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President's Appointment File
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November 10, 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: A commentary on the Vietnam discussion of November 2

I think your instruction to me was to give a brief summary of that discussion, and I also think you were incautious enough to ask for my comments, so the following memo treats each of the five questions you put to the meeting, first by reporting what consensus there was in the answers, and second by offering my own resulting comments. One of the reasons for my delay in reporting in is that I found the discussion enormously interesting and have found my own mind stretched to some new thoughts as a result.

I have somewhat rearranged the order of your initial questions because I think there is a certain logic in taking the most clear-cut answers first.

1. Should we pull out?

The answer to this was a strong and unanimous negative. No one present would quit without a satisfactory settlement. There may well be important latent differences about the kind of settlement that would be acceptable. I suspect that George Ball would be inclined to settle for a deal which might eventually turn sour in the South. I think the rest of us would wish to stay there until there is a viable non-Communist South Vietnam. This difference is not currently critical.

2. What should we do about negotiations?

The general view is that there is no immediate prospect of serious negotiations. Mr. Acheson opened the meeting with a characteristically firm and categorical assertion that there would be no negotiations -- that there never had been negotiations in any real sense with Communists, and that certainly there would be nothing of this sort before our next Presidential election. Most of those present agreed. The principal reservations came from Harriman and Rostow. Harriman continues to believe that the best road to peace lies through Communist capitals (and that he is the right man to travel that road). Harriman does not think that European Communists are watching our election date. Rostow believes that the Communist interest in reducing our presence, and the Communist need at some point for protection of their losers in the South, may lead to real negotiations.

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My own comment is that while Acheson has much the better of the argument, we can probably have our cake and eat it on this one. I see no harm in careful exploration by Harriman, and we can certainly be ready for the kind of real talks which Rostow envisages when and if the time comes. What I think we should not do is to act as if we ourselves believed there was much chance of real negotiations in the early future. We have been ready for them; we are ready for them; we keep checking to see if they are possible; but the Communists do not want them.

I think there could well be a careful statement about the poor prospect for early negotiations, but I wonder whether it should come from the Government. I think the Secretary of State would not be persuasive with doves and moderates on this matter, because they have chosen to believe that he never wanted the negotiations in the first place. The one person in the Government, oddly enough, who might carry conviction with the academic community on this point is Brzezinski in the Policy and Planning Staff. There would also be some appeal in a careful analysis by Katzenbach. Still another alternative would be to get the point made by wise men outside the Government and then refer to their comments. My brother Bill would know which academic men have the most standing on this point. Whoever does it, the point to be made is not that we don't want negotiations, but that we don't expect them from the Communists now, and that even if talks do become possible, we must expect Communist negotiators to act like Communist negotiators.

3. What should we do about the bombing in North Vietnam?

There was broad agreement that the bombing of the North should be continued unless we get a real quid pro quo on the ground. All of those who spoke except George Ball believe that the bombing is an important part of our whole campaign. All who touched the subject felt that bombing should be restricted to military targets. Several spoke clearly against mining of Haiphong or bombing the irrigation dikes; a few also indicated a desire to reduce the level of the bombing somewhat. Nobody explicitly advocated mining or attack on the dikes -- although Mr. Murphy said he would follow the Joint Chiefs of Staff on such matters. Several speakers associated themselves with Secretary McNamara's argument before the Stennis Committee, but several others said that the bombing has important values above and beyond its admittedly limited effect upon what can be moved from North to South.

My estimate of the consensus is that there would be general support for a possibility you outlined at the end of the meeting -- namely that when the currently approved targets have been struck, you should clearly rule out any proposal for major widening of the bombing in the North, and should ask the Chiefs to plan a redeployment of air power against targets which would not constitute "escalation" — with due allowance for necessary restrikes.

If you should decide to move in this direction, I believe it would be highly desirable for you and the two Secretaries and the Joint Chiefs to come to a solid internal understanding on this whole question which would apply to the next fifteen months. There is no doubt that the public airing of differences between McNamara and the top brass has created some confusion, especially when followed by air operations which seemed inconsistent with one or another of the McNamara arguments. And on their side, the top brass have given the impression that they could have done things much better if they had been allowed to do them their own way. This pulling and hauling has been natural, and to some degree inevitable, but the discussion of November 2 suggests that we may be reaching a point where you can find a solid position from which to put a stop to it. You have great assets in such an effort, and you have not yet drawn much on your account of straight loyalty from your top military men. My impression is that they still feel cut off from you and somehow think that they really do not get your ear as much as they should. (Naturally it never occurs to them that their real trouble may be simply that they have not got a very good case, and that you may find them as tiresome as any other powerful but narrow-minded pressure group.)

I believe that if you reach a basic command judgment which clearly defines the future of the bombing in the North, you can put a stop to the sort of thing that has happened in the last few months. I share what I think is a majority view of the outsiders that such a clear delimitation would be of real political value with moderates at home and with worried friends abroad. It would help to stop the foolish and false talk about a collision course with China, and it would help to meet the need for a real focusing of the attention of all toward the South, which remains the real battlefield. Such an internal decision would also require -- and permit -- a gradual reframing of the position of the Secretary of Defense himself. Bob McNamara has tended to focus his attention very sharply upon the single issue of the relation between the bombing in the North and supply and reinforcement in the South. While I tend to agree with him on this emphasis, I do not think it was the emphasis of the majority of those who spoke on November 2, nor do I think it the strongest position for you, all things considered, in the next fifteen months. I therefore believe that Bob should be asked to join in a rationale for the bombing which is a little wider than what he has been using in his wholly understandable argumentation before the Stennis Committee. This is not a matter of a drastic change in his position, but simply a question of reframing it so as to give more emphasis to the element of increased military cost which is a legitimate purpose of bombing.

If I may add one individual comment which does not come out of the discussion of November 2, I would also be inclined to press the Chiefs hard on the question of civilian casualties (both North and South). No matter how often they are pressed on the point, airmen just do not give the kind of attention to this issue that any civilian would wish if he were watching the matter himself. (I first learned this lesson from Colonel Stimson when he was telling me how he was hornswoggled by Hap Arnold on just this point.)

One question which was only briefly argued is whether there should or should not be a pause. Nobody proposed an unconditional pause, but there were several who did urge one form or another of bombing suspension aimed at a possible response by action, and not words alone, from the North. Mr. Acheson thought it would be good if we could trade the bombing for the end of attacks across the DMZ, and one or two others agreed. General Taylor thought this a bad swap and would prefer to trade the bombing of the North against incidents in the South. Still others appeared not to believe that any pause would be productive.

This subject is an obvious candidate for further study. My own belief is that problems of weather and timing make it very difficult to give clear-cut signals that would relate any pauses in the bombing to specific military actions by the enemy. I just don't think we are likely to be that smooth and sophisticated, in the light of the legitimate pressures for continuous use of air power on the lines of communication from the North. I think the case to beat is the case for not having any pause at all (except for short holidays). I think that if such a position is reached within the Government, it should be very carefully expounded, either by the President himself or by Under Secretary Katzenbach. Such a speech should be cleared at the top, whoever gives it, and it might well be an occasion also for such public redefinition of our bombing policy as may become possible after the currently listed targets have been struck.

4. What more can we do in the South?

Few of the speakers were really knowledgeable about events in the South and it is not surprising that most of them refrained from specific suggestions. If there was a general refrain, it was aimed at the need to increase both the reality and the appearance of Vietnamese activity all along the line.

The one area on which I would offer special comment is the one touched on by both Lodge and Taylor. They were the two men with most direct experience in Vietnam, and I found it interesting and troubling that both of them raised important questions about the military tactics now being followed. General Taylor was worried about the fixed positions on the DMZ and in the highlands. Ambassador Lodge questioned the wisdom of large-scale search and destroy operations such as those planned for the Delta. Lodge and I raised the question whether casualties must be expected to continue at their present level and even increase. This specific question was related to the general comment of several others that the prospect of endless inconclusive fighting is the most serious single cause of domestic disquiet about the war.

The discussion permits no conclusion on these questions but it does suggest the importance of a careful review at the highest military and civilian levels. It is obviously a highly sensitive matter to question the tactical judgment of the commander in the field. But it is equally obvious that you have every reason to satisfy yourself about questions of the importance of those raised by Lodge and Taylor.

If the battles near the borders are not wise, or if search and destroy operations in heavily populated areas are likely to be politically destructive, then the plans of the field commander must be seriously questioned. I see no alternative here but to have a very carefully prepared discussion with General Westmoreland, preferably after a good hard look on the spot by junior officers who might be chosen specifically for their acceptability in Saigon.

I should emphasize that what I am suggesting here is something that really has not been done in this war so far, to the best of my knowledge. For extremely good reasons the top men in Washington have kept their hands off the tactical conduct of the war, and most discussions have been directed rather to questions of force levels in the South and bombing limits in the North. (Even in Saigon the successive Ambassadors have been careful to keep out of military matters.) But now that the principal battleground is in domestic opinion, I believe the Commander-in-Chief has both the right and the duty to go further. I don't think anyone can predict the result of such an inquiry, but neither do I see how you can be asked to deal with the home front until you are satisfied that the plan of action in Vietnam -- North and South -- is the one you want.

One obvious difficulty which stands in the way of this kind of policy-making is the risk that there will be leaks of one sort or another which would lead to charges that the whole thing is politically inspired, and governed by election-year thinking. Certainly there would be such leaks and such criticism, but strong answers are available. In the first place, it is entirely legitimate to seek to define and then to explain the policy in terms that will be persuasive at home. But even more persuasive is the fact that clarity of definition is at least as much needed for success in Vietnam as for strengthening public opinion at home. If our present tactics are right from this point of view, all they need is persuasive exposition (which they have not had: how many of us could explain what Westy's strategy really is?). If they need adjustment, to avoid the costs of escalation in the North, and to minimize the danger of political disaffection in the South, then the adjustments are needed on their own merits, and not simply from the point of view of U.S. public opinion.

What I think I am recommending is simply that the Commander-in-Chief should visibly take command of a contest that is more political in its character than any in our history except the Civil War (where Lincoln interfered much more than you have). I think the visible exercise of his authority is not only best for the war but also best for public opinion -- and also best for the internal confidence of the Government. Briefings which cite the latest statistics have lost their power to persuade. So have spectacular summits. These things are not worth one-quarter of what would be gained by the gradual emergence of the fact that the President

himself -- in his capacity as political leader and Commander-in-Chief -- is shaping a campaign which is gradually increasing in its success and gradually decreasing in its cost in American lives and money.

Obviously it would be wrong to prejudge the policy which would emerge from the kind of review I am recommending. But my own hunch is that there may be a really good chance of reaching an agreed program, among civilians and military men alike, which would have these general characteristics:

(1) It could be less expensive in lives by involving fewer exposures to ambush and also by adopting the best tactics of the most successful local commanders.

(2) It could be much less expensive in money. (There just has to be an end of the cost of build-up at some point, and we ought not to let anyone believe that the dollar in Vietnam doesn't matter. It matters like Hell to our ability to stay the course.)

(3) It could be more effective politically in South Vietnam: all evidence of care and control and patient endurance will help on this front.

(4) It could enlarge the real and visible role of the South Vietnamese. There is a good deal of reason for driving home our insistence on their help even by just not doing things they won't join in.

(5) It could still keep plenty of pressure on the Communists.

(6) It could make it plain that we are over the hump. (In a funny, reverse-English way, it occurs to me that such a change of gears could have the same effect in Vietnam as the shift from Walker to Ridgway had in Korea.)

(7) It could establish a pattern of gradually decreasing cost that would be endurable for the five or ten years that I think are predicted by most of the wisest officials in Vietnam. If one thing is more clear than another, it is that we simply are not going to go on at the present rate for that length of time, and since I think the Communists have proved more stubborn than we expected at every stage, I think that sooner or later we are going to have to find a way of doing this job that is endurable in cost for a long pull.

I do have to admit that I can't prove that the time has come to make this shift. But the sooner that time comes -- the less we engage in overkill -- the better for all concerned. And the sooner it is possible to develop this kind of program, the better it will be, in straight foreign policy terms. It would also, quite obviously, be helpful on the hardest question of all:

5. What can be done to pull the home front together?

On this point the advice of last week's group was very mixed. Some seemed to feel that the best course was to march straight ahead without fretting over criticism. While others shared the view that the Administration should not seem to be worried about its critics, they did not seem to feel that nothing ought to be done. A variety of proposals were put forward -- to develop friendly television programs, to organize committees of speech-makers, to bring in the responsible top educators, to reach past the Congress to the people, to promote visits by Bunker or Thieu, and to publicize such favorable assessments as George Carver's (my own reading of Carver's report was somewhat less optimistic, given the necessary discount for a staff officer reporting to superiors who want to hear good news).

My own view of all this is that the advice to keep calm is excellent and that most of the rest is of marginal value -- although I do believe in the value of visible support by those of us not in the Administration. I think we have tried too hard to convert public opinion by statistics and by spectacular visits of all sorts. I do have to say also that I think public discontent with the war is now wide and deep. One of the few things that helps us right now is public distaste for the violent doves -- but I think people really are getting fed up with the endlessness of the fighting.

What really hurts, then, is not the arguments of the doves but the cost of the war in lives and money, coupled with the lack of light at the end of the tunnel. So I think changes in what actually happens in Vietnam are the only effective way of changing public attitudes at home, and I would come back to the notions put forward in the previous section of this memorandum as being the best I can offer on the home front as well. I can add only that if such a redirection of strategy and emphasis should occur, then I also think it would be highly important for us to explain -- really for the first time -- that this war has had a number of phases which are sharply different from each other (our tendency in the past has been to downplay the significance of moves from one phase to the next, but if we can get to a turn-down of overall costs, I think we should candidly review the whole set of major decisions which have moved us up the hill and over the crest).

I apologize deeply for the length of this memo and for the degree to which it really goes beyond the actual discussion of last week. I still hold with all the things I said then and in earlier memoranda about not pausing, not negotiating, and not escalating. I now go on to say that I think some visible de-escalation, based on success and not failure, is the most promising path I can see. I can't prove this path exists, but I think we should search for it.

hcf

McG. B.

8-12-13

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What I think I am recommending is simply that the Commander-in-Chief should visibly take command of a contest that is more political in its character than any in our history except the Civil War (where Lincoln interfered much more than you have). I think the visible exercise of his authority is not only best for the war but also best for public opinion -- and also best for the internal confidence of the Government. Briefings which cite the latest statistics have lost their power to persuade. So have spectacular summits. These things are not worth one-quarter of what would be gained by the gradual emergence of the fact that the President

himself -- in his capacity as political leader and Commander-in-Chief -- is shaping a campaign which is gradually increasing in its success and gradually decreasing in its cost in American lives and money.

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On this point the advice of last week's group was very mixed. Some seemed to feel that the best course was to march straight ahead without fretting over criticism. While others shared the view that the Administration should not seem to be worried about its critics, they did not seem to feel that nothing ought to be done. A variety of proposals were put forward -- to develop friendly television programs, to organize committees of speech-makers, to bring in the responsible top educators, to reach past the Congress to the people, to promote visits by Bunker or Thieu, and to publicize such favorable assessments as George Carver's (my own reading of Carver's report was somewhat less optimistic, given the necessary discount for a staff officer reporting to superiors who want to hear good news).

My own view of all this is that the advice to keep calm is excellent and that most of the rest is of marginal value -- although I do believe in the value of visible support by those of us not in the Administration. I think we have tried too hard to convert public opinion by statistics and by spectacular visits of all sorts. I do have to say also that I think public discontent with the war is now wide and deep. One of the few things that helps us right now is public distaste for the violent doves -- but I think people really are getting fed up with the endlessness of the fighting.

What really hurts, then, is not the arguments of the doves but the cost of the war in lives and money, coupled with the lack of light at the end of the tunnel. So I think changes in what actually happens in Vietnam are the only effective way of changing public attitudes at home, and I would come back to the notions put forward in the previous section of this memorandum as being the best I can offer on the home front as well. I can add only that if such a redirection of strategy and emphasis should occur, then I also think it would be highly important for us to explain -- really for the first time -- that this war has had a number of phases which are sharply different from each other (our tendency in the past has been to downplay the significance of moves from one phase to the next, but if we can get to a turn-down of overall costs, I think we should candidly review the whole set of major decisions which have moved us up the hill and over the crest).

I apologize deeply for the length of this memo and for the degree to which it really goes beyond the actual discussion of last week. I still hold with all the things I said then and in earlier memoranda about not pausing, not negotiating, and not escalating. I now go on to say that I think some visible de-escalation, based on success and not failure, is the most promising path I can see. I can't prove this path exists, but I think we should search for it.

McG. B.