching my personal analysis of the alternatives which appear available to our side (Blue) and to their's (Red) in pursuing our conflicting policy objectives. For the Blue policy objective, I have paraphrased your statement at Johns Hopkins in April, 1965; the Red objective is derived from apparently authentic statements emanating from Hanoi.

In listing available alternatives, I have assumed that neither side will ever completely abandon its objective but either may be obliged to settle for half a loaf or for an indefinite postponement of full attainment. Thus, I have not included an immediate pull-out among Blue alternatives or an unconditional surrender under Red's.

In listing alternatives, one may argue that negotiation is not a true alternative since it takes two to negotiate and, for the moment, only our side is willing. We might say that, under these conditions, negotiation is an alternative for Red but not for Blue. However, for convenience of discussion, I have included it as an alternative, recognizing that it is a development which may grow out of any of the other alternatives.

M.D.T.

M. D. T.

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An Estimate of the Vietnam Situation
November 1967

1. Objectives

A. Blue Objective. The independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack. A self-determined government in South Vietnam with a reasonable chance of surviving.

B. Red Objective. The imposition of a Communist-oriented regime on South Vietnam and the elimination of foreign troops, bases, and influence. Eventually, the unification of all Vietnam under the Communist rule of Hanoi.

2. Blue alternatives.

A. Stick it out. This alternative is generally identical with our present course of action which seeks to bring security to all or most of the South Vietnamese population; to inflict such losses on the VC and North Vietnamese forces as to convince their leadership that they cannot afford to continue the war on the present basis; to continue air pressure on North Vietnam to limit infiltration and to confirm the impression caused by the ground war that it is to the interest of the Hanoi leaders to cease the aggression in the south; and, simultaneously, to strengthen the government, economy, and society of South Vietnam. Under this Blue alternative, these actions would be continued for the same purposes as in the past while making every effort to increase their effectiveness but staying generally within the past ground rules of operations.

B. All out. This is the escalation alternative and escalation means different things to different proponents. In the air war, it calls for the attack of all targets of any political, economic or military importance in North Vietnam with maximum intensity and in the shortest possible time in a revulsion against the gradualism which has been the hallmark of our bombing policy in the past.

In the ground war, it implies an expansion varying from raids into cross-border sanctuaries to various forms of invasion of North Vietnam.

On the home front, some partisans of this alternative favor a declaration of war and the imposition of war-time controls of various kinds.

C. Pull-back. This is the de-escalation alternative which usually includes in the statements of its advocates a cessation of the bombing, a diminution of offensive ground actions, some degree of selectivity in holding and defending terrain, and, in its extreme form, may extend to the so-called enclave concept of defense.

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D. Negotiations under the most favorable conditions possible. The purpose of the negotiations may be a cease-fire, a political settlement, or both.

3. Red Alternatives.

A. Hang On. This alternative amounts to continuing about as at present the guerrilla war in the south, the criminal war of terrorism and the cross-border forays out of sanctuaries beyond reach of our forces. It includes a maximum effort in the propaganda field and a maximum exploitation of divisions of opinion in the United States.

B. Escalate. The possible forms of escalation open to Hanoi appear to be an increased infiltration of North Vietnamese forces and equipment into the south, to include - the introduction of such new weapons as may be obtainable from Soviet or Red Chinese sources; the use of "volunteers" in North Vietnam to free Vietnamese for combat in the South; and perhaps the opening of a new front outside Vietnam to divert hostile forces. Such a new front might conceivably be in Thailand, in Burma, in Korea, in South America or in Berlin.

C. Pull-Back. This is "the back to the woodwork" alternative, a fade-away to avoid further contact and losses and to give the impression that the war is subsiding, or indeed has ended. It might be a short-term ruse or a true withdrawal with the long-term intention to live to fight another day.

D. Negotiations under the most favorable conditions possible. As under the similar Blue alternative, the objective may be a cease-fire, a political settlement or both.

4. The advantages and disadvantages of Blue Alternative A (Stick-it-out) in confrontation with the Red Alternatives.

The principal argument in favor of "sticking it out" is that this course of action has since 1965 recorded many successes in the political, military, and economic fields. Its continuation carries little danger of an expansion of the war beyond Vietnam and the United States and its allies have adequate material resources to sustain it indefinitely at the present level of effort.

On the negative side, it is not clear that the U.S. public has the moral resources to support indefinitely this slow, seemingly indecisive strategy of gradualism which runs counter to the impatient, impetuous American temperament. This evident disinclination for a long, drawn-out test of will in concert with the noisy demonstrations of the radical minorities encourages Ho Chi Minh and his advisers to hang on (Red Alternative A) or to escalate (Red Alternative B).

The growing disunity on the home front may eventually make itself felt on the battle field. It may cause our efforts to slacken and the current progress to stagnate at some point short of success. While the morale of our troops in action has thus far been magnificent, it should not be taken for granted if the home front continues to deteriorate.

The foregoing evaluation of the pros and cons of Blue Alternative A applies generally to a situation in which Ho has opted for hanging on (Red A). If he chose to escalate (Red B), this attempt to raise the tempo would accomplish little more than to require a continuing reinforcement of our U.S. Forces. We should have no particular difficulty in providing the necessary forces (although probably with some reserve call-up) as long as the war remains within the confines of Vietnam.

A new front opened outside of Vietnam would help Hanoi significantly but Hanoi alone does not have the resources to open such a front. It would be necessary to persuade the Chinese to involve themselves in Thailand, Burma, or Korea, or perhaps, to obtain the cooperation of the Soviet Union in stirring up trouble in Berlin. At this moment, such possibilities look very unlikely to us here. If, by any chance, it did occur, the opening of a new front could change the complexion of the entire situation and require a world-wide re-evaluation of strategic requirements.

If, while we are sticking it out on our present course of action, the other side should decide to pull back into the woodwork (Red C), that decision would seem a favorable development from our point of view. We would be able to liberate much of the population which, thus far, has remained under Viet Cong control and would gain ample time to dig out the Communist infrastructure in the villages and hamlets within our extended control. We would obtain a welcome breathing spell in which to concentrate our efforts on rehabilitating and re-building the war-damaged provinces. There would be the additional advantage of the depression in the Viet Cong morale resulting from this retreat and the abandonment of hard-won territory and population.

On the other hand, such a pull-back would leave us in doubt as to the true intentions of the enemy and we would be unsure whether we had reached a truce, a peace, or only a breathing spell in which the enemy was preparing for a new offensive. It would be difficult to decide under these circumstances when, if ever, we could start withdrawing our U.S. forces. In this uncertainty, the South Vietnamese would be very much concerned about their own future in the absence of any firm assurance of peace.

In the United States, once that it seemed the conflict had ebbed and that some kind of de facto cease-fire was in effect, one might expect a cry "to bring the boys home." How difficult it would be to control this emotional surge is hard to evaluate here and now.

It is also difficult to analyze the consequences of a decision on our side to stick it out (Blue A) and on their side to negotiate from a favorable position (Red D). There are certain contradictions in such a confrontation of options since the stick-it-out course, if followed without swerving on our side would make it difficult for the enemy to find favorable factors in the situation to lead them to negotiate. There might be a negatively favorable factor created

for them in that the pressures by our side might become so unpleasant that the outcome of negotiations, uncertain though they might be, would appear a better choice to the Communist leaders than a continuation of the struggle.

5. The advantages and disadvantages of Blue Alternative B (All out) in confrontation with the Red Alternatives.

The primary justification on our side for adopting this alternative would be the desire to bring greater pressure faster on the Viet Cong and North Vietnam, hoping thereby that they would reach a breaking point in a comparatively short period of time. If this were the outcome, it would result in a reduction in the loss of lives and resources and the increased effort would tend to satisfy the "hawks" at home who are demanding "all out or get out." However, if the enemy adhered to their Alternative A and hung on at about the present level of their effort, our increased military efforts would face the same problems as in the past, particularly the difficulty of finding decisive targets to strike either on the ground or from the air. If the ground war were expanded to cross-border operations into Cambodia, Laos, or North Vietnam, there would be a considerable time lag required to raise, train and transport the additional troops necessary for these ground campaigns, a delay which would contravene the hope for quick results which is a prime justification for the option.

To meet additional force requirements, particularly the ground forces, it would probably be necessary to pass to a condition approaching general mobilization in the United States and the imposition of economic controls and other measures equally unpopular on the home front.

Our neighbors in the international world would be concerned over these acts of escalation and, although the danger of Red Chinese or Soviet direct intervention would probably remain low, in comparison to Blue A (Stick-it-out) the escalation route would be relatively risky in possibilities of unwanted expansion of the conflict.

If the other side responded to our escalation with those escalatory acts available to them (Red B), the results would be essentially the same as in our discussion of Blue A. Unless it were possible for the other side to open another front or to bring in effective new weapons (such as light anti-helicopter weapons or missile-firing ships), it is unlikely that Red escalation would have much effect on our course of action. Indeed, if in the course of their escalation, the enemy side responded with major ground attacks, this development could work in our favor in giving us important targets to destroy with our overwhelming mobile fire capability.

If Red elected to pull back and go into the woodwork (Red C) in response to our escalation, our increased military strength would be of little avail since there would be few targets to attack. There would be less justification to invade the sanctuaries or to destroy the urban centers of Hanoi and Haiphong.

by air attack. However, if we allowed ourselves to be lured into a guerrilla chase into Cambodia or Laos, we could readily dissipate any increase in ground force and dilute this strength without adding substantially to our offensive effectiveness.

If in response to our acts of escalation, the Red side sought the negotiation route (Red D), the fact that we had greater strength in being at the time would be a factor tending to strengthen the hands of our negotiators in the tough horse-trading which will inevitably take place around the conference table.

6. The advantages and disadvantages of Blue Alternative C (Pull-back) in confrontation with the Red Alternatives.

If we elect the pull-back option, there is little that our side can hope to gain beyond appeasing some of our domestic and international critics and perhaps facilitating the opening of negotiations. However, in the course of achieving these dubious gains, we would have encouraged Ho and his colleagues who will take any retreat as an evidence of weakness on our part and of a readiness to capitulate. We would discourage our allies, particularly the South Vietnamese, many of whom would begin to seek political storm-cellars in anticipation of the eventual Communist take-over.

Only in the case that our pull-back was part of an overt or tacit agreement involving a similar pull-back on the other side could there be any possible gain for us in this option. Even in such a case, we would have to react very cautiously to this kind of proposal to be sure that it was not a ruse and would not allow the Viet Cong to stake out permanent territorial enclaves in South Vietnam as they have done in Laos.

It is true that our adoption of this alternative might create in the minds of Ho and his colleagues the feeling that a favorable situation had finally arrived for initiating negotiations. However, an offer from them to negotiate at such a time would catch us in a weakened military position with our relations probably strained with the South Vietnamese government which would be made deeply suspicious by our pull-back behavior. At a conference table, we would be faced by a team of negotiators convinced that we were weak, vacillating, and a push-over for intransigent bargainers.

7. The advantages and disadvantages of Blue Alternative D (Negotiation) in confrontation with Red Alternative D (Negotiation)

Since it takes two willing parties to hold a conference, we need to consider only the pros and cons of Blue D in confrontation with Red D.

If both parties favored the negotiation option, the outcome would depend very much upon the relative strength and posture of the contending parties at that particular moment. The side which needed the negotiations most to correct an unfavorable imbalance in the situation would negotiate under a great disadvantage - if the other side used its wits and "blue chips."

Both sides would need to consider the best way to conduct the negotiations and the play of the "blue chips", the relative advantages of negotiating first a cease-fire then a political settlement, of reversing that order or of negotiating both issues at the same time. Because of the great complexity of negotiating a cease-fire and the virtual impossibility of checking on the faithful observance of its terms, the Blue side would be well advised either to reach a private agreement on the major elements of the political settlement and then negotiate a cease-fire or, if the package did not seem too large, to negotiate both simultaneously. The important thing from our side is that we keep on the pressure during negotiations to avoid the foot-dragging which took place at Panmunjom.

Negotiations might grow out of any one of the first three Blue alternatives. Blue A (Stick-it-out) and Blue B (all out) offer the possibility of creating a situation which will convince Hanoi that negotiations are preferable to continuing on a course which is becoming increasingly painful and costly. Blue C (Pull-back) might produce an offer of negotiations by the enemy but he could come to the table in a mood to ask everything and give nothing, convinced that we were prepared to accept the abandonment of our policy objective in Vietnam in order to be relieved of our burdens in continuing the struggle.

There is a strong likelihood that Hanoi will never negotiate unless we opt for Blue C (Pull-back). Rather than come to a public conference table at a disadvantage and accept terms tantamount to the loss of their policy objective (or at least the indefinite deferment of the hope of its attainment) which will probably require public admission of the role played by Hanoi in the frustrated aggression, Ho and his friends would probably prefer to adopt Red C (Pull-back). On the other hand, remembering the advantages of the Panmunjom talks to the Communist side in Korea, they might decide to go to a conference at any time, hoping by twisting and turning to stall the discussions, gain propaganda advantages, split the opposing negotiators, exasperate the Americans and conceivably gain by debating maneuvers at least some important part of their policy objective.

Conclusions

After analyzing the consequences of the confrontation of the various alternatives open to Blue and Red, it would appear to me that Blue A is the cheapest, safest and most promising of courses for our side provided the

home front holds and we overcome our burning impatience for quick results.

Blue B (All out) is more costly and more risky and probably will not produce results in a much shorter time than Blue A. However, it is more appealing to the American temperament and may be necessary to rally the home front and to convince the public that we are in a de facto state of war and that we should adjust our behavior accordingly.

The pull-back alternative, Blue C, offers nothing to Blue except in the improbable case of a reciprocal pull-back in lieu of a formally negotiated settlement. The advantages and disadvantages of such a development would depend upon the conditions existing at the time and the possibilities of verifying enemy performance.

As to the negotiation alternative, Blue D, its outcome will depend upon the balance of strength existing at the initiation of negotiations and upon the attitude shown by the representatives at the conference table. This is going to be a tough contest viewed merely as an extension of the battle field by the Communists who will use every negotiating and propaganda device to gain advantages and to put the United States in the position of the warmonger who really does not want peace. Our side must keep two major points in mind. We must not give away anything in advance for the privilege of negotiating and, once at the table, we must insist that progress be rapid and that the quest for peace be sincere. Our slogan should be, "Never another Panmunjom."

Recommended Courses of Action

For Blue

In light of the foregoing analysis, it would seem to be to our interest to stay with Blue A (Stick-it-out) while making every effort to stiffen the home front. Our government should be prepared to pass to Blue B (All out) only if the enemy escalates in pursuance of Red B (Escalate) or as a means of pulling together the U.S. home front if it seems in danger of collapse. Blue C (Pull-back) should be rejected except in the unlikely case where it is our response to a reliable offer of mutual de-escalation. As for negotiations, we should always be ready to enter into them but only under favorable conditions and with the resolve not to tolerate another Panmunjom. If the Red pull-back (Red C) takes place, we should exploit the advantage offered to widen Saigon's hold on the territory and population and to increase joint efforts to strengthen the government and the society of South Vietnam.

For Red

We might also undertake to make a recommendation to Ho Chi Minh based upon this analysis. It would be to keep on the essentially present level of

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military, terrorist and political action until Hanoi can understand better the situation on the United States home front. In the meantime, Ho should try to get the USSR or China or both to open a new front to divert the Americans. If there are better weapons available in the Communist world to attack U.S. bases or to shoot down helicopters and aircraft, Ho should make every effort to get them from his Communist backers. In a final pinch, rather than fading away in implementation of Red C, it would seem better to accept negotiations and then utilize all possible devices to drag them out, confuse and divide the opposition, and wage a propaganda war which will compromise the U.S. objective of a truly independent Vietnam able to choose its own government. Otherwise, he will have to accept the Red C Alternative, send the VC underground or into feigned submission to the Saigon government, and await a better day to impose Northern rule on the South.

M. D. T.

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