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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

June 21, 1969

Dear Mr. Billard:

Thank you for your very thoughtful letter of June 14, 1969, expressing your views on the problem of statistically evaluating allied progress in Vietnam. I found your comments very interesting.

If you ever have a chance, I would be most pleased if you could stop by for a chat with Mr. Dean Moor, one of my Vietnam specialists, and give us a further reading on your views and experiences.

Best regards,

Henry A. Kissinger

Mr. Philip T. Billard
5703 Cromwell Drive
Washington, D. C. 20016

The above is not just a form letter. I read your observations with the greatest interest and am personally looking into them.

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5703 Cromwell Drive
Washington, D. C. 20016

June 14, 1969

Henry A. Kissinger
Special Assistant to President
National Security Affairs
Washington, D. C.

Dear Dr. Kissinger:

My only personal contact with you came in the 1965-66 academic year when, as a student in the Columbia Graduate School of Business and a participant in the International Fellows Program taught by Professor John Stoessinger, I heard you give a visiting lecture. I am hardly a militant radical. I spent three years in the Army, including OCS and a year in Vietnam, and I will soon begin employment with a large oil company. However, I, too, share much of the concern about the Vietnam war which I heard expressed at the recent commencement of my alma mater by Yale graduating senior William M. Thompson, Jr., who does not himself seem to fit the image of a student radical.

Yet it is not the uncertain state of domestic tolerance for the war which I wish to discuss, nor is it even the current situation in Vietnam -- having been away from that country since last July and never having had access to the broad scope of infromation which is available to people like yourself, I can hardly presume to offer advice on a subject of this nature. I do feel, though, that I know something about the collection and reporting of information that ultimately becomes a consideration in high level decisions, and I feel obligated to cast some doubts on the validity of the raw data which originates at the grass roots level.

I was a district intelligence adviser in Vietnam from July, 1967, to July, 1968. I saw the program in which I was involved change from an extension of the original advisory effort to the ICEX Program and then to the Phoenix Program. I filled out reports on the elimination of VC infrastructure, and I helped prepare Hamlet Evaluation Surveys. Although I had intimate knowledge of only one district, I talked to enough other military intelligence lieutenants during my tour in Vietnam and during my subsequent service at Fort Holabird, Maryland, to conclude that my own experience was not an isolated, individual example.

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My experience indicates that reports from the field tend to err on the side of optimism. Now I am speaking mainly of the U. S. advisers, since I am most familiar with their situation and I feel that they have the best opportunity to judge the relative strength and popularity of the South Vietnamese government versus the local opposition, whatever its form may be. The same tendency probably holds true for U. S. combat units, too, since every commander wants to look good, and there are many ways to count bodies and apply other yardsticks of success in battle.

Basically, everyone wants to be able to report a steadily improving situation and to take some credit for the progress. It hardly matters that success in winning the support of the people is really a Vietnamese function. Advisers are there to help their counterparts; and if they are involved in their work, they cannot help but feel they have a stake in what happens in their area. Even when they do their very best to report the truth, however harsh, they are limited by the fact that their best source of information is inevitably their Vietnamese counterpart, who, as a responsible government official, has a strong interest in portraying a rosy picture.

There is no easy escape from this dilemma. Advisers are in country for one year tours and understand the Vietnamese language and culture superficially, if at all. Vietnamese officials, on the other hand, are intimately acquainted with their local areas, and they have had experience in dealing with several American counterparts other than their current one. They do not have a monopoly on good information, but they have obvious advantages over their American friends. While the U. S. adviser may modify and interpret what he hears from his counterpart, much of what he sees and hears -- the raw input upon which he bases his judgments -- are heavily influenced by his Vietnamese counterpart.

Another problem in reporting is the necessity to describe information in terms of categories that may become arbitrary. Despite real progress toward achieving precision through the use of rigid definitions and concrete examples, it is still difficult to say what it means to be "secure" or "pacified" or who is a "VC infrastructure cadre." Of course, establishing the definitions is just a beginning. It is another big step to get everyone to interpret and apply them correctly.

Naturally, I do not presume that all the above ideas are new and startling, but we sometimes appear to be a nation of forgetful statisticians and quantifiers. We tend to become hypnotized by

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the figures which we produce, and even such shocks as the 1968 Tet Offensive do not for long turn our attention away from the logical answers we have produced and back to questions about basic assumptions and the manner in which we applied them to derive the answers.

From my own experience I know of a district intelligence adviser who reported the elimination of a VC infrastructure member when a truck backed up and accidentally killed an old peasant woman. After all, he reasoned, she was dead anyway, and infrastructure elimination had been rather slow recently. Similarly, I have seen U. S. units add school children and other slaughtered civilian bystanders to their enemy body count. I saw a province level Phoenix adviser wage a beautiful public relations campaign about the elimination of infrastructure in my own district when actually the operations in question netted a number of low level personalities as the result of information obtained from one local VC leader who had been captured fortuitously in a U. S. sweep operation. The good results were not based on a well developed intelligence network at the grass roots level. District officials had not even been involved in the operations because province officials wanted to preserve secrecy (and credit for themselves). It was not wrong to be pleased with this particular attack on the infrastructure, but it was misleading to imply, as was done by the Phoenix official, that the results were due to this "new" program and that more successes could be expected now that a grass roots intelligence network was operating effectively. Today when I read about new advances in eliminating the enemy infrastructure, I always wonder if there has really been some progress or if there is just a new way of keeping score.

At one point during my tour there were five RD cadre teams operating within my district. This made it one of the greatest focal points of the pacification effort in all South Vietnam; yet when I left many months later, I could not see any evidence of increased strength or popularity of the GVN. I know that progress in such matters takes a good deal of time and is difficult to measure, but I cannot help feeling frustrated at what I saw and experienced.

I am convinced that the Nixon Administration is interested in a gradual de-escalation of the war, and I hope that our withdrawal of 25,000 troops will bring some reciprocal action by our adversary. Maybe the psychology of the public negotiations at Paris and, especially, of the tacit type of bargaining which is, hopefully, also going on is what really counts now; but

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to the extent that the local political and military circumstances influence this psychology, as they must, and to the extent to which such factors will influence the scope and timing of our future moves, I urge that you do not simply take for granted the wealth of information about conditions in Vietnam which you have at your disposal.

I do have one suggestion. As a check on information obtained from written reports and VIP visits to the field, you might interview or circulate questionnaires among junior officers who have spent time at lower levels of command. Especially valuable would be the observations of advisers who have recently returned from Vietnam and are now out of the service. Many of these people are intelligent and well educated, and they do not have a career at stake that might suffer if unkind words reached the wrong military ears. Perhaps, in fact, my own writing of such a letter at this time, waiting until after my discharge, illustrates the tendency of many not to speak out as long as the system might be able to make them regret doing so. A military organization demands a certain loyalty and authoritarian structure, but it may not be the best suited to getting a true picture of an unpleasant situation.

Sincerely,

Philip T. Billard

Philip T. Billard

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