

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

INFORMATION

WASHINGTON

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Wednesday, Nov. 15, 1967.  
12:15 p.m.

Authority NLS-CBS 19

MR. PRESIDENT By is, NAME, Date 6-22-84

*Pres file*

Herewith Dick Helms' memo to you on a new National Intelligence Estimate entitled "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam." I have marked its main conclusions, summarized on the last two pages.

It comes to this:

- manpower is the major problem confronting the Communists;
- there has been a substantial reduction in guerrillas since an estimated peak in early 1966;
- there has been a slight reduction in main force units in the past year, but this has been possible only by using more North Vietnamese replacements in Viet Cong units;
- there is a "fairly good chance" that the Communist military strength and political infrastructure will continue to decline;
- Communist strategy is to sustain a protracted war of attrition and to persuade the United States that it must pull out or settle on Hanoi's terms. Their judgment is that the "Communists still retain adequate capabilities to support this strategy for at least another year."

The memo to you and the introductory note reflect a considerable debate in the intelligence community. The debate centers on the fact that they now know more from captured documents than they did about guerrillas, village defense forces, etc. What they know indicates that guerrilla strength was probably underestimated last year, but has declined substantially since.

I had urged that they do a retroactive estimate showing that decline; but they say they cannot do it, and confine themselves to the simple statement that the guerrillas "have suffered a substantial reduction."

The estimate does not deal with an important fact as estimated by Westmoreland and the JCS: namely, that there has been a very substantial decline in the past year in enemy main force battalions rated as "combat effective." (Buzz Wheeler told the group the other day, and confirmed to me on the telephone this morning, that in October 1965 the enemy had 123 maneuver battalions, all rated combat effective. In October 1967 the enemy had 162 maneuver battalions, of which only 87 were rated combat effective.)

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In general, this is a conservative estimate; but it is not a bad thing to build our plans on conservative estimates.

The one danger, of which Dick Helms is aware, is that the underestimate of guerrillas in 1966 be taken out of context and distorted, if leaked. They have tried hard to avoid that possibility.

I told Dick that the one sentence I would challenge is the marked sentence on page 1. I agree that the guerrilla figure was underestimated in 1966; but we have suffered in other areas from overestimation as well as underestimation in dealing with Communist capabilities. But that is not important.

W. W. R.

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**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505  
**OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR**

14 November 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

1. Since mid-May, the intelligence community, both here and in Saigon, has been painstakingly working on the data for a National Intelligence Estimate entitled "Capabilities of the Vietnamese Communists for Fighting in South Vietnam". In essence, this is a revision of an estimate on the same topic issued by the United States Intelligence Board in 1966 and now very much out of date.
2. The new estimate has been produced through an exhaustive process of analysis including detailed consultations in Saigon between the Embassy and MACV and a team from the Washington Community headed by my personal representative. We now have a text concurred in without dissent by all the United States Intelligence Board members and employing figures agreed to by the United States Mission in Saigon.
3. The new estimate is sensitive and potentially controversial primarily because the new strength figures are at variance with our former holdings. ~~Much of the past data on overall Communist capabilities in Vietnam has turned out to be unreliable and many of the figures have been too low.~~ We have taken pains to construct the paper in such a fashion that we explain at each stage how we arrive at the numbers

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By ics, NARS, Date 5-7-84

used. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find a reliable basis for reconstructing Communist strength figures retrospectively to provide a true standard of comparison between present and Communist strength as it actually was a year ago. Like any document, however, the Estimate can still make for difficulties if particular portions are taken out of context.

4. I have considered not issuing this Estimate and after considerable consultation, believe this would be a mistake. In the inevitable daily process of work to ascertain Communist strength levels in Vietnam, too many people are aware that the exercise to get agreed figures has been going on. In short, the charge of bad faith or unwillingness to face the facts would be more generally damaging than the issuance of this document which can stand on its own feet.

5. My purpose in writing you is to outline the problems this Estimate involves and to advise you in advance of the way in which I propose to handle them. The Estimate is now scheduled for release the end of this week to you, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the individual members of the United States Intelligence Board who coordinated it. This procedure will restrict the distribution of the Estimate while at the same time making it available to those members of the Government who need it to do their jobs.

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6. Attached hereto are an Introductory Note and the Conclusions of the Estimate.

*Rich*

Richard Helms  
Director

Attachments - 2

- 1) Introductory Note
- 2) Conclusions

### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Our earlier understanding of overall Communist capabilities in Vietnam had, of necessity, to rely heavily on data provided by the GVN. Much of this turned out to be unreliable, and in many instances our numerical estimates of Communist forces, other than for the Regular forces, were too low. Our information has improved substantially in the past year, but the unconventional nature of the war poses difficult intelligence problems, the more so in a social environment where basic data is incomplete and often untrustworthy.

Manpower, for example, is a key element for the Communists but we lack precise basic data on population size, rates of growth, and age distribution for both North and South Vietnam. Assessing Communist capabilities also involves an understanding of the organization and effectiveness of the various components in the Communist military and political apparatus in South Vietnam. Much of the evidence on these components is obtained from a variety of sources, including captured documents, of varying reliability and timeliness. The analysis of this data, as well as that concerning North Vietnamese support to the South and all manpower questions requires complex methodological approaches which cannot rise above the uncertain data inputs.

Our data and conclusions are, therefore, subject to continuing review and revision, especially since capabilities do not remain static. In this

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estimate we have concentrated on reaching the best judgments of the current strength of the Communist forces and, because of incomplete and unreliable basic data, we have not attempted to reconstruct Communist strength retrospectively.

Reservations with respect to evidence are explained where appropriate in the individual sections of the estimate. The main conclusions which follow, however, allow for such uncertainties in the supporting intelligence, represent our best appreciation of the overall situation as it now stands, and are based on the assumption that there is no radical change in the scale and nature of the war.

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### CONCLUSIONS

A. During the past year, Hanoi's direct control and share of the burden of the war in South Vietnam has grown substantially. This trend will continue.

B. ~~Manpower is a major problem confronting the Communists. Losses have been increasing and recruitment in South Vietnam is becoming more difficult. Despite heavy infiltration from North Vietnam, the strength of the Communist military forces and political organizations in South Vietnam declined in the last year.~~

C. The major portion of this decline has probably been felt at the lower levels, reflecting a deliberate policy of sacrificing these levels to maintain the structure of political cadres and the strength of the Regular military forces. In particular the guerrillas, now estimated to total some 70,000 - 90,000, have suffered a substantial reduction since the estimated peak about early 1966. Regular force strength, now estimated at 118,000, has declined only slightly, but Viet Cong units are increasingly dependent upon North Vietnamese replacements.

D. Given current Communist strategy, and levels of operations, a major effort will be necessary if the Regular forces and the guerrillas are to be maintained at or near present levels. To do so will require both a level of infiltration much higher than that observed in 1967 and intensive Viet Cong (VC) recruitment as well. Considering all the relevant

factors, however, we believe there is a fairly good chance that the overall strength and effectiveness of the military forces and the political infrastructure will continue to decline.

E. The Communist leadership is already having problems in maintaining morale and quality. These problems have not yet impaired over-all military effectiveness, but they are likely to become more difficult.

F. Difficulties in internal distribution will continue to cause local shortages and interfere with Communist operations from time to time. But we believe that the Communists will be able to continue to meet at least their essential supply requirement for the level forces and activities in South Vietnam described in this Estimate.

G. Communist strategy is to sustain a protracted war of attrition and to persuade the United States that it must pull out or settle on Hanoi's terms. Our judgment is that the Communists still retain adequate capabilities to support this strategy for at least another year. Whether or not Hanoi does in fact persist with this strategy depends not only on its capabilities to do so, but on a number of political and international considerations not treated in this Estimate.