

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

ACTION

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE

October 21, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR HENRY A. KISSINGER

FROM: Roger Morris and Tony Lake

SUBJECT: Another Vietnam Option

We believe that there is a Vietnam option which lies between our present course and immediate unilateral withdrawal. It deserves careful study because we are convinced that the present course will lead to the same disastrous consequences which were described in the speech draft as the perils of a quick bug-out. The difference lies in time and number of U.S. casualties.

We do not pretend that this option can win the war, or even provide an eventual political solution in South Vietnam in which most of us could take comfort.

But we do not believe that any option can accomplish this end.

Our Present Course -- Assumptions

Our recommendation rests on serious doubts about the assumptions underlying our present course. To believe that our present course is viable, we must make favorable assumptions about a number of factors, and must believe that Hanoi as well will come to accept them.

U.S. calculations about the success of both "Vietnamization" and our negotiating efforts -- and Hanoi's calculations, in turn, about the success of their strategy -- rely on our respective judgments of:

- the pace of public opposition in the U.S. to our continuing the fight in Vietnam in any form. (We think it will grow quickly, and that "Vietnamization" will not significantly slow it down. We believe that the dangers of our course to domestic cohesion will begin to outweigh any foreign policy interest in Southeast Asia.)

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- the ability of the U.S. Government to maintain even the present level of its own discipline in carrying out an increasingly unpopular policy. (As public pressures grow, we think that the President will face a de facto mutiny in press leaks, etc., that will make your job and his still more difficult.)
- the actual ability of the South Vietnamese Government and armed forces to replace American withdrawals -- both physically and psychologically. (Conclusive evidence is lacking here; this fact in itself, and past experience, argue against optimism.)
- the degree to which Hanoi's current losses affect its ability to fight later -- i. e., losses of military cadre, political infra-structure, etc. (Again, the evidence is not definitive. Most reports of progress have concerned security gains by U.S. forces -- not a lasting erosion of enemy political strength.)
- the ability of the GVN to gain solid political benefit from its current pacification progress. (Again, reports of progress have been largely about security gains behind the U.S. shield.)
- how realistic the basic thrust of our negotiating goals-- i. e., internationally supervised free elections -- is as a compromise alternative to Hanoi. (Elections are not a traditional Vietnamese means of resolving conflict, and Hanoi must be particularly hesitant to risk in voting what it believes it will achieve by simply waiting.)

We thus do not accept the favorable assumptions which must underlie our present policy.

There is at least a better than even chance that Hanoi's current strategy is, as against the French, to ride out enemy strength with low-cost tactics while waiting for the enemy's domestic collapse. We believe that this is Hanoi's most rational, and most probable, course of action.

In the long run, "Vietnamization" will become unilateral withdrawal.



Another Option

Our concessions to Hanoi have been made piecemeal, with the undoubted effect of persuading the North Vietnamese that they need only wait for each succeeding concession until we have given the whole game away. Hanoi cannot know at what point we will stop making concessions -- the point at which compromise becomes humiliation. Nor can Hanoi know how far we intend to take "Vietnamization." It probably believes that we will "Vietnamize" ourselves completely out of the war, at whatever cost.

In sum, we think Hanoi has no real incentive to negotiate. It will continue to bide its time until we change the ground rules. Even if they're hurting badly, we find it difficult to see how they can calculate their staying power as less than ours. We present them with a decision only by substantially increasing the cost of their waiting or offering an inducement to weigh against their current and anticipated sacrifice. The first option -- successful "Vietnamization" or a punishing military action as currently under study -- seems to us unrealistic.

The problem is that our weakness on the domestic flank and the vulnerability of Saigon plus Hanoi's perception of those disabilities remove the bargaining margin between generous openers (of the kind we've offered) and our minimum position. Hanoi simply has no reason to test -- let alone settle for -- what lies in between. We believe the hard fact is that the best deal we can offer is still close to what they can get by waiting (and humiliating us).

If there is to be a negotiation rather than slow unilateral withdrawal, it has to:

- (a) Offer Hanoi terms almost as favorable as what they rationaly calculate they'll get by waiting, and
- (b) Convey in the process that we really care so deeply about a humiliation that we would first act irrationally toward the Soviets as well as North Vietnam. The offer must not be presented as simply another concession.

The offer need not be actually as good as what they believe they'll get by waiting, since it does hold out to Hanoi a gain in time and a lesser cost in resources.

But the deal cannot include American humiliation. Thus, it can offer Hanoi a gain in time through settlement now, but it cannot allow Hanoi to achieve its goals in the immediate future (which would mean that very humiliation we seek to avoid).

A study of this option must consider both the nature of the deal and the manner and circumstances of its presentation. Some general criteria concerning both seem clear. One point should be emphasized -- we would make no concession and bring no pressure to bear on Saigon unless and until the deal were made. We would not unilaterally move against the GVN in order to induce Hanoi to accept.

#### Nature of an Offer

The offer:

- cannot ignore our basic goals of South Vietnamese self-determination and mutual withdrawal. But these goals should not be interpreted in a rigid, narrowly American way.
- must provide a realistic basis for compromise;
- must allow us some reasonable expectation about where we will stand late in 1972;
- must include some sort of agreement about Laos and, perhaps, Cambodia.

An offer which recognizes our basic goals and also offers a basis for compromise must provide some formula for elections which guarantees both the GVN and the PRG a significant percentage of deputies in any assembly, and probably ministers in any government. This means some form of gerrymandering.

It would also mean a new caretaker government in Saigon, acceptable to both sides, to oversee the elections. The NLF will probably have to be offered portfolios in this transitional government. (This government's life should not be long, and the elections should probably be under international supervision.)

In return for these concessions on our part, we should ask for mutual withdrawal under international supervision, including withdrawal from



Cambodia and Southern Laos, including all of the Mekong Valley. Joint recognition of Cambodia's borders might be included.

These are only initial, broad thoughts about what the character of such an offer might be.

It seems clear to us that the success of this course would depend as much on how it were done as on its substance. We see the following essentials in the scenario:

To Hanoi: we pose our offer secretly and strictly on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. The principle is non-negotiable. It is our minimum position. Only mechanical details of the gerrymandering are open to bargaining. If rejected, we would have to be in a position to disclaim everything. On the other hand, if accepted, we would need something for the record in writing, as a further guarantee Hanoi would play it straight. Obviously, we could not leave Hanoi an out when we're descending on Saigon with a bitter pill.

To Saigon: We would have to study carefully how to present the fait accompli, and fuzz the question of who initiated the bargain. But here, too, the basic deal is non-negotiable. We must be prepared to exert means of imposing the settlement over Saigon's opposition. The stakes would warrant steps we have not contemplated since 1963.

We recognize the balance would be delicate -- changing the top leadership of the Saigon Government, if necessary, with as little damage as possible to the organized non-Communists. But we could no more afford to produce Hanoi and stumble in Saigon than to topple Thieu and fail to deliver North Vietnam.

To the Soviets: Their influence, such as it is, seems worth playing to the hilt. To Moscow as to Hanoi, we are playing our minimum card. We are cornered. We are therefore dangerous. The Russians should see this as an authentic last grasp at a political solution, with the product of rejection a U.S. humiliation carrying incalculable risks.

Recommendation:

Again, we would not claim that this option is a panacea. We do believe that it may be the least unpleasant -- both in the short and long runs.

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In any case, we think that sooner or later our present course will force the President to face a choice between escalation, humiliating unilateral withdrawal, and a negotiated exit of the kind we propose.

We therefore recommend that you choose a small group of staff members to study this option now. It must be kept small -- four or less -- simply because a leak would seriously damage our present policies as well as the option itself. We think time is important because we see the President sinking deeper into the Johnsonian bog.

Approve \_\_\_\_\_

Disapprove \_\_\_\_\_

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See me \_\_\_\_\_

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