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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

JCSM-364-68

11 June 1968

TS 189080

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Subject: North Vietnam's Ability To Withstand
Manpower Attrition (U)

1. ~~(S)~~ Reference is made to your request of 10 June 1968 for the comments of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on a draft intelligence memorandum, subject as above, to be transmitted to the President along with your memorandum.
2. ~~(TS)~~ The Joint Chiefs of Staff have reviewed the draft memorandum and have noted that the estimate of North Vietnam Army troops in South Vietnam is somewhat higher than the 90,000 to 93,000 currently accepted by MACV. In view of the uncertainties caused by the impact of the current high level of infiltration, however, any estimate of these forces would be tenuous and would be subject to continuous refinement.
3. ~~(TS)~~ On balance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are in general agreement with the judgment that manpower losses have not exhausted North Vietnam's reserves and that, under the assumptions advanced and with present operating restraints, Hanoi can maintain the combat forces in South Vietnam at their current strengths beyond 1969. It is also believed that continuing heavy manpower requirements will produce increasingly severe strains on North Vietnam, but there is as yet no indication that these developments have reached the point where they are influencing Hanoi's determination to carry on the war. Thus, in the absence of actions or developments to increase attrition, the arithmetic does not support a hope that a pure attrition battle can be won in 2 years.
4. ~~(TS)~~ Nevertheless, the prospect of continuing heavy losses cannot be attractive to the enemy unless he believes they will pay off. Weighing the costs of protracted war, it may well be

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that he intends to bring the contest to final issue long before 2 years have gone by. If this is the case, and there is increasing evidence to support it, he may have already organized and trained larger forces than we know from the one-half million manpower reserve available to him now. If this turns out to be the case and if 1968 is the year of decision, then long-term attrition estimates are not meaningful except as they may have influenced his decision to go for the main chance now.

5. ~~(TS)~~ On the other hand, if he seeks to retain the option for protracted war - as a hedge against failure in 1968, then raw attrition is only one of his problems. An immediate problem he faces is the relationship between his strategy and his losses. In 1968, he has been losing men (both North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong) at a rate which, if it continues, would produce losses of approximately 350,000 men in South Vietnam. This high-loss rate is the consequence of his offensive strategy, the forward deployment of his main forces, and his effort to achieve a maximum impact in a short period of time. From a military standpoint, we do not believe that he can absorb such losses over a protracted period of time and maintain the level of battlefield effectiveness required to pursue this strategy and attain his goals.

6. ~~(TS)~~ If he does not throw his entire force into a final climactic battle, regardless of casualties, we believe he can be forced back into his bases by allied offensive operations. He still can attack on a selective basis, but the basic dilemma he would face in the long run will not change. If he chooses to withdraw his main mobile forces from the populated areas or is forced out by allied action:

- a. Pressure on the Government of Vietnam will be relieved, and it will continue to gain strength.
- b. Pressure on the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces will be relieved, and they will gain strength and effectiveness.
- c. Enemy access to the population will decrease, and his recruiting will fall off.
- d. The effectiveness of his cadre will diminish as the pressure on it increases.
- e. His hope for an uprising will disappear.

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7. ~~(TS)~~ His long-term military prospects on the ground in South Vietnam against allied forces are not good. His best hope is that through spectacular attacks, even at very high cost in casualties, he can create a short-term image of success on his side and the image of hopelessness on our side. If he can bring about a loss of confidence in the Government of Vietnam through military action or negotiations, he will have achieved a major goal.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:



EARLE G. WHEELER
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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