

Friday, Sept. 22, 1967  
12:00 noon

MR. PRESIDENT:

This conversation on the Middle East and Viet Nam between Gene and the Soviet Embassy Counselor is worth reading.

*Profile*

On Viet Nam he is correct: the most face-saving way for negotiations to begin, so far as Hanoi is concerned, is in Saigon.

We are sending his comments to Bunker for analysis and judgment.

It is not clear what Tcherniakov's authority was in floating this idea; but it is a quite remarkable conversation.

W. W. R.

Dist approval JPW 9/21/67 *Memorandum of Conversation*

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DATE: September 20, 1967  
1:00 p.m.  
Embassy Residence

SUBJECT: Vietnam

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Yuri N. Tcherniakov, Minister Counselor,  
Union of Soviet Socialist Republics  
*W* Mr. Eugene V. Rostow, Under Secretary for Political  
Affairs

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4  
NEJ 94-363  
By ~~ing~~, NARA, Date 1-13-95

Under Secretary Rostow lunched with Counsellor Y. N. Tcherniakov at the latter's invitation on September 20, 1967, at the Residence of the Soviet Ambassador.

The conversation concerned several topics, and is reported in separate memoranda of conversation.

Mr. Tcherniakov opened the discussion on Vietnam by commenting that his views were "not altogether official - rather personal," but that they represented the tenor of thought he found on his recent visit to Moscow.

He suggested that the most practical way to begin finding a peaceful solution there was through secret, private talks between the government in Saigon and the Vietcong. The Vietcong was very assertive about its independence of Hanoi, and claimed that the war would continue even if Hanoi stopped sending aid. He recognized the difficulties of coalition governments, and said no doubt there would be trouble, "even tragedies," if a coalition government were formed. But such troubles were better than war. He knew we felt that in a coalition with Communists, the Communists would always dominate. But it wasn't necessarily the prospect in Vietnam. Had we seen the

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recent statement of the N.L.F.? It stated a policy for an independent South Vietnam, and not really a Communist one. He thought the statement was encouraging.

Rostow said that of course his views would be carefully examined. We hoped that the recent election in South Vietnam would help prepare the way for some kind of political solution in South Vietnam. The election was bound to have a stabilizing impact. Tcherniakov asked if we thought the election had strengthened the hand of the military. Rostow replied that of course it gave the government a new mandate, but their majority was such as to require their combining with other elements. Tcherniakov asked whether we thought the military would accept civilians into the government. Rostow said we thought it entirely possible, and recalled General Thieu's comments about seeking peace.

In subsequent discussion, probing the practicality of this approach, Tcherniakov made these points: (1) under present circumstances, he thought peace could be reached in Vietnam without Chinese "consensus"; (2) it would be difficult to start with Hanoi, since it would be betraying an ally for Hanoi to stop aid to the Vietcong, just as it would be difficult for the USSR to stop aid to Hanoi, or for us to make a deal with the Vietcong if our Allies in Saigon disapproved. Therefore the place to start was in South Vietnam; (3) he thought there were only 50,000 regular North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam, out of some 290,000 troops, although more if you counted volunteers; (4) North Vietnamese were treated as strangers and aliens in the villages and small towns of South Vietnam; (5) our enquiry about starting the process of negotiation with a Soviet-American understanding -- a halt in bombing for an equivalent Soviet act of deescalation -- was known and considered seriously in Moscow, but no one to whom he talked was willing to express a firm opinion on the issue -- "perhaps they were afraid," he remarked; (6) Tcherniakov did not demur, but did not agree either, to Rostow's point that it would be difficult to imagine a scenario to stop the fighting within South Vietnam without a concurrent agreement about arms and men from North Vietnam, and from the Soviet Union to Hanoi; (7) he agreed that both the Soviet Union and the US wanted an end to the war in Vietnam, and favorably noted the newspaper story about Tim Hoopes' testimony at his confirmation hearing. He was glad to know such views obtained "even in the Pentagon." Rostow remarked that on the contrary while Soviet

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intentions were often hard for us to understand, it was a common view in the government that the Soviets wanted peace in Vietnam, and on roughly the same terms we favored -- a situation like that in Korea and Germany -- but that it was difficult for the Soviets to obtain or force Hanoi's cooperation. This was the premise for the Secretary's proposals of early January, which had just been discussed again.

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