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MEMORANDUM

3173-X

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

~~SECRET~~/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

URGENT ACTION

May 12, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: SECRETARY KISSINGER

FROM: W. R. SMYSER

SUBJECT: Lessons of Vietnam

At your request, some papers have been prepared for the President and yourself on the "lessons of Vietnam".

At Tab I is a memorandum from you to the President offering some thoughts on the lessons of Vietnam and suggestions regarding public positions we might take.

At Tab II is a paper from Mr. Stearman and myself commenting on a State Department paper (Tab A) and also offering some of our own ideas regarding the lessons of Vietnam. You may wish to read these.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That you sign the memorandum to the President (Tab I) on the Lessons of Vietnam.

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MEMORANDUM

3173-X

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

~~SECRET~~/SENSITIVE/EYES ONLY

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT

FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER

SUBJECT: Lessons of Vietnam

At your request, I have prepared some thoughts on the "lessons of Vietnam" for your consideration and for your background information in dealing with further press questions on the subject.

It is remarkable, considering how long the war lasted and how intensely it was reported and commented, that there are really not very many lessons from our experience in Vietnam that can be usefully applied elsewhere despite the obvious temptation to try. Vietnam represented a unique situation, geographically, ethnically, politically, militarily and diplomatically. We should probably be grateful for that and should recognize it for what it is, instead of trying to apply the "lessons of Vietnam" as universally as we once tried to apply the "lessons of Munich".

The real frustration of Vietnam, in terms of commentary and evaluation, may be that the war had almost universal effects but did not provide a universal catechism.

A frequent temptation of many commentators has been to draw conclusions regarding the tenacity of the American people and the ultimate failure of our will. But I question whether we can accept that conclusion. It was the longest war in American history, the most distant, the least obviously relevant to our nation's immediate concerns, and yet the American people supported our involvement and its general objectives until the very end. The people made enormous sacrifices. I am convinced that, even at the end, they would have been prepared to support a policy that would have saved South Vietnam if such an option had been available to use.

It must not be forgotten that the decisions of American administrations that involved this nation in the war were generally supported at the time they were taken, and that they were supported not only among the people at large but among the political elements and among the journalists who later came to oppose the war. The American people generally supported and applauded President Eisenhower for a decision to partition Vietnam and to support an anti-Communist government in the South. The American people, and particularly the American media, supported President Kennedy's decision to go beyond the restrictions on American involvement that President Eisenhower had set and they also supported his decision to permit American involvement in the removal of President Diem -- although the extent of that involvement was not clear at the time. Many who were later to be labeled as "doves" on Vietnam then insisted that South Vietnam had to be saved and that President Diem's removal was essential to save it. You yourself will remember the strong support that the Tonkin Gulf resolution won on the Hill and the general support for President Johnson's decision to send troops. President Nixon won an outpouring of support for the decision to withdraw American forces at a gradual pace, as well as for the Paris Peace Agreement.

If one could offer any guidelines for the future about the lessons to be drawn regarding domestic support for foreign policy, it would be that American political groups will not long remain comfortable in positions that go against their traditional attitudes. The liberal Democrats could not long support a war against a revolutionary movement, no matter how reactionary the domestic tactics of that movement. They had accepted the heavy commitment to Vietnam because of President Kennedy, whom they regarded as their leader, but they withdrew from it under President Johnson.

One clear lesson that can be drawn, however, is the importance of absolute honesty and objectivity in all reporting, within and from the Government as well as from the press. U.S. official reports tended for a long time to be excessively optimistic, with the result that official statements did not make clear to the American people how long and how tough the conflict might turn out to be. After a while the pessimistic reports from journalists began to gain greater credence because such positive trends as did emerge came too slowly to justify optimistic Washington assessments. In Vietnam, the situation was generally worse than some reported and better than others reported. But the pessimistic reports, even if they were

inaccurate, began to look closer to the mark until almost any government statement could be rejected as biased, not only by the opposition but by an increasingly skeptical public.

Another lesson would be the absolute importance of focusing our own remarks and the public debate on essentials -- even if those essentials are not clearly visible every night on the television screen. The Vietnam debate often turned into a fascination with issues that were, at best, peripheral. The "tiger cages" were seen as a symbol of South Vietnamese Government oppression, although that Government was facing an enemy who had assassinated, tortured and jailed an infinitely greater number; the "Phoenix" program became a subject of attack although North Vietnamese and Viet Cong tactics were infinitely more brutal. The Mylai incident tarnished the image of an American Army that had generally -- through not always -- been compassionate in dealing with the civilian population. Even at the end, much of the public discussion focused on President Thieus's alleged failure to gain political support, but it was the Communists who rejected free elections and who brought in their reserve divisions because they did not have popular support. And at home, it was argued that your aid request meant American reinvolvement when nothing was further from your mind.

Of equal importance may be a dedication to consistency. When the United States entered the war during the 1960's, it did so with excesses that not only ended the career and the life of an allied leader but that may have done serious damage to the American economy and that poured over half a million soldiers into a country where we never had more than 100,000 who were actually fighting. At the end, the excesses in the other direction made it impossible to get from the Congress only about 2 or 3 percent as much money as it had earlier appropriated every year. When we entered, many did so in the name of morality. Before the war was over, many opposed it in the name of morality. But nobody spoke of the morality of consistency, or of the virtue of seeing something through once its cost had been reduced to manageable proportions.

In terms of military tactics, we cannot help draw the conclusion that our armed forces are not suited to this kind of war. Even the Special Forces who had been designed for it could not prevail. This was partly because of the nature of the conflict. It was both a revolutionary war

fought at knife-point during the night within the villages. It was also a main force war in which technology could make a genuine difference. Both sides had trouble devising tactics that would be suitable for each type of warfare. But we and the South Vietnamese had more difficulty with this than the other side. We also had trouble with excesses here: when we made it "our war" we would not let the South Vietnamese fight it; when it again became "their war", we would not help them fight it. Ironically, we prepared the South Vietnamese for main force warfare after 1954 (anticipating another Korean-type attack), and they faced a political war; they had prepared themselves for political warfare after 1973 only to be faced with a main force invasion 20 years after it had been expected.

Our diplomacy also suffered in the process, and it may take us some time to bring things back to balance. We often found that the United States could not sustain a diplomatic position for more than a few weeks or months before it came under attack from the same political elements that had often advocated that very position. We ended up negotiating with ourselves, constantly offering concession after concession while the North Vietnamese changed nothing in their diplomatic objectives and very little in their diplomatic positions. It was only in secret diplomacy that we could hold anything approaching a genuine dialogue, and even then the North Vietnamese could keep us under constant public pressure. Our diplomacy often degenerated into frantic efforts to find formulas that would evoke momentary support and would gloss over obvious differences between ourselves and the North Vietnamese. The legacy of this remains to haunt us, making it difficult for us to sustain a diplomatic position for any length of time, no matter how obdurate the enemy, without becoming subject to domestic attack.

In the end, we must ask ourselves whether it was all worth it, or at least what benefits we did gain. I believe the benefits were many, though they have long been ignored, and I fear that we will only now begin to realize how much we need to shore up our positions elsewhere once our position in Vietnam is lost. We may be compelled to support other situations much more strongly in order to repair the damage and to take tougher stands in order to make others believe in us again.

I have always believed, as have many observers, that our decision to save South Vietnam in 1965 prevented Indonesia from falling to Communism and probably preserved the American presence in Asia.

This not only means that we kept our troops. It also means that we kept our economic presence as well as our political influence, and that our friends -- including Japan -- did not feel that they had to provide for their own defense. When we consider the impact of what is now happening, it is worth remembering how much greater the impact would have been ten years ago when the Communist movement was still widely regarded as a monolyth destined to engulf us all. Therefore, in our public statements, I believe we can honorably avoid self-flagellation and that we should not characterize our role in the conflict as a disgraceful disaster. I believe our efforts, militarily, diplomatically and politically, were not in vain. We paid a high price but we gained ten years of time and we changed what then appeared to be an overwhelming momentum. I do not believe our soldiers or our people need to be ashamed.