

196. Memorandum of Conversation¹

Washington, August 2, 1966.

SUBJECT

Vietnam

PARTICIPANTS

W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador-at-Large
 Henry A. Kissinger, Professor of International Law, Harvard
 Daniel I. Davidson, Special Assistant, FE
 Montleagle Stearns, Special Assistant, S/AH

Professor Kissinger came in at the Governor's request to give his impressions of the situation in Vietnam following his recent visit there.² He explained that this had been his second trip to Vietnam. His first visit was in October of 1965.

Atmosphere

Professor Kissinger emphasized the conspiratorial atmosphere which he said prevailed throughout South Vietnam. He had never visited a country which was so self-absorbed. During his two visits and countless conversations with Vietnamese he did not recall being asked a single question about problems outside Vietnam. He was also impressed by the amount of backbiting that went on among the Vietnamese and the value they attached to qualities like cleverness and cunning as opposed to attributes like probity and integrity which were esteemed in the Western World. He recalled a long conversation he had had with a Provincial Official in the First Corps area. The official had described with considerable pride the tricks and maneuvers he had employed at the time of the struggle movement crisis to avoid committing himself either to the Government or the struggle forces. To many Vietnamese, conspiracy had become a way of life making political stability that much harder to achieve.

Military Situation

Kissinger acknowledged that the influx of American troops into Vietnam had resulted in a short term improvement in the military situation. In the Spring of 1965 Hanoi and the Viet Cong had entertained real hopes of a military victory. Their prospects for achieving this in the foreseeable future had been greatly diminished. Nevertheless, Kissinger thought that the basic situation had not changed since October of '65.

¹ Source: Department of State, Bundy Files: Lot 85 D 240, Kissinger, 1966. Secret; Not to be Drafted by Stearns.

² Kissinger visited Vietnam July 16–29.

The Road to Negotiations

Kissinger said that we should stop talking about "unconditional negotiations if we wanted to convince the world that we were serious about trying to find a peaceful settlement to the Vietnam problem. We did not find that anyone in Saigon understood what the phrase meant and it was usually interpreted to mean that we did not want to talk. In Kissinger's view we should keep pressing for negotiations and state openly what our conditions were. This was particularly important if we wanted to persuade the GVN to think in terms of talks with the NLF-VC. At present the GVN leadership was convinced that we were completely inflexible on this question.

Kissinger argued that negotiations with the NLF-VC offered greater chance of success than negotiations with Hanoi or multilateral negotiations under the umbrella of the Geneva Agreements. Of all the methods of negotiations available to us he believed that a big Geneva-type conference was the least likely to succeed. Such a conference would involve too many people who didn't know the situation and who brought to the conference nothing more than their prejudices. Furthermore, the composition of a re-convened Geneva Conference would be stacked against us.

One advantage of direct negotiations between the GVN and NLF-VC was that it ducked the troublesome problem that would be posed by VC representation at an international conference. Kissinger also thought it possible that Hanoi would prefer to let the NLF-VC take the lead since their own prestige would not be directly engaged in compromise reached by southerners in the South. If agreements could be reached with the NLF they could be ratified by the Geneva powers in a large international conference.

He agreed that the central problem was to conduct negotiations in the South which would not result in a take-over by the NLF. The fragility of the GVN created real difficulties and meant that we were continually in the position of being blackmailed by the political weakness of the GVN. Despite the problems, Kissinger thought that we should direct all of our efforts, military, political and economic, to creating a situation favorable to negotiations with the NLF-VC.

In practice this would mean (a) re-orienting our military strategy to put anti-guerrilla operations before operations against main force units, (b) encouraging the development of a broader political base in Saigon through elections and increased civilian participation in the Government and (c) putting more effort into improvement of civil administration both in Saigon and the provinces.

Another step that Kissinger considered necessary was to levy a top priority requirement on CAS to obtain more and better intelligence on the composition and leadership of NLF-VC. This was vitally important if realistic negotiations were ever to be conducted with the NLF. Even if a

deal could not be made we might be able to induce the defection of non-communist members of the NLF. For this reason we had to do a better job of identifying non-communists and hard-core leaders. Kissinger noted that the NLF leader, Tho, had gone over to the communists in 1962 because of his opposition to Diem. He had tried to return to Saigon in '62 or '63 but Diem had refused to let him. It was barely possible that Tho and others like him could still be induced to return. Kissinger emphasized that we needed not only information on the principal NLF leaders but on their provincial leadership as well.

Kissinger thought that an amnesty offer by the GVN would be useful and should precede any serious effort by the GVN to engage in talks with the NLF-VC.

Impressions of the Embassy

Kissinger said that it would be extremely difficult to bring Ambassador Lodge to accept negotiations with the NLF-VC. He thought it might be done on a step by step basis. If Lodge could be convinced, the job of convincing Ky and the GVN would be much easier. The Vietnamese were somewhat in awe of Lodge's personality and his views would carry real weight with them. Lodge was completely sold on Ky and did not like twisting his arm. The Ambassador was sensitive to charges that he had pulled the rug out from under Diem and did not want the same thing to happen again.

Bill Porter was doing an excellent job under difficult circumstances. He had to spend far too much time answering questions from Washington. This was particularly unfortunate because the mission needed pulling together and Washington often asked the wrong questions.

Phil Habib was a first class professional. Kissinger regretted that he would be leaving in about 6 months. The 18 month tour of duty was a mistake since it took about a year and a half to learn the situation well enough to be able to influence it. The Department should reverse its decision not to let wives remain with their husbands and extend tours of duty to 2 to 3 years.

Kissinger had mixed impressions of Lansdale who he thought was too much of a Boy Scout. He commented that Lansdale had the great virtue of patience and was willing to spend long hours talking to Vietnamese. He was an excellent man for contacts but ineffective when it came to details. According to Kissinger, Lodge should have put Phil Habib in charge of monitoring the elections instead of Lansdale.

Kissinger did not believe that the PATs were accomplishing much. They had been recruited and trained too quickly. He said that it was admitted that they had a desertion rate of at least 15% and the rate might be significantly higher. His own observation of the PATs in operation indi-