

INFORMATION

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Tuesday, March 12, 1968  
6:05 p.m.

*Pres file*

Mr. President:

Herewith Bus Wheeler's  
detailed response to the two recent  
memoranda of Amb. Lodge:

- on urban police operations;
- on search and destroy  
operations and U. S. military  
strategy in general.

W. W. Rostow

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WWRostow:rlm

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Authority OSD 10-6-78, NSC 8-480

By JK/18, NARA, Date 3-3-92



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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

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11 March 1968  
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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

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SUBJECT: Ambassador Lodge's Memorandum

Authority JCS 9-21-78  
By ip/18, NARA, Date 3-3-92

1. Ambassador Lodge in his memorandum dated 5 March 1968, addresses himself to two major problems and then touches on a number of related matters. The first of these has to do with the level of military forces in Vietnam and their employment. The second has to do with the importance of strengthening the police structure within the cities and towns in order to comb out the Communist organization, so that local political institutions and agencies can operate.

2. Taking this last point first, I am in complete agreement with the Ambassador's very perceptive analysis. In fact, now that the enemy is involved in large-scale infiltration of the cities and towns, the effectiveness of police and security forces has become as important as any other measure. If the towns are lost from within, this would be just as fateful as if they were seized from without. I do have the impression that Ambassador Bunker and the entire mission in Vietnam also agree on the importance of this matter. Current plans to expand the police are consistent with this view and the very elaborate organization under Ambassador Komer, including the special organization for the attack on the infrastructure, are all moving in this direction with all of the imagination and energy at their disposal.

3. With respect to the level of forces and their employment, I believe that there is a widespread misunderstanding about the purpose and the nature of the so-called "search and destroy operations" conducted by U.S. forces in Vietnam. It may be that the term itself is misleading. I define "search and destroy" as offensive operations designed to destroy enemy units, bases and supplies.

4. General Westmoreland has been pursuing three military objectives in South Vietnam, which require that he find and destroy enemy forces:

a. Destroy, neutralize or eject the North Vietnamese Army;

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b. Destroy, neutralize or induce the defection of the Viet Cong military and political apparatus; and

c. Extend the control of the Government over all of the people of South Vietnam and all of its territory.

5. In my view, which is shared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it will be necessary, for a number of reasons, to continue to conduct offensive operations in Vietnam. Among the more prominent reasons are these:

a. Even if the missions assigned to the commander were to be wholly defensive in nature - that is, to defend the government in Saigon, in the provinces and districts and to defend and secure the major population concentrations - it would be necessary to conduct offensive operations against the enemy forces which threaten the government, cities and towns, and the people.

b. The geographic configuration of Vietnam is such that the population frontier is long and indefensible by any system of static defense.

c. If our forces were to fall back along the population frontier, the enemy could mass large forces anywhere in the mountain and jungle hinterland and strike deeply, with force and surprise, into the population areas. Such strong enemy attacks would have excellent prospects for initial success. Then, in order to eject him, it would be necessary to mass large allied forces and subject populated areas to the effects of the heavy firepower which would be required to destroy or eject him. This would lead to the kind of destruction we have seen in Saigon, Hue, and many other cities and towns. Civilian casualties would skyrocket, new refugees would be created, and over a period of time almost total destruction would ensue throughout South Vietnam.

d. Even though it is sometimes more difficult to fight in the deep jungle and mountains, as at Khe Sanh, Dak To and Plei Me, the interests of both the United States and the Vietnamese people are better served by fighting outside the populated areas. Put another way, it is better to have the two divisions which surround Khe Sanh back in the mountains than in

the city of Hue - and it is better to fight the 1st NVA Division at Dak To, for example than in Kontum City or Pleiku.

e. In order to defend the population, it is necessary to patrol in strength in the interior to find large formations and then to strike at them with strength. It is exactly operations of this type which best succeed in keeping the enemy "split up and off balance" so that he can attack less frequently and less effectively against the primary population targets in South Vietnam. These are the operations which now fall into the reporting category of "search and destroy".

Lodge: 6. Concerning two other points made by Ambassador

a. I can find no basis for correlating the length of wars with casualty rates and degree of public support. In this connection, you will find the enclosed statistical comparison (Tab A) of interest.

b. When Ambassador Lodge speaks of censorship, he has put his finger on a problem which has been plaguing General Westmoreland. It seems perfectly clear that we are channeling to the enemy, through the press, information which is extremely helpful to him. This is a real handicap to the Allied forces in Vietnam and certainly one which complicates the successful prosecution of operations.

7. Ambassador Lodge expresses thoughts about the requirement for additional forces beyond those "to enable us to keep faith with the troops in exposed positions". Our forces in Vietnam today, as during the past three years, have been employed primarily to hold off the main forces of the enemy - increasingly North Vietnamese - so that the very process described by the Ambassador could go forward behind their protective screen. By reinforcing from North Vietnam with well over three divisions in two months, General Giap has simply rendered our shield less effective. If I understand General Westmoreland's basic requirement for additional forces, it is simply to prevent the relative balance of force from going badly against him. If the balance of force improves in favor of the enemy, as it has in recent months, the enemy

automatically increases his ability to mount attacks, or to threaten attacks, in an increasing number of places. In his current offensive, he has posed threats in precisely those areas which Ambassador Lodge correctly identifies as being the most critical - the cities, the towns and the concentrations of heavy population.

8. With respect to over-all strategy in Vietnam, I would make this observation. We are now engaged in the most crucial phase of the war. The events of the next three or four months could fundamentally alter the nature of this war. In my view, it is not timely to consider fundamental changes in strategy when we are fully committed in what could be the decisive battles of the war.

*Earle G. Wheeler*

EARLE G. WHEELER  
Chairman  
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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War	Period	Length in Months	Battle Deaths	Deaths/Month
I	Apr 1917 - Nov 1918	19	53,000	2,800
II	Dec 1941 - Sep 1945	45	292,000	6,400
Korea	Jun 1950 - Jul 1953	36	34,000	950
Vietnam	Jul 1964 - Mar 1967	32	19,000	600
	(1961 to date)	86	19,200	220)

- World War II was the longest war we have fought in this century and entailed the highest number of battle deaths per month. Yet I believe that it was fully supported by the American public.

- The Korean War never approached the length of World War II. The number of our battle deaths per month in Korea was less than one-sixth of World War II and substantially lower than World War I. But Korea was certainly not a popular war.

- The war in Vietnam (measured from the introduction of U.S. ground combat units) has been shorter than the Korean War and the death rate has been less than two-thirds.

TAB A