

Strategy.

Background interview with Col. Serong on Thursday, July 18, 1968, on significant developments since the first Honolulu Conference, Feb., '66, until the second Honolulu Conference this week.

On the question of what was the great watershed point; was it, for example, the '68 Tet offensive:

The great watershed point was sometime in late '65. In early '65, we had the U. S. troop buildup and then that troop buildup continued to the point where we could say the Allies had pushed back the Communist main forces and prevented the VC from overthrowing ARVN--so that by pure military action, the U. S. battalions had prevented defeat.

Then, we had an intellectual crisis--which way to go? Should the U. S. use more and more big battalions, or should they choose what I call the Special Forces route? The Special Forces by now were disliked--they had been Kennedy's special child and when he was gone they got kicked around. Almost as a matter of professional gravitation, we went against the Special Forces route and were sucked into the big-unit route.

The strategy ~~decision~~ decision was: to destroy the main-force and let the infrastructure problem be dealt with later and at leisure--or to concentrate on the infrastructure and hold off the main force. For almost emotional reasons, the first course was chosen.

Q. Then, several months later, after this watershed decision, Honolulu '66 was held. What was the significance of that?

A. Even in Honolulu '66, ~~we~~ they made all those speeches about the economy, the second front etc. But, these were made with the mouth; the action was minimal; there was minimal expression of this in action because of the distraction with the main-force war.

Q. If the turning point was in late '65, would the Ia Drang Valley battle be a specific date of this?

A. That's as good a point as any.

So, we see that Tet was the consequence of the watershed decision in late '65--Tet itself was not a watershed point. The thinking was that while we were pushing the main-force towards the borders, we were making the cities secure; but in fact, as Tet showed, we were not succeeding in that.

Q. What went wrong in the Honolulu '66 strategy?

A. The White House never intellectually acknowledged even to themselves that ~~there~~ was only one controlling element; MACV ran the war, not the Ambassador; and MACV was all geared in one direction. What was needed was a change of emphasis. Before, ~~one~~ of the U. S. battalions, two were concentrated on fighting the main-force for every one committed to pacification. This should have been reversed. This is not the enclave theory at all.



Now, where we stand now, interestingly and by accident we have got ourselves into the 2 to 1 ratio (two US. battalions for pacification versus one for mainforce war), instead of the old 1 to 2 ratio. We have brought the troops back to the urban centers, the emphasis which we should have had originally. This is currently true except for massive deployments along the 17th parallel and around Kontum with the 4th Infantry Div.

Now, by accident, when Abrams took over, Johnson said no more troops; Abrams would have to live with this situation. At this stage, my guess is neither Johnson nor Abrams understood the implications of this. But, the implications were plain in Vietnam. Never before did the U. S. have a strategic reserve here, because it never needed it; if more troops were needed, they were in the pipeline or out of country. A strategic reserve should run 25% of the deployable forces; now Abrams just subtract this from his existing deployment and this must come from his anti-main-force war forces. (Hence, his battalions fighting the main-force war must be reduced by 25% to build up his in-country strategic reserve). And, hence, Abrams must reshape his strategy for his anti-mainforce war. He must re-shape ~~his~~ his strategy only one way--by emphasis on the counterinsurgency aspects and by de-emphasis on his anti-main-force war. That's where we stand now. This will be intellectually and professionally resisted by MACV--but it is inevitable.

Q. What is Abrams strategy?

A. Abrams is not doing anything. The actions he says he's taking are not reflected by troop movements on the ground. What he is doing is mentally appreciating that the enemy is not homogeneously strong throughout the country and Abrams is using his intelligence units to find enemy strongpoints and once found, then to operate against them. I have yet to see evidence rather than words of these things; the reason it is taking place is because we're still in a posture in which the only action we can effectively undertake is ~~react~~ reaction. Our reaction is good; our initiative techniques are non-existent.

Q. What about the Honolulu Conference starting tomorrow?

A. What ~~is~~ is the need of this Honolulu? If you assume the war is going on along the agreed strategy--then suddenly a Honolulu Conference. It is either a propaganda gesture for the world, or it means some radical change of policy, and Johnson is using Honolulu to get all the boys lined up.

If it is a radical change of policy, what could it be? Only one--out. The conference could only be held to work out the speeds, decencies and mechanics of pulling out.



What are the indications for this? When Clark Clifford said we are going flat out to re-equip ARVN, even at the expense of our own troops. This is acceptable only if we are going out. This is an indication of a state of mind. All this does is make it easier to withdraw--the Americans hand material over to the ARVN, and if ARVN loses it to the VC, that's their problem.

Q. ~~Do you think~~ This policy change would depend on how Johnson wants to play his cards before the American election, no?

A. Before I thought it was impossible for Johnson to limit the options of his successor, that to do so would be a new low in political morality...the immorality of having decisions ~~be~~ binding on the new President. Now, I see significant evidence this decision taken and actions have been planned, if not implemented, although ~~x~~ there's not any substantial steps taken for the implementation yet.

Q. The key index of this decision would be stopping the bombing of the North?

A. That's a good bellweather.

Q. What is the military balance of forces at this time?

A. ~~After Tet~~ After Tet, I said we had the war won now. But, then we failed. We sat and stared and had a mental paralysis for several weeks. The enemy recovered themselves--they did it at the time a local sense, but in a strategic sense they haven't been able to recover. At this time, Hanoi can not force its will on Saigon. It can only try to get us to pull out. The bombing of the North is important only as a means to force Hanoi to negotiate--we have to have a military impact on ~~their~~ their soil, ~~x~~ if not, there's no way in which we can impose our will on Hanoi to negotiate. The only options Hanoi now has, excepting negotiations, is to fadeaway, or to continue the war at a more subdued level for years.

Q. And this is the importance of the Honolulu decisions now?

A. I predict two things will happen. Johnson will make a final bid to go down in history and he will take concrete steps to end the war with the least disadvantages to us--but still pretty disadvantageous and the extent of the disadvantages will be covered up by JUSPAO.

Q. And the American option is just to keep going?

A. Yes, and how do we keep going? With the inevitable change of Abrams strategy being ~~ix~~ thrust upon him.



I suspect that in the final election battle, Humphrey may campaign on the platform that Johnson is now enacting--the latter-day version of bringing the boys home. Humphrey will be the peace candidate and Nixon the dove. But, both of them will be forced to the center and in time both of the voices in the center will be the same.

Q. Why is Johnson doing this?

A. Johnson's desire will be to go out with one last hubris. You don't know what that is? It's a word used by American intellectuals, of which there's only three, and I'm one of them, based on the ancient Greek word meaning an act of arrogance based on pride. Johnson's desire is to make a place for himself in history--any sort of place--and second to hand over a going concern for a Democratic President.

Q. And, so this will lead to Fortress America?

A. All of our Allies will know it; they may make their own noises, and all in due course will make adjustments with Communism, Soviet Communism in Europe and Chinese Communism in Asia.