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Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

The Untold Story: Panic

ANYONE wanting an explanation of the strange course of events in these last months must begin the search in Vietnam, at about the end of October or the beginning of November.



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At that time, in the U.S. headquarters in Saigon, a recalculation was made, which in turn made history. The recalculation took the deceptively simple form of a revised estimate of enemy capabilities.

In order to show why such a routine event can have produced great consequences, one must begin by sketching in the earlier background. In August through October, in brief, the first returns came in on the large American troop commitment in Vietnam. They were remarkably encouraging, indeed stirring returns.

The green American troops fought like veterans. The untested American units regularly won engagements with greatly superior numbers of the enemy. In the light of these happy results, the first experience-based studies were made of the enemy's probable riposte to the much more massive U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Initially, the conclusion was that the Communist riposte would follow the Communist rule-book. In other words, the Vietcong were expected to return to Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's Phase II; to dig in for a very long pull, and to resume classic guerrilla warfare in small formations.

Among the military, Gen. Westmoreland had grave doubts about this assess-

ment. His staff, however, was then more worried about the tactical difficulties of prolonged "penny packet war," than about further large-scale North Vietnamese invasion of the South. Somewhat more pessimistically, the civilian analysts meanwhile predicted the invasion of the South by one or two additional Northern divisions; but even this was not especially disquieting.

BRIEFLY, the civilian forecast gave a maximum future balance of four North Vietnamese divisions plus the equivalent of eight divisions of Vietcong regular troops, against six U.S. divisions, one Korean division, and 13 South Vietnamese divisions. Such a balance would not have been alarming. But throughout October, the South was invaded by more and more North Vietnamese troops, and the earlier assessment began to seem more and more dubious.

This led to the recalculation already mentioned. It mainly took the form of carefully revised estimates of the numbers of troops and quantities of supplies the enemy was capable of bringing into South Vietnam over the Ho Chi Minh Trail — or Geneva Accord Memorial Highway, as it is usually called in Saigon. The new estimates were pretty formidable.

The Vietcong and North Vietnamese were now credited with the capabilities of increasing their strength by two regiments per month from November, 1965, through December, 1966. The North Vietnamese were further credited with the capability of bringing into the South between 140 and 175 tons of supplies per day, or enough to sustain a greatly expanded invasion.

These new estimates were

then presented to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara when he visited Vietnam in late November. The estimates meant that the enemy could well increase his strength by the equivalent of eight full divisions more than had been previously thought likely.

OBVIOUSLY, this in turn meant that a great many more U.S. troops would be needed to redress the balance. Thus when McNamara returned to Washington, his report on the recalculation in Saigon caused what can only be described as a near-panic. Essentially, it was a political panic. Because of McNamara's reform of the armed services, six U.S. divisions could be, and had been, provided for Vietnam without undue political strain. Providing additional divisions meant a severe strain, however.

The first consequence of the panic was the peace offensive and the pause. The President and his advisers were clearly warned of extremely negative effects in both Hanoi and Saigon (which were duly produced). Hence one must assume that domestic-political considerations were the prime motives of the vast international vaudeville which the President staged.

As it turned out, of course, the peace offensive acted, in this country at least, as a kind of noisy advertising campaign against the President's own policy. Furthermore, as always happens in such cases, the near-panic inside the Administration seeped outwards, to the Senate and elsewhere. Thus the public dialogue came to its present pass. It remains to be seen whether such intense concern was justified. But this must be examined in another report.

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