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Thursday, November 2, 1967
7:40 p. m.

MR. PRESIDENT:

For file

Herewith my comments on Secretary McNamara's draft paper of November 1, 1967.

1. I would summarize Secretary McNamara's argument as follows:
In the next 15 months we shall make progress in South Vietnam but not enough progress either to: lead to peace or convince our people that major progress has been made and there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Under these circumstances, he believes two conflicting tendencies will grow in U. S. public opinion: on the one hand, to escalate the war in the North and expand it on the ground in the South; on the other hand, to pull out.

To avoid this believed polarization of U. S. public opinion around the extremes, he believes we should take a series of measures that would stabilize the war and push the North Vietnamese into a negotiation, even on a "fight and talk" basis. At the maximum, he believes this process could lead to a successful negotiation; at the minimum, it would avoid the pressures to expand the war in the air and on the ground, which he greatly fears.

2. My observations on the political, military and diplomatic aspects of this argument follow.

a. Political. If his proposed strategy did not lead to a successful negotiation, you would be pushed off the middle ground you now hold at home. To test Bob's strategy would require a long bombing cessation, plus a Panmunjom phase, until we found out whether they were serious about negotiations. If we then had to resume full-scale bombing, the Republicans could accuse us of vacillation and adopt a hard line which might then appeal to our people. If we got caught in a Panmunjom phase, the case for their advocating a stronger policy would be even more clear. In a recent Gallup poll, some 67% of the American people want us to continue bombing the North (as I remember it). Acknowledging my limitations as a judge of domestic politics, I am extremely skeptical of any change in strategy that would take you away from your present middle position; that is, using rationally all the power available, but avoiding actions likely to engage the Soviet Union and Communist China. If we shift unilaterally towards de-escalation, the Republicans will move in and crystallize a majority around a stronger policy.

If I felt Bob's strategy would measurably increase the chances of a true settlement, I believe the risk might be worth taking. But both a unilateral

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bombing cessation and an announced policy of "stabilization" would, in my view, be judged in Hanoi a mark of weakness rather than evidence of increased U. S. capacity to sweat out the war.

b. Military. Although I certainly will not predict for you an early end to the war, I believe that, with a little luck and reasonable performance by the South Vietnamese under the new government, the evidence of solid progress will become increasingly clear to one and all. It is no accident that Republican politicians are beginning to smell this. If progress in fact continues, we will get more and more of the kind of testimony that Alsop, Walter Judd, General Bradley, etc., are now generating. Moreover, as an old intelligence officer, I know that one should take very seriously events that one did not predict. I have been looking for a long time, as you know, for a negotiation within South Vietnam. But I did not expect so soon after the failure in Paris as substantive a message as we got by the Buttercup channel. That channel may develop only slowly. It may not yield anything. But the simple fact is this: it emerged while we were bombing the North full scale. Before changing our strategy in the direction suggested by Bob McNamara, I would certainly play this string out to the full. Incidentally, if it works well, I am sure we will come back to the bombing question -- if and when the National Liberation Front suggests that we talk to Hanoi about the issues directly at stake between the U. S. and the DRV. (That is foreshadowed in their description of the three negotiations required for peace.) Until proved otherwise, then, I would stay with Buttercup and see where it leads us, while holding steady on our present program.

c. Diplomacy. As indicated above, I would play out the Buttercup string before probing or initiating in any other direction. I detect in the full flow of intelligence a shift of the following kind:

-- an increase in Soviet influence in Hanoi, partially caused by our bombing and a consequent requirement for very large increases in Soviet aid;

-- a shift in Hanoi to the view that they cannot directly take over the South now and, therefore, they have to accept the 17th parallel for a considerable time period;

-- within this framework, a probing for what the status of the Communists would be within South Vietnam in a time of peace.

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If this is right, we are already in a kind of Panmunjom stage; that is, their military operations are designed not to produce victory but to improve their position in a negotiation which is, in a sense, already under way. It is quite clear from Buttercup that they are trying to bargain the highest possible status for the National Liberation Front in the South against our clear desire to get the war off our necks. If and when we come into contact and begin to exchange views, it may well turn out that their minimum price for National Liberation Front status is higher than we and the government of South Vietnam are prepared to pay. In that case, we shall have to prove that their bargaining power diminishes with the passage of time -- not increases. That, in turn, means high costs in the North; maximum pressure in the South on their manpower base. I believe Bob's strategy would ease their problem and permit them rationally to pretract the negotiation -- unless Bob is correct on domestic politics and I am wrong. That is, if the country settled down for the long pull comfortably with Bob's program, he could be right. If his policy opened up a debate between united Republicans claiming we had gone soft and a Democratic Administration, with the JCS in disagreement if not open revolt, then my view is correct.

3. Some Specifics. Having taken this negative stance in general, I would agree at the moment with his points 1 - 5, and 9 (page 6); but I would not announce them as a new policy -- in part, because I don't think we need a new announced policy; in part, because changing circumstances might make it wise to reopen some of the issues in those paragraphs.

W. W. R.