

## MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

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November 25, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR HENRY A. KISSINGER

FROM: Winston Lord *W*

SUBJECT: Escalation?

Frustrated by the November elections, the economy, and Hanoi's intransigence in Paris, the search is on for dramatic recoups.

Are the Soviets playing games in Cienfuegos and with our generals? Never mind, pant after them for a Summit and a splashy trip to the Soviet Union.

Disaster in Pakistan? Certainly we are worried about the human tragedy, but let us also get some PR benefits as well as gainful employment for a discredited Vice President by sending him to the scene. (No matter that the Pakistanis do not want anybody and have their own internal political problems.)

Above all, let us see if we can do something dramatic in North Vietnam that maybe will make the other side negotiate.

This is a dangerous mood. It is apparently flowing strongly enough to justify rehearsing the follies of escalation which one would like to think were self-evident by now.

Lessons from the Weekend

The POW raid, certainly, and the 24 hour bombing, less certainly, were not escalation per se. A case can be made for both weekend activities. I have no way of judging the risks of the rescue operations as presented to the President. One could justify the decision on humanitarian grounds -- the fundamental question was whether on balance the welfare of our POW's would be advanced or jeopardized by the mission, even if successful. On balance, I would have favored it if I were told that POW's were almost certainly there.

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The President's soothing reaction to the dry hole was humane and admirable given the deep disappointment he must have felt. However, I cannot believe that he would have authorized the raid without pretty solid assurance that there were some POW's in the target area. It is now clear that they had been moved not only weeks before, but probably months. I assume that there will be a thorough investigation of the intelligence given to -- and withheld from -- the President and that some heads will roll in addition to honoring the courage and skill of the team and the call for additional daring schemes.

We were fortunate that the intelligence failure cost us so little. Our response should be much greater caution about such "bold" moves rather than eagerly ordering up plans for new ones. Above all, let us look hard at the intelligence fiasco (it is self-delusion to call it anything else) not only in terms of this mission but also for any broader implications about the intelligence apparatus servicing the President. What, if anything, does our intelligence gap on this raid tell us about our overall intelligence on the Southeast Asia conflict? Did the extreme sensitivity of the operation mean that key intelligence analysts were not consulted? Is this pattern repeated elsewhere in clandestine operations, not only in Indochina but around the globe?

As for the "protective reaction" strikes, a case can be made for socking the enemy now and then. It is difficult to argue that one day bombing sets back negotiations: negotiations haven't been going anywhere; the other side's response to the raids in Paris has been minimal; and they can hardly be indignant when one of their tactics is to couple negotiations with offensives. The basic calculation is that we must burn the enemy occasionally to remind them they cannot embarrass us as we withdraw. If we do not respond to their nibbles of a city shelling or a recce plane shutdown, they will be tempted to step up these actions.

The problem is that they must be tempted anyway in order to induce escalation on our part. They see domestic support for Administration policy as the biggest obstacle to their aims. They are sufficiently perceptive to recognize that this support is fragile and that escalation is the surest means of unravelling it. To achieve this basic objective is surely worth putting up with some bombing of their country.

Hanoi will recognize that the single most significant result of the weekend is that Vietnam is once again in the U. S. front and center on the TV

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screen and in newspapers. It is in their interest to keep it there. Whether or not Secretary Laird outpointed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is not very important. The fact that the national networks televised the session live is.

The great danger of these one-day operations, therefore, is that they move us to the edge of escalation. The enemy, if they choose, can pull us over the edge with continued shootdowns or shellings. And escalation is distinctly to the enemy's advantage.

#### Future Plans

We will now see a panoply of other imaginative plans for raids, or sustained bombings, or mining Haiphong Harbor, or sealing the Ho Chi Minh Trail with ground forces. If the other side will not negotiate, the theory goes, we must move militarily while we still have some assets.

To what end?

I am sure you are more than familiar with all the arguments against escalation, but it's worth recalling them since no one else will, except maybe State which does not count. It is almost incredible after the experience of the last several years that we might seriously consider this path and that its senselessness must be pointed out once again.

Military gains? This consideration is almost irrelevant if you are talking about one-day raids which garner a few trucks, a few SAM's, a few supply dumps, and a few civilians. Such raids are primarily a signal. Their political fallout -- as long as they happen at long intervals -- is manageable just as their military significance is marginal.

Measurable military impact would come only after lengthier bombing, i.e., for at least a week, by which time the fig leaf of protective reaction is dropped and the political costs, as well as civilian casualties, mount geometrically. Bombing supply areas for a week would hamper the enemy, perhaps disrupt his plans. At most it would buy some time on the ground -- but it would lose even more time at home.

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Sustained bombing along the lines of 1965-1968 certainly would have significant military impact. We have ample evidence that the impact would not be decisive. The argument might be made that North Vietnam is in a weaker position now than then, but I doubt that anyone would contend that such a campaign would stop their aggression against the South. Rather it would serve to unify the population again and lift their fighting spirit (which has been sagging ever since we stopped our bombing). Furthermore, their air defenses are much more formidable and consequently our own losses would be much greater.

A list of the costs of renewed bombing on an open-ended basis should be familiar litany by now.

There is first and foremost the uproar in this country and the impact on an already strained and bitter society. The reaction would be all the more magnified because of the wounds of Cambodia and the general feeling that the war is winding down. One can imagine the passions among a weary public that the nightmare is starting up all over again.

We would fire up Congress. "Ideological majority" or not, a complete reversal of the downward trend of the war is bound to prompt, at the very least, close votes on restrictive legislation in the Senate. There would be a serious spillover effect on other parts of the President's program, whether the foreign aid supplemental, ABM, or even welfare.

The Paris talks would almost certainly be broken off. Admittedly they are getting nowhere anyway, but the loss of even the symbol of a possible negotiated settlement would add to the shock effect.

This would be one issue which could rally Soviet/Chinese cooperation, whose relations are already warming up. The Soviets and Chinese would, as a minimum, step up their assistance to Hanoi and there would be a genuine danger of their direct involvement.

One could probably count on the demise of SALT and a heating up of the arms race.

The list goes on and on and hardly requires further elaboration.

The only type of offensive that might bring Hanoi to its knees would be a massive campaign, dropping the self-imposed 1965-68 restrictions, against all significant military and industrial targets. This would

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produce untold civilian casualties and public outrage. All the costs cited above, and more, would be incurred. While an intensive bombing campaign might, over time, have a decisive military impact, the American society would be torn apart first and whatever benefits that are salvaged from the military impact would be heavily outweighed by the costs at home and abroad.

Induce negotiations? The argument might be made that a large-scale offensive could quickly produce negotiating movement before some of the heavy costs listed above have to be paid. This theory has never worked in the past and there is no reason to think it will work in the future. We can count on Hanoi battenning down and waiting for the inevitable foreign and domestic pressures to work against us. We have said that they cannot be tricked out of their objectives after 25 years. Would we really think they will be bombed out?

Mining of Haiphong Harbor or a broader quarantine would entail essentially the above calculations, i. e., all hell would break loose long before there was decisive military impact and even if it were to "succeed" (whatever that means), the costs in other areas would outweigh the benefits. In any event, North Vietnam could still get sufficient supplies overland, as Larry Lynn's memo to you last summer demonstrated. This option has the added disadvantages of international legal complications and the likelihood of direct confrontation with the ships of many countries, including the Soviet Union.

A better case could probably be made, both on military grounds and on domestic political grounds, for using Cambodian/South Vietnamese forces to choke off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Assuming no U.S. ground forces or advisers were needed, this looks less unappealing than other alternatives and at least merits study. However, aside from a natural suspicion and cynicism, fed by the painful history of the war, about still another scheme which will finally turn the tide, there are a host of questions to answer. For example, how many troops would be needed? How much would this weaken friendly positions in Cambodia and South Vietnam? Would Souvanna go along? Etc.

#### Alternatives to Escalation

I recognize this memo only tells you what we should not do, but as as you have said, there are no brilliant answers any more. The alternatives -- assuming the other side still refuses to negotiate seriously -- would seem to boil down to either continuing present policy or trying to

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bargain a fixed date for our total withdrawal for concessions by the other side. (I rule out replacing the present GVN, for which we have no incentive and which I find morally indefensible. I also rule out a rapid bug-out, although a sound case for this can be made and, in many ways, it is an honest as well as honorable position. I reject it because I do think the costs would be great and because I am not convinced we can get nothing in return for the withdrawal of our forces.)

Continuing present policy would mean that we calculate that the enemy would not -- or could not -- embarrass us as we move ahead with Vietnamization and withdrawals. The danger is that such a policy may turn out to be an illusion, that with or without threats and 24 hour protective reactions, the enemy one day will be willing and able to present us with the bullet-biting choice between escalation and an ignominious exit.

Bargaining a fixed date for our withdrawal would attempt to use our remaining military assets not for escalation but for agreements with the other side that would not only make our exit graceful but also perhaps give the non-communist forces a chance to survive. The danger of this course is that the other side will not negotiate meaningfully in exchange for only one of their "demands" or that they would violate any agreements that they do negotiate.

### Conclusion

There are two related problems. If the President is seriously considering escalation, how does one persuade him not to do it? What should we do instead? I will give you further thoughts on these.

In any event, if we feel that in a broader sense something is needed to counter Soviet unpleasantness, we should not translate this judgment (unconsciously or not) into escalation against North Vietnam but rather into a steady, sound overall approach to the Soviet Union. As a starter, we should stop eagerly pursuing a Summit until relations are greatly improved and real results can be foreseen.

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