

Secret 1969 report warned of danger to South Vietnam

WASHINGTON — Government strategists in 1969 delivered a unanimous warning to incoming President Nixon that South Vietnam's armed forces would be no match for North Vietnamese-Viet Cong forces "in the foreseeable future," that the pacification program showed no promise of "complete success" for "several years," and that the Saigon government might not "survive a peaceful competition with the (Communists) for political power in South Vietnam."

This gloomy outlook, contained in a secret, two-inch-thick review known as National Security Study Memorandum 1, has changed only in degree during the past three years.

The President's response has been to do his best to bolster Saigon while extricating the United States from the tragic Vietnam war. He has been determined, however, to end the America involvement with dignity. In his private conversations, he has repeated that he won't let the United States be "pushed around," "degraded" or "humiliated."

This was the reason he struck back with such fury from the air after the North Vietnamese assault across the demilitarized zone.

Secret 1969 study

The secret 1969 study, known simply as NSSM-1 inside the White House, was compiled by foreign policy czar Henry Kissinger. He sent eight pages of pointed, penetrating questions to all the government agencies involved in the war effort.

Their answers showed considerable confusion over what was happening in Vietnam. The U.S. Embassy and military command in Saigon, joined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, generally took a rosy view. The Defense secretariat, Central Intelligence Agency and State Department were more skeptical.

Saigon doomed

Here are highlights from the exhaustive

Jack Anderson

study:

All the experts agreed that the South Vietnamese armed forces, "in the foreseeable future," couldn't fight off the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese "without U.S. combat support in the form of air, helicopters, artillery, logistics and some ground forces."

The toughest estimate, surprisingly, came from the Defense secretary's office, which predicted bluntly: "It is unlikely that the (South Vietnamese), as presently organized and led, will ever constitute an effective political or military counter to the Viet Cong."

The South Vietnamese forces, with an annual desertion rate of 34 per cent, were said to be facing "severe motivation, leadership and desertion problems." The total desertions, alleged the study, were "equivalent to losing one ARVN division per month."

'Reasonable progress'

Nevertheless the majority view was that Saigon was making "reasonable progress" toward building a force "able to hold its own against an internal VC threat."

Disagreeing, the Defense secretary's office doubted "that current expansion and re-equipment programs are sufficient to make (the South Vietnamese) into an effective fighting force."

Although the pacification program couldn't "promise anything close to complete success within several years," the U.S. high command found that Saigon controlled "three-fourths of the population." The Joint Chiefs expected this to rise to 90 per cent by the end of 1969.

Their figures were disputed, however, by the Defense secretary's office, which suggested "at least 50 per cent of the total rural population is subject to significant VC pressure and influence."