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MEMORANDUM OF DISCUSSION ON MEETING IN
MR. MOYER'S OFFICE, THE WHITE HOUSE
AUGUST 10, 1965 -- 5:30-6:30 p.m.

PARTICIPANTS: WHITE HOUSE - Bill Moyers
Chester Cooper

DEFENSE - Arthur Sylvester
Orville Splitt

USIA - John Chancellor
Barry Zorthian

STATE - James L. Greenfield
William J. Jorden
Abba Schwartz
Leonard Meeker
Frank Sieverts

Mr. Moyers opened the discussion by reviewing previous meetings on Viet-Nam information problems. He said the President gives this subject very high priority and wants to do what is right. He noted that Barry Zorthian will be given a new position in the Embassy with responsibility for press and information matters, thus removing USIA from the direct line of authority over military news in Viet-Nam. He was looking for ideas of other specific, practical things that could be done to improve public understanding of events in Southeast Asia.

Mr. Greenfield said that the news reports of U.S. soldiers setting fire to Vietnamese villages and related incidents are causing very serious problems here and abroad. We have to recognize that there exists a double standard, that such incidents are considered more serious if Americans, rather than South Vietnamese, are responsible. In view of the extensive press and media coverage in Viet-Nam stories and pictures like these will continue to appear as long as the incidents occur. Alleged maltreatment of Vietnamese civilians and civilian facilities is a moral and humanitarian concern for many Americans. We must recognize this as a serious, long-run problem.

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Mr. Chancellor referred to previous meetings in which the importance of making the American people aware of the changing character of war was stressed. The new kind of "twilight" war we are fighting in Viet-Nam requires more maturity, sophistication, and patience from the American people than previous wars. He said we need to find ways to build the necessary understanding of our involvement in Viet-Nam, an involvement that may well be repeated elsewhere in the years to come. Simple aggressive patriotism wasn't enough. You can't just "kill Japs" in a war like this one. We should work on editors and other opinion-influencers to show them that the habits of mind left over from World War II and Korea are not adequate for understanding this war.

Mr. Sylvester stressed the problem of unfriendly correspondents in Viet-Nam, particularly foreigners, including some who work for U.S. news agencies and media. Some of these individuals are known to be less than fully sympathetic with our efforts and appear to miss no chance to embarrass us. The present concern about the village burned near Da Nang arose largely out of a CBS-TV film made and narrated by Morley Safer, a Canadian subject. The incident depicted in the film was not typical, so even if it was not staged (a possibility he did not rule out) it was a distortion since it conveyed an inaccurate impression. He noted that some reporters fail to tell the full story when they depict U.S. forces in action. They don't give equal time to the facts of Viet Cong atrocities, and they fail to point out that villages burned are Viet Cong strongholds, and that "civilians" who appear to be maltreated are Viet Cong personnel who may have killed U.S. or GVN forces.

Mr. Sylvester also said he thought it was important to take steps to inform our personnel of the press problem stemming from such pictures and stories, so that they don't lend themselves to this kind of coverage in the course of carrying out their missions. He said there was a need to provide better information officers in Viet-Nam. As one step in that direction he was considering sending his Special Assistant for Viet-Nam Col. Rodger Bankson as over-all coordinator of military information, with rank of Brigadier General.

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Mr. Greenfield said we couldn't pull a curtain on the problem. There were too many reporters covering this war. It isn't just a problem of a few bad apples. We have to get used to fighting in the open. This is a new kind of war, a war in which the basic goal is people, not territory. You can't win the people in Viet-Nam by burning their villages. This may have worked at Iwo Jima, but it won't work in Viet-Nam. We have to take steps to prevent these things from happening, not just to make sure reporters don't see them.

Mr. Meeker said the International Committee of the Red Cross was about to enter the picture. The Secretary of State and the Vietnamese Government were about to send letters indicating that the United States and South Viet-Nam would cooperate with the ICRC. The ICRC will want to take an active role in Viet-Nam. Therefore we should:

1. Instruct our troops in the field to conduct themselves in conformity with the Geneva convention and accepted standards of warfare (without hampering their efforts to prosecute the war); and

2. Publicly demonstrate our concern that the rules of war be observed in Viet-Nam. This should be accomplished by publicizing our willingness to cooperate with the Red Cross, and the Viet Cong - North Viet-Nam unwillingness to do likewise. We should call on the other side to mark their hospitals, permit inspection of prison camps, etc. We should also publicize directives and guidelines given to our troops in the field.

Mr. Cooper said we were dealing with a deeply important problem that goes beyond public relations. At issue here is how the war should be fought. We should examine carefully the usefulness of such actions as bombing raids by the VNAF and our own planes against Vietnamese villages. Our object is not so much to destroy an enemy as to win a people. We must make sure our military operations are in fact productive. If burning a village provides the VC with a hundred additional recruits then that action is counterproductive in basic military

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terms. He agreed that this is a difficult war to fight, but that is no reason not to deal with these incidents as a problem in and of themselves.

Mr. Cooper also asked about the Vietnamese interpreters who assist U.S. and foreign correspondents. Is there any way of checking to make sure they aren't slanting their advice in favor of the Viet Cong. Could the Ministry of Information run careful checks on these interpreters?

Mr. Zorthian said the interpreters were accredited by MACV after a check by the GVN, but such procedures don't mean much in Saigon.

Mr. Moyers said he was considering meeting with the heads of the major wire services, to discuss the nature of the war and ask for a balanced view of it. We would suggest that they assign better, more mature reporters, preferably U.S. nationals. Such an approach had obvious risks but was worth considering. It might also be worth approaching editors and columnists in a similar vein. He hoped the series of backgrounders for editors and top media people Ambassador Taylor was undertaking in major cities at the President's request would help.

Mr. Zorthian said better military information personnel were essential. He hoped the marines would get a good one not just someone who saw his job as promoting the leatherneck image. As for the village burning problem, it might be best to have orders issued that no villages should be attacked except under very exceptional circumstances. Also, better Vietnamese liaison personnel should be attached to U.S. units in the field.

Mr. Zorthian raised the question of censorship. The present system of voluntary cooperation is working fairly well. But some high officials favor full field censorship.

Mr. Greenfield pointed out that no system of censorship would prevent stories like the village burning or the CBS-TV film. Censorship dealt with questions of military security, not public relations. He suspected some of those who favor censorship saw it as a way to prevent these inconvenient stories. But it would not work that way.

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Mr. Moyers asked that memoranda be prepared for the President setting forth what should be done in Saigon and in Washington that we are not now doing to deal with these problems. They should be completed by COB Friday.

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