

JOINT CHIEFS

In One Part

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FORESEE FAILURE OF CEASE FIRE

JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — The secret estimate of the Joint Chiefs is that the ceasefire will break down and the Communists ultimately will gain control of all Vietnam.

This would mean, if the estimate is correct, that nine years of American dying have been in vain. For the U.S. government has spilled the blood of 55,000 Americans boys and squandered \$150 billion to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam.

One intelligence analysis suggests that a sporadic ceasefire, at least, should endure for several months. This analysis, which our sources have asked us not to quote directly, cites evidence that Hanoi is preparing for a political struggle to win the support of the South Vietnamese populace and to undermine the Saigon regime.

Political cadres have been sent into the South to conduct an intensive propaganda and organization drive. But once the Communist infrastructure has been rebuilt in the South, warns the analysis, the Communists will seek to end their long struggle for control of all Vietnam with a final military offensive.

Secretly, the Joint Chiefs don't believe President Thieu can survive. He is preparing for the political ravages by tightening his military control over the country. This will make his regime even more unpopular with the people and, therefore, more vulnerable to Communist agitation.

After Thieu has been weakened politically, Hanoi presumably will try to finish him off with a military coup de grace. The Joint Chiefs have grave doubts about the South Vietnamese Army's ability to repel an offensive without massive American air and artillery support. They fear a North Vietnamese frontal assault, coordinated with Viet Cong guerrilla operations, would overwhelm Thieu's defenses.

Nor are they impressed with reminders that the Pentagon was wrong about the South Korean Army's ability to stand off the Communists after the Korean truce was signed 20 years ago. The truce line in Korea is far easier to defend than the spotted truce in South Vietnam. Each spot is a Communist stronghold, whose armed partisans surely will try to widen their spot. Then they will seek to meld the spots into ever larger Communist-controlled areas.

The Joint Chiefs had so little faith in Saigon's survival last October that they warned the regime would collapse if the cease-fire agreement were signed. They urged President Nixon to delay the signing until they could supply Saigon with enough planes, helicopters and military hardware to make up for the loss of American firepower.

As we reported on January 5, the real reason for postponing the ceasefire was to give the Pentagon time to rush these supplies to Saigon. A top general acknowledged to us that more planes and helicopters were delivered to Saigon than South Vietnam has pilots to fly them.

The massive shipments angered the North Vietnamese who, in retaliation, withdrew the truce concessions they had already made. President Nixon finally sent a cable to North Vietnam's Premier Pham Van Dong, offering him a choice between bargaining or bombing. The ultimatum gave Hanoi 72 hours to renew serious bargaining. This was the reason the President ordered the saturation bombing of the Hanoi environs.

The three-month delay in the cease-fire not only has given President Thieu more time to prepare for a Communist offensive, but has bolstered his chances to survive it. But the odds, in the Joint Chiefs' opinion, are against him.