

THE WHITE HOUSE

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March 6, 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE

DECLASSIFIED

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NY 86-250

By , NARA, Date 5-16-87

Dean Rusk, Bob McNamara, and I spent 2 1/2 hours together last night on Vietnam. The following general conclusions emerged:

1. On the evidence so far our air actions in North Vietnam and Laos have caused somewhat less international reaction than we expected. The propaganda and the demonstrations are inevitable, and so are the reactions of the would-be negotiators, here and abroad. Your own effective work has brought the American reaction under control, at least for the present. We got an inadvertent assist from U Thant on this because his outrageous comments solidified a lot of Congressional opinion. We have not driven the Chinese and the Soviets together, as the ^{in Moscow} demonstrations and Chinese complaints show. We have certainly not persuaded Hanoi to leave its neighbors alone, but we may have made a beginning. Most important of all, we may be moving, with less friction than we anticipated, toward a situation in which international opinion may regard our actions against the North as a natural reply against Viet Cong operations in the South. If this can be done by continuing our measured and fitting actions over the coming weeks, it will be a new and important change; it will be most helpful to us against guerrilla infiltration over the long run, whatever the eventual result in Vietnam.

My own view is that if this result is achieved -- and Dean says that Ambassador Thompson, who has been skeptical, is now quite hopeful about it -- it will be your personal achievement. You alone -- against your noisiest advisers -- made the basic decision to present these actions within the framework of a continuing policy and a continuing purpose and not as major new departures. The best and simplest documentary evidence of this is in the amendments which you made to the speech which was never given. I am holding that document for your memoirs.

2. Two of the three of us think that the chances of a turn-around in South Vietnam remain less than even; the brutal fact is that we have

PERSONAL-SENSITIVE-SECRET

~~SECRET~~

- 2 -

PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE

been losing ground at an increasing rate in the countryside in January and February. The air actions have lifted morale, but it is not clear how much, and there is no evidence yet that the new government has the necessary will, skill and human resources which a turn-around will require.

Moreover, our own basic framework for the support of the pacification program leaves a great deal to be desired. (Last night Bob McNamara said for the first time what many others have thought for a long time -- that the Pentagon and the military have been going at this thing the wrong way round from the very beginning: they have been concentrating on military results against guerrillas in the field, when they should have been concentrating on intense police control from the individual villager on up. This is a point which Lodge will make in a report which is to be delivered to you Monday afternoon before your meeting with him on Tuesday.)

We all nevertheless agree that whatever the odds and whatever the difficulties, we must continue to make every conceivable effort in the pacification area. This is the purpose of the Johnson mission, and the results of that mission should be available for discussion with you early next week.

3. There is one particularly tough issue on which we will get comment next week, both from the Johnson mission and the Lodge report. That is the question of the organization and management of the U. S. team in Saigon. McNamara and I, if the decision were ours to make, would bring Taylor back and put Alex Johnson in charge, with a younger man (conceivably John McNaughton) as Chief of Staff. Rusk, McNamara, and I have all learned from separate channels that within the country team it is in fact Alexis who is looked to for leadership and for coordination. Max has been gallant, determined, and honorable to a fault, but he has also been rigid, remote and sometimes abrupt. We all recognize that Taylor has served an enormously important purpose in keeping American opinion from division and criticism, but our inclination would be to bring him back not later than the first of June for a final round of consultation and discussion, and release from his duties at the end of the year for which he originally contracted. (He took the oath on July 2.)

PERSONAL - SENSITIVE ~~SECRET~~

PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE

4. We talked also about our international political position. We all agree that so far we have followed the right course, but we continue to believe that it is important to defend and to insist on our policy in every forum. That is why Dean has agreed with enthusiasm to your proposal for briefings of Ambassadors, and that is also why he has taken on this heavy schedule of public appearances in the immediate future.

5. There remains a real question in our minds as to how much we should open the door to a readiness for "talks." This is a point on which both Dean, and Bob especially, are quite concerned. They both feel, for somewhat different reasons, that it is important to show that we are ready to talk about Vietnam -- always on our own terms -- in all appropriate international channels. They point out that in one sense that is exactly what we are doing now in our briefings of Ambassadors, and in our tough talk with Dobrynin, and in public statements which constitute diplomatic actions. But Bob goes a lot further. He believes that we should find a way to have real talks in an international meeting. (I think his motivation is that we will need a conference table if things go worse, as he expects.) Dean and Bob both feel that to hold some of our allies we may need to be a little less rigid about "talks" than we have in the last ten days. The particular pressure which is visible today is from the British, who have been made nervous by one sub-Cabinet resignation and a lot of yammering from their own Churches and McGovern's. What the British want is to make some explorations toward the possibility of talks, and to say that they have been in consultation with us. This is not an urgent matter over the week end, if only because Wilson is safely in Bonn. It will be up for judgment early next week.

My own opinion on the general diplomatic front is that we can always get to the conference table when we need to, and that there is no great hurry about it right now. (Dean Rusk agrees, though he wants to keep the British just happy enough to hold them aboard.) I think there is a lot to be said for detailed and careful study of the bargaining problem in all the various forms which it may develop. But for the moment it seems to me that we are exactly right to stick on the line which you have set. The one thing we might add is that of course we are willing to talk about ending the North Vietnamese aggression and that talks on that subject in any forum would always be welcome. Dean's backgrounder yesterday went a little way in this direction, and I think we would all be helped by knowing your own reaction to the resulting stories by Roberts, Frankel, et al.

SECRET

- 4 -

PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE

6. Bob and I pressed upon Dean our own feelings that it is important to have contingency planning on what we should do if in spite of our best efforts there is either escalation by the enemy or continued sharp deterioration in South Vietnam. The military planning for reactions to escalation is mostly done, but we do not feel confident that we know just what our actual decisions should be and would be if there were North Vietnamese ground movements over the demarcation line or large movements of Chinese forces into North Vietnam, or both. We estimate both of these as unlikely for the moment, but we have to be ready for them. The crucial question is, in a sense, whether and when you would authorize landings of a number of U. S. divisions in South Vietnam.

A closely related question on escalation is whether it would be useful right now to get a substantial allied ground force in place in the central and northern part of Vietnam. Max Taylor is doubtful about this, but in the heat of discussion last night Rusk, McNamara and I all thought it worth serious further exploration. A force which had Australians, Filipinos, Thais, Koreans and conceivably even Pakistanis would give real international color to the defense of South Vietnam and would also have a substantial braking effect on any possible Communist escalation. We will be asking for your thoughts on this one too.

7. Finally, on the subject of contingency thinking for sharp deterioration, we agreed, in spite of Dean Rusk's reservations, that such thinking should be done -- but very, very privately. Rusk points out that when men even look as if they were planning for defeat, they make defeat more likely, and he is right. So our current plan is that there should be no paper work on this subject at all, but simply some intensive discussion limited completely to the three of us and one subordinate each. There will be no papers, and this mission will not exist anywhere except in this memorandum.

8. I need not tell you how helpful it will be to have your reactions to this discussion. There is nothing in it that makes it urgent for you to respond today or tomorrow, but I will be right here if you want to comment.

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