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Secret Memo Shows Bureaucracy In Conflict Over Viet War Policy

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Assign several government agencies to survey Vietnam and, like the six blind men describing the elephant, they produce a report filled with conflicting observations. Give the report to the President, and he largely ignores it as he shapes his policies.

That is essentially the story of National Security Study Memorandum 1, a set of documents on Vietnam prepared by White House adviser Henry Kissinger's staff for Mr. Nixon soon after the President entered office in early 1969.

The memorandum, composed of contributions from eight U.S. agencies, indicates that military and civilian officials directly engaged in war operations were inclined to be optimistic about the current and future prospects in Vietnam while those primarily involved in analyzing the conflict from afar took a more pessimistic view.

Predictably, then, the hawkish "optimists" were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Pacific command in Honolulu and the U.S. military and diplomatic missions in Saigon. The "pessimists," a more detached group, were the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Department's International Security Affairs office, and two State Department offices, Intelligence and Research and the East Asia bureau.

An ex-member of Kissinger's staff, who participated in compiling the documents, now explains that the divergencies among the contributing agencies were deliberately emphasized in order to dramatize to the President the extent to which perceptions of the Vietnam situation differed.

Balance Bureaucracies

"We wanted to show him how little anyone really knows about Vietnam," the former White House official said.

Judging from his subsequent actions, moreover, Mr. Nixon apparently disregarded many of the assessments and recommendations contained in the memorandum, and instead initiated strategies based on a variety of other considerations.

This suggests, as students of presidential behavior point out, that Mr. Nixon was and still is less concerned with Vietnam itself than with the effects of the war on domestic politics and international relationships. The President's decisions also stem from his efforts to balance rival Washington bureaucracies, all of which are striving to assert their own interests.

Evaluating the global importance of Vietnam, for example, contributors to the National Security Study Memorandum were sharply divided on whether there was any validity to various versions of the so-called "domino theory."

The hawkish military agencies contended that an "unfavorable settlement" in Vietnam would prompt "swift" Communist takeovers elsewhere in Asia. The Washington intelligence community calculated, in contrast, that a Communist victory in Vietnam might push Cambodia and Laos into Hanoi's orbit "at a fairly early stage" but "these developments would not necessarily unhinge the rest of Asia."

Seeking Accommodations

In April 1970, however, Mr. Nixon affirmed that "the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world" should the United States act like "a pitiful helpless giant" in Indochina. The President reiterated that thesis last Wednesday, saying that "the risks of war in other parts of the world would be enormously increased" if the Communists "win militarily in Vietnam."

But despite these warn-

ings, and elsewhere have been seeking accommodations with Communist China. Some have also edged closer to North Vietnam.

Thus new international alignments in Asia and in other parts of the world seem to be evolving mainly for reasons unrelated to the U.S. position in Vietnam.

The contributors to the memorandum generally appeared unable to reach either firm or unanimous conclusions on the effectiveness of B-52 strikes, called "harassment, interdiction and strategic missions" in official bureaucratic terminology.

The Joint Chiefs estimated that the B-52 raids inside South Vietnam during 1968 killed 41,250 Communists, an average of 2.5 enemy per sortie, while the Defense Department's office of International Security Affairs put the total figure for the period at 9,000, or 0.43 enemy killed per sortie. The CIA placed the average number of enemy killed by B-52s at 3.5 per sortie, but added that its evaluation methods were open to question.

Protection Against Raids

With all this, however, the agencies tended to be doubtful about the decisiveness of the B-52 attacks in either halting or discouraging the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

The State Department reported, for instance, that "there is little evidence to suggest" that the B-52 missions "have succeeded in inflicting a scale of losses on the Vietcong and North Vietnamese sufficient to significantly disrupt tactical operations or to force the Communists to alter their basic strategy for South Vietnam."

The same State Department report added, moreover, that the effectiveness of the B-52 operations diminishes "as the enemy develops tactics to adjust to their destructive potential."

Among other things, the re-

port said, the Communists had constructed shelters and early warning systems to protect themselves against "recurring patterns in B-52 strikes."

While asserting that the bombing above the 17th parallel had "adverse effects" on the North Vietnamese people by creating hardships, the Pentagon contribution to the memorandum nevertheless concluded that these difficulties had not reduced "to a critical level" Hanoi's "willingness or resolve to continue the conflict."

Indeed, said the Pentagon report, the bombing "may have hardened the attitude of the people" in North Vietnam. Conversely, the study pointed out, "there is some evidence . . . indicating that morale and support for the war in North Vietnam has declined significantly since the bombing halt" in November 1968.

Ho Chi Minh Trail

Further questioning the value of the air operations, the Pentagon study estimated that the U.S. bombings had destroyed about \$770 million worth of enemy installations while North Vietnam received some \$3 billion in military and economic aid principally from the Soviet Union and China. Therefore, the study said, North Vietnam is "better off today than it was in 1965."

Similarly, the Pentagon contribution referred to U.S. bombings of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos as "impressive" in its destruction of enemy supplies, but added that this "is not really what counts." Said the study:

"The critical factor is the amount that reaches South Vietnam . . . and since we have no control over imports to North Vietnam or inputs to Laos, it appears that the enemy can push sufficient supplies through Laos to

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