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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

24 May 1962

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Communist Threat in Southeast Asia

1. The effort to check Communist advance in Southeast Asia is admittedly one of the most difficult undertakings of US policy and one which at present seems to offer no very sure promise of success. It is sometimes suggested that, because the means now being employed in this effort are so costly and unpromising, the only real solution is somehow to remove the main source of Communist power in the area -- Communist China. This paper argues that such a view misjudges both the nature of the Communist threat in Southeast Asia and the feasibility of the alternative proposed.

2. In Southeast Asia, as everywhere else in the world, the main source of the Communist threat to existing governments is not external but internal. While it is true that China has the military capability to overrun the states of that area, it is extremely unlikely that in the contemporary international climate even the Chinese would attempt so course an act of aggression.

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If the states of Southeast Asia fall to communism it will almost certainly be because their governments have been ineffectual, and have failed to deal with the social disorder arising from backwardness and the need for modernization. Their failure in this regard would allow a native Communist movement, nourished by outside influences, to develop and ultimately overthrow them.

3. That it is the internal condition of a society which is the crucial factor in its ability to escape Communist control is manifest from the experience of these states which are neighbors of the USSR and its European satellites. All of these states have been exposed to subversive efforts from the Bloc but none has been taken over. Scandinavia is geographically placed in relation to the USSR somewhat as Southeast Asia is in relation to China, but in 45 years this area has never been in any danger of being taken over by communism. Greece survived a civil war in which the Communists were supported from adjacent Bloc territory and there is no serious Communist threat in Greece today. Communism failed to get off the ground in Austria despite the Soviet occupation. Turkey has no Communist problem despite decades of Soviet propaganda and diplomatic pressure. Even so weak and corrupt a government as that of Iran has not fallen to Communist control. In some

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of these cases US aid has played a role in their resistance, but in every case the key factor was a determined government coping with internal communism and with the social conditions that would favor it.

4. For a variety of historical and cultural reasons the states of Southeast Asia are more vulnerable. Most are former colonies which have not yet achieved stable governments or developed an effective apparatus of state administration. The drag of traditionalism and backwardness on the one hand and the pressures for development and modernization on the other give rise to deep social tensions. Political leaders who understand very much about the world scene or even about the forces at work in their own societies are few. Altogether the states of Southeast Asia offer the kind of political-social quagmire in which Communist subversion operates to best advantage.

5. Even so, the governments of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaya are not today exposed to any serious threat of Communist internal revolutionary war. To some extent their very backwardness and traditionalism is a protection against the intrusion of Communist subversion with ideas and methods so alien to the

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ancient ways. They have the advantages of having already achieved national independence and of being able to sustain their populations fairly well by Asian peasant standards. Despite their internal problems, and the further ones which disruption of the traditional social fabric through modernization will bring, they have a good chance of escaping Communist subversion if they can develop tolerably stable and effective governments under intelligent and courageous political leadership. Given this latter condition, the ability of Communist China to force them under Communist control merely by external influence will be limited.

6. The most serious threat to these states over the next few years arises from the possibility that the Communists might succeed in winning Laos and South Vietnam. If this should happen, the Communist push southward would acquire a certain momentum, if only because it would probably be believed in the remaining Southeast Asian states that its further advance was inevitable. There might then be a loss of nerve and will on the part of the existing regimes: a traditional spirit of "accommodation" whereas in the Buddhist cultural pattern could come into play; and a step-by-step subversion of the governments themselves, with or even without mass revolutionary action, might occur. However, there is

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nothing foreordained about such a process. It is conceivable that, even if Laos and South Vietnam were lost to communism, the other states of the area would still find the strength and will to preserve their national independence. The manner in which communism won in South Vietnam and Laos could give rise to a variety of unforeseeable counterforces both within and outside the area. In any case, the projection of Chinese Communist power over Southeast Asia would not be a foregone conclusion and other outside influences would still be a factor in the outcome.

7. The present struggle to check the Communist assault on South Vietnam and Laos is thus of major if not necessarily decisive importance for the whole area. The two countries are really involved in a single action of revolutionary warfare, since the mainspring of aggression in both areas is located in Hanoi. The case of Laos is relevant to the theme of this analysis precisely because the prospects for halting a Communist takeover have grown so dim: it is the classic case which illustrates that the real strength for a successful resistance to Communist revolutionary warfare must be found within the society itself and cannot be supplied wholly from outside. If Laos is lost to communism it will not be because the US has not given enough aid but because

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its government is ineffective and has not been able to imbue its people with a will to resist.

8. The vigorous Communist regime in North Vietnam, which is now waging a dangerous revolutionary war against South Vietnam, was not created by Communist China and is not acting as the latter's agent. It found its origins and strength in the anticolonialist struggle against the French, a struggle which Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were waging before the Chinese Communists won power in Peiping. Although in the later stages the Vietnamese Communists did receive help from China, their real strength was that they had captured the movement for national liberation within their own country. It was because they identified themselves with the nationalist cause rather than because they propagandized the peasants into believing in Marx and Lenin or Mao that they became strong enough to defeat the French. The revolutionary warfare they are waging in South Vietnam and Laos today is an extension of that nationalist struggle.

9. The slogans of national liberation promise not only to fulfill socialist and nationalist aspirations but also to rectify social evils associated with the colonialist period. The revolutionary mood in the peasant villages which responds to Communist

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leadership expresses a hope that backwardness and poverty can at last be overcome by a new order of things. The mood of the Vietnamese peasants is not in this respect different from that of peasants in other undeveloped areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but in Vietnam the Communists have succeeded in stimulating and organizing peasant unrest into revolutionary action. This is not surprising since the traditional social order has been exposed to great strains in the turmoil of a war which has been going on in Indochina for 20 years. It is the youth whose whole experience of politics has been in the disruption of these years who have provided the Communists with recruits.

10. Unfortunately, in a nation where the pressures for national fulfillment and for radical social change are very great the government in Saigon has allowed itself to be characterized as conservative. However praiseworthy its purposes may be, its methods of rule are traditional and it has not therefore been able to associate with itself the aspirations for change found in the population. It has not been the equal of the Communists in ability to organize its power potential -- political, economic, and military -- for the revolutionary civil war being waged against it. Beyond this, it is associated with Western

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powers, is guaranteed by them through SEATO and is receiving massive economic and military aid from the US, an ally of the former colonial power. It is therefore vulnerable to the charge of being in a degree a continuation of the colonial regime and a hindrance to nationalist and racialist vindication.

11. What we are resisting in Vietnam and Laos, therefore, is not a projection of Communist power from China but a revolutionary war waged with nationalist slogans and led by Communists who are Vietnamese. The role of China is a supporting one and this role is less important in a material than in a political sense: what is important is that a powerful Communist regime exists in Peiping and declares that it "cannot be indifferent" to a buildup of Western influence and military power in states on its southern border. In a material sense, the support of the USSR has been more important to Hanoi than China's. But the Communist capability in Vietnam rests in the first instance on the power and appeal of the Vietnamese Communists themselves.

12. Consequently, it is incorrect to describe US policy in South Vietnam as merely nibbling at the edges of the real threat. The real threat, and the heart of the battle, is in the villages and jungles of Vietnam and Laos. That battle can be won only by

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the will, energy, and political acumen of the resisting governments themselves. US power can supplement and enlarge their power but it cannot be substituted. Even if the US could defeat the Communists militarily by a massive injection of its own forces, the odds are that what it would win would be, not a political victory which created a stable and independent government, but an uneasy and costly colony. Frustrating and uncertain of outcome as it may be, there is therefore no serious alternative to the policy we are following -- aiding, encouraging, and cajoling the local governments to do the things which they must do, and which only they can do, to secure their own defense.

13. It is obvious that the collapse of the Communist regime in China would greatly ease the struggle against communism in Southeast Asia, if only because the psychological effect of so immense an event would alter the whole array of political forces in that area, and indeed in the entire world. However, it is equally obvious that any attempt by the US to bring this about by military means would involve the USSR and thus would almost certainly result in general nuclear war.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman