

Saigon, Vietnam
August 26, 1968

Dear Hank:

I'm enclosing a short piece, which is rather significant in its own way. At this time, it is exclusive; it is relatively non-perishable and won't be outdated by any battlefield developments here. So, when the rush of news events subsides, maybe you can find a small space for it.

Also, I meant to get a short note off to you on my source for the piece I wrote about the up to 50 per cent withdrawal of the NVA mainforce from the South--since it's not very discreet to cable such material. I also notice the State Depta denied it to Dave Willis, in the last batch of papers I must received. The piece was based on an interview with Brig. Gen. J. N. McLaughlin (USMC), who is Director of the Combat Operations Center ~~leading~~ directly under General Abrams. The COC runs the American side of the war on a minute-to-minute basis--as distinct from the longer-range operational planning of the J-3 section. As usual, I opened the interview by establishing the rules of attribution; he chose the "background" attribution of "informed sources," rather than direct quotation to himself or the American command, which I agreed with. My first question was about General Abrams new strategy--and he started talking about the NVA withdrawal and the current lull. He was quite open about the withdrawal from the South and gave me the Communist order of battle of which divisions had pulled back across the border. This was his view of the military fact on the battlefield at the time; his interpretation of what that fact meant, however, followed the standard official line that the main-forces had withdrawal only to prepare for another offensive. So, of course, I hit the story hard; to me, the story--the news angle--was the extent of the withdrawal, but I also quoted his interpretation that this was just preparation for another offensive. I doubt very much that the general would have given me such detail after President Johnson's hard-line speech; but, this was just several days before that. If the President and State Department choses to ignore, deny or obfuscate what the MACV generals say here, it's a pretty good indication of the political currents--but I don't think it should change what is ~~x~~ the military facts, as expalined and interpreted by an official source, speaking not for attribution.

Incidentally, too, this is not out of line with what other senior people had been telling other correspondents here--but the other correspondents were not the wire services, who had been covering the lull only by predictions of another offensive, without attempting to define the extent of the lull. A few weeks before the McLaughlin interview, Keyes Beech of the Chicao Daily News told me he was informed by General Abrams, as well as CIA sources, that there had been a significant

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withdrawal move by the NVA from the South, although they had a lower percentage at an earlier timeperiod. I believe he wrote this for his paper, although I didn't see the playback here.

I should have written you sooner about this, not only for your information, but also to pass on this information to the Washington people to give them some idea of the direction of things here, seen from this vantage point. I'll try to make sure to do this in the future, should a similar situation arise in the coming days.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Dew' or similar, written in a cursive style.