

SECRET/SENSITIVEINFORMATION

May 6, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. KISSINGER

FROM: TOM LATIMER /g/

SUBJECT: NIE On South Vietnam's Problems
and Prospects

This is a balanced, well-reasoned Estimate. It concludes that the outlook in South Vietnam for the remainder of 1971 is reasonably good. Prospects for 1972 are less clear, however, and looking ahead into the mid-1970's, it concludes that it is impossible now to offer a clear-cut estimate. It does reach the judgment that the longer term survival of the GVN is by no means yet assured.

The judgment that things look pretty good for the rest of this year is based on the "considerable forward momentum" observable on the part of the GVN and on the obvious difficulties the Communists are having both militarily and in the political action field. The Estimate notes, however, that the war is far from over and that the Communists retain important military capabilities as well as a tightly disciplined party organization in South Vietnam. It notes too that as the U.S. withdraws, existing weaknesses in the South Vietnamese government and society will tend to surface.

The Estimate judges that Thieu will probably win the October presidential elections but that even if "Big" Minh should be elected, he might not depart significantly from existing policies. A key factor in the elections, the Estimate points out, will be the South Vietnamese perception of the US attitude. If the South Vietnamese came to believe that the US was truly neutral in the election or favored someone other than Thieu, Thieu's chances of election would probably decline.

In 1972 the Estimate sees the Communists attempting a step-up in its military activity to help generate domestic pressure on the US

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government to disengage from the war and to affect the outcome of the presidential election. It concludes that the Communists will not be able to reverse the military balance in South Vietnam in 1972.

The Estimate makes a number of other points worth noting. One is that the Communist leadership is not likely to view the problem of South Vietnam in terms of whether to continue the struggle but rather in terms of how and at what level. It also raises the question of whether the younger generation of North Vietnamese shares the same unswerving dedication to the reunification of Vietnam as their elders. It says that that question cannot be answered yet.

-- FYI: No where near enough effort is being made by the intelligence community to try to identify the younger Communist leaders and what attitudes they may have. It is a time-consuming and trying task, one which most intelligence analysts and collectors try to avoid in favor of the more dramatic, current types of information.

The Estimate also points out that we have trained the South Vietnamese army to rely on tactical air support and on extensive helicopter support. It will be many years, however, before the South Vietnamese military acquires the technological and managerial skills needed to handle the complexities of maintaining and supporting a modern fighting force. The South Vietnamese will require US assistance to maintain and to provide modern equipment.

The "revolution of rising expectations: on the part of the South Vietnamese people and the GVN's inability to satisfy the demands already generated will be another factor affecting the Saigon government's long term stability, the Estimate points out.

-- But, above all else, the estimators assert, the key to the future of South Vietnam is the matter of will. It was the loss of will in 1965 that led the South Vietnamese to the brink of disaster and it was the rediscovery of that will at Tet 1968 that helped deal the Communists such a setback. The Estimate concludes that there is no way to determine how tenacious the South Vietnamese will be a few years hence when the US is much further along the road to disengagement.

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