



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

May 20, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Bundy

Subject: Suggested Handling of Paris Talks for the American Audience

Climate of Opinion

The state of domestic public opinion today is characterized by immense relief that talks are underway and by high expectations of what may result. This is the picture drawn from conversations with George Gallup and Lou Harris on Friday.

The American people have long been willing to give the President considerable latitude in his pursuit of peace in Viet-Nam. Significant proportions--well over half--of the public have approved strategies of both escalation and de-escalation as ways of bringing the conflict to an end. The President, in short, has been given relatively free reign in the definition of what is to constitute "victory" and of what strategy is most likely to bring that victory about.

However, in about mid-1967, signs of fatigue in the public's support of the war effort began to appear. This fatigue was different from the more vocal opposition in the student, new left, and intellectual communities. Then came the Tet offensive which dealt a profound blow to the durability of public support.

Today half of the American people feel "the US made a mistake sending troops to fight in Viet-Nam". The figure two years ago was only one-fourth. Today less than one-third of the public feels that the US should send troops "if a situation like Viet-Nam were to develop in another part of the world". When people were asked in mid-January whether they described themselves as "hawks" or "doves", four in ten called themselves "doves". A month later, when the severity of the Tet offensive was fully apparent the figure rose to six in ten calling themselves "doves".

These readings are admittedly crude, but the consistency of these and other findings point to the irreducible conclusion that the American people are tiring quickly and are increasingly frustrated that our military muscle has not been able to "solve" the problem of Viet-Nam.

There is thus real danger that the intensity of public relief that talks have started will generate an unreality in public hopes and expectations that something meaningful will result.

In short, the American people need to be prepared for three things: long and drawn-out talks in Paris; little or slow substantive progress in the talks; and continuing bloodshed in South Viet-Nam. Otherwise, public pressures might emerge which would significantly constrain the negotiating flexibility of our team in Paris.

#### Some General Ground Rules

There seem to be several basic guidelines which we should follow in our portrayal of what is happening both at the table in Paris and on the ground in Viet-Nam:

1. Practice understatement: We must avoid overstating today what we will regret tomorrow. We should stay with the old adage of using understatement and overperformance to build confidence over the long run.

There are three areas in which understatement is particularly crucial. First, the public should not be given to expect too much out of Paris and should be prepared for a long haul. Second, the military situation in South Viet-Nam must be portrayed with considerable candor. Recent characterizations of the Saigon offensive and the clearing of the Ashau Valley are hard for the public to square with reports of 100,000 refugees in the capital city of Saigon and with last week's record in US casualties. Third, the South Vietnamese should be heralded as taking over the effort only to the extent to which they clearly are--especially in light of the recent cabinet shuffle and general GVN uneasiness regarding the Paris talks.

2. Polemicize only in response: The North Vietnamese will certainly continue to moralize for the international audience in the hope of generating pressures on the US both here and abroad. Thuy's

opening statement set the keynote of what will be the recurring theme of US aggression.

We obviously have the stronger case on the issue of aggression, but it may be more in our interest to portray ourselves as reasonable men desirous of serious substantive conversations rather than to concentrate on setting the record straight each step of the way in a polemical duel. We can continue to make our own counter-charges, but the over-all posture should be distinctly non-polemical.

3. Restate objectives repeatedly: Any solution to the Viet-Nam issue, short of the unconditional surrender of North Viet-Nam, must be a compromise. The US will necessarily be required to make concessions in one form or another.

It is thus cardinal that our objectives in Viet-Nam be stated again and again so that the American people and the world will have a yardstick by which to measure any concessions we make. An imprecise notion in public thinking about what constitutes "victory" can greatly complicate the task of portraying the Paris drama as it unfolds.

4. Do not assume too much knowledge on the part of the American people: Closely related to the above is the danger of overlooking significant--and often shocking--areas of public ignorance. The Viet-Nam issue has been salient for so long that the American people are probably quite sophisticated about it. But care should be taken, for example, to relate the significance of the air war in the North to the ground war in the South and to point out repeatedly that the crucial question is who assumes political control in the South and by what means.

While education and the mass media have gone a long way to extend the attentive public, public ignorance is still startling. For example, only a few years ago, just over one-fourth of the American people did not know that Mainland China was ruled by a Communist regime and nearly half were unaware of the Nationalist Government in Formosa.

### Suggested Themes

What then are the themes that will be both consistent with our negotiating objectives and plausible to domestic and international

opinion?

1. Propaganda versus substance: We should be able to portray ourselves as the ones seriously interested in peace by avoiding a propaganda offensive and by responding to polemics only when the provocation from the other side significantly compromises our position.

2. North Vietnamese presence in the South: By stressing the presence of NVA regular units in the South we may avoid one peril while making several points.

Systems Analysis in Defense advises that it is the wiser course to concentrate on NVA units actually in the South rather than the infiltration of units to the South. There is a significant discrepancy between the number of NVA personnel in South Viet-Nam and the estimated number of personnel infiltrated down. Attrition and crude infiltration measures account for the difference.

Besides demonstrating the sheer fantasy of the North Vietnamese claim that the US is the aggressor and that the war in the South is a civil war, we can appeal to and exacerbate natural differences between the VC/NLF and the NVA/DRV. Such differences as:

- South versus North.
- VC/NLF desire to shorten the war versus NVA/DRV emphasis on protracted warfare.
- "True" Vietnamese nationalism versus imposed and externally directed Vietnamese communism.
- The suffering in the South that continues versus the suffering in the North that has been relieved by US bombing restraints.

3. False solutions: Without being too explicit we can repeat President Johnson's increasingly frequent references to "false solutions". This would help educate the American people both to the essentially political nature of any solution and to the immense complexity of insuring that a solution will be meaningful and viable.

4. Consultation with allies: By continuing to repeat that we are in close consultation with the GVN, the TCC's and our other allies, we will both allay anxieties in those countries and demonstrate that the cause in Viet-Nam is not pursued by the US alone.

5. Fight while negotiating: Continued reference to the fight while negotiating strategy of the North Vietnamese might be useful to prepare people for both protracted talks in Paris and continued bloodshed in South Viet-Nam.

6. Communist atrocities: The Communist record of terrorism, kidnapping, and assassination should be portrayed vividly. The heavy documentation of the Hue atrocities should give us the opportunity of pointing to recent history as fully consistent with the terror that reigned in the North in 1955-56.

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