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Chapter 28

THE SEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL SOLUTION - 1965

One of the major objectives of the national policy toward Vietnam was aimed at forcing NVN, through forms of carefully controlled military pressures, to halt its support of the insurgencies in RVN and Laos. Implicit in this policy was the understanding that, once the United States was satisfied that the enemy had indeed responded properly and adequately, its military actions against NVN would cease. US officials had not agreed upon exactly what constituted a proper and adequate response or just what steps would be taken once such a stage was recognized. The enemy might respond only by a gradual lessening of support to the VC. Such action might constitute only a tacit understanding unsupported by real controls or checks. Or it might come in the form of diplomatic overtures with all the subsequent actions that these would involve.

In 1965 the Administration remained constantly on the alert for signs of a change in enemy attitudes or actions that might signify a response. Beyond that, US spokesmen publicly importuned the communists for an indication that they were disposed to seek a peaceful solution and, as in mid-May, took positive action to elicit such an indication. As the year went on, pressures from public opinion at home and abroad and international initiatives were brought to bear upon the United States to seek a peaceful solution to the war. Of real concern to US military leaders was the possibility that the nation's political leaders might, at some point, be moved to attempt some form of negotiations without regard to the comparative military positions of friendly and enemy forces, and before there were guarantees that the enemy would give up his attempt to conquer RVN.

The enemy, meanwhile, alternately ignored, denounced, or simply rebuffed overtures for a mutual effort toward a peaceful solution. He did set his own terms, but they were so far out of line with announced US objectives that it was doubtful the enemy seriously believed that the United States would accept them in the foreseeable future.

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Secretary Rusk set the tone for US attitudes on peaceful settlement at the beginning of the year when he stated on 3 January that if the communists in Southeast Asia would "leave their neighbors alone" US forces would come home, and "all sorts of political possibilities" would open up to bring "that situation to a peaceful conclusion." He underscored, however, that if the communists remained determined to press into Southeast Asia, it would be difficult to see how a political settlement could be reached.¹

Ambassador Taylor's Views

Shortly after the first of the year, when the United States was approaching Phase II of its program to force NVN to stop its support of the VC, Ambassador Taylor raised the question of "negotiations" in a limited sense, but his discussion centered on the nature of US/GVN objectives in a settlement of the war and the means of achieving them. Largely in a philosophical vein, the Ambassador examined whether settlement would involve "a return to the Geneva Accords" or a new international settlement would be necessary, and what terms should be demanded of NVN in return for cessation of action against it.²

Following the initial US reprisals in February, and concurrently with his recommendations for further "graduated reprisals," the Ambassador on 11 February again raised the question of "negotiation." This time he was somewhat more explicit, saying that a return to the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 would avoid the pitfalls of new conferences and have the advantage of "avoiding negotiations." Conceivably, if US pressure were strong enough, NVN might tacitly agree to stop its support, confirming this later with "GVN/DRV negotiations at the military level." Adoption of such an approach by NVN would also have the advantage of keeping the United States out of direct negotiations with the DRV. At this stage, the Ambassador was speaking in terms of "cessation of reprisal attacks" as the reward for NVN accession to GVN/US demands. The demands that he

1. Statement, Mr. Rusk on TV Interv, 3 Jan 65, Dept of State Bulletin, III (18 Jan 65), p. 65.

2. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2445 to State, 9 Feb 65, JCS IN 19338.

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proposed be made, when appropriate, involved generally a return to the Geneva Accords. He suggested that military representatives of GVN and NVN might meet in the DMZ under ICC auspices, with US observers present.³

Ambassador Taylor, on 26 February, reported that the consensus reached at a SEACORD meeting of US Ambassadors was that

. . . while, for other audiences, it may be felt necessary frequently to reiterate our willingness to talk and, of course, negotiations may be in fact necessary at some stage, too much reference, especially publicly to our 'willingness to negotiate' causes confusion in SVN, Thailand, and Laos, as well as distortion in the signal we are seeking to convey to Hanoi, Peking and Moscow.

The ambassadors had learned, said Ambassador Taylor, that in the local context, "to negotiate" had come to mean to set up a neutralist or coalition government as opposed to seeing the war through to a satisfactory conclusion. The United States must convince friends and enemies alike of its firm resolve to achieve its objectives. To bring the matter before the UN Security Council for solution would only place the Soviet Government in the position of having to defend the NVN, a role it probably would wish to avoid, especially in view of the great Chinese Communist influence on Hanoi. China stood to gain from continued NVN involvement in the south and would seek to prevent any settlement. Should the Soviets replace Communist China as the main support of NVN a political settlement would become more likely.⁴

Ambassador Taylor also stated that, while countries seeking a neutralist settlement would undoubtedly press hard for a negotiated solution which would fall short of US objectives, the United States should resist, seeking to divert such pressure to Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow as the real villains in the piece.⁵

3. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2495 to State, 11 Feb 65, JCS IN 22678.

4. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2762 to State, 26 Feb 65, JCS IN 42147.

5. Ibid.

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On 8 March, UN Secretary General U Thant issued an appeal to the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, North Vietnam, Communist China, and South Vietnam, to convene a seven power conference as a step toward ending the war in Vietnam. The United States turned down the suggestion, saying in essence that NVN aggression must halt before any conference would be considered.⁶

The JCS Position

As these ideas and suggestions were evolving, the Joint Chiefs of Staff established their own position on negotiations. On 15 March they advised the Secretary of Defense that it was vital for the United States and GVN that at the very minimum there should be no attempt to enter negotiations until their forces had gained a strong military advantage. Further, the minimum acceptable terms for any negotiated settlement must be that NVN cease its support of the insurgencies in RVN and Laos. Should negotiations take place, the United States, the RVN, and the RLG must not lose the contest at the conference table. If the enemy side stalled or displayed intransigence, thus dragging out negotiations (as had been the case in Korea), military pressures against them should be increased in NVN, RVN, and Laos. Although realizing that the RLG would have to be associated at some point with any negotiations, bilateral negotiations between RVN and NVN would be preferable to a Geneva-type conference where the participants could resort to propaganda or bring up matters not germane to the purposes of the conference. The communists could be expected to resist bilateral talks. The United States must not count on the USSR either as a mediator or as a communications channel to Hanoi or NVN, since it would advance its own interests at US expense whenever possible.⁷

One of the main problems in any negotiations would be to develop effective safeguards to make sure that any agreements achieved were carried out. The enemy would probably insist strongly on the inclusion of the NLF in any future GVN. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff were definitely opposed to the participation of the NLF in negotiations.

6. NY Times, 9 Mar 65, 10 Mar 65.

7. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-180-65 to SecDef, 15 Mar 65 (derived from JCS 2339/175), JMF 9155 (22 Jan 65).

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They did not expect the communists to give up easily on this point unless US/GVN military pressures were overwhelming. The 1954 Geneva Accord provisions for "free general elections" must be set aside, since current conditions precluded the reunification of Vietnam. The ICC must be set up in a manner that would allow it to function effectively in Vietnam, and any negotiated settlement must include appropriate deadlines for ceasefire, withdrawal of forces and materiel, and safeguards (in addition to the ICC) to ensure positively that the terms of settlement were carried out. Particularly difficult would be the withdrawal of US forces as a "quid pro quo" for communist withdrawal. As had been demonstrated in 1954, NVN could withdraw its troops but leave behind strong VC forces.

In conclusion the JCS recommended to the Secretary of Defense that the "US/RVN/RLG not enter into negotiations with the communists until a strong military position has been achieved, to include a reasonable indication that DRV intervention in the RVN and Laos has ceased." They asked that their views be considered in the development of a US position on settlement of the Southeast Asia conflict.⁸

The Presidential Offer

On 15 March, 17 nations, terming themselves "non-aligned Nations," passed a resolution at Belgrade that an appeal be made to the United States and other nations concerned in Vietnam calling for a peaceful settlement. Ten days later the President announced in a White House press release that he was ready to go anywhere at any time and meet with anyone whenever there was a promise of progress toward an honorable peace. "We have said many times," he continued, ". . . to all who are interested in our principles for honorable negotiation--that we seek no more than a return to the essentials of the agreements of 1954--a reliable arrangement to guarantee the independence and security of all in Southeast Asia."⁹

The appeal of the 17 "non-aligned Nations" was delivered to Secretary Rusk for the President on 1 April. The United

8. Ibid.

9. Statement, Pres. Johnson, 25 Mar 65, Dept of State Bulletin, III (12 Apr 65), pp. 527-528.

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States turned down the appeal, but the President took the opportunity to spell out for these nations on 8 April that "Peace in Southeast Asia demands an independent South Vietnam -- securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others -- free from outside interference -- tied to no alliance -- a military base for no other country."¹⁰

Within a week after his decision to commit US ground forces to "counterinsurgency combat operations" the President on 7 April made an important policy address at Johns Hopkins University in which he emphasized the US determination with respect to Southeast Asia. He then stated:

. . . it should also be clear that the only path for reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement. Such peace demands an independent South Vietnam -- securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others -- free from outside interference -- tied to no alliance -- a military base for no other country. These are the essentials of any final settlement. We will never be second in the search for such a peaceful settlement in Viet-Nam. There may be many ways to this kind of peace: in discussion or negotiations with the governments concerned; in large groups or in small ones; in the reaffirmation of old agreements or their strengthening with new ones. We have stated this position over and over again 50 times and more to friend and foe alike. And we remain ready with this purpose for unconditional discussions.

But he warned the communists: "We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement."¹¹

10. This appeal was also delivered on 1 Apr 65 to the Secretary General of the UN, and to Canada, Communist China, Poland, USSR, the United Kingdom, NVN and RVN, as well as to the NLF. Dept of State Bulletin, LII (26 Apr 65), pp. 610-612.

11. Speech at Johns Hopkins Univ, Pres. Johnson, 7 Apr 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (26 Apr 65), pp. 606-610.

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In the same address the President proposed a huge program of US economic assistance to the nations of Southeast Asia, including NVN.

The official NVN news agency rejected the President's offer of unconditional discussions on 11 April and called his proposed economic program the "bait" of "stupid pirates."

Hanoi's Four Points

Two days later, Premier Pham Van Dong of NVN stated that it was the unswerving policy of his government to respect strictly the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam and to implement their basic provisions as embodied in what soon became known as Hanoi's four points:

1) Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnamese people--peace, independence, sovereignty unity, and territorial integrity. According to the Geneva Agreements, the U.S. Government must withdraw from South Vietnam U.S. troops, military personnel and weapons of all kinds, dismantle all U.S. military bases there, and cancel its 'military alliance' with South Vietnam. It must end its policy of intervention and aggression in South Vietnam. According to the Geneva Agreements, the U.S. Government must stop its acts of war against North Vietnam, completely cease all encroachments on the territory and sovereignty of the DRV. 2) Pending the peaceful reunification of Vietnam, while Vietnam is still temporarily divided into two zones, the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam must be strictly respected--the two zones must refrain from joining any military alliance with foreign countries, there must be no foreign military bases, or military personnel in their respective territory. 3) The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves in accordance with the program of the NFLSV without any foreign interference. 4) The peaceful reunification of Vietnam is to be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.¹²

12. "Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam," S. Com. on Foreign Relations, Mar 68, 90th Cong, 2nd Sess (1968), p. 302. (Hereafter cited as "Background Information Relating to SE Asia and Vietnam," S. Com. on Foreign Relations, Mar 68.)

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More JCS Views on Negotiations

On 7 May, Ambassador Taylor, in preparation for discussions with GVN, submitted a list of questions, with suggested answers, dealing with US/GVN objectives in the war and with specific ways of reaching a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. After studying these questions and answers, the JCS found that intervening developments had not changed their basic views; indeed, the views submitted on 15 March had been strengthened by events. They again urged the Secretary of Defense that no effort be made to negotiate until US/GVN forces had achieved a strong military advantage. And they proposed that, even should negotiations or discussions take place, the military pressures on the enemy be continued. While the Ambassador had, in his list, postulated minimum and maximum conditions under which the US/GVN would be willing to cut back air attacks and reduce US forces in RVN, the Joint Chiefs of Staff held out little hope that these conditions would be attained.

The United States must view any negotiations on the Vietnam problem in the context of the future US posture throughout SEAsia and the Western Pacific. We must maintain a position of strength to thwart communist aggression and expansion in these areas.

They agreed with the Ambassador that a "tacit agreement" might eventuate in RVN, pointing out that the insurgencies in Greece, Malaya and the Philippines had ended with such an arrangement. While desirable from the US/GVN standpoint to have the insurgents surface and lay down their arms, it might not be practicable.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff observed that it also might not be feasible to insist that NVN dissolve the NLF. The immediate US objectives, which in turn would foster the attainment of other objectives, would be reached when NVN ceased its interference in RVN and Laos and when the VC stopped their insurgency. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that the US make no further offers to the enemy of economic development, at least until NVN responded favorably to the President's standing offer of 7 April. To do so might be construed as a sign of weakness. With regard to inspection and control measures and to withdrawal of US

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troops, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended very careful examination of both problems before entering into any agreements with the communists.¹³

The Secretary of Defense passed these views to the Secretary of State.¹⁴

Confidential Diplomatic Efforts -- 10-20 May

While the Joint Chiefs of Staff were considering Ambassador Taylor's questions, the United States had, in connection with the bombing pause, carried out confidential diplomatic efforts to establish a positive contact with Hanoi. On 10 May, President Johnson informed Ambassador Taylor that he had decided to suspend ROLLING THUNDER operations for about a week. His purposes were to influence world opinion in favor of the United States and, depending on communist reaction, to seek peace or to take increased military action.¹⁵ Secretary Rusk personally informed Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, on the evening of 11 May, of the planned voluntary cessation of bombing. He instructed US Ambassador in Moscow Kohler, to convey to the NVN Ambassador in Moscow as soon as possible the fact of the cessation and the reasons therefore. Basically NVN was to be told that the United States would watch very carefully to see if there were "significant reductions" in armed actions by forces "whose actions can be decisively affected from North Vietnam." Hanoi was to be warned, however, not to misinterpret the temporary suspension as an indication of weakness and that even stronger attacks might result from any such misinterpretation. Kohler would tell the NVN Ambassador that the United States was hopeful that there would be no such misunderstanding and that this first pause in the air attacks might meet with a response which would permit further and more extended suspension of bombings in the expectation of equally constructive actions by the other side in the future.¹⁶

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13. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-394-65 to SecDef, 20 May 65 (derived from JCS 2343/595), JMF 9155.3 (7 May 65).

14. (TS-GP 1) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 26 May 65, Att to JCS 2343/595-1, 1 Jun 65, JMF 9155.3 (7 May 65).

15. (TS) Msg, Pres Johnson to Amb Taylor, State 2553, 10 May 65.

16. (TS) Msg, State 3103 to Moscow, 11 May 65.

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ROLLING THUNDER operations were suspended effective 2400, 12 May, Saigon time. The efforts of Ambassador Kohler and, later, of other emissaries, to establish direct communication on this matter with NVN officials met with failure. Kohler first sought, without success, to see the NVN Ambassador in Moscow. When the NVN Embassy was informed that Kohler had a message of extreme importance to NVN, it was suggested that he transmit it through the Soviet Government in its capacity as Geneva Co-chairman. When Kohler approached Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, the highest official he could reach in the Soviet Government, the Russian refused flatly to transmit the message, saying that NVN had made no request of his government to serve as an intermediary. He suggested that Kohler find his own way of delivering the message. Kohler then delivered a copy of the message to the DRV Embassy, handing it to an employee who promised to get it to the Ambassador. The message was returned on the next morning, 13 May, in a plain envelope addressed to Embassy, US of A. Regardless of his failure to make direct contact, Kohler reported to the Secretary of State on 13 May that he believed the message had actually gotten into NVN hands.

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In order to make doubly sure that NVN had received the message, however, the United States sought help from the British, asking that the British representative in Hanoi attempt to convey the message directly to the DRV there. On 18 May the British Embassy informed Secretary Rusk that the British Consul General in Hanoi had submitted the message to his "usual contact" who accepted it but returned it to the Consul General soon thereafter, ostensibly unopened.

The official US view of this effort was that its reception by both the Soviet Union and NVN was not merely negative but hostile. Instructing several Ambassadors to inform appropriate officials in their respective countries of the failure of this attempt, Secretary Rusk stated, "In view of the complete absence of any constructive response we have decided the bombing must be resumed."¹⁷

On 19 May, an official of the US Embassy in Paris was approached by a source, ostensibly from within the French Foreign Office, and informed that on 18 May (Paris time),

17. (S) Msg, State 2425, to New Delhi et al., 18 May 65.

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just prior to the resumption of bombings, the head of the NVN delegation in Paris, Mai Van Bo, had made "a fairly pressing approach at the Quai" on the matter of negotiation. The French source believed that Bo was making this approach on orders sent from Hanoi as the result of the suspension of US bombings. The essentials of the approach made by Bo were: Indian proposals for a "cordon sanitaire" on the 17th Parallel were not acceptable to Hanoi; the four points set forth by NVN on 8 April were not to be considered prior conditions but rather as working principles for negotiation.¹⁸

On 20 May, M. Lucet, Director of Political Affairs, French Foreign Office, called in the Deputy Chief of Mission of the American Embassy and transmitted officially the NVN "signal" to the United States. He said that his government had not been asked to convey the message but was doing so as a "friend and ally."

While in many respects Lucet's "signal" followed the lines of the reported message from Bo on the previous day, it contained an implication that the "four points" would have to be accepted as a basis for negotiation. Bo stressed that the "four points" of 8 April constituted the best base from which to find the "most just" solution, and that recognition of these principles would create favorable conditions for a Geneva-type conference. When asked if Hanoi recognized that the "withdrawal of American forces" would depend upon "conclusions of a negotiation," Bo said, "Exactly." He said that if agreement was reached on the "bases" the "ways and means" of application of "principles" would be found.¹⁹

Even as the French official was passing on this cryptic signal from Hanoi, the Prime Minister of India, visiting the Soviet Union, joined the Soviet Premier in demanding that the bombing of NVN cease and declared that the solution of the Vietnamese war could be found in the framework of the Geneva Agreements.²⁰

18. (S-NOFORN) Msg, Paris 6582 to State, 19 May 65.

19. (S-NOFORN) Msg, Paris 6612 to State, 20 May 65.

20. NY Times, 20 May 65.

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Further Proposals and Efforts

The President, in a speech of 25 June, called upon all of "the nations of the world to use all their influence, individually, and collectively, to bring to the tables those who seem determined to make war." The United States would, he promised, support their efforts.²¹

In a Voice of America broadcast on 4 July, the Secretary of State announced that the United States had on several occasions, acting through an intermediary, asked NVN what would happen if the United States stopped the bombing. ". . . we've never had a reply," he added.²²

On 15 July, US Ambassador W. Averell Harriman began informal talks in Moscow with Soviet Premier Kosygin. There is some evidence that in these meetings the Soviet official pressed for cessation of the bombing, intimating that should the United States do so, progress toward negotiations could be made.

The Secretary of State signalled a possible change in the US position on negotiation in mid-year when he told interviewers that the United States would not object to the presence of VC in the NVN delegation to any peace parley. He noted that neither Peiping or Hanoi had shown any interest in peace talks.

Turning to the NVN "four points," he singled out as "not acceptable to the South Vietnamese" or to the friends of the RVN the point that South Vietnam should be organized and resolved in accordance with the program of the NLF. "But," he added, "we should be glad to go to the conference table to take up those agreements of 1954 and 1962 to see where things went wrong, to try to bring the situation back to those basic agreements. . . ."

In a letter to the UN Secretary General, President Johnson on 28 July informed him that he had instructed US UN Representative Ambassador Goldberg to keep in close touch with him on the situation in Vietnam and asked him

21. San Francisco Address, Pres Johnson, 25 Jun 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LIII (19 Jul 65).

22. "Background Information Relating to SE Asia and Vietnam," S. Com on Foreign Relations, Mar 68, p. 22.

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for any helpful suggestions he might have "to strengthen our common search for the road to peace in Southeast Asia." U Thant told the President in reply that he would be happy to send him further suggestions when he had them.²³

U Thant presented his proposals for settlement of the war to the United States, NVN, RVN, and Communist China in mid-August. In doing so he noted that the Geneva Agreements seemed to offer the best road to a negotiated settlement, and that the stated positions of the parties involved seemed similar, at least in respect to the military neutralization of Vietnam and elections under international supervision. He called for a well-planned "cessation of all military operations by both sides" and involvement in the settlement of all those who were actually fighting.²⁴

State Department officials noted that U Thant's proposals slighted GVN and called for admission of NLF as a participant in any talks. They refuted his statement that the United States believed that internationally supervised elections would settle the political problems or that, if elections were held, the ICC was the proper body to supervise them. Although U Thant seemed to think it would occur, the United States had little evidence that NVN and NLF would uphold the political procedures of the Geneva Conference. Nor was the United States convinced of the advantages of cessation of all military operations prior to negotiations, since this would tend to weaken its position at any conference.²⁵

On 27 August Secretary Rusk replied to the Secretary General expressing general agreement with his view but adding that: 1) the United States would be "ready and eager to withdraw its forces from South Vietnam" when favorable conditions had been created; 2) neither "zone" of Vietnam should interfere in the affairs of the other; 3) troops and cadres infiltrated from the North must be withdrawn from RVN; 4) free and secret elections to determine unification of Vietnam "without interference from an

23. Ltr, Pres Johnson to UN Sec Gen, 28 Jul 65; Ltr, UN Sec Gen to Pres Johnson, 29 Jul 65; Dept of State Bulletin, LIII (16 Aug 65), p. 275.

24. (TS-GP 1) Msg, USUN 340 to State, 12 Aug 65, JCS IN 91711.

25. (TS-GP 1) Msg, State 432 to Saigon, 14 Aug 65.

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aggressive neighbor to the north" must be guaranteed. The United States remained prepared to engage in "unconditional discussions looking toward a peaceful settlement whenever the other side is ready."²⁶

Perhaps as a measure of the effectiveness of ROLLING THUNDER, in the summer of 1965 the United States began to receive communist demands for unilateral cessation of US bombing before any discussions leading to negotiations could even be considered. These were passed to the United States by both Soviet and Polish diplomats.²⁷

A British newspaper reported on 8 August, citing "unimpeachable sources," that the United States had rejected two NVN offers in 1963 and 1964 to discuss a peaceful settlement. This report tended to confirm earlier reports by UN sources that U Thant had tried twice, unsuccessfully, to bring about peace in RVN in November 1963 and in September 1964. On 15 November, Mr. Eric Sevareid, noted American journalist, wrote that in conversations with US UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson two days before the latter's death on 14 July, Mr. Stevenson had told him that U Thant had, in September 1964, passed on to him an offer from Hanoi to send an emissary to talk with a US representative in Rangoon. According to Mr. Sevareid's story the US decision on this offer had been postponed until after the US elections. After the elections of November 1964, and because of strong opposition from Secretary of Defense McNamara, Hanoi's alleged proposal was ignored by the United States. Sevareid reported that Stevenson told him, "U Thant was furious over the failure of his patient efforts. . . ." ²⁸

A State Department spokesman confirmed on 15 November that U Thant had urged the United States to accept the NVN offer of talks in Rangoon, but pointed out that there had been a spate of such reports and offers from third parties in contact with Hanoi. On the basis of other evidence the United States had not believed that NVN was ready at that time for serious peace talks. Secretary McNamara denied

26. (S) Msg, State 749 to Saigon, 14 Sep 65, JCS IN 48811.

27. (S-GP 3) Msg, Saigon to State 140310Z Aug 65, JCS IN 93755; (C-GP 4) Msg USUN 1689 to State, 1 Nov 65, JCS IN 32683.

28. Keessing's Contemporary Archives, 1966, p. 21349.

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the allegations in the Severeid article as "totally false" and said that now, as in 1964, he felt that the United States should search in every possible way for a peaceful settlement involving "unconditional discussions" at any time and any place. Secretary of State Rusk, in a press conference on 26 November, admitted that the Rangoon offer had been received as described by Severeid, but stated that the bulk of the evidence had led him to the conclusion that Hanoi had not been really serious and had, at the time it made its offer, been increasing its infiltration. Accordingly, the United States had not followed up the alleged offer.²⁹

On 1 December Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko told British Foreign Minister Stewart during a meeting that peace talks on Vietnam would be conditioned on the halting of the US air strikes against NVN and the withdrawal of US troops from RVN. A week later Ho Chi Minh, in an interview with a British journalist, called President Johnson's offer of unconditional talks "absolutely unacceptable."³⁰

The Italian Initiative

By this time, Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani of Italy had already furnished to the President information that he claimed came directly from Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong on 11 November, setting forth Hanoi's terms for beginning negotiations. These conditions reputedly included a ceasefire throughout Vietnam and a US agreement that it would accept the Geneva Agreements of 1954 as the basis for the negotiations. However, these terms defined the Geneva Agreements as "--a declaration made up of the four points formulated by Hanoi, points that are in reality the explanation of the Geneva text. . . ." Fanfani's text showed also that Hanoi was prepared to start negotiations without requiring withdrawal of US forces. This information had reputedly been acquired by two acquaintances of

29. Ibid. There is no evidence in available DOD files to indicate that the SecDef or the JCS were consulted in these early U Thant proposals or that they were even aware of them.

30. "Background Information Relating to SE Asia and Vietnam," S.Com on Foreign Relations, Mar 68, p. 24.

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Fanfani's during an interview in Hanoi. In a vein reminiscent of President Johnson's offer, Ho Chi Minh had reportedly told these men, "I am prepared to go anywhere; to meet anyone."³¹

Without fully accepting the facts as reported, the United States Government took every possible step to insure that, if the Fanfani text was authentic, a suitable contact would be established. Secretary Rusk sent back to the Italian Foreign Minister on 4 December comments on the reputed proposals, establishing the US position on each of them. He stated that the United States would be willing to negotiate on the basis of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 without any qualifications or conditions. On the other hand, the United States did not consider the Hanoi four points an acceptable interpretation of the Geneva Agreements of 1954, particularly since the four points called for acquiescence in the political program of the NLF. "Nevertheless," said Mr. Rusk, "we are prepared to include these four points for consideration in any peace talks along with any proposals which the United States, South Vietnam and other governments may wish to advance."

Mr. Rusk noted that, while the United States would be prepared to negotiate without a ceasefire, should NVN want one as a prior condition it would have to be equitable and reciprocal. In other words, the infiltration of men and supplies from Hanoi and the VC terrorism would have to stop at the same time the bombing of NVN and US/GVN operations in the south were stopped. Rusk told Fanfani that he was far from convinced that Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong were, as quoted by the Italian sources, really willing to start negotiations. He offered to have US representatives meet with the Italian sources if desired and offered Fanfani "free use" of his statement of the US position. On 13 December Fanfani told Rusk that a summary of the Secretary's "essential observations" on Hanoi's reputed position had been turned over for delivery to Hanoi by a qualified representative and that he was sure it had already reached its destination.³²

³¹. Ltr, Fanfani to Pres Johnson, 20 Nov 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LIV (3 Jan 66), p. 11.

³². Ltr, Rusk to Fanfani, 4 Dec 65; Ltr, Fanfani to Rusk, 13 Dec 65; Dept of State Bulletin, LIV (3 Jan 66) pp. 11-13.

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The Italian peace initiative, bona fide or not, came to an unsuccessful conclusion. A misleading leak to a newspaper, indicating that the United States was once again ignoring a valid peace feeler, caused the Secretary of State to release the story of the Fanfani correspondence. "In view of Stevenson-Sevareid episode," he told Ambassador Lodge, "we concluded we must release entire correspondence to make our full position clear and to maintain our peace-seeking posture."³³

Angered by the State Department release, Hanoi denied that it had been in contact with the Italians on possible negotiations, calling the story "sheer groundless fabrications." The Italian sources continued to insist that they had reported Ho Chi Minh's statements accurately.³⁴

The Holiday Truce Period

From the beginning of the insurgency, the opposing forces in Vietnam had curtailed their military actions during Tet, the lunar New Year. On 7 December the clandestine Liberation Radio, voice of the VC, broadcast an offer to observe a 12-hour truce beginning on Christmas Eve. Initially the Secretary of State characterized this offer as being of no political consequence and a matter for local authorities in RVN to decide. Soon, however, it ballooned into great political importance and resulted in a substantial reduction in military pressures on the enemy for a considerable period, with adverse effects on the US/GVN military position in the field and with little tangible benefit politically.³⁵

On 13 December the Department of State informed the US Ambassador to RVN that the VC's proposal was attracting considerable attention and that "wider cease-fire" proposals might be forthcoming shortly. The US Mission Council

33. (S) Msg, State 1705 to Saigon, 18 Dec 65, JCS IN 12791

34. "Background Information Relating to SE Asia and Vietnam," S. Com on Foreign Relations, Mar 68, p. 24; Keesing's, p. 21353.

35. This entire section is based on the study (TS-GP 1) JCS Hist Div, "Chronology of Events Concerning the Christmas Truce and Tet Stand-Down, 1965-66," 4 Jan 66.

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had already approved a policy for the Tet season, 21-23 January, in which air operations over NVN and Laos would be greatly reduced and military operations in RVN would, apart from necessary defensive measures, virtually cease.

It is clear that US officials believed the VC had scored a psychological victory in being the first to propose a holiday ceasefire. Ambassador Lodge recommended on 17 December that a statement, in broad terms, on the reduced US/GVN military posture during Tet be made in order "to pre-empt VC initiative in announcing Tet season ceasefire." With regard to Christmas, the US Mission Council recommended that the United States not respond publicly to the VC offer and that bombing operations over Laos and NVN be continued. However, military operations by US/GVN forces in RVN should virtually cease, except for air operations against VC base areas. Ambassador Lodge noted that this course would not in any way mitigate the propaganda gains made by the VC and suggested that the United States make effective proposals "for a real cease-fire which would win for us considerable propaganda gains."

In the meantime, the Joint Chiefs of Staff learned that the Department of State was preparing proposals for US initiatives on the Christmas and Tet holiday truces that went far beyond anything the VC had proposed. Apparently because of a sense of urgency, a message dealing with Christmas truce arrangements was coordinated by the Department of State and Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) so hurriedly that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not have ample time to consider it formally before its dispatch on 19 December. The message proposed to the Ambassador certain definite actions to be taken with regard to the Christmas truce.

State Department officials believed, in line with the Ambassador's reasoning, that a GVN Tet initiative should be the real response to the VC Christmas offer. However, they were concerned that "some quarters," even perhaps a responsible government, might appeal for "a more forthcoming response" to the VC offer and that the United States should be prepared for this. They suggested that perhaps a joint GVN/US announcement be made that their forces would "respond appropriately" to VC actions on 24 and 25 December. Further it was suggested that the United States and GVN consider some "acceptable and attractive" proposal for the Tet period which would be announced before Christmas. The US public relations posture would be much improved, with little

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military disadvantage, if bombing of NVN were suspended for a 24-hour period beginning on Christmas Eve without prior public announcement. They believed that air operations in RVN should be drastically reduced and other operations there on Christmas be halted except for those absolutely necessary to security of forces.

Ambassador Lodge opposed a public announcement accepting the VC offer, which he called a farce. However, he agreed with the State Department position on suspension of bombing in NVN and other actions in the south. He opposed the suggestion that the US/GVN make a truce offer concerning Tet prior to Christmas, saying it would be better to make such an announcement in early January.

Meanwhile other factors had developed, not the least of which was a strong public appeal by Pope Paul, on 19 December, in which he commended the VC truce proposal "for the blessed Christmas Day" to the "wisdom and heart of the responsible leaders."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, in view of the State Department suggestions to the Ambassador, immediately asked CINCPAC to assess their effects on operations. He replied that suspension of bombing of NVN and of ground and air offensive operations in RVN for Christmas would not result in any significant military disadvantage. On the same day this reply was received, 20 December, Deputy Secretary of Defense Vance called for the JCS views on the Christmas truce for use by the President in a news conference slated in less than an hour. Meeting hurriedly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed to recommend to the President that no statement be made to the press on the subject, but that if one must be made it should be along the lines of Ambassador Lodge's recommendation. There should be no overt response and air operations in NVN and Laos should continue, but with some relaxation of offensive operations in the RVN. The Acting Chairman, General McConnell, immediately relayed this position to Mr. Vance. The White House endorsed Pope Paul's call for peace in Vietnam but did not comment directly on his call for a Christmas truce.

On the afternoon of 20 December, the Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA), Mr. McNaughton, called the Assistant to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lt. General Andrew Goodpaster, and informed him that a joint State-Defense message was being sent to the Ambassador instructing him

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to persuade GVN to issue an announcement on the Christmas period, including a statement that "no military action will be initiated except in self-defense in either North or South Vietnam from 1800 on December 24 to midnight on Christmas Day Saigon time." There would be no announcement of Tet policy until after Christmas. The Secretary of Defense had instructed Mr. McNaughton to inform the Joint Chiefs of Staff of this message because he realized that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were opposed to the "self-defense language." Mr. McNaughton stated that the message was going out despite this opposition. The message was dispatched on the late afternoon of 20 December, Washington time.

On 21 December the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended to the Secretary of Defense that the United States adhere to the US Mission Council position on the Christmas truce, as set forth on 17 December, because the Council was "in the best position to determine the risks and benefits of a Christmas stand-down. . . ." On the next day, Ambassador Lodge notified the Department of State that GVN had accepted "in principle" the Christmas truce policy proposed by the State Department on 20 December. It had also accepted the program for Tet that Ambassador Lodge had outlined on 17 December, saying that its forces would carry out no major military operations in this period.

Shortly thereafter, General Westmoreland informed CINCPAC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that during the period from 1800, 24 December to 2400, 25 December his forces would: 1) assume a posture of extreme alertness, continue normal security precautions, and be prepared with ready reaction forces, to respond promptly to any VC initiative; 2) units in contact with VC forces would not break contact; 3) no ground offensive operations would be conducted but all forces would be prepared to react promptly and be prepared to destroy VC or NVA forces if they started operations which presented such an opportunity; 4) air operations would be conducted only in support of US/RVNAF forces in contact, but 2d Air Division forces would maintain ground and air alert aircraft as requested and required, and unexpended ordnance would be jettisoned in unpopulated areas of previously specified strike areas; 5) operations involving route security would not be discontinued and air or ground alert aircraft would be provided as operations required. The RVNAF Joint General Staff was issuing orders to its forces to follow these same ground rules.

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On 22 December, the State Department instructed Ambassador Lodge to have COMUSMACV announce as early as possible that US forces had been instructed to cease fire except in self-defense from 1800, 24 December to 2400, 25 December. On the same day the Secretary of Defense instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to put the provisions of the Christmas truce as outlined by the Department of State on 19 December and in the State-Defense message of 20 December into effect. The Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately directed CINCPAC and CINCSAC to stop "any air operations over the DRV," as well as BARREL ROLL, STEEL TIGER, and ARC LIGHT missions during the specified truce. Air and ground operations in RVN would be carried out in accordance with the operational policy set forth by COMUSMACV. GVN took similar action with its own forces. BLUE SPRINGS operations were allowed over NVN during the period so long as manned support aircraft were not used.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had been opposed in some respects to a Christmas stand-down in response to what was essentially an enemy initiative. But, in view of the short period of stand-down and the caveats and safeguards written into the policy, they were not greatly concerned over the military consequences.

Subsequent actions by higher authority did, however, give them concern and cause them to protest on what they considered to be sound military grounds. On the evening of 24 December, Washington time, while the Christmas truce was in effect in Vietnam, the Deputy Secretary of Defense sought JCS agreement to a proposed State-Defense message which would, contrary to the JCS recommendations, extend the ceasefire period. The purpose behind such an extension would be to turn international public opinion in favor of the United States by placing the onus for the renewal of fighting on the enemy. The United States did not want the end of the Christmas ceasefire "signalled before the world by US acts of violence." The Acting Chairman protested such an extension on military grounds, but the President decided the truce would be extended. He did, however, direct the inclusion of a discretionary provision in the message to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, which later was used to advantage. The final paragraph of the message, added at the President's direction, stated:

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"We recognize the heavy responsibility these instructions place on all concerned and we want you to know that you are free to make your own decisions within the spirit of these instructions and that those decisions will have our full support."

Orders were issued on 25 December to continue the restrictions on operations in North Vietnam and on ARC LIGHT. Full air operations over Laos could be resumed but not from RVN bases. CINCPAC was instructed that, until he could make public confirmed evidence of renewed VC violence, restrictions would remain in effect. State and Defense officials did not feel it would be very long, "a day or so," until the VC resumed the fighting.

As to operations in RVN, General Westmoreland was informed that, "consistent with the safety of his forces," he could conduct normal patrolling operations required for self-defense but would conduct all other operations in RVN so that responsibility for renewing hostilities fell on the VC. He was to coordinate with the Embassy in ensuring that GVN followed the same course as the United States in this matter. GVN was to be assured that this extension did not modify or dilute the "total US commitment" to RVN, and that it was being done only to secure the overwhelming support of the American people and the broad understanding of the international public. There would be no public discussion of the extension because the United States expected it to be short-lived and wished it kept secret. The GVN agreed to conform.

On 26 December, COMUSMACV reported that, between 1800 24 December and 0300 26 December, Saigon time, there had been 71 significant VC-initiated incidents, a level at least double the pre-ceasefire rate. He called for immediate lifting of all restrictions on his operations in RVN. CINCPAC concurred and, further, asked that ROLLING THUNDER be resumed immediately.

With little hesitation, the Acting Chairman contacted Admiral Sharp, and, basing his action on the discretionary provision within the truce-extension directive, told CINCPAC that so far as he was concerned the VC had broken the truce and that all restrictions on operations in RVN could now be lifted if CINCPAC judged it necessary. The Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, interpreted the discretionary provision as giving CINCPAC the authority to

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decide whether or not to resume operations in RVN, but not as concerned NVN. Consequently ROLLING THUNDER was not affected. Admiral Sharp immediately instructed General Westmoreland to resume offensive air operations and unrestricted ground operations in RVN. He specifically excluded ARC LIGHT operations, however. The Deputy Secretary of Defense, contacted by General McConnell immediately after CINCPAC's message went out to COMUSMACV, agreed that the action had been proper. On 27 December authority was granted to resume ARC LIGHT and some reconnaissance programs over NVN. Despite strong recommendations by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, no authority to resume ROLLING THUNDER was granted. COMUSMACV and CINCPAC added their voices to the call for resumption of air operations, but the ban on ROLLING THUNDER continued into the new year.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out to the Secretary of Defense, that from the military standpoint there had not only been no advantages realized in the Christmas ceasefire but there had been distinct disadvantages. During the 36-hour truce the VC had launched 85 significant incidents in which 73 friendly military had been killed and 101 wounded. The enemy had been permitted unhindered movement, and had taken full advantage of it. Friendly patrols had been made more vulnerable by cessation of artillery and air support. A psychological letdown and reduction in alertness had occurred. Because reconnaissance of NVN had not been permitted, airfields at Vinh and Dong Hoi had gone unobserved for 48 hours. This, in view of the enemy's IL-28 force, had endangered US forces at Da Nang and Chu Lai. Also, suspension of ROLLING THUNDER was permitting unrestrained logistic buildup by the enemy, continued infiltration of men, repair of his rail and road routes, more effective deployment of his air defense forces, and an opportunity generally to recoup.

Preparations for Tet

Ambassador Lodge had been successful in forestalling any announcement of US intentions on the Tet period until after Christmas. Nevertheless the matter remained under active consideration by higher authorities. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had been asked on 22 December to concur in a draft message from the State Department to Ambassador Lodge concurring with "the GVN and Mission in view that GVN and Free World forces should repeat Christmas actions, i.e., initiation of no military activity in North or South

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Vietnam during three day Tet period." They did not address this issue until 27 December, however, owing to other more pressing matters. On that date the JCS informed the Secretary of Defense that they, as well as COMUSMACV and CINCPAC, were opposed to any relaxation of military effort during the Tet holiday period. Their experience with the Christmas truce had more than convinced them that such actions were not in the best interests of either the United States or GVN. Knowing, however, that GVN intended to modify its operations to some degree during Tet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in accordance with similar views from the field commanders, advised the Secretary of Defense that if the United States was going to follow the GVN lead, the minimum posture for Tet was that which had been spelled out by Ambassador Lodge in the US Mission Council recommendations on 14 December.

These recommendations provided that air operations over NVN would continue but with emphasis on special measures to keep down civilian casualties. Air operations in Laos would continue. In the south, forces in contact with the VC would not break contact but no ground offensive operations would be planned. Forces would be ready to react promptly and take other measures for their own security. No ground operations would be conducted, if possible, around hamlets or villages. VC base areas would be subject to air attack but strikes in hamlets and villages would be avoided. Other intelligence and psychological warfare measures would be intensified.

General Wheeler, who was in Thailand at the time, sent a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff registering his strong opposition to a stand-down of all military operations during the Tet holiday. But, in the event the Joint Chiefs of Staff were overruled, he called for a "bare survival level" of security operations, including increased ground observation and security patrols and extensive air reconnaissance to detect possible threats to US forces. He called also, in this case, for increased reconnaissance over NVN.

The VC again anticipated the United States and GVN when, on 28 December, they called by Liberation Radio for a four-day ceasefire during Tet. They promised, during the period from 2400 on 19 January to 2400 on 23 January, to fire only in self-defense and to allow visits and attendance at celebrations by soldiers of GVN so long as

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no weapons were carried. No mention was made of privileges to be granted US and FWMAF soldiers.

On 31 December Ambassador Lodge informed the Department of State that he proposed to announce that Free World forces would not launch offensive operations during Tet although they would maintain the right of self-defense and would continue to patrol. He understood that GVN was going ahead with its earlier plans on Tet and asked for authorization to coordinate US plans with those of GVN. The State Department concurred but instructed the Ambassador to say nothing publicly at this time concerning military operations against NVN. Commenting on the proposed policy outlined by Ambassador Lodge, CINCPAC on the same day noted that it seemed to delete offensive air operations in RVN, but he considered this "satisfactory" so long as the VC did not initiate offensive action. He recommended that the stand-down over NVN not continue until Tet, although the United States could "live with a stand-down during Tet," provided reconnaissance operations continued.

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