

Rostow Memorandum on 'Victory And Defeat in Guerrilla Wars'

Memorandum from Walt W. Rostow, chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, for Secretary of State Rusk, "Victory and Defeat in Guerrilla Wars: The Case of South Vietnam," May 20, 1965, as provided in the body of the Pentagon's study.

In the press, at least, there is a certain fuzziness about the possibility of clear-cut victory in South Viet-Nam; and the President's statement that a military victory is impossible is open to misinterpretation.

1. Historically, guerrilla wars have generally been lost or won cleanly: Greece, China mainland, North Viet-Nam, Malaya, Philippines. Laos in 1954 was an exception, with two provinces granted the Communists and a de facto split imposed on the country.

2. In all the cases won by Free World forces, there was a phase when the guerrillas commanded a good part of the countryside and, indeed, placed Athens, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila under something close to siege. They failed to win because all the possible routes to guerrilla victory were closed and, in failing to win, they lost. They finally gave up in discouragement. The routes to victory are:

a) Mao Stage Three: going to all-out conventional war and winning as in China in 1947-49;

b) Political collapse and takeover: North Viet-Nam;

c) Political collapse and a coalition government in which the Communists get control over the security machinery; army and/or police. This has been an evident Viet Cong objective in this [rest illegible].

d) Converting the bargaining pressure generated by the guerrilla forces into a partial victory by splitting the country: Laos. Also, in a sense, North Viet-Nam in 1954 and the Irish Rebellion after the First World War.

3. If we succeed in blocking these four routes to victory, discouraging the Communist force in the South, and making the continuance of the war sufficiently costly to the North there is no

reason we cannot win as clear a victory in South Viet-Nam as in Greece, Malaya, and the Philippines. Unless political morale in Saigon collapses and the ARVN tends to break up, case c), the most realistic hope of the VC, should be avoidable. This danger argues for more rather than less pressure on the North, while continuing the battle in the South in such a way as to make VC hopes of military and political progress wane.

4. The objective of the exercise is to convince Hanoi that its bargaining position is being reduced with the passage of time; for, even in the worst case for Hanoi, it wants some bargaining position (rather than simply dropping the war) to get U.S. forces radically reduced in South Viet-Nam and to get some minimum face-saving formula for the VC.

5. I believe Hanoi understands its dilemma well. As of early February it saw a good chance of a quiet clean victory via route c). It now is staring at quite clear-cut defeat, with the rising U.S. strength and GVN morale in the South and rising costs in the North. That readjustment in prospects is painful; and they won't in my view, accept its consequences unless they are convinced time has ceased to be their friend, despite the full use of their assets on the ground in South Viet-Nam, in political warfare around the world, and in diplomacy.

6. Their last and best hope will be, of course, that if they end the war and get us out, the political, social, and economic situation in South Viet-Nam will deteriorate in such a way as to permit Communist political takeover, with or without a revival of guerrilla warfare. It is in this phase that we will have to consolidate, with the South Vietnamese, a victory that is nearer our grasp than we (but not Hanoi) may think.