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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

Wednesday, July 12, 1967, 10:30 a.m.

NODIS - EXTREMELY SENSITIVE  
STRICTLY EYES ONLY FOR THE PRESIDENT

Mr. President:

Attached is a brilliant but very hot think piece on Vietnam by Dick Neustadt. In my judgment -- recognizing that I am an outsider on Vietnam questions -- it is very much worth a Presidential reading.

You will want completely to control distribution. I have not, and will not, send copies to anyone -- not even Walt.



Francis M. Bator

NODIS - EXTREMELY SENSITIVE

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

LITTAUER CENTER  
CAMBRIDGE 02138

June 27, 1967.

EYES ONLY

Dear Francis,

In strictest confidence I write to ask a favor.

I'd like you to give me a candid reaction on the attached memorandum which I've written to myself. It sketches a strategy for cutting political risks of Vietnam well before the fall of 1968, at the same time easing prospects for a settlement and honorable withdrawal during 1969.

What's on my mind is a Democratic outcome next year and then getting this war off the President's back so his third term isn't burdened like his second.

I know you're not involved in Vietnam, but that's an advantage: your ego's not in it. You do see and care about the President; that's good enough for me.

I've been jogged into trying to think this through by the approaching implementation of the so-called "barrier," the product of last year's Summer Study. As you know, I was marginally involved in that. "Political" to most of its participants naturally meant something broader than the future of the Johnson Administration. Equally naturally that's where I start, and see no inconsistency. It says in Presidential Power: "What's good for the country is good for the President, and vice versa!" I even believe it!

However, sitting up here one runs a constant risk of thinking about what is good for Presidents in terms that make no sense from a close, current White House view.

It would be irresponsible of me to stir up colleagues here, or anybody else, if what I think is wholly off the beam in that respect. Scientists especially put far too much credence in the notion that I'm "expert" on "presidential perspective." But I haven't seen a President in action, close up, day by day, since 1953. And I'm bound to be influenced, perhaps too much, by White House service in that other war, Korea, under worse political circumstances.

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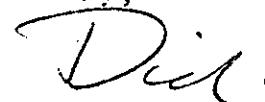
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EYES ONLY

So I don't trust my own fingertips. Therefore, please sharpen yours and tell me whether in your judgment I'm now thinking "presidentially" or "academically". If it's the latter, I promise to go back to the drawing board!

Meanwhile, please keep this memorandum to yourself. Don't even write me about it. Just stop by in Cambridge and tell me what you think. Then I'll either put it in the safe for future reference -- or burn it and start over.

Warmly,



Richard E. Neustadt

Honorable Francis M. Bator  
8 Wyman Street  
Cambridge  
Massachusetts

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June 27, 1967.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CLOSED FILE

Subject: The Politics of the Barrier

The time has come to think about political opportunities attendant on the product of last year's Summer Study. It is hard to do that without benefit of recent information either military or technical, to say nothing of diplomatic. Even so, the effort should be made.

What do I hope might follow from the "barrier"? Three things:

1. An immediate cessation of bombing the Red River Valley on "rational" grounds of "cost-effectiveness" in deploying air power; grounds independent of the moral, diplomatic, world-opinion arguments which Doves advance and Hawks attack. In short: "Better than bombing."
2. A gradual redefinition of the mission of American ground forces in the South, again for "rational" reasons, progressively de-emphasizing both offensive action and pacification in favor of protection for the infrastructure needed to maintain the barrier. In short: "Better than chasing main force units" (and "South Vietnam to the South Vietnamese").

3. A public declaration of intent to expedite replacement of the "barrier" by an effective international police-force on the ground, when, as, and if such a force were created by competent international authority: In short: "If you don't like our finger in the dike find another."

Taken together, these three would redefine our military intervention in such terms that its limits were self-evident and self-explanatory, conveying on their face a strong justification. The "barrier" then serves as both the symbol of our purpose and the center of our effort.

(This assumes, of course, that it works well enough, for long enough, to be convincing as symbol and plausible as effort.)

Such an outcome gives our government a substitute for what it had to sacrifice in 1965 when bombers went North and combat forces South: limits with a built-in rationale as clear as "Let Asians fight Asians." Yet happily, the substitute sets comparable limits without challenging our statements of two years ago when we moved in to counter stepped-up intervention from the North (eg. State's 1965 White Paper). The barrier addresses that problem.

We gain a lot by thus restoring clear, self-justifying limits for our military effort. The gains at home would be the greater if and as those limits are accompanied by lower costs, material and human, but much could be gained merely by affording top officials solid ground on which to withstand bureaucratic and political pressures for widening the war and deepening its Americanization. Abroad, the prospects for some form of settlement with North Vietnam might or might not be brought closer in time were our intervention redefined, but at the least a focus on the barrier should lessen risks of Soviet or Chinese confrontation (provided Laos is sufficiently finessed) while vastly lowering the levels of concern elsewhere.

But these advantages accrue only if our conduct and our statements, both before and after we install the "barrier", are so orchestrated as to give it the requisite significance, emphasizing its symbolic quality and its centrality to our entire effort. This orchestration will come hard: that emphasis is almost bound to be resisted by all sectors of our own officialdom, uniformed and not, whose missions run to nation-building in the South and who are caught up in the "winning" of the war. Ditto Saigon officialdom.

To see the dimensions of the problem one looks at the specific tasks attendant on establishing each of the three positions sketched above. Specifics run along the following lines:

I. "Better than Bombing"

Publicly, this position is dependent on acceptance of the notion that the primary purpose of continued bombing in the North has been to slow and complicate the southward movement of troops and supply.

Bureaucratically, the position is dependent on acceptance of the notion that air power, per se is not denigrated, that a shift to barrier-maintenance in this particular war is no slur on the Mission of the Service.

It follows that:

1. Between now and the date of barrier-installation, high officials should find opportunity on numbers of occasions to downgrade "punishment" and "morale-building" (in the South) as reasons for continued bombing of the North.

"Punishment" is a key problem. Save in Tennessee, the President himself does not seem to have stressed that theme. But it is in the air. And among less attentive publics, also parents, it is a self-generating notion. Were it not downgraded in the next months, the holders of the notion will regard the barrier as an irrelevance.

2. By the same token, "interdiction" needs a lot of emphasis as our current purpose in continued bombing of the North. ("Morale-building" for those committed to us in Saigon presumably has long since been an attribute of troops in the South, not planes in the North.)

3. The clumsiness of bombing as a means needs stress increasingly as we approach the coming of the barrier. But what requires emphasis is the inherent difficulty of preventing reconstruction, substitution on the ground, not the insufficiency of airplanes as artillery. (Time on

that when we have battleships at sea again.)

4. The cost-effectiveness case against continued bombing warrants at least equal stress. The cost in planes and pilots needs emphatic underlining, perhaps not publicly until the "barrier's" comparative advantages are put on view, but certainly in private, sharpening a natural, professional concern wherever found among our Air Force officers and their congressional friends.

5. When the "barrier" goes in, retraction of our bombing should appear consistent with the barrier's requirements, not with the precise boundaries of North Vietnam (unless and where these coincide).

6. But having retracted we should seek cost-effectiveness grounds for not again employing bombers north and east of border areas (not at least unless the case is so distinct from our past practice as to look sharply different in public and abroad). Some "better" means of threatening strategic northern targets may be needed for the future, as and if the fighting in the South goes on. Battleships?

Not only for our own bureaucracy and public but also for officialdom in Moscow the logic of replacing bombing by the barrier needs constant, cumulative demonstration over time, so it sinks in. If Russians thought the barrier an add-on, an escalatory step, their scientist-weaponeers might itch to try to match it with their own summer study, seeking counter-measures ~~aimed at saturation~~. Hanoi presumably lacks the technology; Moscow has means. So our interest lies in helping Russians to accept the logic of the barrier as a de-escalation not to be disturbed. Happily we give that help by following the steps listed above.

II. "Better than Chasing Main-Force Units"

Publicly, this position is dependent on acceptance of the notion, which can only come with time, that the "barrier" is working and that its continued working absolves us of direct responsibility for Saigon's handling of "internal problems."

Bureaucratically, the position is dependent on the technical respectability of plans for holding ports, depots, airfields, or other real estate needed to support the "barrier" in its various manifestations. Within our Army, I should think, there would be formidable resistance to the whole idea. Ditto ARVN. The plans would have to stand up under a torrent of argument, not least the arguments of Saigon which can threaten to collapse. And, for a variety of reasons, plans would have to foreshadow results which did not look like General Gavin's enclaves.

It follows that:

1. The "barrier" must first be seen to have a marked effect on North-South traffic and communications.
2. The need for barrier-maintenance should then be encouraged to assume a very high priority in public terms, and also in the terms of at least some key military staffs.
3. The priority would then promote retraction, on resource-allocation grounds, of other missions for American armed forces.
4. Advance planning to afford the priority should be preserved from premature internal argument within our government.
5. The Soviets, however, should get wind of the priority and be invited urgently to notice every sign that it is working: Thus we pursue the theme that "barrier" spells de-escalation, good for both of us, no challenge to the Soviet Academy, no arms race.

Technical requirements for barrier-maintenance, and their translation into force requirements, and above all their operation after we retracted other missions of our own ground forces -- these our scientists and military planners have to think about. I lack the wherewithal.

But assuming that these issues yield to technically respectable resolution, there still would remain massive vested interests in the way. It follows that:

1. American official statements soon should start to play down, not up, our direct role in pacification.

2. If Komer remains subordinate to Westmoreland, every effort should be made to render the relationship symbolically distinct from missions of our forces: administrative not integral. Alas, this will be hard to do.

3. Tempting though it is, we should resist seeding American units with ARVN cadres or vice versa. By the same token we should continue to defer commitment of substantial new numbers of American troops, lest public demand to use "their boys" in our units instead of "our boys" grows overwhelming. But how long will we defer if MACV presses? Until barrier time? Alas, again hard to do.

4. American official statements should begin again to stress old themes of South Vietnamese responsibility for combat and for pacification in the South. "[the internal war] is their war; they've got to win it".

5. If Saigon's presidential election comes off without a following coup, then we should seize upon it as an opportunity not just to sound those themes again but to embroider them.

6. Alternatively, if the election collapses, or coups ensue, then we should seize upon the "mess" to turn suspicious and standoffish

we could install the barrier in that context: "arms-length" from an "impossible situation." This, if it should befall, renders far easier a turn away from present uses of our forces.

III. "If You Don't Want Our Finger in the Dike, Find Another"

The "barrier" has high potential as a vehicle for guiding the interpretation placed on recent history by publics at home and abroad. It also has potential as a means of signalling to interested governments, including Hanoi and Saigon, what we regard as fundamentals for a settlement.

A public declaration of intent, inviting others to assume the function of our fence, need be viewed in light of both potentials.

Regarding both, the timing of a declaration could be crucial for its substantive effects. I see two options. First is a declaration following immediately on cessation of our bombing North (Position I above). Second is a declaration some weeks (or months) later, with or after a redefinition of our military effort in the South (Position II above). The first is a half-way house; the second goes whole-hog. I favor the second or nothing.

A. The "half-way declaration"

A declaration in the context of one publicly perceived event -- barrier-building instead of bombing -- invites attentive publics to interpret on the following lines:

The barrier is vital to our effort in the South, an effort which defines itself in terms of current manpower and casualties. Our plea for substitution of an international police-force is thus a call for international acceptance of that effort. The declaration then is readily to be dismissed as "propaganda," or worse, "credibility gap."

Governments might well interpret such a plea in such a context very differently: not as propaganda but as formal notice of determination to

impose a South Korean outcome on the conflict, leaving nothing to be bargained for by way of settlement except the occupancy of a cordon sanitaire between the two Vietnams, one of them "ours".

Personally, I never have believed that we can fashion or impose the political wherewithal for a "South Korean" -- or even "neutral Swiss" -- outcome in South Vietnam. We don't know how, and even if we knew we lack administrative means. So I regard this half-way declaration as worse than none.

B. The "whole hog" declaration

Quite different are the prospects for a declaration in the context of a cumulative train of publicly perceived events -- from retraction of bombing with the onset of the barrier to concentration of our military efforts on its maintenance.

Rightly placed in such a sequence, our proclaimed desire to exchange an international police-force for the barrier would strengthen the impression of the sequence as a whole, inviting publics, ours and others, to interpret U.S. intervention in the past two years as follows:

Our aim since 1965 has been to barricade the South against a Northern takeover by force of arms. Lacking better means we used air power in the North, ground forces in the South, alas costly and inefficient. Then our (prideful) technology afforded better means. But better still would be a separation of non-violent sort, maintained by others than ourselves. Rather police than explosives. We hold out for this. Its achievement constitutes our war aim.

And governments could be expected to adduce a corollary: that we would settle for continuing existence of a South Vietnam whatever its post-war political complexion, substituting a political for military contest there, provided we had adequately visible assurance that the regular armed forces of the North were not available for use in Southern politics or purges. This places the Manila Declaration in a new light. Indeed,

were our aim seen in Saigon to be narrowing to this, perhaps the moves toward political accommodation in the South which might make such an outcome palatable to Hanoi would be forthcoming without us or despite us. (That need not be a disadvantage to us in our politics: "ingratitude" helps disengagement; so does "local initiative.")

I myself do not see how our government, engaged as we now are, could enter into -- or let Saigon, for that matter, enter into -- a cessation of hostilities which did not leave two Vietnams on the map (at least for years ahead) and which did not leave present friends a scope in Southern politics (and a security of person) at least equivalent to that accorded present enemies. Those seem to me the likely minimum ingredients in the war's eventual settlement, however negotiated and no matter by whom. The "whole hog" declaration is not inconsistent with that minimum. Quite the contrary.

\* \* \* \* \*

The three proposed positions I have built upon the barrier might help toward negotiation of a settlement, if for no other reason than that having got as far as these we could bear to look farther: having defined an aim within our means we could let ourselves think about terms.

But none of these positions stands or falls depending on its service to a settlement. Conceived as opportunities attendant on the barrier these interest me precisely because they have use regardless of the prospects for a settlement. Assuming as I do, in layman's fashion,

that Hanoi is most unlikely to engage in fruitful talks before our next election, perhaps also after, then there is every need for moves within our own control to restore tight, self-justifying limits on our intervention, lessen external risks of two more years of war, hold down costs in men and money, brake bureaucratic and political momentum, and reduce the rate of political polarization here at home.

Here are reasons enough to seize every shred of opportunity the barrier affords. Pessimists on settlement have still more cause than optimists to do so. For if we cannot soon begin to get this war turned down and stabilized at levels of substantially less cost both foreign and domestic, then all the risks may rise as we turn into the election year. Month by month the Administration loses running room. The barrier's timing is dangerously late. Imagination boggles at the thought of seizing on anything later than that. A "last chance?" Very likely. (I used to say that anything later than last April was too late. But hope springs eternal!)

However, a caveat:

The whole of the foregoing assumes for the sake of thought that the "barrier," taking all aspects together, has a very high prospect of marked success in its ostensible purpose: interdicting the flow of men and supplies from North to South, within Vietnam and also within Laos. (A secondary assumption has been that interference with Laotian traffic, while sufficiently substantial to be deemed a "marked success" will not be so substantial -- or so visible -- as to induce a Soviet-American confrontation.)

To add political dimensions to the "barrier," to make it

bear the further weight of political symbolism and purpose, is foolish politics, positively damaging, really profoundly dangerous, unless it can, in fact, bear the initial weight of its ostensible purpose. That's the caveat.

In other words, if a weapons-system, or equivalent, is to be justified in military terms, technical terms, in order that it can be turned to political account, used for broad policy purposes, then it is indispensable that it stand up under scrutiny in its ostensible terms, the technical terms, lest dubiety about these make all claims for other virtues ring false: phony, gimmicky, incredible. Recall what happened to Macmillan when he based his symbol of Great Britain's independence on, of all things, Skybolt. Recall what happened to us when we placed hopes for Atlantic Community and Anglo-German reconciliation, among other things, on MLF!

Everything I have here, all three proposed positions, lose political attraction unless our scientist-weaponeers are pretty confident about their "barrier's" demonstrable performance as a barrier.

By the same token, though, the marginal utility of every dollar spent and every plane or man diverted which improves their confidence is very high indeed. If manpower or money makes this sweet on technical grounds it automatically grows sweeter on political grounds. A good technical case makes the political case enchanting -- at least to me.

R.E.N.