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INFORMATION

Wednesday, March 27, 1968  
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*Press file*

Mr. President:

Herewith a well balanced on-the-record interview between Bob Korner and Spencer Davis and Lew Gulick of AP.

W. W. Rostow

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5 Mar

Interview with Ambassador Robert W. Komer

Deputy to COMUSMACV for Pacification

Question 1: "How does 'The Other War' stand since the Tet offensive, both in psychological and physical terms?"

Answer: "By and large, the 'Other War' impact of the Tet offensive now appears to have been more psychological than physical. Despite the tragic losses -- some 650,000 Tet evacuees at the high point, about 7,500 civilians killed and 15,500 wounded, around 95,000 homes destroyed or damaged, and extensive damage to business facilities and transport nets -- South Vietnam has displayed considerable recuperative power. Evacuees have now declined to under 400,000, extensive urban rebuilding and resettlement is underway for the homeless, medical facilities have been largely restored, and ample food is available. Prices are back down near pre-Tet levels, most key roads and waterways have been reopened, and traffic on them is slowly increasing.

"However, economic recovery in general has been sluggish as business confidence is only slowly returning. Insecurity and fear of further VC/NVA attacks remain key problems in many cities and even more so in the countryside.

"In pacification, too, the more serious damage seems psychological rather than physical. While rural pacification unquestionably received a substantial setback, especially in the IV Corps Delta area where over half our losses were suffered, the loss of hamlets and resources has proven much less than earlier feared. Now that enough time has elapsed to assess these losses carefully, it appears for example that less than 480 small outposts and watchtowers out of about 5,000 were abandoned or overrun -- chiefly in the Delta. Out of some 8,500 hamlets with some degree of government presence, only about 200 seem to have reverted to VC control, though many more have been downgraded from relatively secure to contested status. Of the local security forces, about 6,600 RF/PF, 460 police and 160 RD cadre were killed or captured through the end of February. Desertions were also surprisingly low.

"In fact, the great bulk of the GVN's pacification forces are already mostly back at their posts. More than 90 per cent of

the 4,000-odd PF platoon and 900 RF companies are back performing pre-Tet missions. As of late March, 464 of the 595 black pajama RD teams are back in the hamlets -- about 77 per cent. This is encouraging.

"In Southern I Corps, II Corps and III Corps, the pacification program is already moving forward again. Recovery is slower in IV Corps and Northern I Corps. Our biggest concern in all areas lies in the greater fear and apathy among the rural population, some loss of confidence in GVN ability to protect them, and a greater defensive-mindedness among GVN security forces worried over renewed VC attacks. These intangible factors are difficult to measure, but we think they are already changing for the better."

Question 2: "What lessons from the Tet assault have been learned which can help against the next general offensive which the Communists say they plan for this summer and fall?"

Answer: "The most obvious lesson is always to expect the unexpected. I doubt the GVN really expected such blatant violation of the Tet truce. In my judgment, the initial success of the enemy's Tet offensive sprang largely from a combination of optimum surprise and meticulous pre-planning. He gained local surprise both by attacking during Vietnam's biggest holiday when the GVN was most off guard and by attacking cities rather than the hamlets.

"But another key lesson from the Tet offensive is that despite surprise, the enemy lacked the capability to sustain his initial success in penetrating many towns. He did not get the RVNAF collapse or popular response he expected. If he was actually so much stronger than previously estimated, why couldn't he hang on longer or exploit more fully? So I see a second lesson of the Tet offensive in the enemy's lack of sufficient strength to exploit his initial advantage.

"We have also learned that we must devote more attention to protecting the cities, although it is doubtful whether the VC could duplicate the special conditions of Tet 1968. In fact, while Hanoi propaganda keeps skillfully talking up a "second

wave," it hasn't gotten off the ground for almost two months. The enemy may well try another "general offensive," but if his losses next time are anything like his losses last time it will further impair his remaining capability for protracted war."

Question 3: "In view of the step-up in military activity, is the pacification program as important as before in determining the outcome of the war? Why?"

Answer: "The relative contribution pacification can make to "the outcome of the war" will vary with its length. Pacification is essential to achieving a viable South Vietnam with full support in its own countryside, but it is a relative slow, undramatic, painstaking process requiring a period of years. Thus its relative contribution in relation to other factors necessarily depends partly on how long the Vietnam war lasts. If, as many believe, Hanoi will continue pressing a greatly stepped-up military effort in an attempt to gain an early decisive advantage and then perhaps seek a political solution, then large scale military action will naturally remain on center stage. However, whether the war ends soon or lasts in one form or another for several years, the GVN must still secure the countryside and gain the willing support of the rural population before it can establish a viable nation."

Question 4: "Will the main burden of pacification continue to rest with the Government of South Vietnam and if so, what should it do to meet the post-Tet situation?"

Answer: "President Thieu intends to push ahead actively with pacification. While we are planning to lend full support, the US role should remain one of technical advice and logistic help. Pacification should continue to be primarily GVN business. The Vietnamese are best equipped to provide local security, re-establish local self government, and meet the needs and aspirations of the farmer.

"To meet post-Tet needs, I believe that the GVN plans to place greater emphasis on those efforts which counter the enemy in the countryside, such as resecuring key roads and waterways, upgrading and strengthening the territorial security forces,

pressing the attack on the VC infrastructure, reviving economic growth -- especially in agriculture; and expanding the GVN presence in rural areas. 1968 provincial pacification plans are being modified promptly in those areas where needed."

Question 5: "What should the US Government do?"

Answer: "On pacification, we should lend every effort to helping the GVN regain the pacification momentum which was developing during 1966-67. I believe that this gradual improvement, which offered promise in 1968, was one of the reasons leading the enemy to launch the Tet offensive. At the same time, we must help the GVN contend with the new problem of recovery in the cities. We must assist the remaining 400,000 evacuees caused by the Tet offensive; we must help rebuild 95,000 destroyed or damaged homes; and we must help the many small businessmen and farmers who were affected.

"In sum, pacification is still alive and kicking, despite the early tendency of many to pronounce it dead. It now seems clear that those who counted out pacification in the immediate aftermath of the Tet offensive were over-reacting and speaking prematurely before the returns were in. We unquestionably suffered a real setback -- especially tragic in terms of innocent civilian losses -- but the enemy suffered grievous losses, too. The real question is whether we can recover and forge ahead more quickly than he. I believe that we are and can, given perserverance and will."