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OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

1 November 1967

MEMO FOR The President

Yesterday at lunch I stated my belief that continuation of our present course of action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly in lives, and unsatisfactory to the American people. The attached memorandum outlines an alternative program.

The memo represents my personal views. Because these may be incompatible with your own, I have not shown the paper to Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow or Bus Wheeler. After you have read it, if you wish me to discuss my proposals with them and report back to you our joint recommendations, I will do so.

RS

Robert S. McNamara

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1 November 1967
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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: A Fifteen Month Program for Military Operations in Southeast Asia

This memorandum explores the likely consequences if we go ahead with our presently planned course of action in Vietnam and considers whether more promising alternatives exist. The purpose is to begin to focus for your decision the actions we should take over the next 15 months in order to achieve the maximum progress towards our objectives in the South while retaining the maximum domestic and international support for our efforts.

In Section I, "Outlook If Present Course of Action is Continued," I state my opinion that continuing on our present course will not bring us by the end of 1968 enough closer to success, in the eyes of the American public, to prevent the continued erosion of popular support for our involvement in Vietnam.

In Section II, "Possible Alternative Courses of Action," I examine both a halt in the bombing and an expansion of our military operations as alternative means of achieving our political objectives in Vietnam.

In Section III, "Recommendations," I state my belief that we should announce a policy of stabilization of our military effort indicating that we plan no further increase in our forces in South Vietnam, and no expansion of our operations against North Vietnam. This posture would help to convince Hanoi that we are prepared to stay in Vietnam as long as necessary, and that we are resigned to a long struggle. It would also increase support for the war at home by removing anxiety about possible increases in our activity. To further increase support for the war effort and to probe the possibilities of a negotiated settlement, I recommend we plan on a halt in the bombing of the North. And finally, I suggest we examine our military operations in the South with a view to taking steps which will reduce our casualties and increase the role of the Vietnamese.

I. Outlook If Present Course of Action is Continued

1. Expansion of Forces

Under present plans, we will continue during the next 15 months gradually to expand the US and free world forces in South Vietnam. The number of American troops will, during this period, increase from the present level of 465,000 to 525,000 while the aggregate increase in other free world forces from outside South Vietnam will bring their total in the area from 59,000 to 75,000.

The additional numbers of combat troops will not produce any significant change in the nature of our military operations. The increase in numbers is likely to lead to a proportionate increase in encounters with the enemy, and some increase in the number of casualties inflicted on both sides. But neither the additional troops now scheduled nor augmentation of our forces by a much

greater amount holds great promise of bringing the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces visibly closer to collapse during the next 15 months. Nonetheless, we will be faced with requests for additional ground forces requiring an increased draft and/or a call-up of reserves.

2. US Ground Operations in South

The military effort in the South would continue along the general lines now being pursued. US forces would be used along the DMZ and opposite the North Vietnamese staging areas in Cambodia and Laos. These forces would also be used in "search and destroy" operations against large enemy units and main base areas of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army.

The South Vietnamese armed forces would continue to be used primarily for "secure and hold" operations and in support of pacification. There are no present plans to turn a larger share of the campaign against main enemy forces over to the South Vietnamese.

Accordingly, the present US casualty rate will probably increase if the present program is pursued. This would mean between 700 and 1,000 US killed in action every month, for a total during the fifteen months of 10,900 to 15,000 additional American dead and 30,000 to 45,000 additional wounded requiring hospitalization. This would bring our total killed in action in the Vietnam campaign to somewhere between 24 and 30,000, close to the Korean total of 33,000, and 75,000 to 90,000 wounded requiring hospitalization.

Continuation of the North Vietnamese attack across the DMZ and use of Laotian and Cambodian territory will produce repeated requests for ground operations against the "sanctuary" areas.

3. Bombing Operations in the North

During the next 15 months, we would expect to run about 115,000 attack sorties against North Vietnamese targets, including approximately 12,000 attack sorties in the restricted areas of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Although no change in the nature of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam is contemplated, the continuing destruction of previously authorized targets will lead inexorably to requests for authority to attack more and more sensitive targets in the centers of Hanoi and Haiphong. There will, as the bombing attack proceeds, be increasing pressures to take direct action to prevent movement of materiel by sea into North Vietnam and to attack the irrigation dikes.

4. Pacification

Pacification efforts similarly would continue along the lines now being pursued. Better utilization of the South Vietnamese regular forces, regional forces and popular forces in the provision of security for the Revolutionary Development Teams would be attempted. Principal reliance for this improved performance would be placed on an increase in the number of US Advisors and some integration of US and Vietnamese forces. The chances of dramatic impact by any measurement of security are slim. The Pacification Program is now

5. Political Evolution

Although the development of the form of representative government has certainly been encouraging, it is not at all clear that the image or performance of this government over the next 15 months will make it appear to the US public to be a government worthy of continued US support in blood and treasure. A new government operating without parties or party discipline amid numerous competing cliques, is bound to have difficult going. It will be faced with hard political and economic decisions in meeting strong inflationary pressures in a disrupted country.

6. Probable Results of Present Course of Action

In South Vietnam, I believe that following the present course of action will bring continued but slow progress. However, I do not anticipate that this progress will be readily visible to the general public either in the United States or abroad.

In North Vietnam, the bombing attacks have been unable to interrupt the flow of supplies and men needed to maintain the present level of enemy military action in the South. Whatever is done in the way of approving additional targets, improving our tactics or munitions, or reorienting the focus of our sorties, unless the "obstacle system" is spectacularly successful, there is little prospect that we will be able to cut off the men and ammunition needed to continue to inflict the present casualty rate on our forces.

Nor is there any reason to believe that the steady progress we are likely to make, the continued infliction of grievous casualties, or the heavy punishment of air bombardment will suffice to break the will of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to continue to fight. Nothing can be expected to break this will other than the conviction that they cannot succeed. This conviction will not be created unless and until they come to the conclusion that the US is prepared to remain in Vietnam for whatever period of time is necessary to assure the independent choice of the South Vietnamese people. The enemy cannot be expected to arrive at that conclusion in advance of the American public. And the American public, frustrated by the slow rate of progress, fearing continued escalation, and doubting that all approaches to peace have been sincerely probed, does not give the appearance of having the will to persist. As the months go by, there will be both increasing pressure for widening the war and continued loss of support for American participation in the struggle. There will be increasing calls for American withdrawal.

There is, in my opinion, a very real question whether under these circumstances it will be possible to maintain our efforts in South Vietnam for the time necessary to accomplish our objectives there.

II. Possible Alternative Courses of Action

In appraising alternatives, it is significant to review the list of military actions presented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on October 17 in response to your request of September 12 for their recommendations of additional actions to bring the conflict to a speedy conclusion. The striking fact is that none of them relate to our conduct of military operations in the South. Six would involve increased operations against North Vietnam -- mining the ports

and waterways, making greater use of our naval forces to attack North Vietnamese shipping and aircraft and expanding bombing and covert programs. The other four involve extension of our activities in Laos and Cambodia. I do not think adoption of any or all of these proposals would bring us significantly closer to victory in the next 15 months.

There are obviously other possibilities for expansion of our military operations, both against North Vietnam and in South Vietnam. We might extend our efforts to eliminate aggression from the North by expanding the geographic scope of the ground conflict. We might intensify the bombing attack to try to break the will of the North to continue. But no further expansion seems likely to achieve sufficient visible progress in the next 15 months to assure the required public support. (See the Appendix for a discussion of ground action in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and air action against the ports and dikes.) And most programs of expanded military action carry major risks of widening the war.

The alternative possibilities lie in the stabilization of our military operations in the South (possibly with fewer US casualties) and of our air operations in the North, along with a demonstration that our air attacks on the North are not blocking negotiations leading to a peaceful settlement. The remainder of this memorandum deals with the use of a bombing halt for this purpose and the decisions that are associated with the stabilization of our military program.

(a) Complete Cessation of Bombing in the North

A decision to stop the bombing is a logical alternative to our present course in Vietnam. The bombing halt would have dual objectives. We would hope for a response from Hanoi, by some parallel reduction in its offensive activity, by a movement toward talks, or both. At a minimum, the lack of any response from Hanoi would demonstrate that it is North Vietnam and not the United States that is blocking a peaceful settlement.

If a halt is to be called in the bombing, we should be prepared to continue it indefinitely. During this time, however, we would plan to continue to bomb the infiltration trails in Laos.

After the bombing stops, we could expect Hanoi to repair roads and bridges, improve its anti-aircraft defenses and take other steps to be able to move supplies and men at reduced cost if the bombing resumes. During this period, Hanoi would of course be able to move supplies more openly and more economically toward the South. However, these actions would not necessarily increase the amount of support now provided to the enemy forces operating in the South, since our present air campaign does not limit this support to its present level.

Moreover, if artillery fire or other overt pressure from across the DMZ were to continue, we could establish a policy of returning fire, including air bombardment of their artillery positions. Hanoi, however, might well respond to our halt in the bombardment of the North by the cessation of

If there were to be a substantial expansion of North Vietnam's operations in the South, either in general or only immediately south of the DMZ, we could resume our air attacks at such level as we saw fit.

We would have to anticipate strong resistance to any resumption. Many here and abroad will always argue that if we wait just a little longer negotiations leading to peaceful settlement will ensue. Politically, resumption will be extremely difficult if Hanoi has responded to the halt by substantial reduction of its offensive, whether or not accompanied by any movement toward talks. But if the halt has bought us an appreciable easing of North Vietnam's military pressure, resumption would be unnecessary and imprudent. In short, the difficulty of resuming will vary inversely with the amount of overt military action continued by North Vietnam. Restraint on its part will create the greatest pressure to continue the bombing halt but the least disadvantage in doing so.

If we halt the bombing without advance sign of reciprocal action and without setting a time limit, the North Vietnamese initially may conclude that the US resolve is weakening. They will be encouraged to believe that the course they have been following is correct. They will also recognize the risk that failure to respond to a bombing halt, either by reduction of the level of operations in the South or by entering into talks, might lead the US to resume bombing at intensified levels. The North Vietnamese leaders will expect considerable pressure to agree to talks, both from free world countries and from the Soviet Union, which will be aware that resumption and intensification of the bombing would face it with a difficult choice.

Suspension of the bombing, particularly for a prolonged period, must be expected to have some adverse effect on the morale both of non-Communist Vietnamese and of US troops fighting in the South.

In sum, a halt would have the following consequences:

1. It is probable that Hanoi would move to "talks," perhaps within a few weeks after the bombing stopped. *How do we feel about this conclusion?*

2. There is a strong possibility that, whether or not talks ensued, a halt would be accompanied by a cessation of enemy military activities across the DMZ. *Shapiro - I sense - Why believe this?*

3. Hanoi, at least initially, would be likely to use the talks for propaganda purposes rather than as a forum for serious negotiation. *Jaeger*

4. As the talks, continue, however, the internal dynamics of the situation would create pressures and opportunities for both parties that might well result in productive discussions moving toward a settlement short of the total elimination of North Vietnam's intervention in the South but consistent with our objective of permitting the South Vietnamese to shape their own future.

5. If large scale shelling and infiltration across the DMZ does not stop, or if Hanoi prolongs fruitless discussions while taking military advantage, resumption of the bombing could be made acceptable to the majority of the American people.

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At a minimum, we would have made clear that our bombing is not preventing peaceful political settlement.

(b) Stabilization of Our Military Effort

With or without a bombing halt, we could state clearly for both internal and public guidance our decision to stabilize our level of military effort in the absence of any major change in the enemy threat. The following elements would be involved in a decision to stabilize military operations:

1. No increase is to be made in US forces above the current approved level.
2. There will be no call up of reserves.
3. No expansion of ground action will be undertaken in North Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia.
4. No attempt will be made to deny sea imports into North Vietnam.
5. No effort will be made to break the will of the North by an air campaign on the dikes, locks or populated targets -- efforts will be made to hold down civilian casualties in the North.
6. We will engage in continued efforts to restrict the war.
7. We will endeavor to maintain our current rates of progress but with lesser US casualties and lesser destruction in South Vietnam.
8. We will be willing to accept slow but steady progress for whatever period is required to move the North Vietnamese to abandon their attempt to gain political control in South Vietnam by military means.
9. In light of the political progress of the CVN, we will gradually transfer the major burden of the fighting to the South Vietnamese forces.

In announcing this stabilization policy, we would have two objectives. First, we would hope to attract greater support by allaying apprehensions that the conflict would be expanded by our actions beyond Vietnam. Second, we would hope to increase pressure on Hanoi to enter into negotiations and/or to reduce their military efforts in the South.

III. Recommendations

I recommend that we:

1. Decide on, and announce, the policy of stabilization outlined above, that we assert that we are making slow but steady progress and

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expect to move ahead without expanding our operations against the North, and without increasing the size of our forces in the South beyond those already planned.

2. Plan a halt in the bombing for some time before the end of the year. This halt seems advisable, if not mandatory, entirely apart from its actual effect in bringing about negotiations and a settlement of the Vietnamese conflict. The argument of many who oppose the American effort in Vietnam comes down to the proposition that American air attacks on North Vietnam are what keep the war going and prevents political settlement. A cessation would thus clear the atmosphere and should minimize further loss of domestic and international support for our efforts. Moreover, I believe there is a strong possibility that a bombing halt would lead to suspension of overt enemy operations across the DMZ. And a bombing halt is likely to lead to talks with Hanoi. It is possible that such talks would lead to productive negotiations on at least some issues. No other course affords any hope of these results in the next 15 months.

3. Review intensively the conduct of military operations in the South and consider programs which involve (a) reduced US casualties, (b) procedures for the progressive turn-over to the GVN of greater responsibility for security in the South, and (c) lesser destruction of the people and wealth of South Vietnam.

Robert S. McNamara

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