

RR

S-E-C-R-E-T

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

8 May 1967

DRAFT
MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implications of the Vietnam War for the US
International Position

INTRODUCTION

1. An examination of the implications of the war in Vietnam, and especially of US policy toward it, upon the US international position poses difficult analytic problems. There are attitudes and responses at various levels, ranging from official government positions to organized opposition sponsored by Communist groups. There are short-term and long-term effects. There are variations from place to place, often depending upon local political circumstances or degree of geographical proximity to Vietnam. Evidence is often contradictory, and much depends upon the importance one is disposed to attach to particular manifestations or expressions.

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

2. The US international position with respect to the Vietnam war is, of course, unique in American experience; we have not before been heavily engaged with so few active allies and so much strong criticism, both at home and abroad. Because so much of the world considers itself affected, or likely to be affected if the war is prolonged and intensified, developments affecting the war have become a major concern of many friendly nations. Moreover, because of the world role of the US as the strongest and leading power of the non-Communist world, the way in which the war is conducted and terminated is widely felt to involve great significance for the future of the free world itself.

3. There was indeed bound to be a certain ambivalence in the attitudes of others toward any policy which the US chose to follow in Vietnam. In the abstract, there was certain to be support for the idea of protecting small nations from aggression and on accompanying fear of this leading to an uncontrolled and dangerous conflict. In any case of big power intervention there will always be those who applaud and those who object. If US intervention had been brief and quickly decisive, much of this ambivalence would have dissolved. The objectors would have been routed by success and the fears of the sympathetic dissipated. The US problem has

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

arisen largely because the conflict has been prolonged and success appears dubious, at least by means considered acceptable in many parts of the world. This has removed much of the world's approach to the problem from the abstract to the specific. It is no longer for many foreign observers and governments a question of a principle but of a specific case to be examined on its merits.

I. CURRENT ATTITUDES AND POLICIES

4. Western Europe. Generally speaking, those who most dislike and disapprove the US intervention in Vietnam and the US military strategy in Vietnam are our European friends and allies. With certain exceptions (Spain and Portugal and to some extent, West Germany), the opinion is almost universal that the US has blundered in the fact and the extent of its involvement. Moreover, among intellectuals, youth, and the working class there is a strong moral revulsion against the bombing policy and against what has come to be thought of as the US objective, namely, to foist a puppet militaristic regime upon a people trying to establish their own national identity.

5. These views contrast strongly with what is often the official policy of the governments, one which might be described as support for our general objectives and sympathy for the problems and difficulties we have encountered. But even the governments which quite honestly

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

make these pronouncements of support often maintain grave reserve about the wisdom and content of our policy. This reserve is not often expressed to US representatives, but it nevertheless exists. It seems to have deepened during the past several months, in contrast to most of 1966, when our military progress was noticeable, our willingness to negotiate accepted at face value, and the recalcitrance of our enemy easy for all to see. But with intensification of the bombing campaign, a slowdown in military progress on the ground, and a growing malaise about the actual US willingness to negotiate, the misgivings of government leaders have intensified.

6. These misgivings have not reached critical proportions, nor do they seem likely to do so in the absence of major intensification of the war. But Socialists in the governments of Britain, Italy, and West Germany would have great difficulties -- and some cases might fail -- in holding the support of their parliamentary contingents and local organizations if certain types of military escalation occurred or if it appeared that the US was refusing what they considered to be reasonable terms for a political settlement.



25X

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

25X

8. Asia. The Far Eastern and South Asia countries constitute a special case because of the significance and future impact of the conflict upon power relationships in the area. The Australians and New Zealanders, of course, would like to block Communist expansion and believe they are taking out insurance by providing political and military support to the US. Others of our allies feel the same way, notably the Thais and South Koreans. Of those countries not allied with us, they generally put their chips on a US victory, but have been cautious; they neither wish to offend nationalists at home who sympathize with the North Vietnamese nor wish to be in an exposed position in case of a compromise political settlement. Indian and Pakistani public opinion sympathizes with the North Vietnamese, but the governments of these two countries are following a policy based largely upon the complications of their international associations. Both these countries and the neutrals would like the war over, and would probably be happy with the status quo ante. The Japanese have accorded us verbal support on the basis of the US diplomatic posture and military strategy to date. But

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

the government has domestic political problems, including the future of the security treaty, which would make it chary of supporting the US if the war were substantiatedly intensified.

9. Other Areas. In much of the rest of the world, attitudes depend greatly upon the state of relations with and proximity to the US. While many feel uncomfortable about according political support, those with useful bilateral relations with the US would like to avoid endangering those relations by engaging in criticism. Radical regimes which are already on bad terms with the US, []

[] are of course critical of US policy.

Many countries simply do not feel engaged and have problems of their own. Most would like the war over, since it has preempted so much of US interest and resources as to reduce the US capability and disposition to extend them economic assistance.

II. EFFECTS UPON US POLICY AND PRESTIGE

10. It was axiomatic that US prestige should have suffered as a consequence of misapprehensions over the wisdom of US policy and the morality of our military strategy. It has also declined over our failure to have won and over the successful defiance of US might by a small Communist country. In the context of our great-power status, which many nations disliked but needed and could not

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

deny, our failures have encouraged a new wave of anti-Americanism, especially in Europe. This would be further stimulated by intensification of the conflict -- especially if it should fail to produce quick results.

11. But in the more specific sense one cannot detect any way in which this reduced prestige prompted by the Vietnam war has frustrated US policy in Europe. The preeminence which the US enjoyed in Europe was on the decline in any case, for a variety of reasons. What the US involvement in Vietnam has done is to accelerate this process and to provide additional talking points to those who have wished to reduce the US role. Dislike of US intervention has made it easier for the USSR to appear moderate and peace-seeking. It has reminded the Europeans, especially the West Germans, that the US has other problems besides Europe in which it is interested, and this has encouraged Europeans to take more things into their own hands. This in turn has made De Gaulle's policies more palatable and contributed to our difficulties with the Kennedy Round, the NPT, and proposals regarding international liquidity.

12. Outside Europe, there has been perhaps a greater loss of prestige, but less loss of policy effectiveness. Where smaller and less powerful nations have felt the need for US help and

- 7 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

protection, they have not been inclined to criticize US actions, at least openly, or to try to frustrate US policy. Most of the frustrations we have suffered have come from deep-seated problems and trends already in existence. In some cases, our role in Vietnam has probably strengthened our position and advanced our general goals. In Indonesia, for example, the generals may not have had the courage to move against Sukarno had it not been for the US presence in Southeast Asia.

III. LONGER-TERM IMPLICATIONS

13. A great deal of the loss to the US prestige and much of the legacy of opposition to US policy would probably be dissipated by an early termination of the war on terms in general consonance with the US objective. There would be general satisfaction that the conflict was ended; if terminated in a way which appeared to fulfill our limited objective, there would be a widespread reaction that the US had been right, after all. As time went on and the world became interested in other things, even those who have been especially bitter critics of US policy would find it difficult to find listeners, and some of these might even join the applause.

14. Nevertheless, there would remain certain residues which could not easily be overcome. These would be of two types. The first would be in terms of the respect accorded US leadership. Especially in Europe, something has been lost which will take much time to recover; because of the widespread belief, even among those who support us, that the US has blundered and refuses to recognize its blunder, the US will have greater difficulties in procuring support for its policies. On European questions US leadership will particularly suffer, since it is now widely suspected that the US is not really interested in Europe except in a commercial sense, that its aims there are more selfish than altruistic. The other type of negative response which will be especially long-lasting will be disillusionment, especially among European intellectuals and youth, with US morality. Because of the great economic progress which has been made in Europe, youth is more concerned with morality and less with personal security than at any time in history. It has the time and the disposition to worry about the bombing and about the correctness of the US intervention. Rightly or wrongly, it has taken a dim view of both US intervention and US strategy, and this will plague us for many years to come.

- 9 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

15. All the problems which have been noted will be compounded the longer and more intense the war becomes and will make recovery more dubious and prolonged. Moreover, particular steps in US escalation might cause special problems and set in motion political responses which would not only be difficult to handle but could result in significant political changes. This is not the place to catalogue either the various types of escalation which might occur or the various responses which might ensue, but it is important to be clear that tolerance is not unlimited, even among those whose loyalty leads them to support us. There would be a point at which domestic political clamor or fear of future electoral defeat will lead some of our friends to desert us. This may be prompted by a particular action or an accumulation of actions, a failure to accept a negotiation or political solution, or a turn of events on the battlefield or in the political situation in South Vietnam.

16. It is neither possible nor desirable to postulate or attempt to predict specific consequences. But there are hazards which must be noted. Developments in the war which inspired wider and sharper criticism and dismay abroad will make the Soviet task much easier and could in time lead to a new structure of power in

- 10 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

various areas of the world. Developments in the war could, even if no immediate political changes occurred, lead to a strengthening of existing political groups who are anti-American or neutralist and whose increased strength would become manifest in subsequent elections. Perhaps most important of all, the hazard should be recognized that certain types of US action could lead some governments to open disavowal of US policy at a time when international support of the US was most important.

- 11 -

S-E-C-R-E-T