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LAIIRD MEORANDUM TO PRESIDENT ON VIETNAM TRIP: March 1969

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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

March 13, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Trip to Vietnam and CINCPAC, March 5-12 1969

At your direction, I have now spent five days reviewing, with General Wheeler, the military situation in Vietnam. Two of these days were spent in consultations with Ambassador Bunker, Generals Abrams and Goodpaster and their colleagues, and South Vietnamese leaders, including President Thieu, Vice President Ky and Prime Minister Huong. Two other days in South Vietnam were spent in the field. I was able to visit I Corps, III Corps and IV Corps, the areas where the major part of the current military activity is taking place. In the field I saw elements of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. Finally, I spent a day-and-a-half at CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii, discussing with Admiral McCain and his staff their views on the current status of affairs in Southeast Asia.

General Wheeler and Assistant Secretary Froehke were in Thailand for one day and will submit separately their observations about the situation there. General Wheeler has also prepared a report for you on his views on certain key Vietnam issues.

In this report I will make, first, some general observations. Thereafter, I will review in somewhat more detail:

- . The current military assessment, including the issue of retaliation for the recent military attacks and the shellings of major population centers.
- . The status of our forces, specifically, whether General Abrams has everything that he needs in men and equipment to insure the maximum safety and security of our personnel.
- . The present readiness and progress of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).
- . The plans for withdrawal of American forces.
- . Termination Day ("T" Day) Planning.

Finally, I shall draw some conclusions and make some recommendations.

NOTE: Memorandum has been declassified by NSC, attachments only require review for declassification.

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General Observations

The trip I just completed to South Vietnam constituted the initial opportunity anyone from the new Administration has had to look first-hand at the military situation there. The trip was, therefore, in many respects a beginning. Both practically and symbolically, it was the beginning of a concerted and dedicated attempt by your Defense leadership to come to grips with the complexities and practicalities of the Southeast Asia conflict. The essential purpose of this aspect of the trip was to determine how we could achieve our objectives in Southeast Asia, consistent with our vital national interests.

But my presence in South Vietnam constituted a beginning, too, for our military leadership there. Just as it was their duty to provide for me the picture of what is happening in Southeast Asia, it was my duty to provide for them the realities of the situation in the United States. Hopefully, each of us accomplished our task.

In attempting to make the determination about how we could achieve our objectives, I used four basic assumptions:

1. No breakthrough in Paris is likely in the near future which will achieve a political resolution of the conflict.
2. We will not escalate beyond the limited objective of attempting to insure for the South Vietnamese people the right to determine their own political and economic institutions.
3. Self-determination requires a capability for sustained self-defense and self-reliance.
4. The North Vietnamese will not voluntarily abandon their aim to secure political control of South Vietnam.

The uniform view of U.S. civilian and military leaders in Vietnam, of the CINCPAC staff, and of the GVN leadership is that we now have and can retain sufficient military strength to preclude the enemy from achieving any kind of military verdict in South Vietnam. At the same time, considering the restrictions with which we are compelled to operate in seeking our limited objectives, none of these men forecasts a military victory for U.S. and allied forces within the foreseeable future. — UWD

That, in essence, is what our military leaders in South Vietnam told me. I believe of equal importance is what I conveyed to them. In the sense that beginnings constitute breaks with the past, I emphasized that the American people expect the new Administration to bring the war

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to a satisfactory conclusion. The people will not be satisfied with less. A satisfactory conclusion, I emphasized, means to most Americans the eventual disengagement of American men from combat.

Again, in the context of beginnings and breaking with the past, I told our people your Administration is not being held responsible for past decisions. The decisions which committed more than half-a-million troops, nearly \$100 billion of resources, and more than 33,000 American lives are behind us. They represent "sunk" costs.

The decisions and the costs the American people and the new Administration are interested in, I stressed, are those in the future. Accordingly, I told our leaders in South Vietnam the key factor in sustaining the support of the American people is to find the means by which the burden of combat may promptly, and methodically, be shifted to the South Vietnamese. This must be done while continuing to insure the safety and security of our own and allied forces and while working towards the objective of self-determination for the South Vietnamese. These aims, I pointed out, are not in conflict. They can, and must, be attained as a package. That is the challenge posed for and by the new Administration.

The Current Military Assessment

Since the last week in February, the enemy forces have been engaged in a new offensive in South Vietnam. This has consisted primarily of attacks by fire against American and Allied military bases. In addition, there has been a troubling frequency of attacks on the civilian population, including rocket attacks on Saigon, Danang and Hue. These attacks are clearly inconsistent with the understandings that provided the reported basis on which the bombing of North Vietnamese territory was stopped.

From the military standpoint, the current offensive appears to be destined for failure. Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, our commanders in the field, and the leaders of the Government of Vietnam are in unanimous accord that the enemy's efforts will gain no territory, nor will they bring about any permanent reduction in the level of pacification. The recently initiated enemy action has had little impact on the morale of the South Vietnamese people and their support for their Government. At the same time, this escalation of activity has increased substantially the rate of U.S. and South Vietnamese casualties, and has brought into public question the validity of the assumptions which led to the elimination of the bombing of North Vietnam.

It would appear that the enemy's objectives are not primarily military, but rather are political and psychological. Perhaps most important is the enemy's desire to demonstrate that he retains the ability to control the level of the combat in South Vietnam. By so doing he probably hopes both to achieve greater negotiating strength in Paris and

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to increase the amount of disaffection within the United States. The enemy's goal appears to be that of producing pressure which will lead to an early and disorderly withdrawal of American forces. In the view of President Thieu, Hanoi also feels compelled to attempt to show its own military personnel and civilian population that the NVA/VC are in control of the situation in South Vietnam and have not entered into understandings with the U.S. in relation to the bombing halt. The MACV staff informed me that enemy attacks, since initiation of the current enemy offensive have been below the level of those of the Tet and May offensives in 1968, as have been the casualties on both sides.

Our military leaders in South Vietnam assured me that this offensive can and will be contained, but they also conceded the enemy's ability to conduct similar offensives in the future, at least on an intermittent basis. This continued capability on the part of the enemy derives from certain intractable factors in the Vietnamese situation. The forces of Hanoi and the NLF continue to be supplied with sophisticated equipment and weapons, such as 122 mm rockets, from Soviet and Communist China resources. In addition, the enemy forces are able to take refuge and sanctuary across the borders of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. The Laotian and Cambodian sanctuaries are of great importance in the enemy's ability to withstand our overwhelming superiority in mobility and fire power. Moreover, Cambodia has become increasingly important in the infiltration of supplies and men, and in the command and control of the enemy forces.

Consideration should be given to border area operations that will at least temporarily diminish the advantage to the enemy of our self-imposed geographical restrictions. Unless we are willing to expand greatly the geographic confines of the conflict, however, the availability of sanctuary areas for the enemy will continue to contribute to the impossibility of a final military solution.

Insofar as U.S. and allied military efforts are concerned, steady progress is uniformly reported. For example, in I Corps both General Cushman and General Stilwell cited significant advances in eliminating enemy influence, including the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). General Cushman, however, informed me that an additional two years would be required before he could see the situation as being completely in hand. Insofar as the VCI is concerned, Ambassador Colby, the Deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), estimates that the anti-VCI program, the so-called "Phoenix" campaign, has eliminated perhaps 16 thousand of the 83 thousand estimated VCI. At the same time, he recognizes that these VCI losses have probably been replaced. A successful anti-infrastructure effort will thus require a substantially higher rate of attrition than has yet been realized.

Militarily, the situation in III Corps is coming more and more under control. General Abrams' tactics and precautions have virtually foreclosed the risks of significant enemy incursion into the capital city of Saigon. The mortar and rocket attacks have been infrequent and unimpressive in number. In IV Corps, as well, the military situation is steadily moving in a direction favorable to the Government of South Vietnam and the United States. But Major General Eckhardt, the senior U.S. Military Advisor in IV Corps, recognizes that the pacification effort is proceeding slowly in this traditional VC stronghold.

Similarly, the pacification effort has reached the point where more than 79 per cent of the South Vietnamese population is credited to the "relatively secure" category. This category includes so-called "A", "B", and "C" hamlets. The "C" category, which includes about 30 per cent of the population, is pivotal and subject to ready reversion to the "contested" classification. "A" hamlets remain relatively rare. There is none, for example, in the strategic area of III Corps immediately north of Saigon which I visited. Thus some appreciable VC influence continues to exist for the major share of South Vietnam's people.

The basic problem remains that of achieving permanent South Vietnamese governmental control over the country. Although Ambassador Bunker gives persuasive documentation of steady political growth by the Government of Vietnam, this progress is difficult to translate into nationwide security. Even greater national exertion will be necessary to bring GVN administrative and political structures into the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam. This would be a difficult task under peaceful circumstances. It is herculean while hostilities continue at the present level.

Substantial de-Americanization of the war is an indispensable precondition, it appears, to the healthy growth of indigenous political institutions. This thesis was highlighted in a comment made to me by the Senior Province Advisor assigned to Go Cong Province in the Delta. This advisor remarked that he sees his job as being "to put myself out of business as quickly as possible." We should all regard that as our job in Vietnam. This would be consistent with the attainment of U.S. objectives in this area.

In short, General Abrams has made remarkable progress in achieving a measure of military superiority throughout South Vietnam. The pacification program, which must depend primarily and increasingly on South Vietnamese efforts, is also proceeding, though at a slower rate. But none of our officials, either military or civilian, is under any illusion that the battle in South Vietnam can be brought to a military conclusion within six months, a year or even several years. Options, over which we have little or no control, are available to the enemy

for continuing the war almost indefinitely, although perhaps at a reduced intensity. Under these circumstances, and unless some change can be made in the relative contributions of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, we are faced with an American killed-in-action rate which could run in excess of 100 a week, and at the enemy's initiative could be increased to multiples of that rate.

A matter that requires the closest scrutiny is the question of retaliation for the NVA/VC violations of the Paris understandings. Whatever the deliberate ambiguity of these understandings, there can be no doubt that the rocket attacks on Saigon, Danang and Hue are completely inconsistent with the assumptions which underlie the bombing halt. We are, therefore, faced with the question of appropriate response to these indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population. Obviously, the question of retaliation, as well as its nature and extent, should be considered in the context of bringing us closer to our objectives in Southeast Asia and protecting our credibility. We should not be interested in merely "getting even," but rather in advancing vital U.S. interests.

These indiscriminate enemy attacks are not militarily significant. As of the preparation of this report, the attacks had not added in any substantially new way to the jeopardy of U.S. forces. The attacks, furthermore, have as yet done little to affect adversely the morale of the South Vietnamese public. In the view of President Thieu, they are designed primarily to improve the morale of the North Vietnamese by demonstrating a residual ability to control the level of the conflict in the south.

The last rocketing of Saigon occurred on the morning of Thursday, March 6. Since then, enemy rockets have been launched against the city of Hue. In my opinion, any further significant shelling or rocketing of Saigon, Danang, or Hue should bring about an appropriate response on our part. This leaves, of course, the key question as to what kind of response would be appropriate. In my conversation with President Thieu, he stated that it should be a wise and measured one, not disproportionate to the level of the enemy attacks. He also suggested that the response might be political or diplomatic, rather than military. As I see it, a response which would entail any extensive bombing of North Vietnam would yield us little militarily. Though it might demonstrate to the South Vietnamese our continued commitment to their cause, it would serve to equate justifiable military activity on our part with unjustifiable and indiscriminate attacks on the enemy's part. It would lead to a renewal of the criticism from many factions within both the United States and the world community, and would tend to put us into the position vis a vis world and U.S. opinion in which the previous administration found itself just about a year ago.

As I indicated in a separate message to you on March 9, I believe we stand to lose, on balance, if we are encouraged to actions which serve to equate military action on our part to indiscriminate terrorism on the enemy's part. I believe it would be reasonable to confine ourselves to consideration of political and diplomatic alternatives to the indiscriminate shellings. A temporary suspension of attendance at the plenary Paris sessions might be effective. If the North Vietnamese are eager for U.S. withdrawal and resolution of the conflict in SVN, such a temporary recess might be more of a burden on them than a military response. North Vietnam would be cast in the role of impeding progress to peace and would take the brunt of adverse world opinion.

To the extent further military action may be indicated against the enemy's current offensive, we should look for a response which would work to our advantage, either by securing some immediate military gain or by bringing us closer to genuine substantive discussions in Paris. A well-considered and effective operation against some enemy military target in the border areas might provide both an appropriate signal and some military benefit. I will be prepared to discuss this issue further with you privately and with the National Security Council.

Status of U.S. Forces -- Men and Equipment

Under the superior leadership of General Abrams, our commanders and our men in the field exhibit the most heartening qualities of dedication and performance. They are confident of their ability to counter and throw back any enemy attack anywhere in South Vietnam. Our men are not only well led, but they are also well equipped and provided for. Not the least among the factors contributing to high morale among our forces is the realization that the most prompt and modern medical care is available. I had the opportunity personally to see how this medical care is being provided in one of the many American hospitals which exist throughout the country. I was assured by General Abrams that he needs nothing further in the way of men, equipment or facilities to insure the maximum safety and security for U.S. forces.

A striking illustration of the complete adequacy of our military support can be seen in the comparative figures on air ordnance expenditures. In World War II, air ordnance utilized by the U.S. in the European and Mediterranean theaters amounted to 1.5 million tons. The Pacific theater accounted for 0.5 million tons. In the Korean War, the total expended by U.S. elements was 0.6 million tons. World War II and the Korean War together thus accounted for 2.6 million tons. By way of comparison, during the years 1966 through 1968, 2.8 million tons have already been expended in Southeast Asia.

Readiness and Progress of RVNAF

I recognize that the RVNAF modernization program had been designed to create an RVNAF capable of coping with insurgency that could remain if US/NVA forces withdrew. I was disappointed, though, by the relatively low rate of progress evidenced toward raising the RVNAF capability to assume more of the burden of the war.

In total, the regular, irregular, and police forces of South Vietnam now include over one million men. The arms and equipment furnished by the United States have increased in quantity and quality. I am recommending that we advance our plans and furnish additional items needed to achieve full modernization for these indigenous forces. I am doing so, however, solely on the basis that this will permit us immediately to begin the process of replacing American forces in South Vietnam with better trained, better led, and better armed South Vietnamese military and para-military personnel.

I regret to report that I see no indication that we presently have a program adequate to bring about a significant reduction in the U.S. military contribution in South Vietnam. The development of such a program should receive our first priority. For example, despite a strong recommendation made, I understand, last summer that the promotion policy of ARVN should be adjusted so as to rectify the substantial shortages in officers in the ranks of captain through colonel, substantial shortages still exist. Progress has been slow. The need for a drastic change in promotion policies apparently has been accepted in principle and potentially adequate corrective programs have been initiated but progress continues to be slow.

Similarly, although our military leaders have recommended the adoption of the accelerated Phase II modernization program, I was given no indication that its completion would enable us to effect any substantial reduction in American forces in South Vietnam. As mentioned earlier, the present RVNAF modernization program was designed only to build up the South Vietnamese forces so that they could cope with VC insurgents. Our military authorities believe neither the South Vietnamese manpower base nor any possible modernization program would enable the RVNAF to cope alone with a threat comparable to the present level of aggression. This has been the assumption from the inception of the RVNAF improvement program. However, I do not believe we can accept the proposition that U.S. forces must remain in substantial numbers indefinitely to contain the North Vietnamese threat, if political settlement proves unobtainable. The heavy expense of RVNAF modernization cannot be justified as a measure merely to permit the GVN to cope with local insurgency.

The presentation given to me by the MACV staff was based on the premise that no reduction in U.S. personnel would be possible in the absence of total withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops. I do not believe that our national interests, in the light of our military commitments worldwide, permit us to indulge in this assumption. Nor do I feel that true pacification and GVN control over its own population can ever be achieved while our own forces continue such a pervasive presence in South Vietnam.

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Our orientation seems to be more on operations than on assisting the South Vietnamese to acquire the means to defend themselves. Thus, for example, we have continued to tolerate notoriously incompetent Commanders in the Fifth and Eighteenth ARVN Divisions in the key III Corps region. I sense, too, a tendency on the part of both our own people and the GVN to discount somewhat the seriousness of the high RVNAF desertion rate. The emphasis can and must now be shifted to measures through which South Vietnam can achieve a self-defense capability that will strengthen our joint hand in Paris and prevent ultimate military defeat if political settlement proves impossible.

Planning for Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

The question that arises is not whether we should do more in South Vietnam, but rather whether we should do less. No one now suggests the necessity for sending more U.S. troops to Southeast Asia. But at the same time, no one has furnished me with any detailed analysis of the necessity for the continued presence of over 549 thousand Americans in South Vietnam and Thailand.

We are presently able to contain the enemy militarily and to maintain mass military pressure on him. With an appropriate improvement in the performance of the Armed Forces of South Vietnam, we should be able to retain this posture with a simultaneous diminution in the U.S. share of the total military effort. This will require full study of the best way to effect the maximum replacement of U.S. combat forces with those of South Vietnam. With your approval, I will direct that such a study be undertaken immediately.

In the meantime, I believe it is essential that we decide now to initiate the removal from Southeast Asia of some U.S. military personnel. The qualitative and quantitative improvement of the RVNAF to date, although perhaps less than desired, should permit us to redeploy from Southeast Asia between 50 to 70 thousand troops during the remainder of this calendar year. I am convinced that this will in no way jeopardize the security of the remaining U.S. and Allied forces and that such a move is necessary to retain U.S. public support for our continued efforts in South Vietnam. Embassy officials in Saigon suggested to me that any reduction on our part would trigger proportionate reductions in other allied forces. Given the present highly disproportionate contribution of South Vietnam's Asian neighbors, as compared with our own, such reduction on their part would be unwarranted. But even if they were made, withdrawal of Korean, Thai, Australian and New Zealand troops in an equal percentage would not significantly affect the total military strength confronting the enemy. Moreover, it is clear that South Vietnam's leaders expect and are entirely ready for a reduction of this size. President Thieu has indicated this repeatedly in public pronouncements. He expressed

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this opinion forthrightly in our private discussion on March 8. At the same time, I feel very strongly that we, rather than the GVN or the possible reaction of other troop-contributing countries, should determine when and how many American soldiers should be withdrawn from the conflict in SEA.

Termination ("T" Day) Planning

The foregoing discussion assumes no termination of the war in South Vietnam, but rather the orderly replacement of United States Forces as the armed forces of South Vietnam take over a steadily increasing share of the war effort. I have discussed with Admiral McCain and General Abrams the status of their plans for the more rapid turnover and removal of American military equipment that would be required in the event a political settlement brings the conflict to a termination.

Under such circumstances, we would want to leave the South Vietnamese forces with the equipment necessary for them to cope with the residual insurgency and to help deter any renewal of aggression by North Vietnam. At the same time, we should not feel that the forces of South Vietnam must be turned into a replica in miniature of the United States military establishment. As in the case of the Republic of Korea, we should anticipate that the more sophisticated elements of the needed defensive strength could continue to be derived from United States resources.

For planning purposes we should define "T" Day as that date on which agreement is reached to cease hostilities in South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese are returning their forces to North Vietnam. Our Paris delegation continues to refer to the terms of the 1966 Manila Conference communique. I, personally, have had serious questions about those terms and believe that they were rendered obsolete by initiation of the Paris negotiations. Under the Manila communique terms, the allied forces would begin their withdrawal concurrently with the gradual withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops. Withdrawal of U.S. and Free World forces would continue only while North Vietnam moves toward total withdrawal and ceases all infiltration. The provision of the Manila communique to the effect that U.S. and other allied forces will be withdrawn not later than six months after these conditions have been fulfilled must be interpreted, if it is to apply at all, as referring to those residual forces that would be on hand at the time when all North Vietnamese forces have returned to their own country.

The Manila communique may not, of course, form the basis of any settlement that may be reached in Paris. The Manila communique was designed on the assumption of a de facto termination to hostilities, rather than negotiations. The Paris talks may yield a withdrawal formula which is either more gradual or more precipitate than that contemplated

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at Manila. In any event, our planning should proceed on a basis that will permit us to effect an orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops and an efficient turnover of United States equipment to the South Vietnamese, beginning as soon as hostilities have ceased.

I found T-Day planning has advanced to the stage where plans are either under development, or the plans have been published and are under review by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Abrams' staff has been able during the past few weeks to define more accurately the size of the problem confronting us in withdrawing personnel and equipment. For example, whereas in October 1968 MACV estimated that some 10 million short tons of materiel and supplies would require removal from Southeast Asia, the current estimate is that the amount is more like 5.5 million short tons. The ongoing MACV staff work includes attempts to improve inventory control and to reduce inventories in certain supply categories.

I believe, however, that we need to address more expeditiously the "T" Day problems of orderly and systematic withdrawal of men and equipment. Even short of cessation of hostilities, such planning can have considerable utility in making our phase-down and the transfer of effort to the RVNAF more efficient.

As in the case of RVNAF modernization, there appears to be considerable reluctance to recognize the inevitability of an early reduction in the American effort in South Vietnam. In the event that a political solution cannot be found in Paris, I am convinced that achievement of our objectives requires immediate initiation of efforts to diminish our share of the total military effort. Accordingly, our entire defense organization must be alerted to the need to develop and implement promptly the measures that will facilitate an efficient and orderly reduction in the current United States involvement in Vietnam.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Our fighting men in Southeast Asia, under the superb leadership ✓
of General Abrams, are fully supported and have the resources in men, material, and facilities to accomplish their assigned tasks with maximum possible safety and security.
2. Steady progress is being made in the application of military ✓
pressure on the enemy. But there is consensus among our civilian and military leaders in South Vietnam that a military victory within 6, 12, 18, or 24 months, or even longer, is not feasible under prevailing constraints.
3. The enemy's increased use of border sanctuaries as safe havens ✓
for logistics, training, and command and control support is a matter of increasing danger to our forces. Consideration should be given to the modification of our rules of engagement to permit more effective actions against this threat, short of lasting extension of the geographic area of the war.