

INFORMATION

83

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

Friday, November 17, 1967
8:30 a.m.

Pres file

Mr. President:

Herewith Nick Katzenbach sets
down his personal view on an appropriate
strategy for Vietnam.

W. W. Rostow

~~TOP SECRET~~

WWRostow:rln

DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4(b)

White House Guidelines, Feb. 24, 1983

By hg, NARA, Date 12-4-91

882

THE UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON

November 16, 1967

Dear Mr. President:

The enclosed memorandum on Viet-Nam represents my personal views which may not be shared by you or by my colleagues in the Administration. For this reason I am sending it directly to you for your consideration.

Only Secretary Rusk, with whom I have not discussed this memorandum, has a copy.

Respectfully,

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach
Nicholas deB. Katzenbach

Enclosure.

The President
The White House.

2/2

THE UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON

November 16, 1967

~~TOP SECRET~~
SENSITIVE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Viet-Nam

Since you are now in the process of reviewing the situation in Viet-Nam, I want to take this opportunity to express my personal views.

I.

Until we can build the GVN as a government and as a fighting force to the point where it can, with moderate levels of outside assistance, both sustain itself and deal adequately with DRV-supported insurrection and terror, we must base our strategy on six fundamental premises:

1. The war is being actively fought on two fronts: One, in Viet-Nam with our military and civilian efforts; the other, in the United States with our efforts to maintain whatever level of popular and Congressional support is necessary to continue our efforts.

2. Hanoi's strategy is based on winning the war in the United States, not in Viet-Nam where our military might obviously forecloses that possibility.

The DRV strategy should not be analyzed in terms of phase 1, phase 2 warfare. Hanoi uses time the way the Russians used terrain before Napoleon's advance on Moscow, always retreating, losing every battle, but eventually creating conditions in which the enemy can no longer function. For Napoleon it was his long supply lines and the

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

DECLASSIFIED

Authority 7L9 85-317

By 28/10/90, NARA, Date 12-15-91
COPY LBJ LIBRARY

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

-2-

cold Russian winter; Hanoi hopes that for us it will be the mounting dissension, impatience, and frustration caused by a protracted war without fronts or other visible signs of success; a growing need to choose between guns and butter; and an increasing American repugnance at finding, for the first time, their own country cast as "the heavy" with massive fire power brought to bear against a "small Asian nation".

3. The war can be lost in the United States. There is considerable justification for Hanoi's belief that public and Congressional opinion will not permit the United States to keep meeting immense costs in men, money, and--above all--severe internal divisions for many more months without an end visibly in sight.

4. The military requirements of Hanoi's strategy are minimal and well within the DRV's capabilities. Even if it never wins a battle, the DRV can create the conditions of growing dissension in the United States merely by denying us crucial victories, inflicting (as well as taking) sizeable casualties and requiring us to maintain a large and expensive force in Viet-Nam. Unless we undertake a full-scale and unlimited war on the North--and almost certainly, even then--this will continue to be well within the DRV's capacities for years to come.

5. Hanoi will continue to fight, so long as it continues to believe it will win the South; and it will continue to believe it will win the South so long as dissension flourishes and grows in the United States. The additional costs we can still impose on North Viet-Nam without invading the DRV weigh far less in Hanoi's scales than the value of continuing a fight which they believe we will be prepared to abandon relatively soon. Unless and until they are persuaded that we are not going to abandon Viet-Nam, they thus have little incentive for negotiation.

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

-3-

6. While the position of the DRV/VC in the field may be weakened by increasing our commitment of men and money to the war and/or reducing our self-imposed restrictions as to how and where we fight, this result is by no means certain. What is certain is that these actions at the same time increase the level of dissent at home and thus bolster the sole basis for Hanoi's hopes.

These actions directly aggravate the four major grounds of domestic oppositions to the war in Viet-Nam.

Our critics think that:

a. We have set ourselves an objective which, despite immense costs, we have not achieved after several years of effort and which we cannot prove we are in the process of achieving. Many see no "light at the end of the tunnel". To some this means principally that our resources are being deflected from urgent domestic purposes. To others there is added the frustration of realizing that the immense power of the United States is unable to cope quickly and cleanly with an undesirable situation in a small, under-developed country.

b. There is a widely-held feeling that the GVN is not bearing its share of the responsibility and burden of the war. To this is added a feeling that the government does not deserve our support because of corruption or other reasons.

c. This idealistic country is, for perhaps the first time, cast in the role of "the heavy" in Viet-Nam. In part, this is traceable to the disparity in the size of the opponents and traditional sympathy for the underdog; in part, to what is viewed as an indiscriminate use of fire power in both South and North Viet-Nam and a popular view that we are indifferent to the welfare of the people of South Viet-Nam; and in part, to measuring success in body counts.

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

d. Finally, there is the fear, often unjustified, of expansion of the war in such a way as to invite Chinese or Soviet intervention.

II.

You have two broad strategic options before you.

1. You can increase the commitment of men and money and reduce the restrictions on how and where we fight in an effort to score a quick "knock-out" of enemy forces in Viet-Nam before dissent at home--which will be greatly increased by these actions--becomes overwhelming.

or

2. You can concentrate on adjusting the United States to a longer pull by gradually attacking the sources of at least much of the growing opposition to the war.

I do not underrate the difficulty of the latter strategy; nevertheless, I think it is the obvious choice for a single reason. The first strategy may let off steam, but it won't accomplish results. It will reinforce dissent--and thus Hanoi's hopes and determination--without destroying Hanoi's ability to continue the war.

By increasing the size of this war, in any one of a number of ways, we can pursue a strategy based on the assumption that Hanoi's forces in the South can be destroyed, and that Hanoi's will to continue the struggle will also end in a reasonable period of time. We should only follow this strategy if we believe that we can destroy the enemy's military forces, eliminate its infrastructure and destroy its will to persist well before American public opinion decides to wash its hands of the whole Viet-Nam problem.

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-5-

If we believe this, if we believe that we do have this capability, then it would be logical to grant General Westmoreland a virtual carte blanche, authorizing an extension of the war into North Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia, remove all target restrictions in the North, make an all-out effort to increase other free world commitments in Viet-Nam, send US troops into the Mekong Delta in a major campaign, etc. (The only limitations would be those forced by international considerations, the danger of directly involving China or Russia.)

In effect, most of this General Westmoreland wants to do. He has been given an extremely difficult mission, and naturally seeks every possible military means with which to carry it out. If I were in his shoes I would do the same thing.

But General Westmoreland is careful not to predict how long the war will last at its present levels. After four years in Viet-Nam he is well aware of the tremendous resilience of the enemy, of their ability to absorb defeat after punishing defeat and still regroup and come back for more. My recollection is that at one of our Non-Group meetings Bug Wheeler, after outlining the dimension of the defeats the North Vietnamese are now suffering in the highlands, said that he thought the North Vietnamese would continue to commit their home army slowly over the next year in order to maintain a continuing military main force presence in South Viet-Nam--a view sharply at variance with the Alsop "end-of-the-main-force" war theory and hardly encouraging in its implications to any hopes for an early end to the war.

In short, the rub is that we can't in this way destroy the continuing capacity of the DRV/VC to inflict heavy casualties and to tie down large numbers of American troops so long as there is a sanctuary in North Viet-Nam, a reserve

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

-6-

of 400,000 troops, and a willingness of Communist allies to provide material support. And, if we cannot destroy the DRV's capacity to continue fighting, it will be our democratic will to fight on--not Hanoi's dictatorial will--that will suffer the harder blow. We will pay the costs of combining frustrated expectations of quick victory with heavy US losses both in men and in political support at home and abroad. Hanoi will at least enjoy the rewards of increased US dissent. Only from Hanoi's point of view is there much to recommend a strategy that promises greatly to increase dissension, impatience, and frustration within the United States without greatly reducing the capacity of the DRV to continue fighting.

III.

The alternative is to pursue a strategy whose principal purpose is to restore the center position here in the United States. If we cannot destroy North Viet-Nam's capacity to fight on without assuming unacceptable burdens and risks and if North Viet-Nam's will to fight on will continue as long as domestic dissent grows--then surely the focus of our attention should be on the front at home. Only in this way can we eliminate the basis for Hanoi's hope that we will abandon Viet-Nam before the GVN is able to withstand Communist pressures on its own.

The time is right for such a "shifting of gears". We have made progress in South Viet-Nam. We could easily maintain it now that we have arrived at a new stage of the war--just as we arrived at a new stage of the war in the spring of 1965. We can now take advantage of what we have accomplished to exercise policy options not previously available to us. How we choose--and what we say about it--will mean a difference both in Viet-Nam and in the United States.

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

Five steps are required to carry out this strategy for strengthening the center at home. Not one of them represents a radical innovation.

1. We must restate our objective in Viet-Nam with greater precision. Our objective should be:

a. to provide the military cover and non-military assistance needed to enable the GVN to grow in capacity and popular support to the point where it can survive and, over a period of years, deal with what will be a continuing and very serious Communist problem. (After it has reached this point we might, of course, continue to render military and non-military assistance at a sharply reduced level. Ideally, our troop strength over the long haul should bear a close relationship to the number of NVA in South Viet-Nam.)

This is a far more limited, far more attainable objective than an alternative formulation we sometimes suggest:

b. to eliminate all significant bases of Communist, anti-government power in South Viet-Nam and to convince North Viet-Nam to allow the South to follow an independent course without outside interference.

The differences are extremely significant. The first objective can be reached, whatever the perseverance of the DRV/VC. The second can be frustrated indefinitely by the enemy unless we alter radically the limits we have so far imposed on our actions (and, perhaps, even then). Progress toward the first is measured by growth of the GVN's capacity; progress toward the second, by body counts. The former recognizes the basic and continuing responsibility of the GVN; the latter does not. Only the former recognizes that there are areas of SVN that the VC have controlled for many years and may control for many more after we have left.

Most important, attaining the first is possible without occupying or destroying sanctuary areas in Southeast Asia; if the second could be accomplished at all, it might well require this dangerous step.

An analysis of the present strategy being followed in Indochina, including consideration of the incremental measures that General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker and the JCS are urging, leads me to the conclusion that-- consciously or unconsciously--all these people are actively pursuing the second ("b") objective. The two objectives are significantly different. If, as I believe, our real objective is "a", then this must be made clear to all of us as well as the American people.

2. With this clarified objective in mind, we must progressively shift more of the weight of the war to the GVN. This would make it clear to all that our objective is a self-sustaining GVN. A progressive and visible shifting of responsibility is the only effective road to regaining public confidence in what we are doing. Even if the result is that the aggressiveness of our pursuit of the enemy is somewhat reduced, that price is worth the benefits.

Many of the dissenters accept the commitment of the United States to help the GVN fight Communist aggression. But they see this as an obligation to assist, not to do the job for the Vietnamese. When they see US casualties consistently higher than the ARVN, when they see the ARVN either unwilling or unable to fight, when they see dissension and corruption in the GVN, they ask whether what we are doing does not get well beyond any reasonable interpretation of our commitment. Many of them would also say that while it may be proper for the United States to use its own forces to hold external aggression, the job of fighting internal subversion should be exclusively that of the ARVN. They do not understand why we need 500,000 US troops to defend South Viet-Nam from 50,000-plus regular PAVN.

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-9-

At the same time we must continue to press upon the GVN the importance of its responsibility for creating a broadly-based progressive government. The GVN should know that many Americans seriously question whether the present Thieu-Ky Government is worth supporting. They point to its many failures and say that the United States cannot bolster this Government to the point where it will gain sufficient support from its own people. They would argue that our military strategy, aimed at killing the opposition, supports this view. They argue that if the GVN is so much stronger than the NLF, why is it afraid to negotiate with them? In short, these people believe that given massive US support for a decade, the government that has not succeeded isn't likely to succeed, and that we are now throwing good money after bad and wasting American lives on a sure loser.

3. Closely related to the above, we should give renewed attention to the effects of our military actions on the civilian population of South Viet-Nam. For example, it is questionable whether the military gains of US operations in populated areas (such as the planned offensive in the Mekong Delta) or of tactics which generate large numbers of refugees outweigh the political losses even in Viet-Nam (except in those special cases like Ben Suc where the tactical gain is clear). But when the cost in domestic support is thrown in, the balance plainly tips.

Rightly or wrongly, too many people are appalled by the brutality of the war. They feel that to fight a war of insurgency with vastly superior fire power is immoral and counter-productive. We use artillery and air power against villages and hamlets which are refuges for the Viet Cong, destroying homes, killing civilians, and devastating whole areas. Some of this feeling may be a traditional sympathy for the underdog, but much of it is simply horror that

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-10-

the United States would level a hamlet or village simply because a few Viet Cong are present. Some feeling (more abroad than in the United States) is based on a feeling that the United States is calloused where non-whites are concerned.

I don't think it is an adequate answer to point to Viet Cong terrorism for two reasons: First, Americans put, and should put, higher standards on their own conduct than they do on that of other people; and secondly, terrorism is more acceptable as a technique of revolution than of government. In modern history, the axe of the Israelis against the British, the French Maquis against the Nazis, the Algerians against the French, the Hungarian revolutionaries against the Soviets, won considerable support. What was morally reprehensible was the overpowering reaction of the legitimate government in each case. Hungarian students who threw home-made bombs at Soviet tanks were heroes, not villains.

Although we are obviously not equatable with the repressive regimes listed above, we do share with them a stigma: for the first time in our history, the United States is cast in the heavy role and this makes many Americans feel uncomfortable. There is much in our own tradition which would oppose inflicting suffering and death on innocent people in order to kill a few guilty ones.

4. We must make clear to the American people that our objective is defined in a way that can be attained without massive destruction of North Viet-Nam, without significant ground operations in any of the present sanctuary areas, and without any further increase in troop strength. Indeed, if I am right about the causes and strength of American dissent and the relevance of this dissent to Hanoi's willingness to continue fighting, we cannot attain our objective unless we restrict the nature and size of our operations as we have in the past.

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-11-

We have too often failed to make this clear. We have talked about honoring our commitments without defining or qualifying them. We have talked about giving the military "what they need to do the job" without defining the job they are doing. We have emphasized that we have a vital national security interest in Viet-Nam without qualifying the nature of that interest. Almost every time there has been a public statement which suggested limitations, those limitations have been overtaken by events. Our statements from the outset on the presence and level of US troops, our many statements on bombing policy, our statements on strategy and its justification, our different statements of objectives--all these have raised questions as to where the limits are and whether limits really exist.

How sure are the American people that: (a) We do not want to invade North Viet-Nam? (b) We will not seek to destroy North Viet-Nam by indiscriminate bombing? (c) We will not invade Laos or Cambodia? (d) We will not mine Haiphong Harbor or bomb Soviet shipping? (e) We will not bomb Chinese airfields in which DRV MIGs are seeking sanctuary?

5. Finally, we should re-examine our bombing policy. We pay a huge price for our bombing policy at home and abroad with very little to show for it in South Viet-Nam. Its supporters maintain that the present costs in terms of domestic and foreign support for the United States is a small price when compared to the future payoff. Unfortunately, that payoff remains in the future and my guess is that it always will. Indeed, the very fact that those who have access to all relevant intelligence continually disagree about its value should be proof at least that its value is dubious.

I do not say that our bombing of the North was a mistake when you authorized it. I would have supported it then, but it is time now that we put it into a new

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-12-

perspective. Nobody really believes that the war can be won with bombs in the North. We may lose it with bombs--here in the United States. (And we lose other objectives abroad as well).

It is very difficult to rationally justify our present bombing policy. I doubt it can convincingly be squared with our stated objectives. This will become increasingly true as pressure mounts for more and more targets in more and more sensitive areas. More people will be killed; more pilots will be lost; more headlines will be made; more defections from our policy will take place. The war will continue to escalate when exactly the opposite should be our objective.

It is true that bombs make the DRV pay a price for its aggression. But, is there any evidence that this is the price they are unable or unwilling to pay?

My own preference would be for a qualified, but indefinite, halt in the bombing. It would be qualified in that I would have no hesitation in bombing visible efforts to expand resupply of the South as well as troop concentration in and north of the DMZ. Such bombing is never criticized and is clearly related to the big war.

There are clear political advantages to this course of action. It would not only remove the stigma of our present policy, but it should put most of the onus for continued war on the DRV. I think the military disadvantages are grossly overstated. It simply isn't possible to maintain that the military value of destroying the Doumier bridge for a few days outweighs the political cost of the headlines it makes. Nor is our policy viewed in terms of our stated objectives credible. We say we do not seek to destroy North Viet-Nam, but our aerial photographs

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

~~TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE~~

-13-

show many residential areas destroyed. Continuous re-strikes of Hanoi and Haiphong come perilously close to straight population bombing. Nor is this avoidable when the targets, the SAMs and the anti-aircraft are located where they are.

I do not think a halt would lead to negotiations, but in time it might. But even if one thinks that the "peace pressures" would have little influence on Hanoi, these pressures would at least be off our back. (I think it would be difficult to resume full-scale bombing if the decision to do so were made, but I think we could manage this by doing it gradually in response to direct infiltration.)

Furthermore, we gain one blue chip. The DRV never knows when we might renew our extended bombing, and that threat may be worth as much as the fact.

If this policy is unacceptable, then I think we should at a minimum stay away from Hanoi, Haiphong, and other glamor targets such as thermal power plants. These get the publicity, cause the losses and accomplish little. If we put these off bounds bombing causes little attention and therefore little defection. But I think this half-a-loaf approach causes more criticism at home from the Hawks and gains less on the other side.

In short, I think the danger of loss of political support for the war by curbing the military is much less than the confidence which would be restored to the middle. And, in my judgment, those who press for a military solution are never going to be satisfied anyway.

IV

Time is the crucial element at this stage of our involvement in Viet-Nam. Can the tortoise of progress in Viet-Nam stay ahead of the hare of dissent at home? All our present evidence points to the fact that progress in Viet-Nam will be steady but undramatic over next year. Yet slow and steady progress may not be enough if, as I suspect, the rate of US disenchantment with the war is growing rapidly. We must, it seems, find a way to change the pace at which events move on the two fronts--Viet-Nam and the United States.

The hope that this change can be accomplished by a rapid acceleration of our progress in Viet-Nam is a slim one. Even if we progressively remove the limits we have imposed on how and where we fight, there is little reason to believe that the end of the road would be significantly nearer. But it is certain that taking such action would greatly increase the volume of dissent at home and thus further encourage North Vietnamese hopes for an early US withdrawal.

Winston Churchill, speaking of traditional frontal conflicts, once said that in war "nothing succeeds like excess." Hanoi is relying on our following that strategy in the very different context of Viet-Nam--a war which has as a principal battleground the minds of the American and Vietnamese people and in which the enemy has the power to deny us the opportunity to show to the public an end to the struggle. In this situation, excessive expenditures of men and money--which will not measurably shorten the war--are the surest route to failure, not to success.

If we can't speed up the tortoise of demonstrable success in the field we must concentrate on slowing down the hare of dissent at home. At pages 7 - 11 above I have set forth in some detail the five general ways in which we could move in this direction. By way of conclusion I want only to suggest five specific measures.

1. We should clarify our objective in South Viet-Nam by updating NSAM 288 of March, 1964. This NSAM, which is

still used by our military commanders, states our objective in the following general terms: "We seek an independent non-Communist South Viet-Nam." From this general statement, the JCS and CINCPAC have derived the following specific mission and tasks for MACV:

- a. "To make it as difficult and costly as possible for NVN to continue effective support of the Viet Cong and to cause NVN to cease direction of the Viet Cong insurgency."
- b. "To defeat decisively the Viet Cong and NVN in South Viet-Nam and force the withdrawal of NVN forces."
- c. "To extend GVN dominion, direction and control over South Viet-Nam." (underlining added)

If I were given this mission I would follow the same strategy as General Westmoreland. But this mission overshoots our real objectives in SEA: to provide the military cover and non-military assistance needed to enable the GVN to grow in capacity and popular support to the point where it can survive and, over a period of years, deal with what will remain a continuing and serious Communist problem.

Unless we help General Westmoreland off the hook by writing a statement of objectives from which a more realistic and attainable mission can be derived, we will continually be faced by "thin edge of the wedge" requests from the military for expansion of the war.

2. Instruct our field commanders, including Ambassador Bunker, to adjust their strategy and tactics to the revised objective.

No one in Washington can second-guess the field on the details of strategy, at least not successfully. Therefore, in the first instance, I think we should ask Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland for their proposals, which we could then review in Washington to make sure they meet our requirements.

In rough outline, I would anticipate that such a change in objective and mission should mean that MACV would deploy its forces so as to minimize their involvement with the population, and to reduce substantially American involvement in those measures which should be the GVN's responsibility. It would probably mean:

- a rigorous review of free bombing zones,
- a policy on refugees which would sharply reduce our vulnerabilities at home and around the world on this festering sore point,
- dramatic new efforts to reduce civilian casualties,
- and an end to the continual military requests for incremental expansions of the war into Laos, Cambodia and North Viet-Nam.

These steps, while controversial with the military, are not radical departures, and would not prevent General Westmoreland from achieving the mission and objective which we have set forth.

3. Demand more of the GVN--not only in the traditional ways, but also in seeking contact and accommodation with the NLF.

I am, of course, wholeheartedly in favor of the current drive to get the ARVN to assume a larger part of the war, the anti-corruption drive, and our other efforts to improve the GVN across the board. I would go further than we have yet gone and tell Thieu and Ky frankly that there are time limits on our commitment at its present level and that they had better face up to that fact and plan accordingly.

At the same time, I would like to see Ellsworth intensify his efforts to get the GVN into contact with the NLF. The risks are obvious, and only Ellsworth can determine the exact pace at which to move. But I feel

SECRET-SENSITIVE

-17-

strongly that we should look toward an accommodation and that Ellsworth can prod the GVN harder in this direction. Both these actions with regard to the GVN are implicit in the restatement of our objective which is discussed above.

4. Stop bombing targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. While, in the main body of this paper, I have advocated a qualified but indefinite halt in the bombing, I recognize that this is a special problem and not necessarily derivable from a restatement of objectives. I do feel, however, that we must at a minimum bring our target system into line with our objectives. Therefore, we should avoid targets which raise doubts as to our often stated position that we are not seeking to destroy the DRV.

5. To tie all these themes together, develop over a period of weeks a public posture which rebuilds the confidence of the American center in our objectives and methods in Viet-Nam.

Such a public policy would entail

- major but not dramatic statements by you and your principal deputies, including General Westmoreland, taking advantage of reports on recent progress;
- public statements by Thieu and Ky re-emphasizing their hope to see peace and the eventual control of South Viet-Nam by Southvietnamese without large numbers of Americans.
- and acts visible to the world showing that our rhetoric is matched by our deeds. The visible acts would be derived from points 2, 3 and 4 above.

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach
Nicholas deB. Katzenbach

SECRET-SENSITIVE