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15 March 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Agency Vietnam Discussion

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1. At 1430, Monday, 11 March, the Director convened a meeting of Agency officers concerned with the Vietnam problem. Those present included [redacted] and Messrs. R.J. Smith, Abbot Smith, [redacted] and Carver [redacted]

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2. The Director asked those assembled to address themselves, in turn, to each of two questions:

(i) If you were President, what actions would you take regarding Vietnam (i. e., bombing, troop dispatch, etc.)?

(ii) What is your assessment of the Thieu-Ky combination:

a. Can the Thieu-Ky government remain in power?

b. Can it run the GVN with any reasonable chance of success?

3. The ensuing discussion was marked by expressions of general disquiet at the situation in Vietnam, most of which ranged from despondency to despair. The thoughts expressed contained many more adjectives than nouns. There was no articulation of, let alone consensus judgment on, a detailed action program the President should follow. Some favored stopping the bombing, either now or in the near future, ostensibly for humanitarian reasons but actually to disencumber the U.S. of the bombing's political opprobrium at home and abroad. Others felt the bombing was doing little good but now constituted a political given and, hence, should not be stopped; for if it were, Hanoi would conclude that our determination to persevere was crumbling. A small minority felt the mix of targets should be adjusted, with

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some expansion, for both military and political reasons. There was similar diversity of opinion on the troop dispatch issue: some believed no more troops should be sent, since the war was unwinnable and further U.S. asset commitment pointless. Others felt what could be sent now should be, to tide over the emergency, but decisions on additional dispatch should be deferred until GVN performance could be gauged. One or two felt a reserve call-up and defense posture which would permit the dispatch of even more than 200,000 troops would have a political impact on Hanoi whether or not the troops were sent.

4. The group's assessment of current and reasonably foreseeable GVN performance was generally morose. Though most felt the GVN, as presently constituted, could probably hang on somehow, if propped up by continuing U.S. guidance and support, few felt that it could generate enough drive and improvement to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by the Communists' present exposed and extended position.

5. Underlying much of the group's general malaise seemed to be the belief (or assumption or judgment), explicitly stated by some, that present U.S. objectives in Vietnam -- the establishment of a viable, reasonably stable GVN whose writ would cover the bulk of the population -- were simply not attainable. This led several to advocate, with little enthusiasm, courses that might stave off near term disaster, but dampened positive thinking regarding lines of action that could turn the present situation to maximum advantage.

6. The group did generally agree that in the GVN's ability, or inability, to function at at least a minimum level of competence lay the essential key to any satisfactory resolution of the Vietnam problem. Without a certain threshold Vietnamese performance, virtually no incremental U.S. input could make much appreciable difference. As indicated above, however, the group was less than sanguine over the likelihood of the Vietnamese reaching that minimal performance threshold.

7. I find it hard to summarize the sense of the 11 March meeting accurately and without distortion, since I am apparently very much out of phase with the current thinking of most of my colleagues. While I certainly do not minimize the magnitude of the problems, and hence the challenge, we face in Vietnam, I do still regard it as a challenge rather than an insoluble morass. I agree completely that the key to success (or failure) lies with our Vietnamese allies, but I do not yet share the almost entirely bleak assessment most of my colleagues seem to make of the possibilities for operational improvement in this critical sphere.

George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

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