

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

September 28, 1967

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Pres file

FOR THE PRESIDENT
FROM WALT ROSTOW

Herewith the draft as edited according to your instructions by Busby, Katzenbach, Nitze, and myself.

It is now 2023 words.

Busby and Katzenbach requested that you make a conscious decision on the question of our ~~current~~ casualty figures. They recognize the advantage of giving the figure on wounded returned to duty; but they question whether the President rather than the Pentagon should handle this matter.

Neither Sec. Rusk nor State Department nor the Intelligence community could nail down the statistics of casualties imposed in the North versus election terrorism in the South. Our common view was to drop that item.

Reedy liked the speech very much but thinks the Tonkin resolution should not be used. The others believe its use is OK in this context.

Led by Busby we all felt that what was needed now was the clear strong assertion of the President's position and commitment rather than complex argumentation. For what it is worth, we all felt pretty good about the draft at the end.

DETERMINED TO BE AN ADMINISTRATIVE
MARKING. CANCELLED PER E.O. 12536
SEC. 1.3 AND ARCHIVIST'S MEMO OF
MAR. 10, 1989.

BY *125*

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This evening I want to speak to you about the dominant issue of this day -- the struggle in Vietnam.

Vietnam is the arena where Communist expansionism is most aggressively at work in the world today -- where it is armed; where it is crossing international frontiers in violation of international agreements; where it is maiming and murdering, killing and kidnapping; where it is ruthlessly attempting to bend free people to its will.

The problem of Vietnam is a compound:

-- of an insurgency that feeds on memories of colonialism and the present facts of poverty and injustice;

-- and a powerful aggression that is spurred, not by idealism, but by an appetite for conquest.

Into this mixture of subversion and war, of terror and hope, America has entered -- with its material power and moral commitment.

* * *

Why?

Why should three Presidents and the elected representatives of our people have chosen to defend this Asian nation ten thousand miles from American shores?

We cherish freedom -- yes. We cherish self-determination for all people -- yes. We abhor the political murder of any state

by another, and the bodily murder of any people by gangsters of whatever ideology. And for twenty-seven years -- since the days of Lend-Lease -- we have sought to strengthen free people against domination by aggressive foreign powers.

And over these years every American President has had to answer a basic question:

-- Is unopposed aggression a threat -- not only to the immediate victim, but to the ultimate peace and security of the world of which we are a part?

-- Would our own security be at stake if the structure of order which America has supported over these 27 years were to erode?

That is the question to which Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had to respond in facing the issue of Vietnam.

That is the question to which the Congress responded when the Congress declared in 1964 that

"the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

Those who tell us now that we should abandon our commitment

-- that securing South Vietnam from armed domination is not worth

the price we are paying -- must also answer this question. And the test they must meet is this: what would be the consequence of letting armed aggression against South Vietnam succeed. What would follow in the months and years ahead? What kind of world are they prepared to live in a decade from tonight?

For those who have borne the responsibility for decision during these past ten years, the stakes have seemed clear -- and high.

President Eisenhower said in 1959:

"Strategically, South Vietnam's capture by the Communists would bring their power several hundred miles into a hitherto free region. The remaining countries in Southeast Asia would be menaced by a great flanking movement. The freedom of 12 million people would be lost immediately, and that of 150 million in adjacent lands would be seriously endangered. The loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us and for freedom..."

And President Kennedy said in 1962:

"...withdrawal in the case of Vietnam and the case of Thailand might mean a collapse of the entire area." A year later, he reaffirmed that "We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to

withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there. "

This is not simply an American view. Let me call the roll of those who live in the region -- in the great arc of Asian and Pacific nations -- and who bear responsibility for the fate of their peoples.

President Marcos of the Philippines:

"Vietnam is the focus of attention now...it may happen to Thailand or the Philippines, or anywhere, wherever there is misery, disease, ignorance...for you to renounce your position of leadership in Asia is to allow the Red Chinese to gobble up all of Asia. "

Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman of Thailand:

"The American decision will go down in history as the move that prevented the world from having to face another major conflagration. "

Prime Minister Holt of Australia:

"We are there because while Communist aggression persists the whole of Southeast Asia is threatened. "

President Park of Korea:

"For the first time in our history, we decided to dispatch our combat troops overseas...because in our belief any

aggression against the Republic of Vietnam represented a direct and grave menace against the security and peace of Free Asia, and therefore directly jeopardized the very security and freedom of our own people."

Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia:

"It is the Communists who are the aggressors and the source of all the trouble in Vietnam. But for the American intervention, South Vietnam would have been butchered and massacred by the Communists."

Prime Minister Holyoake of New Zealand:

"We can thank God that America at least regards aggression in Asia with the same concern as it regards aggression in Europe -- and is prepared to back up its concern with action."

Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew:

"I feel the fate of Asia -- South and Southeast Asia -- will be decided in the next few years by what happens out in Vietnam."

I cannot tell you -- with certainty -- that a Communist conquest of South Vietnam would be followed by Communist subversion and unendurable political pressure throughout Southeast Asia. I cannot tell you -- with certainty -- that a Southeast Asia dominated by Communist power would bring a third World War much closer to terrible reality. One could hope that it would not be so.

But all that we have learned in this tragic century tells us it would be so, I believe it would be so. And, as President of the United States, I am not prepared to gamble the security -- indeed, the existence -- of this nation merely on hope and wishful thinking.

I am convinced that by seeing this struggle through now, in Vietnam, we are reducing the chances of a larger war -- perhaps a nuclear war.

I would rather stand in Vietnam, in our time, and by meeting this danger now, reduce the danger for our children and grandchildren.

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I want to turn now to the struggle in Vietnam itself.

There are questions about this difficult war that must trouble every thoughtful person. Let me put some of these questions -- and give you the best answers I know.

First, are the Vietnamese -- with our help, and that of their other allies -- making progress? Is there forward movement?

The reports I see make clear that there is steady progress and forward movement.

Certainly there is positive movement toward constitutional government. Thus far the Vietnamese have met the political schedule they laid down in January 1966.

The people wanted an elected, responsive government. They wanted it enough to brave a vicious campaign of Communist terror and assassination to vote for it. And, on November first, a legitimate elected government will be inaugurated and an elected Senate and legislature installed. Their responsibility is clear: to answer the desires of the South Vietnamese people for self-determination and peace, for an attack on corruption, for economic development and social justice.

There is progress in the war itself -- dramatic progress.

The campaigns of the last year drove the enemy from many of their major interior bases. The military victory almost within Hanoi's grasp in 1965 has now been denied. The grip of the Viet Cong on the people is being broken.

Since our commitment of major forces in 1965, the proportion of the population living under Communist control has been reduced, well under 20%. Today about two-thirds of the people in South Vietnam live in secure areas -- and in the contested areas, the tide continues to run with us.

But the struggle remains hard. The South Vietnamese have suffered severely, as have we -- particularly in the First Corps area, in the North, where the enemy has mounted his heaviest attacks, and where his lines of communication to North Vietnam are shortest. Our casualties in the war have reached 11,000 killed in action, and 85,000 wounded. Of those wounded, we thank God that 79,000 have been returned, or will return to duty.

I know there are other questions on your minds; for instance:

"Why not negotiate now?" The answer is that we and our South Vietnamese allies are wholly prepared to negotiate now.

I am ready to talk with Ho Chi Minh tomorrow.

I am ready to have Secretary Rusk meet with their Foreign Minister tomorrow.

I am ready to send a trusted representative to any spot on this earth to talk in secret with a spokesman for Hanoi.

I am ready to have the issue of Vietnam dealt with by the United Nations.

We have made this very clear to Hanoi -- directly and through third parties.

We have informed Hanoi again and again that the United States is willing immediately to stop aerial and naval bombardment of North Vietnam when this will lead promptly to productive discussion.

But Hanoi has not accepted any of these proposals.

It is by Hanoi's choice -- not ours, not the world's -- that war continues.

Why, in the face of military and political progress in the South, and the burden of our bombing in the North, do they persist with the war?

From many sources the answer is the same. They still hope that the people of the United States will not see the struggle through to the end. As one Western diplomat recently in Hanoi put it: "They believe their staying power is greater than ours and that they can't lose." A visitor from a Communist capital said, "They expect the war to be long and that the Americans will in the end be defeated by a breakdown in morale, fatigue, and psychological factors." The Premier of North Vietnam said as far back as 1962: "Americans do not like long, inconclusive war. Thus we are sure to win in the end."

Are the North Vietnamese right about us?

No. They are wrong. It is the common failing of totalitarian regimes, that they cannot understand the nature of our democracy;

-- ~~that~~ they mistake dissent for disloyalty;

-- ~~that~~ they mistake restlessness for a rejection of policy;

-- ~~that~~ they mistake a few committees for a country.

They are no better suited to judge the strength and perseverance of America, than the Nazi and Stalinist propagandists were. It is a tragedy that they must discover these qualities in the American people through a bloody war.

And, soon or late, they will.

Therefore, we shall continue to seek negotiations -- confident that reason will at last prevail; that Hanoi will realize that it cannot win; that it will turn away from fighting and toward building for its own people.

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Since World War II this nation has met and mastered many challenges -- Greece and Turkey, Berlin, Korea, and Cuba.

We met them because brave men were willing to risk their lives for their nation's security. And braver men have never lived than those who carry our colors in Vietnam at this hour.

The price of these efforts has been heavy, indeed. But the price of not having met these challenges and seen them through would have been vastly greater.

We know it. Our friends know it. And our enemies know it, too!

And so we shall press forward.

Two things we must do -- two things we shall do.

First, we must not mislead our enemy.

Let him not think that debate and dissent will produce wavering and withdrawal. For they won't.

Let him not think that protest will produce surrender. Because it won't.

Let him not think that he will wait us out. For he won't.

Second, we will provide all that our brave men require to do the job that must be done.

They have our prayers -- and our heartfelt praise -- and our deepest gratitude.

For, because of them -- because of their sacrifice -- because of their devotion -- our nation and our world are safe.