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Second thoughts on Enterprise

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WASHINGTON — The nation's top general reportedly told other high government officials that, in retrospect, perhaps a Navy carrier task force should have been ordered to feint toward Vietnam as a warning to Hanoi.

Administration sources said yesterday that this expression by Gen. George Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, triggered an angry outburst from a surprised Secretary of State Kissinger.

Kissinger had not been informed before the task force, led by the carrier Enterprise, left the Philippines bound for the Indian Ocean on Thursday, the sources said.

"He blew up" at Brown's words, said one source.

Kissinger apparently was angry on two grounds — because he didn't know in advance of the planned voyage and because he wasn't consulted before the Defense Department denied reports that the ships would head for Vietnam. Kissinger, agreeing with Brown, felt such a feint should have been considered and that the denial foreclosed such a move.

The source said Kissinger contended the Enterprise task force should have been directed to sail toward Vietnam as a warning signal to Hanoi. Presumably, the Secretary of State would have had no objection to a later change of course.