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Johnson, Lyndon B.
Point 2 The Vantage Point

Only under Johnson

Exploring the Avenues To Peace in Indochina

This is the seventh of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"DEFEATING AGGRESSION AND SEARCHING FOR PEACE (VIETNAM 1965-1967)"

In the summer of 1965 I came to the painful conclusion that an independent South Vietnam could survive only if the United States and other nations went to its aid with their own fighting forces. From then until I left the Presidency, we had three principal goals: to insure that aggression did not succeed; to make it possible for the South Vietnamese to build their country and their future in their own way; and to convince Hanoi that working out a peaceful settlement was to the advantage of all concerned. Those three main strands of action—defeating aggression, building a nation, and searching for peace—were tightly braided together in all that we, the other allies, and the Vietnamese tried to accomplish over the next three and a half years.

U.S. forces, which had numbered 75,000 in July, increased to about 184,000 by the end of the year. We felt certain that the South Vietnamese forces, with our cooperation, could begin to take the offensive in 1966.

Clearly, however, the Communist forces were far from defeated.

We had to do what was necessary to resist them. In the meantime, my advisers and I kept searching for some way to bring the war to an end by diplomatic means rather than on the battlefield. Few Americans realize how intensive—and extensive—that effort was over the years. Only a handful of my closest advisers knew of all the many attempts we made to get into a dialogue with Hanoi. The fact is that from 1965 until January 1969 we were in virtually continuous contact, either directly or through intermediaries, with leaders in Hanoi or their representatives. Hardly a month passed throughout that period in which we did not make some effort to open the gateway to peace. Until March 31, 1968, every attempt we made was ignored or rejected by the North Vietnamese.

In July Secretary McNamara suggested that, once the troop deployments he was recommending had been



completed, we consider making another intensive effort to find a way to peace negotiations. He thought that our effort should include a bombing pause of considerable length, perhaps six to eight weeks. By November 1965 McNamara decided that we had reached the point he had anticipated. He wrote me a long and detailed memo on November 7 setting forth his views. He described the situation in Vietnam as he saw it and listed the various options open to us. He pointed out that the large U.S. troop deployments of the previous months had prevented the Communists from inflicting the "serious military defeat" that had been threatened. McNamara was convinced, however, that we would never achieve our desired goals in Vietnam with the force we had there at that time (160,000 Americans in Vietnam and about 50,000 more scheduled to go), and that more men would be needed. He believed that we would also have to step up the campaign of military pressure against the North.

McNamara felt strongly that before we took either of these actions—sending more men and exerting more pressure on the North—we should try to find a way to peace, using a bombing halt to reinforce our diplomacy.

My first reaction to McNamara's memo was one of deep skepticism. The May pause had failed, and I was sure that Hanoi would probably view a new

cessation in the bombing as a sign of weakness. My skepticism was shared by McGeorge Bundy and even more by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Rusk pointed out that Hanoi had given no sign of interest in a reasonable settlement, and he was convinced that a bombing pause would have no positive result at that time. Rusk also believed that leaders in Hanoi might try to make it hard for us to resume bombing by dangling the possibility of talks before us, talks they had no intention of making into serious negotiations. He felt that a bombing halt would have a bad effect if it led only to prolonged talks while the enemy continued the war full force. Rusk felt strongly, however, that we should continue to try to probe Hanoi's outlook through diplomatic contacts. If the North Vietnamese gave some firm sign that they would lower the level of fighting or enter into serious negotiations, he said, we then should end the bombing.

At lunch one day late in November, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin told McGeorge Bundy that if there could be a pause of "twelve to twenty days," we could be assured that there would be "intense diplomatic activity." A Hungarian diplomat advised Secretary Rusk that, in his opinion, "a few weeks would be enough." No one was offering any ironclad guarantees, but their overall tone was hopeful.

Inside our government, the weight of opinion increased gradually in favor of a pause. McNamara was a strong advocate. Mac Bundy moved to uphold his position. George Ball was an outspoken supporter of the idea. Secretary Rusk finally decided that, all things considered, it might be worth the risk. The top civilian echelons of the State and Defense departments were solidly in favor of the proposal. Resistance centered mainly in the military services and in our Embassy in Saigon. I had grave doubts about a pause, but I was reluctantly moving toward acceptance of the risks I believed were involved.

Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy came to my ranch in Texas on December 7, 1965, to argue their case.

On December 18 I met in the Cabinet Room with some of my chief advisers. I had asked two old and trusted friends from outside the Executive branch to join us for discussion. They were Clark Clifford and Associate Justice Abe Fortas, men whose experience and intelligence I valued highly. I wanted to review all the arguments, all the pros and cons. I began the discussion by saying: "The military says a month's pause would undo all we've done." McNamara reacted quickly: "That's baloney."

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