

Thursday, Feb. 8, 1968
6:20 p.m.

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Mr. President:

This is an excellent, well-balanced evaluation,
by the Australian Ambassador in Saigon,
of the Tet offensive.

W. W. Rostow

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AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

7th February, 1968

Dear Phil,

You asked yesterday what assessments we had had from Border about events of the last week in Vietnam. You may be interested to read the attached report received this morning.

Yours sincerely,

R.W. Furlonger
(R.W. Furlonger)

Mr. P. Habib,
Department of State,
WASHINGTON. D.C.

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FOR THE MINISTER

Following is repetition of telegram No. 030 dated 6/2/68 from Saigon.
Begins --

Enemy Tet Offensive.

Preliminary Assessment.

In the week beginning 29th January Viet Cong and NVA forces have demonstrated a greater military resourcefulness and dedication to their cause than most observers here would have believed possible. It will be some time before we know the real objectives of their offensive and whether it is to be ultimately recorded as a victory or a severe defeat. There will be much speculation about its repercussions, but no one will deny that the Viet Cong supported and directed by Hanoi and assisted by the NVA, put up a dramatic, spectacular and memorable performance, and have shown themselves capable not only of great skill in planning and coordinating their strategy and tactics but also of great courage and fanaticism in executing their plans.

2. The major questions are whether this Viet Cong offensive was a final all-out desperation effort to achieve military victory with the aid of a general uprising, or an exhibition of their strength to either to offset the progress being made in the south or to place themselves in a favourable position prior to accepting negotiations in an attempt simply to relieve the heavy pressure being applied on them in all fields and so restore some balance in the picture being presented of relative power and influence. It will also be asked whether the GVN and the allies have tended in the past to under-estimate the strength, resourcefulness and devotion of the Communists, and whether the allied effort here can make a speedy recovery from what must be seen as being a setback to our efforts locally and internationally.

The Plan.

3. When the analysts have completed their researches, it will probably be seen that this offensive has followed the doctrinal steps laid down by Giap and the leadership in Hanoi. Such a cunningly conceived and coordinated campaign must have taken months of planning. The fact that it was kept secret points to the devotion of all those who took part in it, not a word of it seems to have leaked. In II, III and IV Corps, enemy dispositions did not indicate that a major attack on a widespread scale was imminent, and the timing -- for the Tet truce which the enemy had said they would observe for seven days -- was perfect.

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4. The basic strategy was to bring the war simultaneously into all the major centres of population throughout the country where there was plenty of cover, where schools, pagodas and hospitals could be used as command posts, and where the counter firepower and striking force of the allies could not be effectively brought to bear. The overall pattern is not yet clear but it seems that local forces and guerrilla-type squads were the spearhead of the attack, forces made up of men who in many cases had lived or worked in or near the towns and cities by day and donned their uniforms at night or were guided to their goals by local supporters. Targets were carefully selected, access and escape routes were mapped, and it was probably expected that these forces were sufficiently well-known to give the leadership required to incite the local population to join in a general uprising which would both overthrow the government and paralyze the allied forces.

5. The infiltration of large numbers of troops -- perhaps running as much as 3,000 in Saigon -- could have easily taken place in the pre-Tet days when the traditional large scale movement of people carrying bulky parcels had begun, and the police could have been relied on to be even slacker than usual in stopping vehicles and travellers and even more purposeful in foregoing inspections at the offer of a sum of money or a "Tet gift". In some cases main force units waited outside, presumably to back up the units working inside the populated centres or to cover their withdrawals if necessary, or even to move in and take vital installations such as airfields, ports, radio stations and provincial headquarters if the activities of the guerrillas brought the local people massing spontaneously and vociferously to their side. We need not be surprised about the success of the infiltrations, the enemy had time and circumstances going for him particularly the laxity and corruption of the police and the inefficiency of the government's intelligence machine.

The Execution.

6. We do not know yet whether an offensive in the DMZ and I Corps was to coincide with the plan to carry the battle into the population centres. The build-up and threat there might have been designed to facilitate the offensive in the cities by tying up allied forces and generally diverting attention from the cities. On the other hand, an attack there might have been temporarily thwarted by massive U. S. bombardments and by the failure of the weather to provide the required cloud cover.

7. Whatever the case, the fact was that the penetration of the populated areas was successful, it seems, in every instance, and designated targets were hit. In some places the damage was great, as in Pleiku, Kontum, Nha Trang, My Tho and Den Tre, in others, as in Saigon, Banmethuot and Danang, it was quite light. Installations were sometimes occupied, most seem not to have been. In the Delta cities no withdrawal plans seems to exist, and -- according to Westmoreland -- most of the available enemy forces seem to have been committed. In Saigon, the attackers were to be relieved, after 48 hours, of the positions they were meant to be then holding, and, even though this did not occur, they were backed by main force units waiting outside. In all, including I Corps and the DMZ, some 60,000 troops are believed by MACV to have been involved.

The Objectives.

8. The pattern of events does not lead easily to a conclusion about objectives. It does seem at this early stage, however, that the general offensive was in fact launched, designed to bring down the government both by force and by generating a popular uprising. The latter would be brought about by a show of considerable force and audacity, by incitement, by evidence of physical occupation of important installations and government and administrative centres, and by the exposure of the helplessness of the U. S. to bring their power to bear when the battle was to be fought in the very places where the people lived. The fact that the main damage in the towns was the result of the fighting itself, not of deliberate sabotage by the Viet Cong, suggests that the Viet Cong were confident that they would need to make use themselves of the main installations. Thus here is evidence that the attackers of Tan Son Nhut Airfield in Saigon were instructed not to damage it if possible.

9. The conception and the planning were brilliant. The execution, if the above analysis is correct, was not successful--at least in our terms.

(For the Viet Cong; perhaps it was a great victory.)

For the most part the installations were not taken and held. The people although frightened--did not respond and rise up. The Tet-depleted Vietnamese Army and police forces fought back well, and the physical and moral support of the U.S. and the other allies did make itself felt, not only in the defence of their own installations but also in the aid given to the local forces in gunships, flares, airlifts, tactical advice, communications, and in the many other trappings of a highly mobile, mechanised force.

10. In less than one week after the offensive began the VC/NVA forces held not one of the towns or cities they had attacked. (At no time did they take real control.) Small pockets of resistance continued in many places, there was some fighting in the outskirts, and in one or two centres there were uncommitted mainforces still waiting on the outside. Enemy casualties were placed as high as 20,000 dead, bringing their total to over 30,000 since the beginning of the winter-spring campaign last November. Their forces, some still defiant, were on the run or being ferretted out, they had lost thousands of weapons.

11. If the objective was to demonstrate strength per se--in an election year in the U.S. it was successful, because this offensive revealed more clearly than ever before the nature and extent of Viet Cong organisation, discipline and power. It confirmed what has been said many times, that the ultimate solution of the Vietnam problem must be political, not simply military. Viet Cong losses were undoubtedly heavy but, according to MACV, their strength remains formidable, and the Vietnamese people know this.

The effort does not seem to have been a desperate, all-out one, although the Viet Cong have undoubtedly been badly hurt.

12. If the demonstration of strength was to bring the Viet Cong back into the picture, to offset the growing political and military confidence of the GVN and the weight of the U.S. forces here, it was again successful. If it was designed to open the way to negotiations (I remain sceptical on this) they will presumably now give some sign. On the other hand, they could allow events to do their work, knowing that their actions will give rise to a fresh wave of demands overseas for negotiations and of pressure on the U.S. to halt or completely stop the bombing of the north. They will know that the voices favouring a coalition government will be strengthened, because the Viet Cong are demonstrably a political and military force which cannot be belittled or turned aside.

13. Having said this, the possibility remains that this offensive was forced on the Viet Cong by the progress being made in the south. If they were not to react to the increasing pressures upon them they were in danger of gradually losing by default their hold in the countryside. Too many people were saying that the trend of events was no longer in their favour. If this was the objective, its success is questionable. Having been repulsed with great losses and having used such questionable tactics in Vietnam's eyes, the Viet Cong might find that their currency will be further debased by this episode. They might try a second wave, or launch their big move in I Corps, but they will still run the risk of heavy defeats whatever the damage they cause of the fear they inspire. There is no doubt a limit to their ability to keep up such offensives.

Viet Cong Strength

14. Has the power of the Viet Cong been underestimated? I am inclined to think not. In reporting on my provincial tour three weeks ago I noted that there was a realistic acknowledgement almost everywhere of the continuing strength of the enemy, despite our own gains, and of the protracted nature of the struggle ahead. The confidence of the enemy in his own military power has been frequently pointed out, especially in relation to the discussions on the negotiations issue. It was only last year that Westmoreland made his plea for more troops. The difficulties of making the pacification programme work have always been evident. Nor has Viet Cong resourcefulness ever been underestimated.

15. What, then, was at fault? Not underestimation of the Viet Cong strength, I suggest, but failure to insist that the Vietnamese make a genuine effort to protect themselves against insidious infiltration, for only the Vietnamese can do this work, and undue confidence that the Viet Cong would not run the risks of casualties and loss of face which unsuccessful attacks on the towns were almost sure to bring. The Viet Cong did what we hoped they could not do, or would not dare to do, on such a large scale.

The Results

16. There are no easy answers to these questions.

But already the next is upon us--where do we go from here?

The GVN reacted to the crisis like a stunned mullet.

It did not utter for two days, and then only did so at the prompting of the Americans.

The Press which had closed down for the week, was not brought back to life for the emergency, but the Americans have got things moving.

Thieu has called on the people to back the Government, and the Lower House has now met and given its support.

The Assembly itself will no doubt do the same, and the Press will, I think, follow suit.

On the military side the Viet Cong will be pursued.

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17. Our best hope perhaps is that the Government, assisted by the U.S. and the friends of Vietnam, will now take the opportunity to show what it can do for the people in the way of reconstruction.

The ARVN fought well and will continue to improve.

Now the civilians must get to work on the problems of the refugees and the injured, and all the other work involved in restoring normal economic and social life. The chance is offered to gain the confidence of the people, the very people who preferred not to rise with the Viet Cong.

Surely this must be some stimulus to the Government to do more, surely it must give the Government some confidence in itself.

18. I take some comfort personally from the fact that the Vietnamese charged with running the new reconstruction task force are Ky and General Thang because, in my book, they are among the few Vietnamese who have the drive and ability and sense of dedication and national spirit to make a success of this venture and to try to break down the prevailing indifference, corruption, and recklessness of the officials with whom they will have to work.

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