

MANFIELD  
MONTANA

United States Senate  
Office of the Majority Leader  
Washington, D.C.

February 8, 1965

To: The President  
From: Senator Mansfield  
Subject: Vietnam

On the basis of the meetings of the National Security Council on Saturday night and Sunday morning, both of which I attended at your request, I endeavored to make my position clear on the situation as it has developed and may develop in Vietnam. I raised questions concerning the advisability of the action which you and your advisors proposed to undertake, not so much on the basis of the attack made on our installation but in view of the future possibilities which might be incurred by the retaliatory action.

Contrary to Ambassador Thompson's analysis of the situation, it appears to me that what has happened in North Vietnam will, in a sense, force Kosygin's hand for a number of reasons:

(1) Kosygin was there when it happened and he had just made a speech in which he said that the Soviet Union would supply assistance to North Vietnam in its struggle against the United States.

(2) A closer degree of cooperation by the Soviet Union and the Chinese will be brought about because in view of what developed, Kosygin

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will have little choice to do otherwise. It may well express itself in this situation by a resumption of major Russian military aid to China and transference through China of Soviet aid to North Vietnam. This would be most unfortunate because one of the hopes of Western policy was to encourage the split between the two great communist powers, a hope which will now, I believe, lessen to a considerable degree.

I raised questions about possible Chinese intervention and pointed out that the Communist Chinese had recently completed roads into Laos which could be used for troop and supply movements; that they had recently completed an air-field infrastructure in North Vietnam and that they had air-fields and naval bases on the Island of Hainan, off the coast of the northern part of North Vietnam and South China.

Whether or not the Chinese will intervene is a factor which only the future holds the answer to, but an increase in at least indirect Chinese intervention is to be anticipated.

I pointed out also that South Vietnam has a very unstable govern-ment and that we could not depend upon it or the great majority of the population therein. That is proved by news stories from reliable American officials in today's press which state that there was plenty of opportunity for advance warnings on the Pleiku attack but that the attack when it came was, in effect, a complete surprise.

It is especially hard to understand why we were caught off-guard ourselves, in view of the attack of November 1st on our force at Bien Hoa, 12 miles outside of Saigon. Our own security arrangements were certainly lax there and despite the explanation given at our meeting on Saturday night, it appears to me they were lax at Pleiku. It is my understanding that the American base at Pleiku is situated on a high plain, dotted with brush here and there but certainly not the kind of jungle area which surrounded Bien Hoa. While McNamara and Wheeler said that it would be extremely difficult to provide security two miles out, this is, nevertheless, a matter which should be looked into especially in view of the fact that aside from the more distant mortar shelling of the base, rifle fire and hand grenades were used right inside the American compound and explosives were placed against the barracks. This makes it clear that the Viet Cong were in the compound as has been stated in the press and proves that the security which was supposed to be furnished by both the United States forces and the Vietnamese military was lax. It is my understanding that more than half of the 23,000 U.S. personnel in South Vietnam are stationed in Saigon. Certainly some of them could be used to guard U.S. compounds. The explanations given this morning by General Goodpaster and others, in my opinion, were not convincing.

At the recent meeting, I also pointed out that General Giap had an army of 350,000 men, well-trained, and that he was and is one of the best military tacticians in Asia.

It is disturbing to me, though understandable, that the retaliatory move was essentially unilateral, initiated by us and then we had to wait until the South Vietnamese government was informed in order that the protocol of the situation might be maintained at least on the surface.

In other words we had decided on what our moves would be without any request from the government of South Vietnam but only in anticipation of such a request.

I have grave doubts about the ability of General Khanh's government. I have no doubt but that the great majority of the population of South Vietnam are tired of the war and will give us no significant assistance. I have a full awareness of your feelings, which I share, because of the attack on Pleiku. I appreciate, too, your repeated statements that it is not your desire to spread the war. However, the prospect for enlargement now looms larger and I think it is only fair that I give you my honest opinions, as I did on Saturday and Sunday, because to do otherwise would be a disservice to you and to the Nation.

In this connection you will recall that I also stated at the meetings that before we make any moves that we understand their full implications, in terms of the costs involved, and the fact, as I see it, that if we went too far in North Vietnam we would be in a far worse position than we were in Korea.

For, in a larger sense, not only can we not depend on the South Vietnamese population, but we can also place very little reliability on the Laotians and the Thais and none whatever on Cambodia. Moreover, beyond Indochina, we could well be squeezed in a nut cracker by developing events throughout Southeast Asia over which the Chinese cast an ominous shadow.

Events in Malaysia could under certain circumstances bring into force the ANZUS Treaty which would call for our giving assistance to Australia and New Zealand.

Finally, as you know we have approximately 42 mutual security agreements of one kind or another with countries or groups of countries scattered over the face of the globe. Short of nuclear war, we have not got the resources or the power to honor those agreements if the demands on them multiply. We are stretched too thin as it is and even with total mobilization there would be little hope of fulfilling simultaneously any large proportion of these commitments.

What the answer to the situation is at the moment I do not know nor does anyone else. But I am persuaded that the trend toward enlargement of the conflict and a continuous deepening of our military commitment on the Asian mainland, despite your desire to the contrary, is not going to provide one. I did suggest on Sunday, therefore, that the matter be referred to the United Nations and I am glad that Ambassador Stevenson has brought it up at the Security Council. I did suggest further that the Geneva powers be convened again for the purpose of seeing what if anything honorably could be done. I did suggest that any other forum might be considered in a search for acceptable ways to contract and to end the fighting in South Vietnam.

I further suggested that Ambassador Kohler in Moscow could carry any or all of the above suggestions to Breshnev in Moscow and that our Ambassador in Warsaw, who already has had in excess of 125 conferences with his Chinese Communist counterpart, follow the same procedure.

The purpose of this memorandum is to furnish you with a brief analysis of my views in writing on this most difficult subject as I have expressed them in large part in the meetings at the White House over the past three days.

Finally, you will recall that I stated to you that the burden of decision was yours but that, regardless of my individual views, I would do whatever I could to support you in the exercise of your grave responsibility.