

MEMORANDUM

3 September 1968

TO: The Vice President

FROM: Rufus Phillips

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam and Your Campaign

*Rufus Phillips*

1. Viet-Nam can become either a negative or a positive factor in your campaign. It is not likely to be a neutral factor. At present, it is mainly a negative factor because of the factions within the Party who oppose you over this issue and because the public at large tends to blame the Administration for mishandling, or at least, not winning the war.
2. The Viet-Nam issue can be blunted only slightly by focusing on the Paris peace talks. It is very unlikely, as I wrote you after my return from Viet-Nam in June, that the Paris talks will produce anything substantive between now and the election. Viet Cong plans are for at least two more major offensives this year before negotiating, and they predicate negotiations on having first seriously weakened the present Saigon Government. Some American hopes were pinned on Russian intercession; but with the invasion of Czechoslovakia, this seems unlikely. The hard-liners in Hanoi have been reinforced.
3. The prospects then are for more bloody fighting in Viet-Nam. Public attention will be more riveted there, where Americans are dying and materiel is being expended, than on Paris. The American public is not likely to grow any happier because they will see no dramatic signs of progress, and won't believe some of the few lesser signs they will see.
4. In addition to the Viet-Cong, it will be the Administration who will be making the news on Viet-Nam. Statements from General Westmoreland, Dean Rusk and the President, will be interjected into the campaign and you will have to either defend or take issue with them. Unless you establish your own point of view about Viet-Nam, you will be forced into spending most of your time defending Administration statements and actions. If these statements were aimed more at presenting a believable program for achieving peace and less at justifying past policies, having Administration spokesmen take the lead and you defend them would not be harmful. Such is not likely to be the case.

5. In summary, then, I believe that unless you establish your own unique point of view about Viet-Nam that you will lose votes heavily on this issue. You will lose votes precisely because your sincerity and your understanding of the human issues involved there will become obscured by the need to constantly defend the Administration's word and deed. The American public longs for straight talk on this issue.

6. There is then, in the present situation, a serious weakness on the Viet-Nam issue which is inherent in your position as Vice President. Can this weakness be overcome; can Viet-Nam be made a more positive factor? I believe it can, but it will involve chartering an independent course - as the titular head of the Democratic Party and as a Candidate, not as Vice President. What is needed is for you to reveal your true convictions and your deep understanding of the basic, human problems and values involved in Viet-Nam to the American public.

7. How can this be done?

a. As a first step, I would propose the formation of a small informal staff of people who know and understand the Vietnamese people, and who are either no longer in the Administration or who are willing to leave it voluntarily to help you. Bob Coate could, and would, be willing to participate along with key members of your personal staff. Ex-IVS members such as Charlie Sweet, the District Eight youth organizer, would be willing to resign from the U. S. Government to take part, if needed.

b. The primary task of this staff would be to begin preparing immediately a series of speeches containing a realistic program for Viet-Nam. These speeches would stress idealism and principles, bringing to bear in Viet-Nam the idealism and energy of new people and youth, and getting American troops out.

c. The thrust of this program for peace would be two-fold. First it would explain, in terms Americans can understand, the truth about the Vietnamese people, their aspirations and the nature of the struggle. This would reinforce the basic feelings of most Americans that our cause is just and right. Secondly it would draw a distinction between our goals, which are still just and correct, and our actions or our means of attaining these goals which must be changed and made more effective. This would be essentially a "people-saving" strategy for Viet-Nam with appropriate changes in the way we help the Vietnamese to fight their war. While modifying our own use of firepower, for example, we would also insist that the Vietnamese Government lives up to their own democratic goals as set forth in their constitution.

d. The emphasis would be shifted away from self-centered attitudes at home and away from a picture of the "corrupt, spirit-less" Vietnamese to an affirmative picture of the democratic values that they and we believe in and which they are struggling to achieve. In short, the true story of Viet-Nam would begin to be told in such a way that it became the focus of the campaign - not the mistakes of the past.

8. I had considered proposing a Citizen's Advisory Group for the purpose of assisting you on Viet-Nam but I believe time is too short for it to become fully effective. Senator Douglas' committee could help in a parallel fashion by sponsoring visits from such Vietnamese as Gen. Thang who could excite the American imagination thus giving you a living example to point to of the kind of Vietnamese idealism you are talking about.

9. I know from talking personally to hundreds of Americans all over this country, that they do respond favorably to the human side of the Viet-Nam story. You can tell this story in ways which would create the positive, hopeful tone in your campaign which you are seeking. For example, the Viet-Nam conflict can be cast as what it truly is, a struggle for the human rights of the Vietnamese people, which cannot be evaded anymore than our struggle for these same human rights at home. A "New Day" for the Vietnamese, as well as the American people, is a worthy and attainable goal which I believe can still be sold to the American people if they can come to better understand the human side of the war.

10. As a last thought - if the American people cannot be convinced that it is worth persevering to achieve this goal, then the peace that will be achieved will not be either honorable or enduring. Therefore, we must persevere and you have the understanding to illuminate the reasons why we must persevere; and to inspire the needed courage and to instill the necessary hope.