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FROM: WALT ROSTOW
TO: THE PRESIDENT
CITE: CAP80232

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WEDNESDAY

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JANUARY 10, 1968

AT HIS URGENT REQUEST, I HAD LUNCH TODAY WITH JOE ALSOP AT HIS HOUSE. I THOUGHT I WOULD USE THE OCCASION TO ENCOURAGE HIM TO WRITE THOUGHTFULLY ABOUT THE INADEQUACIES OF THE TRINH NEGOTIATING FORMULA; UNDERLINE THE ELEMENTS IN SAN ANTONIO; AND DISCOURAGE FALSE OPTIMISM. I FOUND MYSELF CONFRONTED WITH AN HOUR'S MONOLOGUE IN WHICH I COULD BARELY GET A WORD IN EDGEWISE.

THE MONOLOGUE WAS, HOWEVER, OF SUFFICIENT INTEREST FOR ME TO REPORT IT PRECISELY.

THERE WERE THREE SUBJECTS: NEGOTIATIONS; SENATOR ROBERT F. KENNEDY; AND KHE SANH.

NEGOTIATIONS. IN HIS BEST GLOOM-AND-DOOM MANNER, JOE SAID WE ARE ABOUT TO LOSE A WAR WE ARE WELL ON THE WAY TO WINNING. HE HAS BEEN TALKING TO MCNAMARA AND BILL BUNDY. HE SAYS MCNAMARA'S IDEA THAT WE CAN FIGHT A MORE EFFECTIVE WAR WITHOUT BOMBING THE NORTH IS "TRAGIC NONSENSE," EVEN IF THE DMZ IS QUIET. THERE ARE, IN JOE'S JUDGMENT, 800,000 NORTH VIETNAMESE TIED UP IN DEALING WITH OUR BOMBING. THEY WILL POUR SOUTH VIA THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL INTO LAOS. WE SHALL HAVE A NEW MASSIVE WAR AS THE RESULT OF LIVING WITH THE SAN ANTONIO FORMULA AS HE UNDERSTANDS IT IS NOW BEING INTERPRETED. WHEN I POINTED OUT THAT WE DID NOT INTEND TO ENGAGE IN PANMUNJOM-TYPE ENDLESS NEGOTIATIONS, HE THEN SAID THAT THE EVIDENCE REQUIRED TO DEMONSTRATE AN INCREASE IN INFILTRATION WOULD BE SO OBSCURE THAT WE COULD NEVER PERSUADE THE BRITISH, ETC., THAT INFILTRATION HAD INCREASED. THE PRESSURE TO CONTINUE THE TALKS ON HANOI'S TERMS WOULD BE VERY GREAT. ONCE THE PRESIDENT HAD ACCEPTED THE TALKS AND THEN WAS FORCED BACK TO BOMBING, HE WOULD LOSE GROUND. HE WOULD APPEAR WEAK AND VULNERABLE.

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HE THEN WENT ON, WITH SOME RELISH, TO SAY: "I TOLD THE PRESIDENT HE SHOULD MAKE A STATEMENT THAT WOULD FEND OFF ANY NEGOTIATIONS. HE REFUSED TO TAKE MY ADVICE. NOW HE IS IN A GREAT DILEMMA WHICH COULD BE MORTAL. WHAT HE SHOULD DO IS TO GET ON THE AIR AND TELL THE PEOPLE: 'I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR 225,000 OF OUR MEN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. I WILL NOT ACCEPT NEGOTIATIONS WHICH WILL RELEASE THE MANPOWER IN THE NORTH FOR A MUCH EXPANDED WAR IN THE SOUTH. I WILL NOT HAVE THAT BLOODSHED ON MY HANDS. LET THOSE WHO ARE PREPARED TO ACCEPT THIS COST STEP FORWARD.'"

PUTTING THE EMOTION ASIDE, WHAT JOE IS SAYING IS THAT:

- IT WILL BE VERY DIFFICULT TO MONITOR AN INCREASE IN INFILTRATION;
- IT WILL BE VERY DIFFICULT TO DEMONSTRATE AN INCREASE IN INFILTRATION PERSUASIVELY;
- IT WILL BE HARD, THEREFORE, TO MAKE A PUBLIC CASE FOR RESUMING BOMBING IF TALKS ARE PROTRACTED AND THEY BEGIN TO RELEASE MANPOWER FROM THE NORTH TO THE SOUTH;
- AND, THEREFORE, WE MUST INTERPRET THE SAN ANTONIO FORMULA AS REQUIRING A TOTAL CESSATION OF INFILTRATION.

IN SHORT, JOE PUTS A VERY HIGH PREMIUM ON THE PINNING DOWN IN THE NORTH OF WHAT HE NOW ESTIMATES TO BE 800,000 NORTH VIETNAMESE BY OUR BOMBING; AND BELIEVES THAT IF WE PUT HANOI IN A POSITION TO RELEASE THESE PEOPLE FOR MOVEMENT TO THE SOUTH, WE COULD GRAVELY PROLONG THE WAR.

SENATOR ROBERT F. KENNEDY. JOE SAYS HE SAW BOBBY KENNEDY YESTERDAY. BOBBY IS UNDER GREAT PRESSURE FROM ALL HIS ADVISERS EXCEPT TED SORENSEN TO CHALLENGE YOU FOR THE NOMINATION: "ALL THAT IS STOPPING HIM IS HIS OWN SENSE OF POLITICAL REALITY." HE SAYS THAT PRESIDENT KENNEDY HAD ADVISERS STRETCHING FROM TED SORENSEN ON THE LEFT TO HIS FATHER ON THE RIGHT. SENATOR ROBERT KENNEDY HAS TED SORENSEN ON THE RIGHT AND GOD KNOWS WHOM ON THE LEFT. IN HIS OWN JUDGMENT, THE ONLY WAY FOR THE PRESIDENT TO DEAL WITH SENATOR KENNEDY IS TO ASSERT TOUGH LEADERSHIP. UNCERTAINTY MIGHT LEAD HIM TO JUMP, EVEN THOUGH HE TOLD BOBBY, HE SAYS, THAT THE ONLY RESULT WOULD BE TO DESTROY HIMSELF AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND PUT THE REPUBLICAN RIGHT WING INTO POWER FOR TWENTY YEARS. JOE LINKED HOW THE NEGOTIATION ISSUE IS HANDLED TO HOW SENATOR KENNEDY WILL MOVE. IF WE GET INTO A NEGOTIATING SITUATION AND THEN HAVE TO RESUME BOMBING ON INADEQUATE EVIDENCE, WE SHALL LOOK WEAK AND UNCERTAIN. THAT WILL BE THE SIGNAL FOR ROBERT KENNEDY TO GET INTO THE RING.

KHE SANH. JOE SAID THAT IN HIS JUDGMENT THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN IS GOING EXACTLY AS THE DOCUMENTS SAID IT WOULD. THEY ARE USING UP THEIR ASSETS IN THE SOUTH. HE IS, HOWEVER, WORRIED ABOUT THE CONCENTRATION OF FORCES IN LAOS AGAINST THE MARINE OUTPOST OF KHE SANH. HE SAID THAT IF HE WERE THE PRESIDENT HE WOULD ASK WESTMORELAND FOR A STATEMENT OF THE PROS AND CONS OF OUR GETTING OUT OF KHE SANH. HE UNDERSTANDS THE ROAD TO KHE SANH IS ALREADY CUT. HE BELIEVES THE AIRFIELD AT KHE SANH CAN BE COMMANDED BY THE NORTH VIETNAMESE FROM NEARBY HILLS. HE FEELS THAT WESTMORELAND IS INHIBITED IN THAT AREA BY THE TRADITIONAL, SOMEWHAT DISTANT RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MARINE COMMANDER IN I CORPS AND HIMSELF. HE FEELS THE PRESIDENT MUST BE ASSURED THAT WESTMORELAND IS ABSOLUTELY CONFIDENT HE CAN DEAL WITH THE KHE SANH PROBLEM: IT IS THE BEST OPPORTUNITY FOR A DIENBIENPHU. AND THE ENEMY IS LOOKING FOR A DIENBIENPHU.

FYI. I HAVE FOR SOME TIME BEEN ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT KHE SANH. IT IS CLEAR THAT WESTMORELAND HAS IT VERY MUCH ON HIS MIND. I SHALL LOOK FURTHER INTO OUR CONTINGENCY PLANNING.

DTG 102127Z JANUARY 1968

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