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FROM: WALT ROSTOW
TO : THE PRESIDENT
CITE: CAP67983

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Authority NLJ/CBS 1
By ied, NARS, Date 5-7-84

~~SECRET~~

22. NOVEMBER 1967

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM WALT ROSTOW HEREWITH DICK HELMS
RESPONDS TO YOUR REQUEST FOR AN OBJECTIVE EVALUATION
OF VC LOSS DATA

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT

A WEEK AGO YOU ASKED ME FOR A PAPER DESCRIBING THE
METHODS USED TO COMPILE CASUALTY FIGURES IN THE WAR
IN SOUTH VIETNAM. ALTHOUGH THERE WAS A RATHER FULL DISCUSSION
OF THIS PROBLEM AT BREAKFAST YESTERDAY, I THOUGHT YOU WOULD STILL
LIKE TO HAVE THIS PAPER SINCE IT IS MORE DETAILED AND
SINCE AT THE END IT DOES IDENTIFY CERTAIN OF THE PROBLEMS
IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS FIELD.

RICHARD HELMS
DIRECTOR

ATTACHMENT -1

THE VALIDITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF VIET CONG LOSS DATA

SUBJECT: THE VALIDITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF VIET CONG LOSS DATA

ENEMY KILLED IN ACTION (KIA)

THURSDAY
19 NOV 1967
1:35 PM

1. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE VALIDITY OF THE VIET CONG
KIA FIGURES ENTAILS TWO DISTINCT PROBLEMS: THE ACCURACY
OF THE KIA FIGURES THEMSELVES AND THE RELEVANCE OF THESE
FIGURES TO THE VIET CONG'S MANPOWER POTENTIAL. SIMPLY
STATED, THE QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE ANSWERED ARE: (A)
ARE WE KILLING THE NUMBER OF ENEMY PERSONNEL EXPRESSED
IN THE OFFICIAL KIA FIGURES; AND (B) DO THE KIA FIGURES
REPRESENT LOSSES TO COMMUNIST MAIN FORCE AND LOCAL
FORCE UNITS ONLY, OR ARE THEY A CONGLOMERATE OF MILITARY,
IRREGULAR, AND CIVILIAN CASUALTIES.

2. PROCEDURALLY, COMUSMACV HAS SOUGHT TO INSURE THAT
THE KIA FIGURES REFLECT AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE THE NUMBER
OF ENEMY ACTUALLY KILLED IN EACH GROUND OPERATION.
INITIAL REPORTS ARE MADE BY THE TACTICAL UNITS-- PLATOONS
AND COMPANIES -- DIRECTLY ENGAGED. USUALLY THESE REPORTS
REFLECT AN ACTUAL COUNT OF BODIES FOUND ON THE BATTLEFIELD.
THE COMPLETENESS -- AND HENCE THE VALIDITY -- OF SUCH
COUNTS DEPENDS LARGELY ON THE NATURE OF THE TERRAIN. INC

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CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ACTION. ENGAGEMENTS IN FLAT, OPEN TERRAIN IN WHICH FRIENDLY UNITS CONTROL THE BATTLEFIELD AFTER THE ACTION PRODUCE MORE ACCURATE AND COMPLETE COUNTS THAN THOSE IN JUNGLE AREAS OR UNDER CONDITIONS WHERE THE ENEMY HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REMOVE HIS DEAD FROM THE BATTLEFIELD OR WHERE BODIES MAY SIMPLY NOT BE SEEN BY FRIENDLY TROOPS. GENERALLY, BODIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN, UNARMED WOMEN, AND OLD MEN ARE NOT INCLUDED AS KIA'S BUT ALL BODIES OF MEN OF MILITARY AGE ARE COUNTED EVEN IF WEAPONS ARE NOT FOUND WITH THEM. IN THIS CONNECTION, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT VIET CONG IRREGULAR TROOPS -- AND OFTEN REGULARS AS WELL -- DO NOT CARRY PAPERS WHICH WOULD PERMIT AUTHENTICATION OF THEIR STATUS. FURTHERMORE, IN ANY SINGLE ACTION THE VC MAY USE A MIX OF MAIN AND LOCAL FORCE TROOPS (REGULARS), PORTERS OR OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE ELEMENTS, LOCAL GUERRILLAS AND, SOMETIMES, ELEMENTS OF LOCAL IRREGULAR FORCES (E.G., SELF-DEFENSE PERSONNEL). THUS EVEN AN ACCURATE COUNT OF BODIES DOES NOT PROVIDE FIRM LOSS FIGURES FOR EACH UNIT PARTICIPATING IN A GIVEN ACTION.

3. INITIAL KIA (BODY COUNT) REPORTS ARE REVIEWED AND CONSOLIDATED AT HIGHER LEVELS -- BATTALION, BRIGADE, TASK FORCE OR DIVISION -- AND CROSS - CHECKED TO PRECLUDE DUPLICATE REPORTING OF KIA'S BY ADJOINING UNITS. IN SOME CASES THE INITIAL REPORTS MAY BE SUPPLEMENTED WITH COUNTS DERIVED FROM LOW-LEVEL AERIAL SURVEILLANCE OF THE BATTLEFIELD. OCCASIONALLY, AN ESTIMATE OF ADDITIONAL KIA'S MAY BE ADDED TO THE OBSERVED COUNT BY GROUND COMMANDERS IN CIRCUMSTANCES WHERE PHYSICAL SEARCH OF THE BATTLEFIELD IS NOT FEASIBLE; HOWEVER, THIS IS AGAINST COMMAND POLICY AND IS THOUGHT TO OCCUR LESS FREQUENTLY THAN IN THE PAST.

4. IN GENERAL, THE COMMAND POLICIES AND PROCEDURES OUTLINED ABOVE TEND TO PRODUCE A CONSERVATIVE COUNT OF ENEMY KIA'S. ALTHOUGH SOME NON-COMBATANTS MAY BE ERRONEOUSLY INCLUDED IN ENGAGEMENTS OCCURRING IN DENSELY POPULATED AREAS, THIS MAY BE MORE THAN OFFSET BY EXCLUSION OF FIGURES ON BODIES REMOVED FROM THE BATTLEFIELD UNDER COVER OF NIGHT OR JUNGLE. MOREOVER, THE POSSIBLY INHERENT INFLATIONARY EFFECTS OF DEVELOPING A VALID COUNT UNDER THE PRESSURE OF BATTLE ARE COUNTERBALANCED BY THE UNCOUNTED -- AND UNESTIMATED -- NUMBERS OF ENEMY TROOPS KILLED BY THE HUNDREDS OF DAILY AIR AND ARTILLERY STRIKES WHOSE RESULTS ARE NOT OBSERVED BUT WHICH ALMOST CERTAINLY INFILCT SIGNIFICANT LOSSES ON THE ENEMY.

5. GIVEN THESE INFLATIONARY AND DEFLATIONARY PRESSURES, ON BALANCE, WE BELIEVE THE OFFICIAL KIA FIGURES REFLECT THE GENERAL ORDER OF MAGNITUDE OF VIET CONG COMBAT LOSSES WITH A MODEST CONSERVATIVE BIAS. ATTEMPTS TO VALIDATE THE ACCURACY OF KIA FIGURES FOR SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENTS BY EXAMINING CAPTURED DOCUMENTS HAVE BEEN INCONCLUSIVE. IN SOME INSTANCES, THESE DOCUMENTS HAVE SHOWN THE OFFICIAL COUNT TO HAVE BEEN LOW, AND IN OTHERS THE KIA FIGURES WERE EXAGGERATED. THE EVIDENCE IS TOO FRAGMENTARY TO WHOLLY CONFIRM OR WHOLLY DISCREDIT THE SYSTEM. THUS, ASSUMING RELATIVE CONSISTENCY IN THE REPORTING PROCEDURES, WE BELIEVE THE KIA FIGURES ARE BOTH A USEFUL INDICATOR OF TRENDS IN THE RELATIVE INTENSITY OF COMBAT, AND A GENERALLY CONSERVATIVE, ORDER-OF-MAGNITUDE REFLECTION OF VIET CONG COMBAT.

LOSSES. THESE, HOWEVER, ARE GROSS OR AGGREGATE LOSSES, NOT LOSSES POSITIVELY ASSIGNABLE TO SPECIFIC ENEMY FORCE COMPONENTS. FROM BODY COUNT ALONE WE CANNOT BE CERTAIN OF THE LOSSES INCURRED BY MAIN AND LOCAL FORCES, ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE COMPONENTS (INCLUDING PORTERS), GUERILLAS OR OTHER IRREGULAR ELEMENTS OR, IN SOME CASES, MORE OR LESS INNOCENT BYSTANDERS.

ENEMY WOUNDED

6. NUMBERS OF ENEMY WOUNDED ARE RARELY KNOWN OR REPORTED. NO ATTEMPT IS MADE BY COMUSMACV TO CALCULATE FIGURES FOR ENEMY WOUNDED ON A CONTINUING BASIS COMPARABLE TO THE PROCEDURES USED FOR DETERMINING KIA'S. RATIOS OF THE NUMBER OF WOUNDED TO KIA'S HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED, HOWEVER, FOR USE IN ANALYZING THE VIET CONG MANPOWER SITUATION. THESE RATIOS WERE DERIVED FROM AN ANALYSIS BY COMUSMACV OF CAPTURED DOCUMENTS WHICH REVEALED THAT, DURING 1966, FOR EVERY 100 ENEMY TROOPS KILLED, 150 ARE WOUNDED; OF THESE, 35 SUBSEQUENTLY DIE OR ARE PERMANENTLY DISABLED, WHILE THE OTHERS PRESUMABLY RETURN TO DUTY. THE VALIDITY OF THIS METHODOLOGY, WHICH WAS BASED ON FRAGMENTARY EVIDENCE, IS QUESTIONABLE ON THE GROUNDS THAT THE PATTERN OF CASUALTIES IN 1967 MAY DIFFER MARKEDLY FROM THAT IN 1966 BECAUSE OF CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF COMBAT. WHILE THESE RATIOS ARE NOT UNREASONABLE, WE RECOMMEND CAUTION IN USING THEM TO COMPUTE ABSOLUTE VIET CONG MANPOWER LOSSES.

ENEMY PRISONERS

7. CURRENT PROCEDURES FOR DETERMINING VIET CONG LOSSES THROUGH CAPTURE DIFFER MARKEDLY FROM THOSE USED FOR EITHER KIA'S OR WOUNDED. PRISONER DATA IS NOW BASED SOLELY ON THE ACTUAL INVENTORY OF PROCESSED MILITARY PRISONERS HELD IN CAMPS. PREVIOUSLY, PRISONER DATA WAS BASED ON THE NUMBER OF ENEMY TROOPS REPORTEDLY "CAPTURED" IN BATTLE, BUT EVENTS PROVED THIS TO BE QUITE UNSATISFACTORY BECAUSE SUCH REPORTS OFTEN INCLUDED A LARGE PROPORTION OF "SUSPECTS" WHO SUBSEQUENTLY PROVED TO BE INNOCENT BYSTANDERS. OUR ONLY MAJOR DIFFICULTY WITH THE CURRENT SYSTEM IS THE TIME LAG -- SOMETIMES UP TO A YEAR -- BETWEEN THE CAPTURE OF THE PRISONER AND HIS ULTIMATE ARRIVAL, AFTER PROCESSING, IN A PRISON CAMP. THIS TIME LAG MEANS THE DATA ARE NEVER CURRENTLY COMPLETE, AND PAST FIGURES ARE CONSTANTLY BEING ADJUSTED AND UPDATED TO REFLECT DELAYED CHANGES IN THE INVENTORY. PRISONER DATA ARE THUS INHERENTLY CONSERVATIVE, AND ALTHOUGH THEY CAN BE USED WITH CONFIDENCE IN BROAD MANPOWER CALCULATIONS, THEY SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS REFLECTING CURRENT TRENDS IN ENEMY MORALE, FRIENDLY FORCE EFFECTIVENESS, OR EVEN COMBAT INTENSITY.

ENEMY DESERTIONS AND DEFECTIONS

8. ALTHOUGH THE MILITARY CHIEU HOI DEFECTIOIN DATA PROVIDE A REASONABLY ACCURATE REFLECTION OF DESERTION FROM THE ENEMY, THEY MUST BE USED WITH CAUTION IN VIET CONG MANPOWER CALCULATIONS. CURRENT REPORTING METHODS DO NOT DIFFERENTIATE ADEQUATELY BETWEEN MEMBERS OF IRREGULAR AND REGULAR FORCES, MERELY CLASSIFYING THEM TOGETHER AS MILITARY. SINCE WE HAVE NO BASIS FOR ESTIMATING THE PROPORTION WHICH MAY BE REGULAR, VIET CONG LOSSES THROUGH THE CHIEU HOI PROGRAM SHOULD BE APPLIED TO THE TOTAL OF REGULAR AND IRREGULAR FORCES -- INCLUDING THE VARIOUS "SELF-DEFENSE" CATEGORIES --

AND NOT TO THE REGULAR FORCES ALONE. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE ARE NO RELIABLE DATA AVAILABLE ON SIMPLE VIET CONG DESERTIONS. A RATIO OF ONE UNDETECTED DESERTION FOR EVERY MILITARY CHIEU HOI IS USED IN SOME US OFFICIAL CALCULATIONS, BUT THIS IS A VERY ROUGH FIGURE WHICH LOGIC WOULD SUGGEST IS LOW. ALTHOUGH CAPTURED VC DOCUMENTS REFLECT INCREASING CONCERN OVER A SEEMINGLY MOUNTING DESERTION PROBLEM, THEY RARELY CITE STATISTICS, AND THE FEW FIGURES AVAILABLE ARE OFTEN LISTED IN AN AMBIGUOUS FASHION.

ALLIED LOSSES

9. ALTHOUGH DATA FOR ALLIED LOSSES ARE ACCURATE, DIFFERING CRITERIA FOR LISTING WOUNDED AMONG THE ALLIED FORCES TEND TO DISTORT THE IMPACT OF TACTICAL OPERATIONS AND SERIOUSLY DISTORT COMPARATIVE "CASUALTY" STATISTICS. THE VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES GENERALLY LIST AS WOUNDED ONLY THOSE WHOSE INJURIES REQUIRE HOSPITALIZATION US FORCES, ON THE OTHER HAND, INCLUDE AS WOUNDED-- AND HENCE AS "CASUALTIES" -- PERSONNEL WHO HAVE RECEIVED ONLY LIGHT INJURIES WHICH CAN BE TREATED WITHOUT HOSPITALIZATION. (MANY OF OUR "WOUNDED" REQUIRE LITTLE MORE THAN FIRST AID, AND SOMETHING ON THE ORDER OF 80 PERCENT OF ALL "WOUNDED" US PERSONNEL ULTIMATELY RETURN TO DUTY STATUS.) THIS ANOMALY IN CASUALTY ACCOUNTING HAS CONSISTENTLY MADE US LOSSES APPEAR TO BE DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGHER THAN THOSE OF THE VIETNAMESE. RECENTLY, THE US COMMAND HAS BEGUN TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN HOSPITALIZED AND UNHOSPITALIZED WOUNDED IN CASUALTY REPORTING. THIS PROCEDURE WILL PERMIT US AND VIETNAMESE "CASUALTIES" TO BE COMPARED ON A MORE MEANINGFUL BASIS.

10. THIS NEW PROCEDURE, HOWEVER, WILL NOT RESOLVE THE PROBLEM OF COMPARING ALLIED LOSSES TO THOSE OF THE ENEMY, SINCE IT IS NOT FEASIBLE TO ESTIMATE THE NUMBER OF ENEMY WOUNDED ON A CONTINUING BASIS. WE BELIEVE THE ONLY MEANINGFUL COMPARISON THAT CAN BE DRAWN IS THAT OF ALLIED KILLED TO ENEMY KILLED. ALTHOUGH THE RELIABILITY OF THE DATA IS NOT ABSOLUTE ON THE ENEMY'S SIDE FOR SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENTS, WE BELIEVE THE AGGREGATE WEEKLY FIGURES DO PROVIDE A REASONABLE BASIS FOR COMPARISON AS A MEASURE OF THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRIENDLY OPERATIONS, AS WELL AS A MEASURE OF THE INTENSITY OF COMBAT.

PUBLIC USE OF LOSS DATA

11. IT IS NOT NORMALLY WITHIN OUR PURVIEW TO MAKE JUDGEMENTS CONCERNING THE RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO THE PRESS. IN THIS INSTANCE, HOWEVER, WE WOULD NOTE THE FOLLOWING FACTORS WHICH SHOULD BE CONSIDERED IN SUCH A JUDGMENT:

A. WHILE THE VALIDITY OF THE "BODY COUNT" MAY VARY WIDELY IN DIFFERENT ENGAGEMENTS, THE AGGREGATE FIGURES PROVIDE A USEFUL INDICATOR OF THE LEVEL OF COMBAT AND A CONSERVATIVE, GENERAL MEASURE OF THE DAMAGE INFILCTED ON THE ENEMY.

B. CURRENT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN THE FIELD EFFECTIVELY LIMIT ADMINISTRATIVE AND HUMAN ERRORS TO A REASONABLE MINIMUM.

C. WHILE SOME SEGMENTS OF THE PRESS ARE SKEPTICAL OF THE OFFICIAL KIA FIGURES, THEY DO TEND TO REPORT THEM-- NORMALLY WITHOUT CRITICISM -- ON A CONTINUING BASIS.

D. WITHHOLDING OF THE OFFICIAL KIA FIGURES FROM THE PRESS WOULD REMOVE THE ONE MEANINGFUL YARDSTICK OF THE INTENSITY AND GENERAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TACTICAL OPERATIONS NOW AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC.

E. ALTHOUGH WE SEE LITTLE ADVANTAGE TO BE DERIVED FROM WITHHOLDING THE KIA FIGURES -- EITHER FOR INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENTS OR IN PERIODIC TOTALS -- WE DO SEE ADVANTAGES TO WITHHOLDING FROM RELEASE THOSE FIGURES IN WHICH WE HAVE CONSIDERABLY LESS CONFIDENCE, I. E., THE RATIOS FOR WOUNDED AND THE COMPUTATIONS -- BASED ON INCOMPLETE AND WEAK EVIDENCE -- OF OVER-ALL VIET CONG MANPOWER DIFFICULTIES.

F. THE MOST MEANINGFUL COMPARISON THAT CAN BE MADE BETWEEN ALLIED AND ENEMY LOSSES IS THAT IN THE KILLED IN ACTION CATEGORY ON AN AGGREGATE, PERIODIC BASIS. WE BELIEVE IT MAY NEVER BE FEASIBLE TO DEVELOP RELIABLE, UNCHALLENGEABLE ESTIMATE OF VIET CONG WOUNDED WHICH WOULD PERMIT MEANINGFUL COMPARISONS OF TOTAL CASUALTIES FOR THE OPPOSING FORCES.

G. PRESENTATION OF US CASUALTY DATA IN A FORM WHICH DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN HOSPITALIZED AND UNHOSPITALIZED WOUNDED ON A CONTINUING BASIS WOULD HELP TO DISPEL DISTORTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS INEVITABLY PRODUCED BY THE PRESENT REPORTING SYSTEM.

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