

INFORMATION

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Pres file

Thursday, February 8, 1968
7:00 p.m.

Mr. President:

I won't sign the attached note, because it is
Marshall Wright's feeling and his speech draft.
(Marshall works for Bill Jorden.)

It's an excellent speech.

We've found an extra draftsman.

W. W. Rostow

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Thursday
February 8, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

In the next day or so you have a unique opportunity to slay the credibility-gap dragon with one blow -- or rather with one speech.

The correspondents and the public know in their bones that we and our allies sustained a heavy blow last week. Yet there is a growing feeling that the Administration is attempting to pretend otherwise. It will do us no harm to tell them what they already know -- and it will do us much good to do it in so unvarnished a way that the wonder will be at your candor and frankness.

It is, I think, also the time to say plainly that hard fighting and heavy casualties lie ahead. They do, and the way to minimize their impact on American public opinion is to acknowledge them in advance and set the national tone by a call for steadiness and resolution.

Finally, sooner or later, we are going to have to take on the peace issue squarely. There is a widespread assumption in the country, even among those who support our policy, that peace requires only that the right button can be found to push -- the right gimmick discovered. This is, of course, naive. But it furnishes the basis for what will probably be a growing issue as the year proceeds. The serious opposition will not call for a pull-out from Vietnam. They will, instead, promise to do it better. They will say you cannot find the right button -- and they will imply they can. We can defuse this issue by saying plainly that there can be no peace because the enemy still wants war. And those who talk of peace only cause the enemy to redouble his attacks on our men in Vietnam.

In short, it is time for a war leader speech instead of a peace-seeker speech. The attached draft is an attempt at such a vehicle.

W. W. Rostow

Att.

MW rkght:wpt

My fellow Americans:

Nine days ago, the Communist enemy in Vietnam launched the biggest attack of the war. He chose to strike during the heart of the lunar New Year's celebration, which is Vietnam's major holiday. It was as if a wide-spread assault had been launched against American cities in the early morning hours of Christmas Day. Undoubtedly, the Vietnamese defense forces in the stricken cities were somewhat relaxed. Certainly, the civilian population of the cities was totally unprepared for the savage assault of which they were the victims.

[We should remember that this coordinated and long-planned attack came during the middle of a cease-fire which the communists themselves had announced. We should remember that -- because it tells us so much about the nature of the enemy we are facing.]

I feel that I should report to you on the events of the past nine days -- what the cost has been to us and to our friends -- what the enemy was able to accomplish -- what he was not able to accomplish -- and what we should expect in the days ahead.

The cost in terms of American lives and those of our friends and allies has been grievous. Since January 30, 614 telegrams have gone from this city to American citizens informing them of the death of their son or their husband. The toll among our Vietnamese allies has been even higher -- 1,500 Vietnamese soldiers have died since January 30 defending their cities and their homes. Very many Vietnamese civilians have died and been hurt, although we do not yet know the numbers. The damage in the cities

towns of Vietnam has been heavy, so heavy that we now believe some 200,000 men, women and children have been left homeless as a result of the Communist assault.

There is no gainsaying the fact that we have sustained a heavy blow. I do not wish in the slightest to suggest otherwise. No one, I think, is more aware than I am of the grisly statistics by which we must measure the past few days and their meaning in terms of human grief. I have followed these developments almost hourly -- and with an increasingly heavy heart. The enemy set out to bring home to us the heavy cost of defending freedom. He set out to give us a grim week -- and he has succeeded.

He has also done something else during the past few days. He has learned the cost of aggression. The communist forces which attacked the cities of Vietnam have paid an appalling cost for their boldness. Over 22,000 communist soldiers died since January 30. Another 5,000 have been taken prisoner. In one week, the communists have lost many more soldiers than we have lost during the entire Vietnam war. I take no joy in this carnage. But I think that our sadness about the past week should be mixed with deep pride at the magnificent performance of our men in Vietnam, and of the performance of our allies.

The communist attack was, of course, an assault upon the will of the Vietnamese and American people to continue the fight. Apart from that, the communist attack appears to have had three primary purposes. First, they hoped to cause a general uprising in their favor among the inhabitants of the cities and towns of Vietnam. They told their own troops that

happen. Their propaganda broadcasts called upon the Vietnamese people to rise up and end the war. That they were serious in this hope seems clear, for they did not provide any orders to their troops for withdrawal, apparently believing that withdrawal would not be necessary.

They could not have been more wrong. Nowhere did the Vietnamese civilians come to the aid of the communist troops. Nowhere was there an uprising. To the contrary the civilian population of Vietnam's cities appears to view the Communist assault as exactly what it was -- a savage and vicious attack upon civilian populations with a callous and total lack of concern for the welfare of civilian lives.

A second communist purpose appears to have been the destruction of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, the ARVN, as a cohesive and disciplined national military instrument. If that was their purpose -- they failed. Everywhere, the ARVN behaved well, and in many places they behaved with outstanding gallantry and professional competence. In the past, a number of prominent Americans have seized every opportunity to criticize the fighting capacity and will of the ARVN. In view of the ARVN performance in the past few days, and in view of the very heavy casualties which they have sustained and the much heavier casualties which they have inflicted -- I suggest it is time for such criticism to stop.

Finally, the communists undoubtedly intended to shatter the government of the Republic of Vietnam by simultaneous assaults on its national and districts centers. The primary communist purpose in South Vietnam is, of course, to destroy the Government of South Vietnam, and to replace

it with a communist government. Thus, throughout Vietnam the communist assault on the cities concentrated on government offices and police stations, on the Vietnam equivalent of the city hall, the county courthouse, and the State Capitol. The communists even announced the creation of a new government in the hope that people would rally to it -- and if not rally to it, then at least accept it as an alternative preferable to a continuation of the fighting. This phony coalition government was treated by the Vietnamese people with the contempt which it deserved.

In these purposes, then, the communists have failed. And they have failed at the cost of 22,000 of their best men slain. The tidings in Washington and Saigon have been heavy this week. But they cannot have been light in Hanoi.

It is a fact that the attacks which began on January 30 were more ambitious in concept, broader in scope, more savage in execution, and more secure in their development than we had thought possible.

It is certain that in the savagery of the past week, the enemy has squandered, for little gain that we can see, a major part of the human and material resources available to him. All of these will be hard for him to replace and some of them may prove impossible to replace. It may be that what we have witnessed the past week is a convulsive effort which he can hardly repeat. But we cannot, in prudence, assume that to be the case.

We know that he has many more forces which were not committed to the assault upon the cities. We believe he is capable of repeating that assault, if he is willing to pay the price.

We also know that the enemy has brought down from the north large and



well-trained forces of the North Vietnamese regular army. They have concentrated these forces in the northern part of South Vietnam -- and particularly around our Marines at Khe Sanh. We expect in the very near future that the enemy will attempt to overrun the Marines at Khe Sanh. We expect that he will make a determined effort to do that. We expect that he will fail, and we expect that he will suffer appalling casualties before he discovers that there is not going to be any Dien-Bien-Phu in this war.

I cannot, therefore, hold out to you the prospect of quiet weeks ahead. There will be fierce fighting around Khe Sanh. There may be a recurrence of the assault on the cities of Vietnam. There will be casualties for us and for our friends to mourn.

You may ask, why is it necessary for us to bear this heavy burden. I have discussed with you many times the reasons why we are in Vietnam. This is not the time to discuss those reasons again. There is nothing new to add to the reasons. The only thing that is new is the intensity of the enemy's effort to break our will. He is waiting to see what the effect will be upon the American public -- and upon the Vietnamese public -- of last week's savagery.

I believe that I can tell him what the effect will be. We have known savagery before. And we have known how to deal with it. We still do. Do not look to Iowa, or New York, or Oregon or Alabama for a reward for your deeds of last week. You will not find it.

As for the Vietnamese people, I will let them speak for themselves. They have endured this kind of gangsterism for many years with a fortitude and an endurance which compliment the human race. I will say simply this: We will not let you down. Do not fear that we will cut and run when

gets tough. Neither this administration nor any other elected by the American people will betray you -- or the American soldiers who fight with you. We will be there to the end. And in the end, it will all come out right.

Now -- what is left of the hopes for peace after the events of last week -- and the events we believe will come in the next few weeks. I will tell you frankly that I do not see any prospect for an early peace. At San Antonio I set forth our minimum requirements for peace. We would stop the bombing of North Vietnam if the enemy would assure us, publicly or privately, that prompt and productive peace talks would result, and that they would not take advantage of the cessation of bombing to mount a larger war effort. We set these conditions because we have had some experience with peace talks with communists. At Panmunjon in Korea we talked for 372 days and during that period 12,700 American soldiers lost their lives and almost 49,000 were wounded. I am not interested in such peace talks as that. I have no intention of denying to the American troops in South Vietnam the advantages of American air power if the only purpose of that denial is the well-being of those who are shooting at American troops. That is the meaning of the San Antonio formula. We want peace. We will stop the bombing of the North to get quick and serious peace talks. We will not stop it for any other reason.

I think we have clearly had our answer to our offer of peace talks. I think that the assault upon the cities of Vietnam was the answer. I think ~~that~~ the massive effort the enemy has made to besiege the American garrison at Khe Sanh is the answer -- and incidentally, every man and every pound of material surrounding our men at Khe Sanh came down from North

If it were not for our bombing of the North, our Marines at Khe Sanh would face more enemies and better armed and supplied enemies.

The enemy does not want peace. He wants to try to win a military victory. He expects to defeat us as he defeated France -- by fighting us fiercely in the field and propagandizing us fiercely in our own homes. It was a communist who said that a coffin is better propaganda than a leaflet. They believe that principle, and they are acting upon it in Vietnam.

I repeat to you: they do not want peace at this time. They want to continue the fight. You cannot make peace with a man who is determined to fight you. It is not a question of finding the right words, the right place, the right gimmick. It would be easy to find the formula for peace -- if they wanted peace. It is impossible to find the formula for peace so long as they are determined to have war.

What are we going to do about this? We are going to give them the fight they want -- and more than they want. We are going to mete out the measure they have asked for -- and more than the measure. We will not do this with any joy -- for we are a people who hate war. But we are also a people who are willing -- and not for the first time -- have always been able to do what was necessary to preserve our freedom and the freedom of our friends.

Peace is available to the communists in Vietnam -- when they want it. The San Antonio terms are reasonable. Indeed, they are more than reasonable. When the enemy wants peace it is available to him. In the meantime, we do not intend to confuse him and to raise his hopes of a cheap victory with constant pleas that he talk peace. He has heard us at San Antonio.

heard him in the mortars that he fired into the heart of the largest cities in South Vietnam. We fully expect to hear him in the fury of the attack upon our Marines. We understand the message. We do not like it -- but we are prepared to accept it. As Winston Churchill put it to another enemy who specialized in savagery, "you do your worst -- and we will do our best."

For that is the way to peace. In this war as in many others, the aggressor will not make peace until he has been convinced that he has no choice. He has chosen to make a supreme effort to obtain victory. That has made the last week a hard one and it is likely to make for other hard weeks to come. If we meet this challenge with fortitude and with unity, then the answer is clear to the enemy. If we meet it with dismay and panic -- if we respond to the enemy attack by calling for our own forces to retreat -- by questioning whether our own forces should be there at all -- by criticizing our friends and our allies -- then the enemy will be succeeding -- and he will see that he is succeeding. He will redouble his efforts, with all that implies for the safety of the American men in Vietnam.

This is a time for steadiness -- and for resolution -- and for determination. I intend to do my best to show all three on your behalf. I ask your help.