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3/16/68

FROM WALT ROSTOW
TO THE PRESIDENT
CITE CAP30571~~TOP SECRET~~

HEREWITH GOLDBERG PROPOSES WE GO FOR A BOMBING CESSATION AND A NEGOTIATION PROMPTLY. IN MY JUDGMENT, THE RIGHT TIME WILL BE A FEW MONTHS FROM NOW -- ASSUMING WESTY AND THE GVN WEATHER THE WINTER-SPRING OFFENSIVE IN TOLERABLY GOOD SHAPE.

SECRETARY RUSK HAS MADE CLEAR IN HIS STATEMENT TO THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE THAT THE ENTIRE SITUATION WITH REGARD TO VIETNAM IS UNDER REVIEW FROM A TO Z. IT IS MY UNDERSTANDING THIS REVIEW ENCOMPASSES NOT ONLY MILITARY ASPECTS BUT ALSO POSSIBLE MOVES TOWARD A POLITICAL SOLUTION. IT IS ON THE LATTER QUESTION THAT I SHOULD LIKE TO ADVANCE THE FOLLOWING THOUGHTS FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF THOSE ENGAGED IN THIS POLICY REVIEW.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN OUR COUNTRY HAVE DEMONSTRATED THAT THERE IS GRAVE CONCERN AMONG THE AMERICAN PUBLIC WHETHER THE COURSE WE HAVE SET IN OUR VIETNAM POLICY IS RIGHT OR HOLDS PROMISE OF RESULTS COMMENSURATE WITH THE COST -- CONCERN WHICH HAS BEEN DEEPENED BY THE REVERSES WE AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE SUFFERED DURING THE TET OFFENSIVE, BY THE APPARENT LACK OF ENERGY, EFFECTIVENESS AND APPEAL OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT, BY THE MOUNTING RATE OF AMERICAN CASUALTIES, BY THE EXTENT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF LIFE AND PROPERTY IN VIETNAM, AND BY REPORTS THAT REQUESTS HAVE BEEN MADE OF THE PRESIDENT FOR SUBSTANTIAL TROOP REINFORCEMENTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM. THIS CONCERN REFLECTS A GROWING PUBLIC BELIEF THAT THE WAR IN SOUTH VIETNAM IS INCREASINGLY AN AMERICAN WAR, NOT A SOUTH VIETNAMESE WAR WHICH THE U.S. IS SUPPORTING, AND, FURTHER, THAT THE WAR CANNOT BE WON ON THIS BASIS WITHOUT EVERMOUNTING COMMITMENTS NOT WORTH THE COST.

AS I SEE IT, UNDER OUR DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES, IF PUBLIC SUPPORT IS PERMANENTLY AND SUBSTANTIALLY ERODED, WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN LET ALONE INTENSIFY THE LEVEL OF OUR MILITARY EFFORTS IN VIETNAM. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT DECISIONS ON THIS MATTER SHOULD BE CONTROLLED BY THE NORMAL FLUCTUATIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION CONCERNING THE PROGRESS OF THE WAR. MAJOR PRESIDENTIAL DECISIONS CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT BE MADE ON THE BASIS OF A DAY-BY-DAY READING OF THE PUBLIC'S TEMPERATURE. IT IS MY CONSIDERED OPINION THAT THE VERY BEST WAY TO PREVENT FURTHER EROSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FROM TAKING PLACE IS TO MAKE A NEW AND FRESH MOVE TOWARD A POLITICAL SOLUTION AT THIS TIME. MOREOVER, AND INDEPENDENTLY OF THIS, I BELIEVE ON THE MERITS THAT A FRESH MOVE TOWARD A POLITICAL SOLUTION SHOULD BE MADE NOW.

THE QUESTION WHICH THEN ARISES IS: WHAT NEW AND FRESH EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE? IN MY VIEW, THERE IS ONLY ONE FEASIBLE STEP AT THIS TIME WHICH OFFERS ANY POSSIBILITY OF MAKING PROGRESS TOWARD A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT AND, AT THE SAME TIME, OF BEING RECEIVED

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BY THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AS A GOOD-FAITH MOVE TOWARD SUCH A SETTLEMENT. STATED SIMPLY, THAT STEP WOULD BE TO PUT INTO EFFECT THE SAN ANTONIO FORMULA BY ASSUMING HANOI WOULD NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE BOMBING CESSION AND WITHOUT SEEKING PRIOR ASSURANCE FROM HANOI ON THIS POINT. THERE ARE OBVIOUS RISKS IN THIS COURSE OF ACTION. NEVERTHELESS, I BELIEVE IT MUST AND SHOULD BE TAKEN.

IT IS PERTINENT TO RECALL WHAT THE PRESIDENT SAID AT SAN ANTONIO:

"AS WE HAVE TOLD HANOI TIME AND TIME AGAIN, THE HEART OF THE MATTER REALLY IS THIS: THE UNITED STATES IS WILLING TO STOP ALL AERIAL AND NAVAL BOMBARDMENT OF NORTH VIETNAM WHEN THIS WILL LEAD PROMPTLY TO PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS. WE, OF COURSE, ASSUME THAT WHILE DISCUSSIONS PROCEED, NORTH VIETNAM WOULD NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE BOMBING CESSION OR LIMITATION."

TAKEN AT ITS FACE VALUE, THIS FORMULA DOES NOT CALL FOR ANY PRIOR ASSURANCE THAT NORTH VIETNAM WOULD NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A CESSION OF THE BOMBING. RATHER, IT FORESEES THAT WE WILL ACT ON THE "ASSUMPTION" THAT NORTH VIETNAM WOULD NOT TAKE SUCH ADVANTAGE. THEREFORE, THE STEP I PROPOSE WOULD NOT INVOLVE A DEPARTURE FROM THE POLICY ENUNCIATED BY THE PRESIDENT.

SINCE THE SAN ANTONIO FORMULA WAS ENUNCIATED, WE HAVE HAD EXPLICIT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE STATEMENTS FROM NORTH VIETNAM THAT: A) TALKS BETWEEN THE U.S. AND HANOI WOULD FOLLOW RELATIVELY SOON AFTER AN END TO THE BOMBING AND OTHER HOSTILE ACTS AGAINST THE NORTH; AND B) NO SUBJECT MATTER WOULD BE EXCLUDED FROM THE TALKS. THIS LEAVES THE WAY OPEN FOR US TO INSIST IN SUCH TALKS THAT THE FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WOULD BE APPROPRIATE ARRANGEMENTS TO ENSURE THAT HANOI DOES NOT USE THE BOMBING CESSION TO OBTAIN A MILITARY ADVANTAGE.

IN SPECIFIC TERMS THEN, MY SUGGESTION, BASED ON THE SAN ANTONIO FORMULA, MEANS THAT--WITHOUT ANNOUNCING ANY CONDITIONS OR TIME LIMIT--WE WOULD "STOP" THE AERIAL AND NAVAL BOMBARDMENT OF NORTH VIETNAM, FOR THE LIMITED TIME NECESSARY TO DETERMINE WHETHER HANOI WILL NEGOTIATE IN GOOD FAITH; IN MY VIEW THIS CAN BEST BE DETERMINED BY WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS DURING THE TALKS RATHER THAN ANY ADVANCE VERBAL COMMITMENTS OF THE KIND WE HAVE BEEN SEEKING.

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, MANY THINGS WHICH MY SUGGESTION DOES NOT MEAN:

- A) IT DOES NOT MEAN WE WOULD REFRAIN FROM BOMBING THE MAIN INFILTRATION ROUTES THROUGH LAOS OR WITHIN SOUTH VIETNAM;
- B) IT DOES NOT MEAN WE WOULD CEASE OR REFRAIN FROM INTENSIFYING CUR BOMBING IN THE KHE SANH AREA, THE NORTHERNMOST PROVINCES OF SOUTH VIETNAM, AND ANY OTHER POINT IN THE SOUTH WHERE VC/NVN TROOPS ARE CONCENTRATED;
- C) IT DOES NOT MEAN WE WOULD DISCONTINUE NAVAL BOMBARDMENT SOUTH OF THE 17TH PARALLEL OF HANOI'S SUPPLY AND INFILTRATION OPERATIONS BY SEA;
- D) IT DOES NOT MEAN WE WOULD BE INHIBITED FROM ROTATION OR NORMAL AUGMENTATION OF OUR OWN FORCES IN THE SOUTH DURING THE BOMBING CESSION OR THE SUBSEQUENT TALKS--UNLESS, OF COURSE, THOSE TALKS RESULTED IN AN AGREEMENT CONCERNING NON-AUGMENTATION OF FORCES;

ED IT DOES NOT MEAN, FINALLY, THAT WE WOULD BE PRECLUDED FROM RESUMING THE BOMBING IF, IN FACT, NORTH VIETNAM WERE IN BAD FAITH TO TAKE MILITARY ADVANTAGE OF THE BOMBING CESSION.

IN ADDITION TO AND CONCURRENTLY WITH THE BOMBING CESSION, I WOULD URGE THAT WE PURSUE THE FOLLOWING COURSES:

1. GO PRIVATELY TO THE SOVIETS AND THE BLOC COUNTRIES TO ENLIST THEIR STRONG SUPPORT TOWARD ENSURING THAT, ON THE ONE HAND, HANOI DOES NOT TAKE MILITARY ADVANTAGE OF THE BOMBING CESSION AND, ON THE OTHER, THAT HANOI WILL PROMPTLY BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS WHICH WILL BE FRUITFUL. WE WOULD ALSO BE IN A STRONG POSITION, HAVING FOLLOWED SOVIET AND BLOC ADVICE ON STOPPING THE BOMBING, TO URGE THAT THEY USE THEIR SUPPLY LEVERAGE IN SUPPORT OF A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT;
2. ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF OTHERS (E.G., FRANCE, INDIA AND OTHER NON-ALIGNED COUNTRIES) TOWARD THE SAME END;
3. ENLIST SIMILAR SUPPORT FROM THE POPE AND THE SECRETARY GENERAL;
4. ATTEMPT TO OBTAIN, AT AN APPROPRIATE TIME, THE SUPPORT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL FOR OUR DIPLOMATIC EFFORT PRIOR RPT PRIOR TO ANY RESUMPTION OF THE BOMBING. RESORT TO THE COUNCIL, TIMED SO AS NOT TO UNDERMINE OUR OTHER POLITICAL INITIATIVES, WILL ADDITIONALLY SERVE TO SATISFY CONGRESSIONAL AND PUBLIC OPINION IN FAVOR OF INVOLVING THE UNITED NATIONS AND TO MINIMIZE THE DIFFICULTIES WHICH WOULD BE INVOLVED AT ANY TIME BOMBING IS RESUMED.

I REALIZE FULLY THE COURSE I AM PROPOSING WOULD HAVE REPERCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT IN SAIGON, PARTICULARLY AT THIS TIME. BUT A GROWING EROSION OF SUPPORT BY THE AMERICAN PEOPLE FOR OUR PRESENT POLICIES WOULD HAVE FAR GREATER REPERCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THAT GOVERNMENT.

IN THE VIETNAM SITUATION, LIKE ALMOST ALL POTENTIAL NEGOTIATING SITUATIONS, THERE CAN NEVER BE AN IDEAL TIME FOR NEGOTIATIONS. IF THINGS ARE GOING WELL MILITARILY, THE NATURAL INCLINATION IS TO LOOK UPON NEGOTIATIONS AS UNNECESSARY. IF, CONVERSELY, THINGS ARE GOING BADLY MILITARILY, THEN THE DISPOSITION IS TO LOOK UPON NEGOTIATIONS AS DISADVANTAGEOUS. IN LIGHT OF OUR PAST EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM, THERE WILL NOT BE, IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, AN IDEAL TIME FOR NEGOTIATIONS. WERE WE TO DECIDE UPON A SUBSTANTIAL MILITARY BUILD-UP, I SEE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT OUR ADVERSARIES ARE INCAPABLE, GIVEN THE SUPPORT THEY ARE RECEIVING, OF STEPPING UP THEIR MILITARY RESPONSE, RATHER THAN BEING FORCED WITHIN PRACTICAL TIME LIMITS INTO NEGOTIATIONS UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES MORE ADVANTAGEOUS TO US THAN THE PRESENT.

MY STRONG CONVICTION ABOUT THE NEED FOR A MOVE TOWARD NEGOTIATIONS NOW IS BASED UPON THESE CONSIDERATIONS. NO FORESEEABLE TIME WILL BE BETTER FOR NEGOTIATIONS THAN THE PRESENT, AND NEVER HAS A SERIOUS MOVE TOWARD A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT BEEN MORE NECESSARY.

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