Saturday, March 9, 1968
2:45 p.m.

Mr. President:

Herewith Gen. Taylor's view -- in response to Lodge's paper and others.

The statement of views A and B couldn't be better.

W. W. Rostow
Mr. President:

I have had the opportunity to read Walt Rostow's memorandum to you of March 6 and Cabot Lodge's of March 5 conveying their thoughts on the war. These papers plus the Post editorial of March 6 and the recurrent Senate debates have stimulated the following discussion of possible changes in the tactics and strategy of the Viet-Nam war.

The attitude which one adopts toward the Vietnamese war results largely from the choice one makes of the facts and purported facts drawn from the vast amount of available information (and misinformation) contained in official and media reports. This exercise of selectivity in choosing what to believe contributes to the wide fluctuation in points of view which we encounter in most discussions of Viet-Nam. However, at the present moment as we try to sort out the facts and consequences of the Tet offensive, there seems to be a polarization of views about two opposing positions; one (View A) that the enemy lost and that we should press forward to exploit that loss, the other (View B) that the enemy won and that we should hedge our losses and seek merely to stalemate the military situation with the resources presently committed.

View A

The Tet offensive was a surprise to us in terms of magnitude, concurrence of attacks and precise timing, and scored important psychological advantages for the enemy. However, it was a risky course of action forced on the enemy by the success of our strategy in 1966 and 1957, which thus far has been a net loss to the enemy. This conclusion arises from a consideration of the heavy losses which the enemy has sustained in the attacks, the present exposed position of many Viet Cong units in areas remote from their relatively secure bases, the alienation of the urban population as a consequence of the damage caused in the cities, and the disillusionment of the enemy troops arising from disappointed hopes of popular risings and decisive victories. While the GVN and RVNAF have suffered heavy blows, none has been mortal and, although there are uncertainties as to the exact condition of ARVN, the Regional and Popular Forces and the pacification program, the situation appears to offer great opportunities if it can be exploited promptly.

This spectacular effort on the part of the enemy may be a last climactic attempt to create conditions favorable to negotiations or may be merely a peak in intensity of effort which can be repeated although probably at a lower level and without the benefit of the surprise which the Tet attack enjoyed. In either case, the enemy seems to have abandoned the strategy of a prolonged conflict and to be willing to play for high stakes in a comparatively short period of time.
Thus, we should view the year, 1968, as possibly a year of decision and act in concurrence with this assumption. The military crisis may come in the spring or later in the year and we should prepare for either contingency. For the moment, we should rush reinforcements to General Westmoreland as rapidly and in such numbers as our depleted resources will permit and, at the same time, leave no stone unturned in energizing the GVN and ARVN to greater efforts. Concurrently, we need to rebuild our Strategic Reserve at home to be ready for the next phase in Viet-Nam and elsewhere.

With a battle joined which may be decisive, it is no time to consider fundamental alterations of strategy or to be diverted by doubts about the future. General Westmoreland should be encouraged to husband his resources, develop reserves and pass to the offensive as soon as possible. There should be no thought of diminishing the bombing of the North—indeed, now may be the time to decide to mine Haiphong. By the end of year, we should know better the nature of our residual problem in Viet-Nam and can then adjust our conduct accordingly but, for the present, the battle is the thing.

View B

According to View B, the Tet offensive must be rated a net success which demonstrated unsuspected resources and capabilities on the part of the Viet Cong, shattered the illusion of urban security and undermined popular confidence in the GVN.

Although the attacking forces suffered heavy losses (though probably not as many as reported by U.S. officials), the attackers dealt a shattering blow to ARVN, driving most of its units into the towns where they remain, reluctant to return to their posts in the countryside. It will take months to restore the combat effectiveness of ARVN to its pre-Tet condition if, indeed, such restoration is possible. The GVN, while performing reasonably well under fire, is now moving apathetically to repair the damage created by the enemy attacks and it is doubtful whether it could survive another round of heavy attacks. Thieu and Ky are more at odds than ever and there is a real possibility of an anti-Thieu coup or an unconstitutional seizure of emergency powers by the military junta.

With the withdrawal of ARVN to the cities, the countryside has been left exposed to the Viet Cong recruiters and propagandists. Pacification has been set back to a degree as yet unmeasured, but certainly very substantial.

Under the circumstances, it is becoming apparent that even a large reinforcement in U.S. troops can not guarantee a favorable military outcome since any reinforcement by our side can be readily offset by additional enemy infiltration from the north where large resources of military manpower remain untouched. Furthermore, any large U.S. augmentation will result in a further Americanization of the war and will encourage the South Vietnamese to sit back and let the Americans carry even more of the burden.
Under the circumstances, with no prospect of a quick military victory, the commitment of additional forces by the U.S. would be a waste of resources badly needed elsewhere to sustain our world-wide posture. If we keep adding forces, conceivably we could "win" in Viet-Nam and lose the home-front and the rest of the world.

The conclusion to be drawn from the situation is that we should give serious consideration to a new strategy in South Viet-Nam based upon a leveling off of the U.S. strength and the establishment of a military equilibrium behind a defensive front protecting the largest possible amount of friendly population. This equilibrium (or stalemate) would be maintained, if necessary, for several years, during which time the CVN and ARVN would, we hope, pull themselves together and develop a capability to stand alone. Thus, our decision should be to cease reinforcing and to prepare for a prolonged, low cost, limited war while the Vietnamese develop the necessary strength to end the conflict and to sustain a viable government in the post-war period.

As you might expect, I hold more to View A than to View B but I must admit that the returns are not all in and we can not be entirely sure of the outcome of the Tet offensive. Indeed, that offensive appears far from over and General Westmoreland is likely to have some anxious days before the military situation stabilizes. But, in the short run, even if View B is closer to reality than View A, we still need to reinforce Westy as rapidly as possible with what we presently have available and to create further reserves at home for future contingencies.

Left unanswered is the primary concern of holders of View B that Viet-Nam is a sponge with an inexhaustible capacity for absorbing U.S. resources and, hence, at some point we must call a halt. There is no positive answer to this fear which is a real one, other than to point to a few countervailing considerations.

a. North Viet-Nam has many constraints on increases of its military strength in the south such as finite quantities of trained leadership, difficulties in local recruiting in the south, manpower requirements in the north resulting from our bombing campaign, and concern over denuding the homeland of combat-ready units.

b. Logistical factors place some limit (though hard to define) on the numbers of troops and/or the tempo of operations which Hanoi can sustain in South Viet-Nam. The current rate of consumption of munitions must put considerable strain on their logistics system as evidenced by the recent effort to run munitions boats by sea through the MARKET TIME barrier.
c. This is the fourteenth year of war for North Viet-Nam just as it is for South Viet-Nam and it is hard to believe that Hanoi is enjoying the conflict or can hold out indefinitely as the pessimists believe. You will recall that Giap in a recent interview with a Hungarian visitor allegedly described his forces at Dien Bien Phu as being on the verge of complete exhaustion. They have experienced a lot of fighting since that time and it is now 1968.

These considerations encourage the belief that an end—or at least the start of negotiations—may not be far off and we should place ourselves in the best possible position in anticipation of such a development. It is not a time seriously to consider fundamental changes of strategy although we should always be thinking hard about the alternatives of the future. In this connection, however, I would have real doubt of the feasibility of any strategy which depends for its success upon the willingness of the American people to wage a prolonged, limited war of stalemate. That was a critical weakness of General Gavin's "enclave strategy" and it applies equally to the new strategy of View B.

M. D. T.

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