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March 5, 1969

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Here are my comments for Dean Howells. They are topically arranged under headings, and center on what seem to me INR achievements and misses that are important or significant enough to deserve mention.

At times I've elaborated and annotated the point, at others I've just noted it. All together, I look on this as new material for Mr. Howells in his effort at evaluation, which he might want to undertake in a different manner -- e.g., all the plus marks together, their general characteristics, significance, patterns, if any; and the same for the minuses.

Fred Greene

Dept. of State, RPS/IPS, Margaret R. Grafeld, Dir.  
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Random (and Enumerated) Observations  
on INR's Record on Vietnam 1961-1968

A. Internal South Vietnamese Political Scene

1. a) Very perceptive -- in estimates and policy implications -- on Diem as a problem and on the risks he presented to our objectives and to his own purposes, especially on his resistance to reform and how this interacted with our deep commitment to him.

b) However, we were too optimistic regarding the pool of competent political leaders available in South Vietnam, as well as on the capacity of SVN to reinstitute an orderly process of access to power and legitimation of the regime. For example, Tho as an adequate replacement. This is not to argue against the INR view that Diem's defects were legion or that he should not have been treated as irreplaceable, but rather that the difficulties on both sides of the argument deserved greater stress.

2. INR was particularly effective in signalling and explaining the prospects for coups in 1961-63 and the political instabilities of 1964-65.

In the early years, especially impressive were its evaluation of high likelihood, its non-Communist nature, the essential role of government participants, and the VC weakness to capitalize on this type of effort.

3. a) The general appraisal of Minh appears to have been valid in terms of his popularity but overly optimistic regarding his ability to govern or hold power.

b) Conversely, the judgment on Khanh was accurate regarding his ineffectiveness as a leader and his inability to reshape a dynamic and revolutionary situation in a constructive way. However, we underestimated, for most of 1964, his capacity to hold tenaciously to power.

4. INR was particularly effective in stressing the positive aspects and constructive aspects inherent in the turbulent period 1963-65, and the benefits that could flow from this social and political (non-Communist) revolutionary atmosphere. Its argument that chaos and disorder must be measured against the growth in the sense of national identity and greater popular engagement is particularly important.

5. Though the INR estimate of the Minh-Tho record seems excessively optimistic (in performance and durability), the

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Bureau was not as depressed as other Agencies who were struck by revelations after November 1, 1963, as to how bad things had become in the Diem period. Furthermore, INR seemed to be far better balanced in its judgments of the Minh-Tho regime and the general situation in the country than were McNamara and McCone. Their extreme pessimism on the new government may have been an important factor -- i.e., revealing US uncertainty about the regime, in opening the way to Khanh.

6. a) Very competent analyses of Khanh's inability to broaden the government or deal with the upsurge in strong popular sentiment. However, INR also was aware of the fragmental interest groups and their insistence on participation in government, recognizing that this long step forward toward involvement was most seriously flawed by the interest of these groups to use power essentially to foster or protect their own interests, and not to further effective government or national unity. Again, INR did very well in judging the military-Buddhist coalition as capable of overthrowing Khanh but remaining inherently unstable.

b) This discussion does not contradict #5, since there remains a genuine non-communist social revolutionary situation, but one not conducive to orderly and constructive government. The Bureau's position was to feel a policy that kept both tracks going offered the country the best chance for rejuvenation and an effective war effort ultimately.

7. The shakiness of GVN political situation in the spring of 1966 and the power of the Buddhists may have been over-estimated to a degree.

8. a) Though it underestimated the size of the vote in 1966, INR was basically correct in judging that the regime enjoyed little popular support. It argued into 1967 that the US was better off in not favoring order at the expense of legitimate political expression, and felt that the political situation would eventually gain strength from a situation that permitted a freer play of political forces, and more general popular participation.

b) It judged this to be a "do nothing" regime and felt that a genuinely civilian government with popular support was preferable, even if it brought some instability in its wake.

9. In noting the US commitment to a military controlled constitutional order in mid-1967, INR argued that the US at the very least should not support any one candidate. It went against the basic trend by arguing that Thieu had more support in the military than Ky and that the US should not throw its support behind the latter.

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10. In discussing voting patterns in 1966 and 1967 we noted the importance of the size of the vote before it occurs, and then, after a large vote, argue that only a small vote would have been significant. Does its largeness have no importance, indicating only the insulation of a regime in power? Perhaps we should have -- and should still -- discuss certain basic issues: e.g., popular preferences, issue of pessimism, traits in political behavior.

11. a) INR, in oral conversations in the fall of 1968, stressed that the South Vietnamese had not come on board earlier in the year on the "our side your side" formula, and were not willing in October to accede readily to an NLF presence in Paris. In its papers during 1968, it did note generally that Thieu would as a matter of policy seek to delay as much as possible the formal negotiation stage, in order to gain time for his effort to minimize the role of the NLF.

b) We did not, however, systematically take up the full effects on GVN of entering into negotiations in 1968, and the consequences for this on the SVN political/governmental situation -- e.g., would it drive the Southerners to more effective mutual cooperation? Would the GVN propose the way for eventual comrades? We did, however, address the basic question of whether the GVN could adjust at all and somewhat too pessimistically concluded that it could so adjust but barely.

B. The Course of the US/GVN War Effort in the South

1. a) All through the period INR was consistently effective in making the following crucial points: (1) the government's inability to muster popular support for itself or the war effort, (2) the enemy's ability to control substantial portions of the countryside and to persist there, (3) our inability to keep the enemy from holding the tactical and strategic initiative most of the time, (4) our inability to reduce the rate of infiltration -- thus allowing the enemy to employ this device according to his availability of manpower, strategic plans, and general policy orientation.

b) In each of these categories, the issue frequently took the form of an argument over statistics: their adequacy, reliability and meaning, and again the Bureau came out consistently well.

2. Less effective was our discussion of the relationship between the importance of security and of popular support. At times they were treated as interdependent; on other occasions

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they were separated, with a prior importance or significance attached to one or the other. I recognize that this was often required because of the unique nature of a particular situation, but equally we seemed to be making general judgments from a somewhat detached perspective along such non non-compatible lines. We appear to emphasize security whenever the political situation is stable. At other times we say that the lack of a politically attractive government generates such an inherent weakness that adequate support for an effective political-military security effort is not possible.

3. Did we ever judge why a SVN so perennially weak was able to absorb so much punishment -- military and political -- and still be able to cope to some degree -- as we agreed in the spring of 1965 during the debate over the despatch of US ground forces?

4. A later variation on #1 above, is the consistency with which INR was correct in its pessimistic appraisals of the key categories and indices of progress: regime stability, popular involvement, administrative efficiency, pacification, effectiveness of ground campaigns, initiative in combat, capacity to destroy the foe, blockage of his supplies and infiltration, prevention of increased size and efficiency of enemy force.

5. INR correctly analyzed the flaws in MACV's two-war concept in 1966, noting that these were not practically or conceptually separable. Moreover, it accurately observed that support for the conventional effort did and would continue to outweigh the unconventional guerrilla effort, which was far more difficult to handle and perhaps more important.

6. At the end of 1966, INR again stressed the essential stalemate in the war, with the enemy keeping the initiative and augmenting his strength. It stressed the dangers of too rapid an effort at pacification -- arguing that the GVN little understood it or desired it and that the program was completely unrealistic. This in turn led to the great struggle over statistics of progress that ended only with the Tet offensive. Even without that attack, it seems evident that INR was correct in arguing that ARVN remained in a conventional mold and could not cope with this new assignment, and the US did not do enough to reorient ARVN, a task made all the more difficult by the instant assignment of the Vietnamese, requiring full-blown immediate results. The failure of the "two war" concept was starkly revealed, and ARVN's low morale, poor leadership, bad popular relations, low operational capability, and misuse for political purpose were never more clearly demonstrated.

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- 5 -

7. INR did change its view on the importance of the bombing for the South Vietnamese in 1967. Until then it argued that morale would first rise and then sink when it did not lead to a favorable outcome. With bombing long sustained, INR noted that it had become, as a regular program, important to SVN morale and confidence, and that discontinuance would present problems. Bombing became important both symbolically as an earnest of US intention, as well as a "damage for damage" retribution to an enemy wreaking havoc on the South.

### C. The North Vietnamese War Effort

1. INR stood out, often alone, in its grasp of the essential NVN position through many initial years -- that Hanoi was determined to persist in this effort and would do so in the face of bombing and even the presence of US troops. It was especially persistent in its judgment in 1963-65 that NVN would not offer concessions to get the bombing stopped.

2. a) On the other hand, INR did not give adequate credit to NVN initiative, planning, and determination to shape events. (Neither did anyone else.) Too many actions by the enemy, though accurately predicted and described, were treated as responses to US actions, or they were considered within the framework of US deterrence at work (successfully or unsuccessfully).

b) An example that illustrates the point, but also deserves elaboration in its own right, is our repeated observation that NVN was careful to avoid a bombing threat in 1963 and 1964, and so would refrain from sending unit troops to the South. Another is the constant theme of Communist retaliation in the South in response to our bombing of the North, as though this basic aspect of Hanoi's activity would be so reactive.

3. We did not, partly for the reasons noted above, even give full and serious credence to the likelihood that NVN would send its own formations into the South in 1964; nor did we treat many of its policies and words of that year as a possible function of its decisions to do so, a decision made during the spring. Even when we argued that the NVA might go south, after Tonkin, it was couched in terms of responding to that bombing and demonstrating a will not to capitulate.

4. A related, more general, point is the high level of prudence that we assigned to NVN. Hence our surprise at Tonkin led to a view that Peking had been egging Hanoi and that this was a critical factor. Again, Hanoi's alleged reluctance to send troops is another example; here one could argue that NVN didn't expect us to get so involved and so was engaged in an

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enormous low risk policy, but its willingness to face bombing and a US troop presence (see #1 above) argue against this.

5. As before, INR was on sound ground arguing in 1964-5 that the bombing of the North would not get a cease fire or a Communist effort to hold a meaningless conference, or a halt to operations in the South, though it stood alone in the Intelligence Community on these points. Later INR added a similar view, also in the minority, that the bombing would not in 1965-66, bring about a greater NVN willingness to negotiate.

6. INR correctly judged bombing pauses through early 1967 as having a negative effect on Hanoi if they appeared coupled with an ultimatum or calls for reciprocity.

7. a) There is a curious downplaying for a while by all, INR included, of the impact the injection of NVA forces had on the balance of military power in the South. Even when the massive infusion was recognized INR argued that much time would be required to build up logistics to sustain large-scale operations.

b) On the other hand, by the end of 1967 INR took the lead in stressing the degree to which the NVA force presence had grown, to numbers far beyond those conventionally reported by the military and accepted until then as generally valid.

8. INR did not prove correct on its estimate that a silent pause at the end of 1965 would get results -- i.e., on NVN interest in negotiation -- at the end of 1965. This may have stemmed from its judgment that the enemy was interested in serious negotiations in the fall of 1965, at a time of moderately heavy escalation, in order to head off heavier escalation which would have intensified NVN dependence on China.

9. INR felt that Hanoi faced serious diplomatic-military problems in 1967 that created some inducement to negotiate, but it also recognized the limited nature of the US impact, including diplomatic probes, on Hanoi. INR also recognized the strong position NVN held in the South, and how suspicious it was of the US, yet insisted that probes could clarify Hanoi's position and locate points for future flexibility and give. While this was generally sound, on the other hand, we made only the simplest link between Trinh's December 1967 statement (there would be talks) and Tet -- noting only that Hanoi always sought military spectacles to support it during negotiations. For example, we did not grapple with the question of what Hanoi would do if it did not win a clear military triumph, as indeed it did not compared to 1954. Still INR presented a better balanced position

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of the situation, Hanoi's options, and the mixed pressures on NVN by year's end, compared to the military's rosy view and OCI's judgment that the enemy was in good military shape -- able to stand by his rigid demands.

10. We seemed to be unclear or somewhat short of the mark in our analysis of how Hanoi related US politics to the war, and what estimate NVN made of its importance. A similar comment could be made on our discussion of the degree to which Hanoi's tactics and even strategy were influenced by domestic US developments, and by what Hanoi thought it could accomplish.

11. a) On negotiations, INR steadily stressed the close tie and reinforcing nature of Hanoi's combat and diplomatic efforts: to keep up the pressure for a favorable settlement without raising the level so much that retaliation would ensure. Hence, we did not consider whether a renewed escalation might not help NVN in gains among US and foreign publics at relatively little military cost.

b) INR was consistently correct in arguing that reconnaissance would not pose a major problem in the 1968 negotiations or be an issue on which Hanoi could hold firm. Similarly, it argued steadily that the enemy would oppose a cease fire until considerable progress had been made as to the shape of the political settlement.

#### D. The Communist War in the South

(See also B.1.)

1. INR noted the value of terrorizing the cities in 1964 and repeated this theme frequently thereafter. This still did not prepare us adequately for the Tet 1968 thrust.

2. a) INR appeared too sanguine that the war would continue along lines essentially similar to the past after the arrival of NVA units was confirmed.

b) It also argued in the first half of 1965 that the ARVN could, for all its defects, cope with this new element and keep the stalemate going, but it no longer adhered to this view by year's end and thereafter.

3. INR was correct in repeatedly downplaying in 1965-66, and earlier, the alleged Communist desire to gain control over a large portion of SVN in order to set up a rival government, e.g., in the Central Highlands.

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4. It also made the key point in 1965 that the insertion of NVA and US units into the war would not induce or compel the foe to fight our kind of battle, one that would enable us to find, fix and destroy him. The enemy still had considerable initiative as to style and frequency of contact.

5. INR may have been too slow to note the degree and speed with which the enemy would move to large-scale -- third stage -- warfare, though it correctly noted that the earlier stages would be retained, so that no complete switch in approaches occurred. Still in 1966-67 there may have been too much stress on the enemy's continuity in tactics, downgrading the proportionate importance of the large-scale efforts in the new mix.

6. INR consistently and correctly noted the limited value of Cambodia to the enemy's war effort. Yet, it may have been slow to note that official collusion was involved in supply efforts to support the Communists, though admittedly hard evidence came in very slowly.

7. The rise in China's fear of war with the US -- fall 1965-February 1966 -- may not have stemmed directly from Vietnamese war developments but from fear of a Nationalist effort against the mainland.

8. The Tet offensive was immediately recognized by INR as the extension of the war to the urban centers, but the move caught all members of the Community by surprise. INR was quick to note, shortly thereafter that as the situation unfolded the pacification effort was the next victim. Though INR did not emphatically say so, this may have been an unplanned, unexpected dividend of a Tet plan that failed in its maximum objective. Nonetheless we were surprised by the original thrust, and also failed to stress at an early date the significance of the Communist political failure to generate an urban uprising, a failure all the more important because the tactical military achievement in many places, particularly Saigon, afforded the urban residents a great opportunity to do so. Yet we were correct in estimating the serious efforts of Tet on SVN urban communities and on the pacification program.

9. INR was basically in a sound position in arguing that the enemy's capacity includes a ready ability to deal with changes in US/GVN military emphases, and to change its own threats and initiatives accordingly -- regarding doctrine, situation, or general strategy that seems best. This takes the emphasis away from an exclusive concentration on doctrinal decisions in Hanoi, foreign influences, or restrictions placed on his effort by allied forces; and it adds both field initiatives and adjustment-responses. (This does not contradict point raised in B regarding our failure

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to understand over-all strategic, and generally broad, direction of the war. Here I am addressing problem of certain specific switches in combat orientations at given occasions.)

E. China

1. INR was in 1963-64 well ahead of the others, who later came around to a degree, in prudently estimating that the likelihood of China entering the war and with considerable force was considerably greater than was generally believed. However, INR overestimated Peking's intensity of preparedness and readiness to participate overtly and actively in the war. It also overestimated the likelihood of Chinese air power intervention in response to heavy US air attacks against NVN.

2. a) Again, treating China's verbal escalation in 1964 as matching various US moves appears quite noted, and in useful contrast to tendency elsewhere in Community to downplay or ignore the danger of Chinese involvement. It probably went too far in arguing that these verbal efforts, even when coordinated with extensive physical preparations, reflected in commitment to render assistance to NVN with armed forces who would engage the US in combat. (I concur in Mr. Whiting's presentation that there was much evidence of a growing cooperation that could have led to air combat on China's part.)

b) However, INR was exactly correct in its discussion of the nature, timing, and relative reliability and size of Chinese aid from 1964 onward.

3. The entire Community, including INR agreed that China would come in at some stage in the gradual escalation program that was actually followed, and that an overt commitment would be made because this would make China's role clear. Yet it was not done, for China pursued a more prudent tactical course within a very risky strategy (on latter, see #4). More specifically, the Community was not proven right in arguing that the Chinese air force would become involved at the upper end of the graduated escalation that was followed. INR felt that US air attacks in the NE quadrant would induce a Chinese air defense effort and use of Chinese bases.

4. Whereas the Intelligence Community argued in the mid-60's that NVN would go on only with a deep involvement by China and that this was not likely, INR held that NVN would go on in any event and that Chinese involvement would become as deep as necessary to keep the NVN effort afloat. By 1967, INR had changed its detailed position away from positing overt Chinese

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involvement, air encounters, to a more general and cautious maintenance of NVN, but it continued to posit China's will to go all the way to sustain the North even if the intensity of US attacks required China to put its security directly on the line.

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