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MEMO 2/26/68-THE OUTLOOK IN VIETNAM

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

26 February 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Outlook in Vietnam

1. This Memorandum does not seek to explore all aspects of the situation in Vietnam, or its probable development over a long term. It is addressed only to the specific question put to us, i.e., whether developments in Vietnam are apt to involve a continuation of combat into the indefinite future at a level comparable or higher than current levels, or whether it is more probable that either the VC or the GVN will be unable to sustain such a level beyond a few months.

2. The current phase of combat will have a critical bearing on the further course of the war and may even prove to be decisive. We cannot be sure how long this phase will last, but it seems likely that by early summer the immediate results and the longer term implications will be fairly clear to Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington. At present, the key questions concern:

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(1) the capabilities of the Communist forces to sustain their current challenge, and whether they can continue the fighting thereafter, and (2) the capabilities of the South Vietnamese political and military establishment to cope with the tasks imposed by the present Communist offensive.

Communist Plans and Prospects

3. Hanoi's aims in the present offensive phase are: to register significant military successes against US and especially ARVN forces, and to inflict such heavy losses, physical destruction and disorganization on the GVN as to produce a total situation favorable to a negotiated settlement on Communist terms. The Communists are not likely to have a rigid timetable, but they probably hope to achieve decisive results during the course of the summer. The high importance which Hanoi now attaches to forcing the issue is evident from the risks and costs of the enterprise.

4. The toll on Communist forces has been considerable, even if reported casualties are greatly inflated by inclusion of low level recruits and impressed civilians. To some extent these losses have been offset by measures already taken. Heavy

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infiltration of both new units and replacements from the North is continuing. A strenuous, last minute recruitment effort was made prior to the Tet attacks. A significant part of the guerrilla and Main forces could still be committed. And, at present, the Communists enjoy fuller access to the rural areas, where they are recruiting heavily. They will probably be able to recoup their recent losses, though at some sacrifice in quality.

5. In any case, the Communists probably will maintain their offensive for the next several months and be prepared to accept the high losses this entails. They cannot accept such losses indefinitely, however, and they probably will not be capable soon again of launching repeated mass attacks of the magnitude and widespread scale of 30-31 January. But they are almost certainly capable of sustaining a high level of combat, including major battles with US forces, assaults on selected cities, and rocket and mortar attacks on urban areas and military installations.

6. It is possible that the Communists regard the present campaign as so critical to the outcome of the war that they will commit their full resources to a maximum effort in the near term. On balance, however, we think it likely that even if their present

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push falls short they will wish to be able to sustain a protracted struggle. Hence they will probably not exercise their capabilities in such a profligate manner as to deny themselves the possibility of continuing the struggle should the present phase fail to produce a decisive result.

GVN/ARVN Prospects

7. The will and capability of the GVN and its armed forces remain the keys to the eventual outcome.

8. In the main, the ARVN has acquitted itself fairly well since 30 January, though the record is uneven. Morale has held up on the whole, and we know of no unit defections. However, the ARVN is showing signs of fatigue and in many areas it has now lapsed into a static defensive posture. Security in the countryside has been sharply reduced. A long and costly effort would have to be undertaken to regain the pre-Tet position. It is highly unlikely that the ARVN will be inspired enough or strong enough to make such an effort -- certainly not in the near future.

9. The GVN also performed adequately in the immediate emergency, particularly in the Saigon area. There now appears

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to be a greater recognition of the need to push forward with additional measures, but the Communist challenge has not yet proved a catalyst in stimulating an urgent sense of national unity and purpose.

10. The overall position of the government has been weakened. Its prestige has suffered from the shock of the Tet offensive; its control over the countryside has been greatly reduced. Popular attitudes are confused and contradictory; the Viet Cong received virtually no popular support, but neither was there a rallying to the government side. Passivity is likely to continue as the dominant attitude in most of the population, but further military defeats could cause a sudden swing away from the government. While the central authority in Saigon is unlikely to collapse, its ability to provide energetic leadership throughout the country and all levels is in serious doubt. It is possible that over the next few months certain provinces, especially in I and IV Corps, will be lost to Saigon's effective authority.

11. The psychological factor is now critical for South Vietnam's whole political-military apparatus. The widespread rumors that the US conspired with the Communists are symptomatic

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of popular anxieties over the future course of the war and US attitudes toward a political settlement. As yet, however, there are no signs of a crisis of confidence within the government.

12. If major military reverses occur, the political and military apparatus could degenerate into general ineffectualness. If, on the other hand, US and ARVN regain the initiative and inflict some conspicuous setbacks on the Communists and the general offensive appears to be contained, then the GVN might manifest new energy and confidence and draw new support to itself. On balance, we judge that the chances are no better than even that the GVN/ARVN will emerge from the present phase without being still further weakened.

Alternative Outcomes of Present Phase

13. We believe that the Communists will sustain a high level of military activity for at least the next two or three months. It is difficult to forecast the situation which will then obtain, given the number of unknowable factors which will figure. Our best estimate is as follows:

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a. The least likely outcome of the present phase is that the Communist side will expend its resources to such an extent as to be incapable thereafter of preventing steady advances by the US/GVN.

b. Also unlikely, though considerably less so, is that the GVN/ARVN will be so critically weakened that it can play no further significant part in the military and political prosecution of the struggle.

c. More likely than either of the above is that the present push will be generally contained, but with severe losses to both the GVN and Communist forces, and that a period will set in during which neither will be capable of registering decisive gains.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

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