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Executive Registry
66-916

1 March 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Joseph Alsop's Column of 28 February 1966:  
Comments on the Validity and Possible Origin  
of the Infiltration Figures Appearing Therein

SUMMARY

Mr. Alsop's figures on net capability to increase Communist military manpower in South Vietnam are about twice as high as anything in Agency or USIB publications or in the MACV November 1965 briefing for Secretary McNamara, to which Mr. Alsop refers. His figures on supply capabilities, on the other hand are low. The language of the column implies, but does not state, that his information was gathered in Vietnam on his recent trip out there. This may be; at least his figures do not jibe with any figures published by the Agency or used in USIB papers.

\* \* \* \* \*

1. Alsop speaks of "recalculations made . . . at about the end of October (1965) or the beginning of November" and says:  
"These new estimates were presented to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara when he visited Vietnam in late November." He

states that the "new estimates" concerned enemy capabilities to infiltrate men and supplies. According to Alsop the "Vietcong and North Vietnamese were now credited with the capabilities of increasing their strength by two regiments a month from November, 1965, through December 1966 . . . which meant that the enemy could well increase his strength by the equivalent of eight full divisions more than had been previously thought likely."

2. The MACV briefing for Secretary McNamara had in effect two sets of figures. First, it gave the DRV a gross capability to train and infiltrate about 4,500 men a month -- equivalent to three regiments as the regiments were at that time estimated (they are now estimated at nearer 2,000 than 1,500 men each). This figure is 50 percent higher than Alsop's. Second, the briefing had a net figure obtained by adding local VC recruitments but subtracting estimated combat losses and defections. This figure would presumably represent the amount by which the enemy could actually "increase his strength." It was given as "45 battalion equivalents" by the end of 1966, or an average of about one regiment equivalent a month over 13 or 14 months -- this figure is one-half Alsop's.

3. The net figure does not appear in any National Estimates, but the gross PAVN infiltration figure of nine battalion equivalents a month appears in SNIE 10-12-65, Annex A, 10 December 1965. It says:

"With a force of this size (about 12 regiments) available to furnish instruction and training, about 36 new PAVN regiments or regimental equivalents of approximately 1500 men each could be trained and infiltrated into South Vietnam during 1966. This would amount to an average of 9 battalion equivalents a month."

This passage is also quoted in a footnote in SNIE 10-1-66, 4 February 1966. This figure also appears in an OCI Memorandum of 11 January 1966,\* which says:

"It has been estimated that the North Vietnamese could maintain an average infiltration rate to South Vietnam throughout 1966 of approximately 4,500 men per month. It appears, on the basis of reports of captured prisoners, that somewhere near this figure may have been reached in the last two months of 1965."

The figure of 36 regiments or at least 50,000 men as an "apparent" infiltration capability for 1966 also appears in a 21 February 1966 Directorate of Intelligence Memorandum, "Buildup of Vietnamese Communist Forces Continues After Resumption of Air Attacks."\*\*

\* "The Status of PAVN Infiltration into South Vietnam," OCI [ ] SECRET.

\*\* [ ] TOP SECRET, [ ]

4. Mr. Alsop's statement that in the recalculation the North Vietnamese were . . . "credited with the capability of bringing into the South between 140 and 175 tons of supplies per day . . ." is also at variance with the McNamara briefing and all Agency and USIB publications that we have seen. The figures given to Secretary McNamara by MACV in November were as follows, in tons per day:

Through LAOS

300 in dry season

50 in rainy season

195 average

Through CAMBODIA

25 minimum

By Sea

14

TOTAL AVERAGE CAPABILITY

234

SNIE 10-12-65, Annex A, says: "The cumulative throughput capability into South Vietnam by means of the Laos corridor is estimated for the current dry season at 150-200 tons daily." Recent studies of improvements on that route have led to raised figures. The 21 February 1966 DD/I Memorandum estimates the

capability of the Laos route as ". . . at least 400 tons a day in the dry season, and about 100 in the wet." This memorandum also says that "from 70-90 tons per day has been moved into Laos in January and February" and that some 50-70 tons of this probably goes on to South Vietnam. Nowhere does Alsop's 140-175 tons per day appear.

5. Since neither the studies published here nor the MACV briefing contains any of the figures used in Mr. Alsop's column, we are at a loss to know where he got them. A reasonable guess would be that he got them third-hand and garbled in conversations in Vietnam, or, perhaps, in Washington. There is nothing in his column which indicates that he has had access to any of the Agency or USIB publications.

NOTE: We understand that in the Honolulu briefing for Secretary McNamara this February the projected number of Communist battalions in the South by the end of 1966 was raised from 155 to 179. This would be close to an average monthly increase of two regiments. Alsop makes no reference to this briefing.

ARBOT SMITH  
Deputy Director  
National Estimates

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

March 7, 1966

TO DICK HELMS

FROM: Bill Moyers

Thanks.

# Matter of Fact . . . . . By Joseph Alsop

## The Untold Story: Panic

ANYONE wanting an explanation of the strange course of events in these last months must begin the search in Vietnam, at about the end of October or the beginning of November.

At that time, in the U.S. headquarters in Saigon, a recalculation was made, which in turn made history. The recalculation took the deceptively simple form of a revised estimate of enemy capabilities.



Alsop

In order to show why such a routine event can have produced great consequences, one must begin by sketching in the earlier background. In August through October, in brief, the first returns came in on the large American troop commitment in Vietnam. They were remarkably encouraging, indeed stirring returns.

The green American troops fought like veterans. The untested American units regularly won engagements with greatly superior numbers of the enemy. In the light of these happy results, the first experience-based studies were made of the enemy's probable riposte to the much more massive U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Initially, the conclusion was that the Communist riposte would follow the Communist rule-book. In other words, the Vietcong were expected to return to Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's

II, to dig in for a pull, and to resist guerrilla war-all formations. The military, Gen. had grave doubts about this assess-

ment. His staff, however, was then more worried about the tactical difficulties of prolonged "penny packet war," than about further large-scale North Vietnamese invasion of the South. Somewhat more pessimistically, the civilian analysts meanwhile predicted the invasion of the South by one or two additional Northern divisions; but even this was not especially disquieting.

BRIEFLY, the civilian forecast gave a maximum future balance of four North Vietnamese divisions plus the equivalent of eight divisions of Vietcong regular troops, against six U.S. divisions, one Korean division, and 13 South Vietnamese divisions. Such a balance would not have been alarming. But throughout October, the South was invaded by more and more North Vietnamese troops, and the earlier assessment began to seem more and more dubious.

This led to the recalculation already mentioned. It mainly took the form of carefully revised estimates of the numbers of troops and quantities of supplies the enemy was capable of bringing into South Vietnam over the Ho Chi Minh Trail — or Geneva Accord Memorial Highway, as it is usually called in Saigon. The new estimates were pretty formidable.

The Vietcong and North Vietnamese were now credited with the capabilities of increasing their strength by two regiments per month from November, 1965, through December, 1966. The North Vietnamese were further credited with the capability of bringing into the South between 140 and 175 tons of supplies per day, or enough to sustain a greatly expanded invasion.

These new estimates were

then presented to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara when he visited Vietnam in late November. The estimates meant that the enemy could well increase his strength by the equivalent of eight full divisions more than had been previously thought likely.

OBVIOUSLY, this in turn meant that a great many more U.S. troops would be needed to redress the balance. Thus when McNamara returned to Washington, his report on the recalculation in Saigon caused what can only be described as a near-panic. Essentially, it was a political panic. Because of McNamara's reform of the armed services, six U.S. divisions could be, and had been, provided for Vietnam without undue political strain. Providing additional divisions meant a severe strain, however.

The first consequence of the panic was the peace offensive and the pause. The President and his advisers were clearly warned of extremely negative effects in both Hanoi and Saigon (which were duly produced). Hence one must assume that domestic-political considerations were the prime motives of the vast international vaudeville which the President staged.

As it turned out, of course, the peace offensive acted, in this country at least, as a kind of noisy advertising campaign against the President's own policy. Furthermore, as always happens in such cases, the near-panic inside the Administration seeped outwards, to the Senate and elsewhere. Thus the public dialogue came to its present pass. It remains to be seen whether such intense concern was justified. But this must be the subject of a later report.

MEMORANDUM FOR: Messrs. R. J. Smith, [redacted]  
[redacted]

This memorandum was prepared at the request of Mr. Helms. OGI and OHR assisted.

Abbot Smith

1 March 1966

(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101  
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Helms

Here is the memorandum you requested.

Since it seems quite clear that Mr. Alsop could not have got his figures from any Agency publication or SNIE, we have not looked into the distribution of these papers. It can of course be done if you wish.

Abbot Smith

1 March 1966

(DATE)

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