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Report

VIETNAM PANEL

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By *ip*, NARS, Date 3-26-79

[This group consisted of Messrs. Bradley, Gilpatric, Kistiakowsky, Larson, and McCloy. It met with Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Ambassador Thompson, and Mr. William Bundy.] The following are highlights:

1. Stakes and Objectives in South Vietnam

[The group, with the possible exception of Mr. Larson, felt that the stakes were very high indeed.] They concurred in the Administration judgment that Thailand could not be held if South Vietnam were taken over, and they thought that the effects in Japan and India could be most serious. They particularly felt that the effect in Europe might also be most serious, and that de Gaulle would find many takers for his argument that the US could not now be counted on to defend Europe.

They also felt that [South Vietnam was a crucial test of the ability of the free world and of the US to counter the Communist tactic of "wars of national liberation", and that a US defeat would necessarily lead to worldwide questioning whether US commitments could be relied on.]

It was the feeling of the group that these consequences would be accentuated if the US by its own decision withdrew from South Vietnam, or if the US suffered a military defeat there. On the other hand, the group felt that the consequences would not be much reduced if a Communist takeover took place as a result of a change in government in Saigon, as a result of which the US was asked to leave.

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Mr. Larson appeared to dissent from this assessment, in line with his over-all view that we should be seeking UN action or serious negotiations (see para 4 below).

2. Increase of Combat Forces in South Vietnam

[In line with their view of the grave stakes, the group generally felt that there should be no question of making whatever combat force increases were required. Several members of the group thought that our actions to date had perhaps been too restrained] and had been misconstrued by Hanoi that we were less than wholly determined.

[The group urged that, in connection with any decisions for further increases, there should be a full spelling out of the military situation and the facts making the increases necessary.]

One or two members of the group asked whether it was possible to undertake the closing of the South Vietnamese border as a military operation. They appeared, however, to accept Secretary McNamara's statement that this would be a very fast, major operation of uncertain effect, and that the job had to be done within South Vietnam, including the possibility of major forces in the plateau area-- although this currently did not seem wise because of the fact that the main operation route (Route 19) was cut in several places and would have to be fully defended before forces could be sustained in the plateau other than by air supply.

3. The Policy on Bombing of the DRV

Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara, and Ambassador Thompson, laid out the various factors--particularly the question of Soviet reaction--that had led us not to hit Hanoi and Haiphong. The consultants appeared to accept these points, and none pressed for any early change in this policy. However, General Bradley did raise the

question whether we might not conduct individual raids on Hanoi and Haiphong in reprisal for specific outrages in the South. It was noted that this should not be done for outrages confined to Americans--but noted equally that most outrages were not likely to be of this character.

4. Negotiating and International Actions

There was much discussion whether it would be useful to take the South Vietnam issue to the UN. Mr. Larson argued at length for this course, but much of his discussion related to whether it should have been done in 1961 before we went into the advisory build-up. At the present time, Mr. Larson said that his soundings indicated that there would be much support in the United Nations for a simple call for the convening of a Geneva Conference. Others doubted whether there would not be hookers such as a demand for the cessation of bombing. Mr. Larson himself did not see much use in convening the Geneva Conference, and appeared to have in mind that the UN itself might act to introduce forces or police a cease-fire. [Others doubted very strongly that either of these was either practical or useful, and Mr. Acheson and Mr. Dean were vehement on the subject in the later plenary session. (Mr. Dean said that this was no time to "turn over our Far East policy to the UN".)]

[Mr. Larson's basic underlying view appeared to be grave doubt that we would get a truly viable and democratic Vietnam even by causing Hanoi to pull out, and he repeatedly queried whether what we might get as a "success" would be that much better than what we might get now.] Dr. Kistiakowsky suggested that the real difficulty might be the difference between a South Vietnam in which individuals now in the Viet Cong were free to engage in political activity--which would certainly have its difficulties--and a South Vietnam in which the Communist Viet Cong had become a part of a coalition government and were highly likely to take over. The matter was not really developed in detail, but it was clear that the group thought we needed to look hard at just what we did expect to come out in South Vietnam--

and equally clear that none of the other members of the group were prepared to buy Mr. Larson's basic thesis.

As to going to the UN, it should be noted that several members of the group, while clearly opposing Mr. Larson's line, thought that it might be useful at some time--perhaps in the context of increased military commitments--to do this, in order to make clear again that we were ready for negotiations. But the general feeling was that such a move at the present time would not be useful and would be a dangerous sign of weakness. (General Bradley particularly stressed this point.)

5 [In the plenary session, Mr. Hoffman (who, like Mr. Larson, had apparently been having extensive personal contacts in the UN corridors) more or less backed Mr. Larson's thesis in favor of an early move in the UN.] He thought it was essential to persuade the Afro-Asian countries we were not acting as imperialists, and that many of them did have this view. He specifically suggested a UN call for talks which would include the two Vietnams, the US/USSR/UK/France/Communist China, but also the Liberation Front. The plenary session did not pursue the question of dealing with the Liberation Front, but the matter had been raised in the Panel, and the Panel members appeared to accept Secretary Rusk's statement of the many strong reasons why this would be unwise and unproductive in terms of real negotiations, and seriously damaging to the whole view of the war on which our actions were based.

5. Prognosis of the Situation

7a [Mr. McCloy spoke at some length--both in the Panel and in the later plenary session--on the degree to which he had been impressed during the discussion with the toughness of the situation. He thought that it was most unlikely that merely blunting the monsoon offensive would bring Hanoi to a negotiating mood, and that the situation would probably remain critical for a long time.] He was particularly concerned that the Soviets might be brought

increasingly to what he called an "annealing" of the Sino-Soviet relationship, i.e., the Soviets competing with the ChiComs and acting on parallel lines, although with no necessary resolution of the basic policy differences between them.

7b | While others did not express themselves at length on this question, [it seemed clear that Mr. McCloy's views had many takers both in the Panel and in the plenary session.]

In the plenary session, Mr. Dean said that he thought there was a great deal of sentiment in the country for doing whatever it took, if we were going to go on at all. Mr. Lovett made the point that it was not useful to talk about "victory", that what was really involved was preventing the expansion of Communism by force; in a sense, avoiding defeat. This view seemed to be generally shared.

6. Specific Suggestions

The importance of local intelligence was particularly stressed by General Bradley, including the importance of Americans throughout the countryside.

Mr. McCloy and others stressed the great importance of the closest possible contact with our allies, and wondered if more could not be done particularly with the British, and, he thought, the Germans.

Mr. Larson thought that it would be useful for the government, particularly as it took further decisions, to spell out a number of points that had been bothering the public. He specifically mentioned the legal justification for bombing in the North.

8b | [Mr. Cowles thought that government sources had consistently painted too rosy a picture of the situation, and Mr. Lovett joined in this view.]

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Mr. Cowles thought that one highly popular move in South Vietnam might be for the government to abolish taxes, with the US making up the deficit through increased economic aid.

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