

A Secret Nixon Study of the War

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President Nixon received "profoundly different" judgments from key government agencies at the start of his adminis-

tration concerning the state of the war in Vietnam, the consequences of a Communist takeover and the actions he might take.

This is disclosed in the summary of a survey ordered by the president on Jan. 21, 1969, the day after his inauguration. The study as National Security Study Memorandum Nov. 1, assembled by the National Security Council staff headed Henry A. Kissinger.

Many of the conclusions and recommendations in it have been altered or overtaken by events in the intervening three years — troop withdrawals from South Vietnam, and international shifts of position by China and the Soviet Union in their relationship with the United States.

But some of the findings

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shed light on actions now unfolding, such as the current Communist offensive and the renewed U.S. bombings of North Vietnam's heartland.

STUDY

One of the most striking disclosures in the study is the evidence it contains of great splits inside the federal bureaucracy, dividing optimists from pessimists, in assessing what had happened in Vietnam up to early 1969 (when the survey was completed).

While some of these differences have become public knowledge — especially with the publication last year of the Pentagon papers, which carried the war history up to 1968—the new study reveals how these diverging viewpoints were extended from the Johnson into the Nixon administration.

Two broad schools of assessment emerged among the policy planners. In the first group, more optimistic and "hawkish," were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. military command in Vietnam, the commander in chief of Pacific forces and the American embassy in Vietnam, headed by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

Advisers

Often conflicting with the judgment of those advisers was a second group, composed of the office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The first group, the summary of the study says, generally took "a hopeful view of current and future prospects in Vietnam," with State, Defense and the CIA "decidedly more skeptical about the present and pessimistic about the future."

These are some of the ma-

nor disclosures in the summary:

- "Sound analysis" of the effectiveness of American B-52 bomber strikes against enemy forces was rated "impossible" to achieve; but, "the consensus is that some strikes are very effective, some clearly wasted, and a majority with indeterminate outcome." B-52s had been used against targets in South Vietnam during the Johnson administration; they are currently being conducted for the first time against the heartland of North Vietnam, and under a different strategic rationale.

- In early 1969, the optimists concluded that on the basis of programs then in existence, it would take "8.3 years" more to pacify the remaining contested and Viet Cong - controlled population of South Vietnam. The pessimists estimated it would take "13.4 years" more to achieve that goal.

- In "sharp debate" — over the validity of the "domino theory" consequences of a Communist takeover in Vietnam military strategists generally accepted that principle, but most civilian experts concluded that while Cambodia and Laos might be endangered fairly quickly, the loss of Vietnam "would not necessarily unhinge the rest of Asia."

- On Soviet and Chinese military aid to North Vietnam, the joint chiefs and the U.S. military command in Saigon said that "if all imports by sea were denied and land routes through Laos and Cambodia attacked vigorously," North Vietnam "could not obtain enough war supplies to continue." But the CIA and the office of Secretary of Defense, "in total disagreement," concluded that

"overland routes from China alone" could supply North Vietnam with sustaining war material. "even with an unlimited bombing campaign."

President Nixon's subsequent actions in Vietnam have been more in accord with the assessments reached by the pessimists in this study, although his public explanations of his actions have reflected more of what the optimists were claiming in 1969.

In the process, the president has cut U.S. forces in South Vietnam from over a half million at the time he took office, to about 80,000 today.

While the National Security Council summary discloses sharp disagreements three years ago on the effectiveness of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, the current battlefield situation in Vietnam is much different from the situation in early 1969 and U.S. airpower is being applied in different ways.

In contrast to the guerrilla attacks or hit-and-run actions by larger units which have dominated the enemy's strategy in the past, the current Communist offensive is much more like a conventional battle with tanks, artillery and massed troop concentrations standing and fighting.

BOMBING

Thus, it is reasoned officially, bombing now is more important — and potentially more effective — because big, conventional battles need large quantities of fuel and ammunition to be sustained for more than a few weeks.

The summary outlines sharp differences of opinion in early 1969 over the fighting capabilities of Saigon's forces, the importance of the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville as a major entry point for enemy supplies, and the over-all effectiveness of U.S. bombing.

To a surprising extent, the document portrays the Pentagon's civilian hierarchy within the office of the Secretary of Defense as more cautious and skeptical, in all of the major assessments affecting the future course of the fighting, than the U.S. military command in Saigon or the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

DOCUMENT

The document also seems to make clear that it was from Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird's office that the suggestion came, early in 1969, to cut U.S. forces while modernizing those of South Vietnam — a plan which was eventually to be called "Vietnamization" and which provides the backbone of the President's current policy.

On the military situation, the document makes these points:

- The Pentagon believed that there was "fat" in U.S. force levels that could safely be cut back without affecting combat capabilities. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the U.S. Military Command in Vietnam both denied this.

- While there was agreement that B-52 strikes in South Vietnam were very effective against troop concentrations or in close support, the Joint Chiefs estimated 41,000 enemy troops were killed in 1968 by the planes but the Pentagon estimate was about 9000. The Pentagon took a more skeptical view of the B-52's effectiveness against infiltration routes and base camps.

- As to destruction of supplies on the trails leading south, the summary disclosed a Pentagon/CIA belief that while many enemy supplies and trucks were knocked out, the enemy needs were "so small and his supply of war material so large that the enemy can replace his losses easily ..."

This kind of assessment, however, might be one that is no longer applicable for the type of major offensive now going on.