

*sent to President 3/22/69*

~~TOP SECRET - SENSITIVE~~

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Vietnam Papers

Attached are several papers on Vietnam focused on:  
(1) negotiations, (2) possible escalation, and (3) U.S. force levels  
in the South and possible de-escalation. The papers attached are:

HAK Memo on Vietnam Situation and Options.

My effort to summarize where we stand and my recommenda-  
tions for action in the next several months. Attached to this  
memo is my memo to you on de-escalation and a staff paper  
on negotiations.

Laird Memo.

Trip report plus recommendations, particularly on U.S. troop  
levels and ARVN improvement. A lucid description of the  
situation we face in South Vietnam. A summary of the memo  
is also at the Tab.

Wheeler Memo.

Recommendations related mainly to reactions to enemy shelling.

Mutual Withdrawal Memo.

This memo points to the evidence that Hanoi may be seriously  
interested in negotiating mutual withdrawal.

Encls: a/s

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DECLASSIFIED  
E.O. 12958 Sec. 3.5  
NLJ-S-98001  
By JOW, NARA, Date 3-15-01

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## MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Vietnam Situation and Options

This memorandum contains my analysis of the Vietnam situation and my views on the major decisions which you will have to face in the next several weeks concerning: (1) negotiation strategy, (2) the level of our forces in the South and possible de-escalation, and (3) response to further enemy shelling of major cities.

I. The Situation as of January 20

The situation in South Vietnam which we inherited on January 20 is well described in Secretary Laird's memorandum to you:

"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."

While the domestic opposition to the war which was again increasing quieted down after January 20, there is little question that domestic controversy will begin to mount, certainly within a few months.

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## II. Assets and Liabilities

In evaluating our options now, we need to take account of our own assets and liabilities and those of the enemy.

Our main asset is the presence of our troops in South Vietnam. Hanoi has no hope of attaining its objective of controlling the South unless it can get us to withdraw our forces. Because of our overwhelming economic strength and military power Hanoi knows that we cannot, by military means, be forced to withdraw.

Our substantial capability to escalate the war confronts Hanoi with the danger of having to rely even more heavily on China and the Soviet Union.

Our liabilities are the domestic opposition in the United States and the continuing weak political base of the Saigon government.

Hanoi's assets and liabilities are to a large extent the reverse of our own. Hanoi knows it cannot defeat us militarily and that a step up in our actions could threaten its autonomy. There are signs of strains in morale in North Vietnam which must worry the leadership. Moreover, the danger of a Sino-Soviet clash which would disrupt their supplies from both countries almost certainly poses a continuing sense of unease. The unpredictable international situation provides an incentive to Hanoi to negotiate.

Hanoi's main asset is the high value it attaches to gaining control of South Vietnam and hence its willingness to accept casualties and risks that seem disproportionate to us. Hanoi is, of course, fighting in familiar terrain and has been able to develop a political-military strategy for the conflict. The Hanoi leadership also counts on world and U.S. public opinion.

## III. Where Do We Go From Here?

We must, in the coming months, fully coordinate our diplomacy with our military actions in a carefully orchestrated plan designed to maximize the possibilities of getting a satisfactory settlement.

We face the continuing dilemma that if Hanoi believes we are running out of time it has no incentive to negotiate. We, thus, must play our hand in a way which:

- (1) increases the time we have available,
- (2) makes clear to Hanoi that our domestic opposition will not force a precipitous withdrawal, and
- (3) provides incentives to both Hanoi and Saigon to negotiate.

In order to do this, we must:

- (1) seek private talks and progress in the negotiations without appearing over eager or anxious,
- (2) maintain the confidence of the GVN,
- (3) assess military questions, including possible escalation, not in military terms alone but also for the political effect of our actions and, in particular, its impact on the negotiations.

We must recognize the paradox that a deliberate pace is the fastest route to a settlement. A calm posture will bring peace faster than constantly pressing for talks, seeking to force the pace, and putting forward a smorgasbord of proposals.

How should we apply these general principals in dealing with the specific questions of negotiations, U.S. force levels and possible U.S. de-escalation and the political effects of possible escalatory steps particularly in relation to the Soviet Union?

#### IV. Negotiations

It is extremely important that we carefully consider the pace of our negotiations and the subjects we wish to negotiate about. We must avoid the mistakes of the past.

Prior to January 20, we fluctuated between intensive efforts to get negotiations started and long periods in which there was no contact at all. During our "peace offensives" American envoys descended on capitals all over the world; during the intervals between these spasms, we relied largely on military measures. When we engaged in diplomacy we sometimes seemed so anxious that we encouraged Hanoi to believe that domestic support was fast running out. We thus encouraged Hanoi intransigence by giving rise to the hope that domestic opposition would force us to withdraw.

Governor Harriman's negotiating style compounded these problems. He presented a picture of being desperate for a settlement and gave Hanoi a smorgasbord of proposals from which to choose. This gave Hanoi a feeling that we were enormously anxious and gave Hanoi the ability to choose to discuss those proposals which would create maximum difficulty between us and the GVN.

We must avoid these pitfalls in the future. Thus far, our objective has been to establish a deliberate pace in the negotiations. We have developed a careful plan of action designed to assure the GVN that we do not intend to sell out their interests in a desperate effort to get out as quickly as possible and to convince Hanoi that we believe we have time. We have not blocked private talks; we have simply not asked for them. To have pressed for private talks sooner would have run the risk of a confrontation with the GVN.

There are signs that this strategy is evolving successfully:

(1) Hanoi has indicated a willingness to engage in private discussions which would at least include military questions. This was reflected in a Vance/Lao conversation and in several recent conversations with Soviet officials. There is no comparable period during the Vietnam War in which the enemy has been making so many overtures to us for private talks. The enemy is also complaining publicly that we are refusing to talk to them privately.

(2) The GVN has inaugurated private contacts with the NVN and the NLF.

(3) Our relations with Saigon have greatly improved. We are just beginning to establish full mutual confidence as reflected in your conversation with Ky, their failure to press hard for retaliation after the Saigon shellings, and Thieu's agreement to our proposing to Hanoi that we begin bilateral private talks.

We must now begin to make progress in Paris moving carefully and deliberately. As we move into private talks with Hanoi, the issues we must face are:

(1) The Pace of the Negotiations. We wish to move as quickly as possible towards a settlement. However, we should gear the pace of the negotiations to actual progress and not seek talks for their own sake. To press for frequent private meetings and to constantly alter our position

in an effort to show sincerity would be counterproductive. Hanoi would only conclude that by waiting they can get better terms.

(2) Agenda.

We should first discuss the issue of mutual withdrawal on which our bargaining position is the strongest. Hanoi's primary objective is to get us to withdraw our troops; our major objective is to get their troops withdrawn. We must recognize that neither we nor Hanoi may want to implement a complete withdrawal until the other parts of a settlement take shape, but we should delay talking about political issues related to SVN since such discussions can only lead to acrimony with the South -- a basic objective of Hanoi. Saigon, in any talks on political matters, is likely to appear to be obstinate and we will be under great pressure to press the GVN not to prevent successful negotiations.

I recognize that we must at some point be prepared to discuss a political settlement. But the issue is what we talk about first. We should begin with an issue on which our position is close to that of the GVN and which the GVN believes is a legitimate subject for US/NVN discussions.

(3) Relations with the GVN. There is no doubt that at some point we will have to engage in arm twisting of the GVN. The question is again one of timing. If we press the GVN now, since their structure is fragile, there may be nothing to negotiate about. We should only be prepared to press them very hard towards the end of the negotiations when an overall settlement is in sight.

(4) Relations with the Soviets.

There is no question that the Soviets could play a major role in bringing the war to an end if they decide to put pressure on Hanoi. The Soviets probably would like the war to end but we have not yet found the leverage to get them to act on that desire.

There are two views on how we can influence the Soviets. The first argues that we must demonstrate our good faith, our desire for peace.

The second view, which I share, is that the Soviets will put pressure on Hanoi only if after a careful calculation of costs and gains they decide that it is in their interest to do so. The Soviets clearly would pay a price in terms of their relations with Peking, with Hanoi, and with the world communist movement if the Kremlin pressured Hanoi into accepting settlement. We must give those in the Soviet hierarchy who might want to move in this direction credible arguments to use with their hard-line colleagues.

We must find a way either within the Vietnam context or beyond it to change the current Soviet calculation of gains and risks.

Within Vietnam, we must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we are losing our patience and may get out of control. Possible escalatory steps must be considered in this light.

Our negotiating strategy must be related to our military operations in the field. Our decisions regarding responses to Hanoi's shelling of the cities, U.S. military operations in the South, and possible troop deployments must show the same determination not to be panicked and a sense that we know what we are doing.

#### V. Escalation

Any escalatory moves that we take in response to Hanoi's shelling of the cities must be based on a clear understanding of what we are trying to achieve. Our escalatory moves would not have primarily a military objective. Our concern would be the political effect of our actions.

It is difficult to conceive of political effects in response to Hanoi which would justify full scale resumption of the bombing. We must weigh the physical damage we can do to North Vietnam against the loss of domestic and international support of the American position which would follow a resumption of the bombing. A consideration of these factors leads, I believe, to the conclusion that a sustained resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam would not now be justified. What we have done thus far has, I believe, conveyed the appropriate message. If the shelling and abuse of the DMZ continues over the next several weeks, a single escalatory strike might be warranted.

If we do engage in more extensive escalation, I believe it should be aimed at influencing the Soviet Union not Hanoi. We must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we are losing our patience and may get

out of control. The only credible objective we could have in escalating would be to give the Soviets concern. Our planning for possible escalation does not have this criteria in mind and thus our current options have only the unfortunate consequences of a bombing attack without the possible advantages of posing a threat to the Soviets. We have just begun to give imaginative thought to this problem.

#### VI. U.S. Military Forces and Operations in the South

One school of thought argues that we should de-escalate the war in the South in concert with a negotiating initiative and then hope that by demonstrating good faith to the Russians we can get a settlement. As I noted above, I do not believe that we could influence the Russians by demonstrating sincerity. Moreover, I believe that we must keep up our military pressure in the South. When and if we withdraw troops it should be on the basis that the ARVN forces are now in a position to pick up the slack of a full scale military campaign against the enemy. Ordering de-escalation would not necessarily reduce casualties, since the enemy could still attack, nor would it reduce pressures to bring forces home and to end the war. Of equal importance, it would be very difficult to devise orders which would be at all acceptable to the field commanders and which would in fact lead to de-escalation. (My memorandum to you discussing de-escalation is attached.)

It is conceivable that at some point we would de-escalate. However, to try to negotiate de-escalation would be demoralizing to our forces and any negotiation could only be very protracted. Hanoi may seek to discuss de-escalation but we should not assume that we must talk about whatever the enemy wants to talk about. Discussions about de-escalation would only be time wasting.

An announcement at the right time, probably May or June, of our intention to withdraw about 75,000 troops this year and to re-examine the situation at the end of the year would buy us a considerable amount of time at home, make clear to Hanoi that we will not be forced into the total withdrawal which they seek, and at the same time indirectly put pressure on Saigon to negotiate a political settlement in the South. I believe we should move in this direction. We should aim at withdrawing U.S. maneuver battalions leaving the combat support units behind to aid the ARVN. Prior to their withdrawal, we may want to regroup some of our combat units and hold them in reserve. Since the vast majority of our casualties occur in maneuver battalions, this process would result in reduced U.S. casualties while permitting us to support the ARVN.



VII. Recommendations

1. Between now and June we should engage in private talks with the North Vietnamese about mutual withdrawal and press Saigon to talk to the NLF. If Hanoi proposes 4-party private talks, we should, with GVN agreement, enter into them but let the GVN take the lead in discussing political matters.

2. We should announce in June that we will withdraw 75,000 troops from South Vietnam during the remainder of the year and that at the end of the year we will re-examine the situation. (General Abrams should be told that the decision to withdraw some troops this year has been made in principle and be asked to submit a concrete plan for withdrawal of 50 or 75 thousand men between July and December. This is Secretary Laird's recommendation except that he suggests withdrawing 50-70 thousand men.)

3. The U.S. withdrawal announcement should be in the context of a major Presidential speech stressing our desire for peace, presenting a detailed peace plan, and calling upon Hanoi to engage in serious negotiations about mutual withdrawal. (I am working on a detailed scenario.)

4. We should do everything possible to accelerate ARVN modernization and put all the pressure that we can on the GVN to improve the quality and effectiveness of the ARVN.

5. We should develop a plan for the withdrawal of our combat forces over the next several years. The plan should explore the possibility of withdrawing U.S. combat troops leaving support units behind to aid ARVN combat units.

6. We should not take any de-escalatory moves within the South. If Hanoi proposes discussions of this subject we should refuse to talk about de-escalation except in the context of an agreement on mutual withdrawal.

7. We should begin immediately to develop alternate plans for possible escalatory military actions with the motive of convincing the Soviets that the war might get out of hand. (At your direction, work is underway on this question.)

8. We should continue to press the GVN to engage in discussions with the NLF. We should instruct Ambassador Bunker to continue his discussions with the GVN about political arrangements in the South and urge them to develop a specific plan which they could put forward publicly with details which could be passed privately to the NLF and Hanoi.