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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

16 September 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT : The Coming Political Struggle for South Vietnam

1. The long awaited and much heralded third Communist offensive has fallen well short of its advance billing. In contrast to repeated warnings of a massive country-wide attack, approaching or even exceeding the Tet offensive, the current effort has been a fairly cautious affair. No doubt much of this is due to increasingly effective Allied spoiling operations. In any event, the bulk of the evidence indicates that the Communists are not now attempting a major military offensive; most of the action has been sporadic, with considerable emphasis on attacks by fire, and only occasionally followed by limited ground probes. The present effort is more prolonged but less intense than the Tet or May offensives.

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2. The gap between the ominous predictions and the subsequent reality has led to considerable speculation. One view is that the Communists have suffered a near disastrous defeat and have been forced to postpone if not cancel their plans for a major offensive. A contrary opinion is that the climax is yet to come, and that we have only witnessed the preliminaries to a massive assault, ultimately against Saigon.

3. In our view neither of these interpretations is accurate. While there will probably be lulls and new bursts during the next several months, Communist military action is not likely to rise significantly above the level of the past month. It now appears that the Communists have made a strategic decision to conserve their forces, while trying to maintain intermittent pressures sufficient to preoccupy Allied troops in or near the urban areas. Further, this decision, we believe, rests on Hanoi's reappraisal of certain fundamental Communist strengths and weaknesses -- a reappraisal which was probably conducted at the highest level during Le Duc Tho's absence from Paris in July.

4. In terms of manpower and materiel, the Communist forces are still capable of a formidable effort. But the

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political and military leaders must now be acutely aware that such an undertaking involves extremely high costs, cannot be recycled indefinitely, and would almost certainly not win the war. On the other hand, the Communists are quite capable, without the expense and risks of an extraordinary military effort, of enduring the next six months or more without seriously impairing their position in South Vietnam.

5. In these circumstances a massive military move would only be justified if it promised significant psychological and political dividends in terms of Hanoi's basic objectives: breaking the "aggressive will" of the US and destroying the GVN. It would be foolish to rule out such a move; Hanoi could well see a high political return not apparent or convincing to others. In our view, however, the Communists can no longer have very high expectations that their objectives can be advanced by large scale military attacks. The Tet attacks were unique, and in a sense an aberration. They yielded important gains for Hanoi, but it is increasingly unlikely that such a situation can be duplicated.

6. Now, Allied forces and the general populace have been fully prepared for further offensives by the Communists. US

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opinion to some extent at least has been conditioned to expect an intensification of the fighting. The record of the last few months should raise doubts in Hanoi whether the Paris talks can be directly influenced by battles -- or even lulls -- in South Vietnam. And one important benchmark has been passed -- the political conventions -- without a significant turn in US policy.

7. One further consideration must be of growing importance in Hanoi's calculations. Unless the North Vietnamese surprise everyone by making a rapid settlement in the next three months, Hanoi will have to deal with a new American administration. The Communists might be tempted to try a political move or even a dramatic military effort in an attempt to sway the election. But they could have no assurance of the net result; Hanoi is in no better position than anyone else to guess what policies will prevail after the election. In this context, it would be prudent for the North Vietnamese to confront a new administration with its forces not seriously weakened, rather than expend its manpower and resources trying to influence an outgoing administration.

8. In sum, we agree with the remarks, recently attributed to President Thieu, to the effect that the present period is a transitional one: the military aspects of the struggle will

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gradually be overshadowed by the political aspects. The military effort will be supplementary to the political and diplomatic struggle. We believe that Hanoi intends to reach a negotiated settlement; the optimum period for this settlement opened on 31 March and in Hanoi's view will probably not last much beyond the first six months of a new administration. Thus, we foresee an intensive political-diplomatic struggle coming, one which could produce some dramatic surprises.

9. In Paris we expect the pace to quicken somewhat. Since Hanoi is not certain of the character of the next administration, its immediate aim will be to commit the US more firmly to the continuation of the talks, so that a new administration could not easily abandon them. Some concession, if only a cosmetic one, will probably be made behind the scenes to whet the interest of the US team. Probably Hanoi believes there is still an outside chance that the bombing will be ended before the American elections and it will work for this in Paris. Hanoi's general objective still is to move the negotiations onto highly charged substantive issues -- the role of the Front, the withdrawal of American troops, etc. -- which unnerve Saigon and create divisions between the US and the GVN. There would also be some advantage in advancing the talks so that a new administration would be able to dispose of

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the Vietnam problem by making some clear-cut decisions. Major concessions to the American position on reciprocal de-escalation, however, seem unlikely before the elections. If such concessions are intended, they would probably be reserved for a new administration.

10. Within South Vietnam, the Communists intend to go forward with the political preparations for an end to the fighting. They will develop two new instruments: the urban oriented "Vietnam Alliance for Peace..." and the administrative apparatus in the rural areas known as revolutionary liberation committees. Thus far these two instruments have been given a public identity separate from the National Liberation Front. Though this calculated ambiguity may be somewhat confusing to the rank and file, it permits the Communists to keep open several options when serious negotiations over a political settlement begin. The general aim of a "coalition" government underlies the creation of these new devices, but how the various pieces fit together is open for bargaining. In any case, the Communists are laying the groundwork for claiming a share of political power when the fighting stops.

11. Some painful choices, however, confront the Communists as they proceed toward a settlement. One is whether to press

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for a cease fire. With their forces intact and in control of large areas in the countryside, a cease fire might seem an attractive move, especially since the GVN seems to fear it. The Communists would count heavily on the widespread popular fears that a cease fire could only mean that the Communists would be eventually given some political position in Saigon. On the other hand, by agreeing to cease fire, the Communists would lose important leverage on the GVN and the US and would then be in the position of having to deal, sooner rather than later, with the present Saigon authorities. We simply cannot be sure how they would weigh the prospective gains and losses. But such a move could come at any time.

12. There is one further problem which Hanoi may have already begun to mull over. What if, despite serious negotiations, continued military action, and a change in US administrations, Hanoi cannot achieve a settlement which, at a minimum, provides an opportunity for winning power in political competition. In other words, what if US terms are simply too harsh and unacceptable. Then North Vietnam must face the prospect of reducing its own minimum terms, or gearing its military strategy for a much longer war than it now foresees or intends. An awareness

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of this potentially agonizing decision may give some greater sense of urgency to Le Duc Tho and his comrades in Paris over the next few months.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ABBOT SMITH  
Chairman

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