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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

3 APR 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Redeployment of US Forces from Southeast Asia

During my January 1971 trip to Southeast Asia, I discussed with Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, Admiral McCain, and Admiral Moorer future US force levels in and redeployments from Southeast Asia. I reported those discussions to you after the trip. As you may recall, I asked General Abrams to provide a plan for redeployments through the end of calendar year 1972. Anticipating a mid-April 1971 announcement by you of the next redeployment increment, I granted General Abrams' request for submitting his recommendations by April 1. His plan, plus the Joint Chiefs of Staffs' recommendations, reached me on March 27. I discussed the military views in detail with the Chiefs last Monday, March 29. Subsequently, on Thursday, April 1, Admiral Moorer supplemented the Chiefs' views. I am now ready to report the military views on redeployments and to provide you with my recommendations.

In this memorandum, I shall (a) review our redeployment record to date, (b) indicate the principal current redeployment options, (c) assess those options, (d) take a look beyond the next feasible redeployment option periods, and (e) provide my conclusions and recommendations. The rationale leads, I believe, to an announcement of intentions to redeploy an additional 105,000 troops between May 1 and Christmas of this year. The resultant authorized US force level by the end of the year would be 179,000 men.

Record to Date

By May 1, 1971, we shall have reduced the authorized US force level in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) from 549,500 to 284,000. The average redeployment rate over the inclusive July 1969-April 1971 period has been slightly in excess of 12,000 troops per month. Redeployments during the twelve-month period ending in April 1971 have, as well, been at about that average rate.

Since US redeployments started in July 1969, the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimate the VC/NVA regular combat strength threatening the RVN has declined about 20 percent. The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), not including the para-military structure, have increased more than twenty percent, from about 875,000 to more than 1,050,000 men. More importantly, the quality of the RVNAF has improved markedly

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in every major respect, e.g., equipment, training, leadership, and attitude. The RVNAF's combat record throughout the Republic of Vietnam, in Cambodia, and in Southern Laos is the best testimony to the solid progress under the Vietnamization program.

You have outlined our objective and policies in clear and unmistakable terms. On May 14, 1969, you said:

"... We have to understand our essential objective in Vietnam: What we want is very little, but very fundamental. We seek the opportunity for the South Vietnamese people to determine their own political future without outside interference."

On November 3, 1969, you outlined the policy:

"In July, on my visit to Vietnam, I changed General Abrams' orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policies. Under the new orders, the primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility of the security of South Vietnam."

I believe your new policies have been sound. Our forces have conducted their new mission well since July 1969. The RVNAF has increasingly improved in the performance of its mission.

Risks have been taken in the interest of attaining our objective of RVN self-determination. Those risks have been justified. The record since July 1969 has been one of steady progress towards our goal.

While steady positive progress coupled with declining US involvement have typified the period since July, or even January, 1969, the costs of our Southeast Asian involvement remain high. There are numerous aspects to the cost situation. Two are of particular importance: combat deaths and impact on the Defense budget.

Since January 1969 more than 15,000 Americans have lost their lives in Southeast Asia. While the rate of US combat deaths has successively declined in 1969 and 1970, to the point where the annual rate is the lowest since 1965, the US combat losses in 1971 will almost surely be in excess of 1,369 -- the US losses in 1965. So far this year we have suffered combat deaths in excess of 560. I know that we share the judgment that any combat losses are lamentable. It is simply a continuing cost which must be kept in mind.

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In addition, the impact of our Southeast Asian involvement on the Defense budget continues to be severe. The following table highlights that fact:

DoD Outlays
Baseline and SEA-Current and Constant Dollars
(\$ billions)

| Fiscal Year | Current Dollars | | | Constant (FY 1972 Dollars) | | |
|-------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------|-----------------|
| | Total | Baseline | SEA Incremental | Total | Baseline | SEA Incremental |
| 1964 | 50.8 | 50.8 | - | 75.8 | 75.8 | - |
| 1968 | 78.0 | 58.1 | 20.0 | 99.9 | 75.6 | 24.3 |
| 1969 | 78.7 | 57.1 | 21.6 | 96.1 | 71.0 | 25.1 |
| 1970 | 77.9 | 60.5 | 17.4 | 88.1 | 69.0 | 19.1 |
| 1971 | 74.5 | 62.5 | 12.0 | 79.6 | 67.1 | 12.5 |
| 1972 | 76.0 | 68.2 | 7.8 | 76.0 | 68.2 | 7.8 |

The year 1964 was the last pre-SEA year for the United States. It therefore represents a reasonable base-line year. As you can see, during the last three fiscal years (1969-71), the defense resources available after deducting the SEA incremental costs are substantially below those needed to maintain the base-line capability. The prospect in FY 1972, despite Southeast Asian outlays less than one-third those of FY 1969, is for continued availability of non-SEA resources below the base-line figure. This, purely and simply, is one of the major reasons the Soviet Union has been able to make such marked military strides relative to the United States during the past few years. The opportunity cost to the United States, therefore, goes well beyond the dollar expenditures in Southeast Asia. The implications of allowing the trend to continue are severe, if not critical.

Options Available

The continuing costs, especially in lives and dollars, lead me to believe that a continuing US redeployment trend is desirable. The record, particularly since July 1969, gives me confidence we can continue to move towards achieving US goals in Southeast Asia with a declining US presence.

Three force level and redeployment options, in my judgment, should be considered:

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- . Option 1. Retain current planning to reach the 255,000 force level by 30 June 1971. Authorize force levels of 233,000 and 199,000 by 31 October and 31 December 1971, respectively. Announce on April 7 only those redeployments through 31 October. This is the option recommended by MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- . Option 2. Retain current planning to reach the 255,000 force level by 30 June 1971. Authorize and announce a force level of 134,000 by 30 April 1972. This option is the JCS second choice, based on my discussions with them on March 29.
- . Option 3. Retain current planning to reach the 255,000 force level by 30 June 1971. Authorize and announce a force level of 179,000 "by Christmas of this year."

There are, of course, numerous other combinations which could be considered as options. The three listed, however, offer a short, medium, and relatively long-term set.

Assessment of Options

Each of the options retains the current planning for a reduction of a US force level of 255,000 spaces in RVN by 30 June 1971. I have been assured by General Abrams and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that this goal remains valid. Planning, which you approved in the FY 71 and FY 72 budget requests, has been carried forward to achieve that goal.

In other aspects, the options differ markedly. I believe the major pros and cons of the options are as follows:

Option 1

Pros

- . Continues the trend of US redeployments in a general sense.
- . Provides more personnel for security of remaining US forces, as well as personnel to help in logistics retrograde movement.
- . Consistent with President Thieu's request to keep redeployment rates low, and future US intentions obscure, during RVN 1971 political campaign.
- . Facilitates redeployment of a Thai brigade during the period.
- . Constitutes the plan MACV and the Chiefs feel has the lowest military risks.

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Cons

- . Constitutes a redeployment between 1 May and 31 October of 51,000, a rate of only 8,500 per month. Constitutes a redeployment from May to December of 85,000, a rate of 10,600 per month. These are well below the overall redeployment rate to date. Such rates would clearly contradict your March 4 statement, "... we can say at this time the troop withdrawal will continue at its present level," and your March 11 statement, "it [redeployment announcement] will be at least at the level that we have been going through withdrawals up to this point." The average rate to this point, again, has been nearly 12,500 per month.
- . Retaining personnel mainly to facilitate logistics retrograde puts the materiel cart before the personnel horse. Other logistics retrograde plans can be worked out without sacrificing efficiency in that area.
- . While President Thieu did indicate to me his desire for a relatively small announcement covering the RVN political campaign period, he also was clear in recognizing the importance of continued US popular support. Of the two, I believe he would agree continued US popular support is the more important.
- . If we allow US redeployments to be held up to facilitate other nations', like the Thai's, withdrawal, the impact on public support in this country could be severe.
- . Retaining larger numbers of US forces increases the risks of higher US combat deaths and the costs to the Defense budget.
- . Requires multiple and disappointing announcements, thereby giving added exposure to an unpopular subject, and risking further erosion to Congressional and popular support.
- . Risks being interpreted as an assessment that the Laotian operations were a failure.

Option 2Pros

- . Maintains the prior redeployment rate of approximately 12,500 per month. Constitutes a large redeployment in absolute terms (150,000), and brings US authorized strength to 134,000, the lowest since September 1965.

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- . Constitutes a longer-term period, allowing MACV added flexibility in the use of personnel resources.
- . If actual US redeployments were slowed during July-Sept 1971, could provide some political help to President Thieu.
- . Is a plan which MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff feel is manageable.
- . Consistent with US budget planning.

Cons

- . While the absolute size of the increment is large, the failure to accelerate the redeployment rate at some point during a twelve-month period could result in a negative reception by the US public.
- . Could be interpreted as an indication we have decided the recent Laotian operations have not been a success.
- . The large absolute size of the increment and the relatively low resultant US force level projected in the announcement could be a major liability to political stability in RVN.

Option 3

Pros

- . Provides for continued redeployments at a rate (13,000 per month) slightly higher than the overall average since withdrawals started. The absolute size of the increment (105,000) is reasonably large. The resultant force level of 179,000 would be the lowest since November 1965.
- . Is only 20,000 men below the MACV proposal for strength levels at the end of the year. It, therefore, would appear to be within tolerable military risks.
- . Constitutes a reasonable compromise for President Thieu between announcements which might enhance his political posture and one which would almost surely erode the US public support needed to sustain US assistance to the RVN.
- . Progressively reduces exposure of US troops to combat risks.
- . Is within planned US budget parameters.

- . Reasonable posture vis a vis assessment of current Laotian operations. Allows us to wait until later in the year to assess the full impact of those operations.
- . Allows sufficient manpower and flexibility for a systematic logistics retrograde.
- . Means fewer public announcements required than the MACV/JCS plan.

Cons

- . Still a redeployment rate at about the historic average. Could be received and assessed by Congress and US public as a disappointment.
- . Not recommended by MACV or Joint Chiefs. Admiral Moorer indicated he believes the 15,000 to 20,000 additional men included in this option, above those in the MACV plan for the same period, would have to be redeployed between 1 July and 15 October 1971. He considers that "excessive." /Actually, it would mean 31,000 to 36,000 men would be redeployed in three-and-a-half months. The rate would be lower than that we have been using for nearly two years./
- . Would put added burden on MACV in making arrangements for the major logistics retrograde movement this summer.

In terms of continuing to move towards achievement of our Southeast Asian objectives through reasonable policies, I believe Option 3 looks best. It strikes a more optimum balance than the other reasonable options among providing adequate military capability, sufficient continuing help in Vietnamization, positive movement towards implementing the Nixon Doctrine, and compliance with past assurances given the American people. While it is not the option recommended by the military leadership, it is close enough to their recommendation to be, in my judgment, workable. Actually, MACV and the Chiefs join me in the conviction that a US force level in RVN of about 130,000 men is achievable by April 1972. The principal differences in our viewpoints are in the July-December interval. The lesser increments in that period preferred by the Chiefs are so far below our redeployment experience to date, both in absolute size and rate, as to be unacceptable in my judgment. Conversely, the increase in the redeployment increments above the military recommendations to make the plan acceptable are still consistent with our experience to date on RVNAF improvement and the intelligence community's assessment that the DRV will not be able to mount a serious military threat for at least the next twelve months.

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Moreover, Congressional and popular US support for our programs in Southeast Asia are now more tenuous than ever. There are growing indications, as you know, that all US redeployments have already been discounted.

In any event, it is important that the redeployment increment you announce on Wednesday, April 7, be consistent with the longer-range outlook. I should like to offer a few observations along that line.

A Look Ahead

In reality, as I have indicated, all three redeployment options cited are consistent with the longer-range outlook in Southeast Asia. I believe MACV and the Joint Chiefs generally share that view. The importance of insuring adequate indigenous military capability for Free World forces in Southeast Asia is, however, undiminished. Given the lead-time required to effect substantive changes, if program changes need to be made, we need to be as sure as we can now that those indigenous forces are capable of doing the job. To that end, I recently issued instructions for a hard and searching look at all aspects of the Vietnamization program, as well as those programs affecting Cambodian and Laotian forces.

We have also postulated alternative redeployment programs to completion, i.e., to the point of a remaining US military advisory group in Southeast Asia. While the military leadership provides admonitions about, and recommends caution on, the rate at which that transpires, I believe they uniformly support the idea that the goal can be achieved with reasonable risks.

Most importantly, in our look ahead, I want to be as sure as I can that we are providing, not only in Southeast Asia but throughout the world, those levels and types of military forces needed to effect your foreign policy goals. You indicated in your recent Foreign Policy Report:

"Our current level of security expenditures is adequate to provide the forces necessary to protect our vital interests. It must be kept that way."

You also indicated:

"... there is an absolute point below which our security forces must never be allowed to go. That is the level of sufficiency. Above or at that level, our defense forces protect national security adequately. Below that level is one vast undifferentiated area of no security at all. For it serves no purpose in conflicts between nations to have been almost strong enough."

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In many respects, Southeast Asia represents our most important immediate Defense challenge. But it also represents the most costly single drain on our resources. It therefore impacts most heavily on our ability to accomplish other tasks. We must be sure that we, and especially the RVNAF, are moving towards our goals in Southeast Asia by the most efficient means possible. The opportunity cost to other US foreign policy goals of our Southeast Asia involvement is exceedingly high. Even if we were to be provided substantially increased Defense budgets that would still be true. Without substantial budget increases, the opportunity costs are becoming, in my judgment, critical.

I believe, therefore, that we must over the longer term ahead insure that we derive every last measure of benefit from our military programs and our redeployments from Southeast Asia. I would hope that all possible steps would be taken to insure we garner available dividends from our Southeast Asian activities in the diplomatic as well as the purely military area.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- . The US redeployment record to date has been marked with significant success. By April 30, 1971, authorized spaces will have been cut nearly in half from the 549,500 level which existed in early 1969. The indigenous Free World forces in Southeast Asia have shown a marked and growing ability to assume the military burden there. I recommend we do everything possible to insure the trend continues.
- . The US military leadership and I believe an assistance and redeployment program is feasible which works towards a US ground advisory group, as well as some air support, by the end of 1972. This program can be effected within the bounds of tolerable risks. I recommend we continue to plan along those lines.
- . The three redeployment options cited are consistent with movement towards US objectives in Southeast Asia. Each is feasible from a military standpoint. However, Option 1 would be, in my judgment, a severe disappointment to the US public and would erode our support. Option 2 would obviate some potential advantages your forthcoming announcement could have for RVN political stability. Option 3 contains the most nearly optimum balance among the many complex factors involved. I recommend you authorize and announce a US force level of 179,000 in RVN by Christmas of this year.

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- . The costs of our Southeast Asia programs continue to impact heavily on our ability to support your foreign and national security policies elsewhere. I recommend we insure that our Defense budget planning recognize the realities of that situation. I also recommend that, consistent with achievement of our Southeast Asian goals, we take every feasible step to free resources from that area. I further recommend that we do everything possible to derive benefit, especially in the diplomatic field, from our current and prospective Southeast Asian programs.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Laird". The signature is stylized with a large, looping initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

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