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October 20 1967

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To: Secretary McNamara

From: W. W. Rostow

The President wished you to have, on a personal basis, a copy of this memorandum by Mac Bundy.

~~SECRET~~ attachment
copy of 10/17/67 memo
to Pres from McG. B.

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4(b)

White House Guidelines, Feb. 24, 1983

By RG, NARA, Date 11-4-91

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October 17, 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Vietnam -- October 1967

I have talked today with my brother Bill, Bob McNamara, a knowledgeable Junior interdepartmental staff team, Dick Helms, and Bromley Smith. I am going to see the Vice President, Clark Clifford and Walt Rostow before the day ends, and when we talk I can make amendments orally to the following tentative conclusions.

Basically, I think your policy is as right as ever and that the weight of the evidence from the field is encouraging. I also believe that we are in a long, slow business in which we cannot expect decisive results soon. And while I think there are several things which we can usefully do to strengthen our position, my most important preliminary conclusions are negative. Because these negative conclusions define my affirmative recommendations, I begin with them:

1. At present I would be strongly against
 - (1) any unconditional pause;
 - (2) any extended pause for the sake of appearances;
 - (3) any major headline-making intensification of the bombing -- such as a renewed bombing of Hanoi;
 - (4) any large-scale reinforcement of General Westmoreland beyond the totals already agreed;
 - (5) any major immediate change in the public posture established by your Texas speech and recent supporting efforts by Cabinet Officers;
 - (6) any elaborate effort to show by new facts and figures that we are "winning."

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2. The argument which follows attempts first to spell out these conclusions in detail, and second to outline some things I would do now.

(1) No unconditional pause. The basic objection to an unconditional pause is simply that the odds are very heavy that you would have to resume, and that if the pause is truly unconditional, the circumstances of any such resumption would be very damaging to us both at home and abroad. Dean Rusk is absolutely right when he says that none of the advocates of such a pause have told us they would support a resumption, on any grounds (although Walter Lippmann acknowledged the impossibility of a permanent and unproductive pause a year ago). If we pause unconditionally, we impale ourselves on a terrible dilemma:

a. to accept continuing and visible reinforcement from the North without reply;

b. to resume on our own say-so, thus "destroying the hope of peace" by unilateral action.

(2) No extended pause for the sake of appearances. The argument against this kind of pause is somewhat different: it is that nothing which pretends to be a pause and has conditions attached to it is likely to have any useful effect whatever upon people like the New York Times. They will simply say once more that we have done it wrong, that we were insincere, and that we have proved again that we cannot be trusted by Hanoi. Since in fact Hanoi will not accept any such conditional or limited pause, we can only get the worst of both worlds by offering it. This means that any short standdown at Christmas or New Year's should be very carefully handled to prevent a false impression that we are quietly reopening a serious pause as we did -- in all good faith -- in 1965-66. We should not repeat the pattern of 1966-67.

There is one and only one condition on which I would order an extended pause -- it is that there should be a recorded and acknowledged diplomatic position like the one which we have been stating to Hanoi through the Harvard professor. A quick review of this exchange persuades me that it has been extremely well handled and that it is to our advantage to keep it going. If it leads to a nibble, and we should get grounds for a bombing suspension, we would have a clear predicate on which to base any necessary resumption if the truce were not productive

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or if there were heavy reinforcement from the North. If, on the other hand, we get no response, we have certainly established a record which will show plainly that we were ready to stop the bombing on a still more forthcoming basis than any we have yet stated -- even in the Texas speech. To me this exchange is a valuable and cost-free exercise, because even without it, as the next paragraph shows, I would be in favor of leaving Hanoi alone. While the exchange continues, we must stay away from Hanoi, but in my judgment we should stay away from there in any case. My reasons follow:

(3) No headline-making intensification of the bombing -- and especially no more bombing in Hanoi. As you know, I think that the bombing of the North is quite intense enough as it stands. While I strongly support bombing of communications lines and supply depots -- tactical bombing -- I see no evidence whatever that North Vietnam is a good object for a major strategic campaign. Dick Helms told me solemnly today that every single member of his intelligence staff agrees with the view that bombing in the Hanoi-Haiphong area has no significant effect whatever on the level of supplies that reaches the Southern battlefields. Nor does any intelligence officer of standing believe that strategic bombing will break the will of Hanoi in the foreseeable future. This strategic air war engages our pilots and the pride of our air commanders; it also has a military life of its own, with its own claimed imperatives. But it does not affect the real contest, which is in the South. Its political costs are rising every week. We have everything to gain politically and almost nothing to lose militarily if we will firmly hold our bombing to demonstrably useful target areas.

The one great objection to this otherwise desirable restraint is that the top brass and their political friends disagree. I know you have thought in the past that we could not afford to break with them on this issue, but I believe that the balance of opinion is shifting rapidly against them and that it is more and more to our advantage to put a distance between ourselves and people like Symington, Rivers, Harvey -- and even Russell. They are overwhelmingly wrong, on all the evidence, and the belief that you are gradually giving in to them is the most serious single fear of reasonable men in all parts of the country.

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(4) No large-scale reinforcement beyond totals already agreed. I would hope that 525,000 would hold Westy through 1968. I would certainly try to meet this total early if that is now what he wants, because if there is to be hard fighting in the next fifteen months the sooner it comes the better. Indeed, my impression is that whatever we do, our casualties are likely to go up at the turn of the year because of operations now planned, and this seems to me one more powerful argument against an extended holiday pause.

(5) No immediate change in our public posture. The Texas speech is one of the most powerful you have given, and I think it is right in moving the emphasis a bit toward the whole of Southeast Asia and away from the details of Vietnam. I think we ought to do more of this later on, because as you know I think the strategic victory has already been won and is worth claiming. But I do not think the next month or two will be a good time for very extended additional argument. Neither Rusk nor McNamara states the matter quite the way you do, and you yourself need to save your breath until later.

(6) No elaborate effort to use new facts and figures to prove our case. There is a credibility gap and it really makes no difference that the press has done more to make it than we have. We do not gain with the mass of the people by what we report of progress in Vietnam. What we desperately need is that the newspaper men should begin to find progress for themselves. Joe Alsop, with all his weaknesses, is worth ten of our spokesmen. We should strive for a situation in which Reagan's charge begins to look plausible -- that we really are hiding our successes -- for whatever reason. It might cost us a few headlines and a few unbalanced television news reports to observe such a policy of reticence -- but it would help to set a new stage for the necessary efforts we shall have to make next year.

* * * * *

I turn now to the things I would favor. As you will see, they grow out of what I am against.

1. I would favor a careful and considered exposition of the argument against an unconditional pause sometime in the next month or two. I think the right man to do this would be Nick Katzenbach, and I

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think the arguments should be fully developed and firm. Once we have made an absolutely fixed decision on this point, we will end some of the chatter and we will lay a base for looking at other less categorical alternatives.

2. I think we should have a careful staff study of the possibilities for continuous bombing in the North which avoids startling targets and has the public effect of deescalation without seriously lightening the burden on the North Vietnamese. My conversations today persuaded me that there is a very promising possibility here that we can have both the essence of the present real military advantages of bombing and much of the advantage of seeming to exercise a new Presidential restraint. I would hope that this alternative could have as careful and complete a review as any other in the immediate future.

3. I would continue the effort to expand the visibility of Vietnamese participation in all forms. I understand that Bunker and Westy are tired of Washington prodding on the subject of ARVN performance, but I also understand that there is some real enthusiasm both in the Pentagon and in Saigon for brigading a few Vietnamese battalions with U. S. forces in offensive action. I would give prompt and strong encouragement to this idea because nothing would do us more good than a few battlefield reports of truly shared combat.

4. All the evidence is that our present team in Saigon is much the best we have had. But they are not getting the very best people to help them even yet. I think you might make progress with the assignment of both Army and CIA officers if you were to press the Army people directly (not through Bob) and Dick Helms too to tell you whether they are using every possible incentive to get their very best professionals into the work of pacification, intelligence collection, province leadership, and other such traditional unglamorous activities. My agents tell me that the Pentagon rewards the battalion commanders but that it is not really giving top priority to getting top men into other countryside jobs.

5. Finally, I would not listen too closely to anyone who comes from a distance and spends only one day looking at the evidence. What

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I think I might do instead is to find a way of widening the circle of those who talk regularly about overall policy choices in this area. I do get a feeling that while a number of different people are working on a number of different angles, only a few are trying to keep the whole picture together, and those few are not your least-burdened men. My impression is that here, as in the Middle East, the best organizer of continued study is Katzenbach (whom I have not seen today) and you may wish to look for a way of sitting with him and his people every now and then.

McG. B.

McG. B.

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