DOS 7/1/71

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS BRIEFING BY STEPHEN LEDOGAR, THURSDAY, JULY 1, 1971, 3:30 P.M.

MR. LEDOGAR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Well, it seems as though Le Duc Tho had something in his pocket after all. But whether it is something of substance or whether it is something that he designed to confuse the debate on Southeast Asia in the United States remains to be seen.

You have received, I believe, the text of Ambassador Bruce's statement. Those words were carefully chosen. And I warn you ahead of time I am not going to go much beyond them.

I did have some communication just before I came out here with Washington, and it seems as though although your analyses have been penetrating and on the mark, as usual, some of your editors and headline writers are billing this new program as something which on its face we don't know whether it is or not.

Q Do you think it is something new?

A Well, the fact that it is new and reworded is a fact. But as to whether it represents something new

some of the questions that immediately struck me.

Here is a program in seven points. What about Point No. 1, which seems to be part of so much of the debate in the United States? Could thatbe operative separately or is the program all one? Now, I say this without admitting for one moment that there is not much more involved than just the question of U.S. withdrawal and prisoners of war. As you know, there is a lot more involved. But there is one question -- an over-simplification, it seems to me, that has been jumped to. We don't know the answer to that. What about that part in the first point, for example, where they say that the parties will agree on the modalities for withdrawal and prisoners and so forth? Now, as you know, when you sought clarification of the three points they came out with last December, the answer you got was that Point No. 1 operates as a whole. So what about this point? Is this just a way of saying that discussions will ensue?

Now, they say there will have to be agreements on the modalities. But what are the modalities? What is the definition of "withdrawal"? What do they mean by stopping the policy of Vietnamization? Are they going to tell us, or do we have to agree as to what that means? What all is in here? I just think that it is a --

Q I read it that they will discuss simultaneously the procedures for withdrawing American troops and the release of prisoners.

A Well, what does "withdrawal" mean?

Q That will be part of the modalities.

A That we will discuss.

Q Yes. At the same time as you discuss the release of prisoners.

A So all there is here is an offer to discuss, their definition of "withdrawal."

Q At the same time --

A Their definition of "withdrawal" may include the requirement that we go to the point that will cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese Government.

Q Why don't you go and find out?

A Well, we intend to do what we can to seek negotiations on their proposals and on our proposals, as the Ambassador pointed out today. They talk here, for example, about the military men and civilians captured in the war. What war? Peter, what's your feeling? What war? Are they talking about the war in Viet-Nam? Does that exclude the military men captured in Laos, the military men captured in Cambodia?

Q I don't think it excludes anything.

A I seem to get the impression from the early morning radio shows in the United States today that people are talking about there being a new offer to exchange -- U.S. troops going home in exchange for all prisoners. What do they mean by "all prisoners?"

Well, as I say, I am not going to comment on this. The Ambassador pointed out that we will be looking at it.

Q But, Stephen, you repeatedly said that the prisoners are held, wherever they were captured -- that they were held by the North Vietnamese and by the Viet Cong.

A We hold the North Vietnamese responsible, whether they hold the prisoners or whether their clients hold the prisoners, because they are the ones that call the shots.

Q All right. Well, I mean here there seems to be -- to release all --

A Yes. But you heard Nguyen Thanh Le last week, and you heard other spokesmen recently, including Xuan Thuy in his conversation with Chal Roberts, saying that the prisoners in Laos and the prisoners in Cambodia have to be dealt with elsewhere.

Q Steve, if I get you correctly, you seem to be very much concerned about the connection between the

withdrawal and the liberation process and the political problem in South Viet-Nam. Is that one of the things you are wondering about?

A Well, we are wondering about that, and a whole lot of other things, yes. There is no excessive concern -- we are not singling them out. It is a very cleverly worded document, I would say. It raises as many questions as it --

Q I think what they mean by "civilians" is political prisoners.

A Well, one man's political prisoner is the other man's terrorist. What I mean by civilians are the more than fifty American civilians who have been captured and held in North Viet-Nam or by North Vietnamese clients in South Viet-Nam.

Q Steve, in view of the fact that this obviously does, in anybody's opinion, raise numerous questions, as to connections, interconnections, meanings, etc., etc., and in view of the fact that Ambassador Bruce did not, at least as far as -- you haven't told us that he had -- did not follow up the presentation of this by posing such questions today, we can rationally assume, therefore, that this will now be studied intensively in Washington and before the next session a whole series of

such questions will be prepared in an attempt to clarify their attitude further?

A Well, you can assume that it is going to be studied, yes. Now, as to whether or not the approach will be questions immediately, or narrative, or something, I suppose is one of the things that we are going to work on during this week. But I just point out that it does raise questions. I hope that you will raise a lot of these questions, and that instead of asking me you will ask the two Communist spokesmen who will be on here shortly, and maybe they will be able to shed some light, and then we will have a better idea and it will help us in our studies. But what we have here now is difficult to study by itself.

Q One question that only you can answer, if you choose to. When are you expecting Mr. Kissinger here?

A The White House announced that his schedule generally is that he hits Paris on the way back. He is going to Saigon, then to Bangkok and then to India and Pakistan and then -- I just don't remember, but he hits Paris on his way westward, returning to Washington.

Q You don't have --

A That puts it around the end of next week.

Q When is he meeting Le Duc Tho?

A Mr. Ziegler said yesterday at the White House, when he was asked if Kissinger had plans to meet North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris, he was not aware of any plans for him to meet anyone except Ambassador Bruce.

Q Steve, to get --

A On the other hand, Le Duc Tho hasn't asked for a meeting.

Q To get the answers to these various questions that are to be raised, surely the only way to get these answers is to negotiate with them.

A Yes. We would be delighted. Against experience, we continue to hope that one day there will be the beginning of the process of negotiation.

Q And yet you seem to object to this process by saying that they are again talking about modalities.

A No. We are ready to talk about their program and our program together, in the plenary sessions here or in a more discreet forum, if that is the way we can get to the beginning of the negotiating process.

Q Are you going to invite them to do this?

A We have already invited them in the general

form of "a more discreet forum," yes.

Q After today's proposals were presented?

A I have no comment on what we are going to do after today.

Q Regardless of the subsequent study, isn't it quite clear from the document as it stands that they maintain their precondition on the date of withdrawal? They don't talk about anything to be done.

A I really don't know. Ask them whether they maintain their preconditions. I am talking about preconditions to the beginning of the process of negotiation. Now, you look at the document and I think that you could say, "Well, it looks like they still have the same basic preconditions." On the other hand, we can always hope that we can begin the process of a negotiation without these obstacles.

Q Steve, does our standing invitation to discuss either here or in a more discreet forum, as you said -- is that a simple invitation by the U.S. Government, or does it involve all of the parties, necessarily?

A Well, it is an invitation by the U.S. Government. We do not define "forum". As you know, in the past we have met privately -- the only private meetings we have had have been directly with the North Vietnamese.

We would be delighted to have meetings in a more discreet forum among all of the parties. That is also a standing invitation.

Q Would you exclude meetings in a more discreet forum with, say, Madame Binh and Xuan Thuy, without the presence of the South Vietnamese representatives?

A Yes, we would exclude that.

Q But you would be ready to do again what you did before, have direct meetings with the North Vietnamese?

A Yes -- or direct meetings among all four parties. They don't have to be private ones. We could try restricted sessions.

Q How about private meetings between the U.S. and the North Vietnamese? That still is possible?

A Oh, yes. We have done that before.

Q Would you do it again?

A That is all we have done before. Certainly.

Q But the U.S. with the PRG is notpossible?

A That is correct. We are not going to have meetings where there is one of the necessary parties excluded. But there could be meetings of ourselves with the North Vietnamese and of the two South Vietnamese parties going on at the same time, in separate rooms,

or something. There are all sorts of possibilities. So we are open to suggestions -- with the one proviso, that we are not going to agree to meetings where one of the necessary parties is excluded. And there is no change. That has been our position since we came here two-and-a-half years ago.

Q Would you consider as one of the questions raised by the seven points a question as to whether the omission of any names other than that of President Thieu is significant?

A No -- because our position on that is as stated by Ambassador Bruce in his additional remarks. The question of the political future of South Viet-Nam is one for the South Vietnamese to decide.

Q Well, Stephen, you are not quite sure that the two preconditions are there, are intact, the way they were before -- because Mr. Dan seemed to be quite sure Mr. Lam's statement flatly stated that the two preconditions are there.

A I continue to hope, and I hope my optimism will last through the two briefings this evening. This time I hope you will ask them about their preconditions -- whether they still

demand that there must be a price paid, a concession made, a unilateral concession made before there can be the beginning of the negotiating process, or whether they are going to take the occasion of this move by them to at least try the process of getting together and talking about their proposals and our proposals, and try the process of negotiation, of doing business, of compromise, concession.

Q Stephen, this Point No. 1 -- "... at the same time agree on the modalities," -- could this expression "at the same time agree on the modalities" cover also the date of the withdrawal, which means isn't this an offer to negotiate at the same time the date of the withdrawal and the modalities of the release of the prisoners?

A I don't know. I don't know the answer to that question. It seems quite clear they are talking about a date in 1971, though.

Q Why do you say that?

A In effect, this is a proposal for December 31, 1971.

Q Steve, just one basic thing about this all. Do you think that the private or restricted meetings or the outside-of-the-every-Thursday meetings is more possible now after this session today than before?

A We can't answer that, because our attitude has always been completely forthcoming, ready, willing and able to negotiate in any such forum. It is the attitude of the other side which has prevented any such contacts. So you ask the spokesmen for the other delegations, who will be here shortly, the answer to that question. They are the only ones who can answer it.

Q Steve, does the date of December 31, 1971 by itself make unacceptable to the United States discussion or agreement on this point?

A I cannot comment on that, really. No -- I guess the answer to that is no, because we have always said that there is no problem about talking about our withdrawal. "If you don't like our proposal for us getting out in twelve months, then let us hear what your alternative proposal is." Well, this is July 1 -- here they are apparently talking about six months. So that means that we are willing to consider it. But we are not going to consider that and that alone. There are other things that we have to talk about -- would like to get into negotiations and talk about -- their proposals and our proposals.

Q If you are going to consider withdrawal, total withdrawal within six months, you mean you would

like to talk about other things -- release of all the prisoners during that period.

A We want to talk about our position as well as their position. We want to get together and see whether we can find common ground. We want to find out whether there are things about their position that they are willing to elaborate on and if they have questions about our position we want to explain it further, in more detail. We want to see if we can isolate some things and agree for the time being, or disagree on those, and get together, seeing things where we could agree. And it is just called negotiation. It has never taken place here in Paris.

Q One of the important items in the U.S. position, Steve, is some action on their part in withdrawing North Vietnamese forces from South Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia, which would seem to be answered in advance by Point No. 3, which is also Point No. 3 of the old ten points also, a negotiating point for them.

A Well, I appreciate your zeal to discover the news and the truth. But I also have to try to stick to what we said. We are going to study this and we are going to give our reaction to it another time. Now, I cannot really go in and give a reaction to one point, and then six questions later

I will have reacted --

Q But it is a major point of the U.S. position.

A Oh, yes.

Q Withdrawal -- future withdrawal.

A That is right.

Q Steve, you mentioned that you would like to be able to put the two proposals, or to put proposals on the negotiation table and ascertain where they seem to meet on certain points, etc. We have in fact gone through that stage after the global solution in ten points was proposed, and then President Nixon, on May 14, I think, made his proposals. We were at this stage. And we found then that we could not move into negotiations. Do you find that today's proposals give you a little more hope, because we seem to detect some more flexibility? Looking back to 1968, was it -- 1969?

A Well, I don't know the answer to that. There is a difference between hope and expectation.. Do I have an expectation different than the one I had back in May 1969?

Q Yes.

A I really cannot say. On the other hand, when I see that Mr. Le Duc Tho comes here and he talks

in terms of conditions having changed, and so forth, maybe that gives one reason to hope that negotiations now might be possible -- or they might at least be tried. If the other side was sincere, they would have tried the process of negotiation instead of ultimatum.

Q Steve, would it be correct to say that any Communist proposal, no matter how it is presented, that requires from you a prior commitment for total and unconditional withdrawal before anything else is discussed is unacceptable?

A It has been our position and it continues to be our position that we are not going to do business on the basis of what we have to do first before there can even be a conversation on the modalities, that is true, yes.

Q I have read the proposal in the seven points, and there is one thing I think is rather curious -- and that is Point No. 6, talking about the United States making good for all the damage done. I don't know what has been the background of this Point 6 -- whether it is an appeal to the United States' charity of helping underdeveloped countries, or that it infers a kind of silent admission of guilt and a feeling of having lost the war. How do you feel about it?

A Well, I have a couple of reactions. First of all, it is not anything new. If you read Point No. 9 of the ten-point overall solution of May, 1969, it says almost exactly the same thing -- "The U.S. Government must bear full responsibility for the losses and devastations it has caused to the Vietnamese people in both zones." A second reaction to your question -- I have never noticed any reticence previously on the part of the other side to demand one hundred percent of their objectives here at the negotiating table when they haven't been able to achieve them on the battlefield. So there is nothing extraordinary about the way they put it. But for you scholars and those with long memories, you might go back to the spring of 1965 and President Johnson's Johns Hopkins speech and the offer for post-war development for the whole Mekong Valley.

Q This brings me to my point that in fact they have referred in the statement today that they are interested in joining various groups of economic development, including, I assume, the Mekong project.

[Whereupon at 3:50 p.m. the briefing was concluded.]