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INFORMATION

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Monday, March 11, 1968 -- 11:35 am

Mr. President:

Herewith a report on post-Tet morale.

In general:

- people are shaken;
- they fear further attacks;
- they are not pro-Viet Cong;
- the outcome (see last para., p. 5) depends on the reestablishment of security and allied initiative.

W. W. Rostow

Salgon 21585

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Authority OSD 10-6-78; NSC 8-14-80

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

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Saturday, March 9, 1968

TEXT OF CABLE FROM SAIGON (21585)

SUBJECT: Provincial Popular Attitudes on Tet Attacks and Aftermath

The Political Section and the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office have prepared an assessment of provincial popular attitudes, as of early March, based upon all material available to the Mission. Reasonably comprehensive information is available on attitudes in urban areas, but there is only fragmentary data on the situation in rural areas. The next HES study will not be available until some time after March 20. The following is a shorter and updated version of a longer assessment of the same subject, which will be transmitted by pouch.

The Tet offensive was a direct attack on the morale and confidence of the people of South Vietnam. Although far from achieving the success for which the enemy hoped, there is no question that it did have significant impact on the countryside as a whole, producing considerable fear of the power the Communists can bring to bear. This impact is likely to be felt for months. What may have been a minimum enemy objective of achieving and consolidating control in the countryside may have been achieved temporarily in many areas in the wake of the assaults on provincial and district towns. Communist armed and unarmed propaganda and food -- collecting teams are reportedly active in much of the countryside. Viet Cong control and influence in many villages and hamlets appears to be adequate to permit fairly large-scale recruiting and intensive propagandizing.

The psychological impact was not all to the advantage of the enemy, however. The excellent overall military performance of ARVN (unfortunately offset in some localities by extensive looting) has on balance produced a new sense of pride and confidence in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. There is a degree of satisfaction in the population that their armed forces and the civilian administration, through their own efforts and backed by a heavy U.S. commitment, were able to throw back the heavy Communist assaults. The enemy was unable to mobilize the people for a general uprising, as he anticipated, though small groups here and there were mobilized for specific purposes, most notably in Hue.

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How long the impact of these various reactions to the offensive will last depends to a great extent on events in the months ahead. The people in the cities as well as in rural areas are apprehensive about the ability of the Government of Vietnam and its allies to provide security, an apprehension which will be allayed only with re-establishment of security in the countryside and reacquisition of the military initiative by the Government of Vietnam and free world military forces.

A probable and quite natural outgrowth of these apprehensions will be an even greater reluctance on the part of individual Vietnamese to commit themselves explicitly to the Government of Vietnam. This tendency may slow nation-building and pacification programs and require more effort and time to stimulate the average citizen to action or commitment.

There has been surprising credence paid to the rumors of Viet Cong/ U.S. collusion to force a coalition government on the Government of Vietnam. The fact that this rumor has been heard in all parts of the country suggests that this is a psychological vulnerability which Viet Cong propaganda is exploiting with success. Public statements by the Ambassador and repeated efforts by members of the Mission to lay this allegation to rest have had only limited success, although in areas where U.S. forces have been heavily engaged and where U.S. casualties have been seen, the rumor has died away quickly.

Attitudes by Corps area follow:

A. I Corps -- Attitudes in I Corps are dominated by the fact that the five provinces in the area are closest to the 17th parallel and are thus closest to the danger of being overrun by the North Vietnamese Army in the event of a Korean-style assault. Morale in I Corps has been fragile for the best part of a year, as a consequence of heavy Communist attacks on the Con Thien and Gio Linh positions, as well as the heavy buildup around Khe Sanh. Communist attack and occupation of parts of Hue for three weeks contributed to further loss of morale in the area as a whole. Recent events have given new life to the rumor, first heard in the spring of 1967, that the U.S. would pressure the Government of Vietnam to abandon the two northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien to the Communists either to obtain peace or simply to improve the military situation. Communist assaults on Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Quang Tin province capitals were quickly contained and thrown back, with heavy enemy losses, but fear of renewed Communist assaults is still widespread among the population. Viet Cong/ North Vietnamese Army forces largely control western (mountainous) portions

of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, and Viet Cong propaganda cadre are active in lowland villages and hamlets. There was some response to the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army attacks by oppositionist elements in Hue, who appear to have joined the Communist Emergency Administration of Thua Thien-Hue, but the population as a whole did not respond to the Viet Cong, despite a prolonged enemy presence in the city.

B. II Corps -- Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army attacks on province and district capitals were generally thrown back in a few days, although in a subsequent attack on Phan Thiet (Binh Thuan province) February 18, the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army were able to hold part of the town for two days before being driven out. In the provinces where there was strong military and civilian leadership (e.g., Khanh Hoa and Kontum), morale has remained generally good, even though Kontum was the site of major fighting and is still menaced by the presence of Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army forces nearby. Morale elsewhere in II Corps is spotty and has been affected adversely in Phan Thiet and Tuy Hoa by looting by ARVN troops. Fighting lasted two weeks in Dalat largely because of a lack of combat troops and a confused command picture, both of which depressed civilian morale. On the whole, simultaneous Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army attacks on nine of the 12 II Corps province capitals resulted in considerably increased fear of, though not allegiance to, the Viet Cong in the region. Here, as elsewhere, there was little evidence of popular response to the Communist call for a general uprising, though in Ban Me Thout, for example, the Viet Cong were able to mobilize about two hundred Montagnard to march on the city with the invitation to join in looting it after its anticipated capture by the Viet Cong.

Viet Cong propaganda activity in II Corps villages and hamlets appears to be considerable, although effects are not yet noticeable. Government of Vietnam military and civilian presence is slowly making itself felt once again outside the province and district capitals to which it had largely been withdrawn during and immediately after the attacks.

C. III Corps -- Overriding concern in most of III Corps is apprehension concerning security. Tet attacks on province and district capitals were not on as large a scale as elsewhere, presumably because some Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army strength was diverted from III Corps for attacks on Saigon. Some villages and hamlets in the area were largely unaffected and untouched by events of the past month, and morale there is unchanged. Renewed apprehensions have resulted from the fact that seven of 11 province capitals have been hit by mortars and rockets since the main

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thrust of the Tet offensive died away. Major Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army units are reportedly operating in the provinces surrounding Saigon, which has had a predictably depressing effect on morale in the areas involved. Such enemy strength also means more Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army presence in populated rural areas of Gia Dinh, Binh Duong, Bien Hoa, Hau Nghia, and Long An provinces than has been the case for well over a year. While information on conditions in rural areas is sparse, indications of heavy propaganda and recruitment activity are widely reported. Impact on the people is hard to document, but in absence of effective Government of Vietnam counteraction, we must assume people will adjust to improved Viet Cong power positions and will see no alternative to providing food and recruits to the Viet Cong when demanded. Overt Viet Cong hamlet administrations reported by the district chief to have been established in five remote areas of Binh Long province, although it does not appear that the Communists have been able to expand their control to this extent in other rural areas of III Corps. No signs of popular enthusiasm for Viet Cong in III Corps, and most members of Viet Cong Hamlet Councils in Binh Long appear to have been appointed to positions by Viet Cong hard core but did not volunteer for these jobs.

In several areas of III Corps the Communist propaganda cadre appear to be spreading the jingle, "Blood will flow in May, there will be peace in June." This may indicate an effort to provide the excuse of one more big effort and then peace will come, when the Viet Cong make heavy demands for food and recruits, as they now are reportedly doing. We have no reports on popular reactions to these heavy demands, but cannot believe this will make the Viet Cong more popular.

In the strongly anti-Communist northern Catholic refugee villages near Vien Hoa city, people have formed self-defense organizations and are strongly committed to the Government of Vietnam. The Catholics here have recognized and accepted the necessity for damaging or destroying their homes in order to route the Viet Cong. There have been some encouraging indications of Cao Dai cooperation with the Government of Vietnam in Tay Ninh in driving Viet Cong out of villages and towns and in connection with recovery operations.

D. IV Corps -- The public attitudes in IV Corps are a special case, for they are conditioned by perhaps the most prolonged exposure to more or less continuous Communist activity for the past 20 years. When the Communist insurgency was reactivated in 1959, it moved out of Communist base areas in the U Minh area of Ca Mau Peninsula and the Plaine Des Joncs, near the

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Cambodian border, where the Communists have been in virtually full control since 1945. Government of Vietnam administrations in An Xuyen, Kien Tuong, Kien Phong, and parts of Kien Giang have largely been shells for years, while Viet Cong activity in Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, Kien Hoa, Chuong Thien, and Vinh Binh has been on a formidable scale since 1960.

The Viet Cong assaults and the destruction and looting by ARVN that accompanied and followed them had a negative effect on civilian morale and attitudes. Fear of renewed assaults continues to affect popular attitudes towards the Government of Vietnam. There was and is popular resentment that the Viet Cong violated the Tet holidays, but Communist forces remain poised to strike many province and district capitals from positions located, in many cases, only a few kilometers from the centers of the towns. Our impression is that resentment against the Communists is not nearly as strong as prevailing fear of them and of what they may do in the next round of assaults. Behind the shield of Communist forces around the towns the Communist political cadre are reportedly actively working over the population in the rural areas, with indications of active recruitment of additional Viet Cong replacements and whole new units being formed or upgraded from local to main force level. The people may not like the Communists, but what sparse indications we have suggest they are responding to the reality of Communist power in many areas.

Nevertheless, in IV Corps, as elsewhere in the country, there is no enthusiasm for the Viet Cong and no general belief in Communist victory. The Tet offensive has been a heavy blow to popular morale, but there has been considerable recovery since then, and there is a feeling of achievement in many areas that a major Communist assault has been thrown back.