

91a

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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February 10, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Further Reinforcements for Viet-Nam

Bob McNamara and Walt Rostow have given me the gist of the matters discussed at your meeting Friday with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I have had the opportunity to study General Westmoreland's cable (091633Z) to General Wheeler. In the latter, Westy sets forth his estimate of the situation in the four corps areas, his problems there, and his need for further reinforcements from the U.S. He also gives a general indication of how he would use these reinforcements if he gets them.

With regard to the broad overall question of whether we should send additional forces to Southeast Asia at this time, my answer would be affirmative. The situation in South Viet-Nam is too precarious and the possibilities of an unpleasant surprise in Korea or elsewhere in the Far East sufficiently acute that it is an act of prudence to move additional ground forces to the area as rapidly as possible. As for numbers, I understand that the Joint Chiefs have recommended a force of some 15 battalions totalling about 45,000 men which would seem to me to be a reasonable increment at this time.

I have given some thought to the desirability of putting some strings on these forces if they are sent. They might be kept partly afloat, partly on Okinawa pending further verification of their need in South Viet-Nam. I think we should recognize that once they are on the soil of Viet-Nam they are likely to be there for keeps.

Although my initial reaction was favorable to exploring the possibility of keeping them as an offshore reserve, after reading Westy's cable I am convinced that the need for these troops is so evident that he should have them in South Viet-Nam as soon as we can transport them there. Their use can be controlled or at least influenced by the issuance of new strategic guidance to General Westmoreland, a matter which I shall discuss below.

If we decide to send these reinforcements, then the next question is their replacement in the strategic reserve at home. I would support the argument which I understand the Chiefs have made that three reserve divisions be called to active duty and I would hope that they would be a balanced force in the sense of having the necessary supporting units to permit their prompt deployment overseas if required. I think this call-up is justified by the military requirement and that, in addition, it would have some political-psychological value in demonstrating to the world, including Hanoi, that we mean business. It would also serve as a reminder to our people at home that, while we are not technically at war, we are in a situation of similar emergency which places on our citizens duties and responsibilities analogous to those in a state of declared war.

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- 2 -

I am told that the Chiefs also want an extension of tours and a call-up of individual reservists, actions which will require Congressional approval. Unless the military need for these actions can be demonstrated to be truly overriding, I would advise against any measure requiring Congressional action.

Passing now to Westy's cable, I found much of interest in it, some of which I had not appreciated before. In particular, I was struck by the weakened condition of ARVN as he describes it and his estimate that it would take about six months to restore it to full strength. I did not find in the cable how he expects to react to the offensive in the north which may strike the Third Marine Division units across their forty-mile front from the coast to Khe Sanh, using North Vietnamese units totalling about 35,000 and supplied for 60-90 days of intensified combat (See CIA document "Construction and Logistic Activities in the Khe Sanh Area"). If the enemy uses this imposing force with full effectiveness in a battle of attrition for the widely separated Marine positions, he can seriously disrupt the plans which Westy describes in his cable.

Whether or not you decide to send further reinforcements, I would recommend consideration of conveying new strategic guidance to Westy and Admiral Sharp, setting forth in broad terms the way the campaign should be conducted during the coming months.

Such a document, I believe, should include the following points in ample detail to give a clear picture of the results which we would like to achieve in the coming campaign. My views on this matter are influenced by the short paper which I passed to you today, "Enemy Scenario of the Future?"

a. The most pressing matter at this moment is the suppression of the attacks on the cities and the restoration of order throughout the areas of South Viet-Nam under attack.

b. During this period of crisis in the cities and during the unfavorable weather along the frontier, our forces should avoid major actions under disadvantageous conditions of weather and/or terrain. Every effort should be made to avoid giving the enemy a "victory" (real or propaganda) during the winter-spring offensive which seems to have begun. We should not seek battle close to the cross-border sanctuaries of the enemy but rather try to entice him out of the sanctuaries even at the sacrifice of some terrain in order to get him into favorable killing zones. We should not undertake to hold exposed outposts unless their value is equal to the anticipated cost and unless reinforcements are available if needed for the defense.

c. While avoiding combat at a disadvantage, we should build up mobile reserves in readiness to pass to a vigorous offensive with the resumption of favorable weather in March. In the meantime, much of our current military activity should be directed at setting up main enemy elements for a decisive blow during our offensive.

SECRET

SECRET

- 3 -

d. Throughout the coming months, we should maintain the bombing of the north at maximum levels of effectiveness. If we can find North Vietnamese command and control centers, they should be attacked.

Recognizing that it is the goal of the enemy to initiate negotiations under conditions of no bombing of North Viet-Nam for the purpose of reaching agreement on a coalition government, we should devise a political track parallel to the military which would include a joint US/GVN assertion of the principles which must govern any terminal settlement to which we would agree. Such a statement of principles would rule out any coalition government based upon the arbitrary inclusion of members of the National Liberation Front in the Saigon government and would reject any action tending to nullify the new constitutional government but would offer participation in elections to all Viet Cong who will pledge allegiance to the Constitution. The exact terms of such an offer need a careful elaboration which I shall not attempt here.

In a short summary, my recommendation is that we start reinforcing at once but, concurrently, review and clarify our military and political objectives for the remainder of this year.

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