

Secret Memo Shows Bureaucracy In Conflict Over Viet War Policy

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By Stanley Karnow

Washington Post Staff Writer

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

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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."



South Vietnamese mother carries her two children in basket hung from a shoulder

pole as she and other civilians flee fighting around the city of Kontum.

Associated Press

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 warnings, many nations in Asia 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 sig-

nificantly 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 report 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 South Vietnam in spite of relatively heavy losses inflicted by air attacks."

Despite this appraisal, the number of U.S. air raids against Communist supply lines in Laos more than doubled following the 1968 halt in bombings of North Vietnam. In addition, President Nixon ordered B-52 attacks against the North for the first time three weeks ago and asserted last Wednesday that the bombings would "be continued until the North Vietnamese stop their offensive in South Vietnam."

Back in July 1969, while visiting Saigon, the President praised the "steady progress in pacification" and hailed the "improving performance of the Vietnamese armed forces." But, the memorandum shows, there was scant evidence at the time to justify Mr. Nixon's confidence.

'Emphatic Differences'

According to the study, the "optimistic" agencies estimated that it would take 8.3 years for the Saigon regime to win the allegiance of some four million South Vietnamese living in Vietcong or contested areas, while the "pessimists" saw that objective attained in 13.4 years.

At the time the study was made, the bullish U.S. military mission in Saigon expressed the belief that President Nguyen Van Thieu's government then controlled three-quarters of the South Vietnamese people. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, equally hopeful, suggested that 90 per cent of the population would support the Saigon regime by 1969. But the meekish agencies disagreed sharply.

Defense Department civilians calculated that the Saigon government's position had not improved since 1962, a "discouraging year." The CIA backed that evaluation, and the State Department's Intelligence and Research office was even gloomier: "Our best estimate is that the Vietcong has a significant effect on at least two-thirds of the rural population."

Although President Nixon would later stress in his statements that the South Vietnamese army could "hack it," contributors to



United Press International

Armed with a pistol, former South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky stands in a plane at Hue. Ky called situation "serious but not desperate."

the White House survey offered an assortment of divergent opinions that, as usual, mirrored their own aspirations. Or as a summary of the survey said: "The emphatic differences between U.S. agencies . . . outweigh the points of agreement."

The U.S. military contributors to the survey calculated that the South Vietnamese army was "making fairly rapid strides in improvement and effectiveness," and would be able to cope with "purely indigenous" Vietcong forces without American combat support until the completion of its modernization program in 1972.

Combat Estimates

Civilians in the Defense Department challenged that appraisal, saying that "it is unlikely that the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, as presently organized and led, will ever constitute an effective political or military counter to the Vietcong."

Except in rare instances, however, the contributors to the memorandum side-

stepped the question that is critical in the current Vietnam situation—the possibility that the North Vietnamese might simply invade the South in force after substantial numbers of U.S. troops had been withdrawn.

The contributors also differed to a large degree in their estimates of enemy strength. These differences, which mainly pitted the CIA against the U.S. military establishment, revolved around the question of whether to include Communist political cadres and support troops in counts of enemy personnel.

The military establishment tended to exclude all but enemy combat troops in its estimates, for two possible reasons. First, it tended to downgrade the political nature of the war and, secondly, it sought to project its optimism and therefore hoped to put forth lower estimates of enemy manpower.

The CIA, whose assessment of Communist strength exceeded that of the Pentagon by 90,000, argued strenuously that the agencies involved in Vietnam agree on statistics. As a passage in one CIA study said:

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"The difference in estimates may become of major political importance if developments should lead to an agreement on the phased withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops which intelligence might be required to confirm or monitor."

But despite Saigon and Washington conferences designed to overcome the discrepancies, the survey says, the agencies "failed to reach agreement." Whether they have since reached an accord is not known. It is common knowledge, however, that the Vietnam war since its beginnings has been characterized by a multiplicity of official U.S. divergencies.

Back in August 1963, perplexed by events in Vietnam, President Kennedy sent a mission there composed of two supposed experts, Marine Gen. Victor Krulak and State Department officer Joseph Mendenhall. After a frenzied weekend of investigation and interrogation, the two men returned to Washington to report on their findings.

Krulak said that the South Vietnamese army was performing beautifully and that the regime, then headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, was widely supported. Mendenhall said that the local government was on the brink of collapse and that South Vietnam was in a desperate situation.

After listening to their versions, President Kennedy politely asked: "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?"