

LBJ Reacted Cautiously to Break

This is the 12th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO"
[VIETNAM 1968-1969]

(Part One)

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3, 1968, began like most days in the White House. I was up early and read through the morning papers over breakfast.

Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson of Washington came into my office with his wife and their two children, Anna and Peter. Peter was celebrating his second birthday. I gave the children gifts and the White House photographer took a birthday picture. At that moment, Tom Johnson rushed in from the Press Room with a piece of ticker copy in his hand. He handed it to George Christian, who passed it to me. It was a bulletin from Singapore reporting a Hanoi broadcast. It said, in effect: "Hanoi is ready to talk."

In minutes the Situation Room sent me the full text of Hanoi's statement. After a long preamble criticizing us bitterly, the Hanoi statement said:

It is clear that the U.S. government had not correctly and fully responded to the just demand of the DRV government, of U.S. progressive opinion, and of world opinion. However, on its part, the DRV government declares its readiness to send its representatives to make contact with U.S. representatives to decide with the U.S. side the unconditional cessation of bombing and all other war acts against the DRV so that talks could begin.

Secretary Rusk was in New Zealand attending a meeting of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, so I asked George Christian to call Acting Secretary of State Katzenbach and Defense Secretary Clifford for their reactions.

"The first three-quarters of Hanoi's statement is the standard Communist attack on us," Katzenbach said. "But there is a more interesting and crucial part that follows." He believed that this key passage went "further perhaps than Hanoi has ever gone before."

"The President took the first step so that Hanoi could have an opportunity to take the next step," Clifford said. "Then the President could take a further step. This may be what Hanoi could have in mind. They seem to be responding to the President's initiative." We discussed this possibility for a while, then went on to other Cabinet business.

I had asked my principal foreign policy and military advisers to meet me for lunch after the Cabinet meeting. But several appointments intervened

in Viet Peace Talk Stalemate

and we could not get together until after three o'clock. Except for Rusk, the "regulars" were all present—Clifford, Wheeler, Helms, Rostow and Katzenbach in place of Rusk. General Maxwell Taylor and Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy were also there, and I had asked Ambassadors Goldberg, Harriman, and Thompson to join us. Our main task was to decide how to reply to Hanoi's statement. Everyone present favored a positive re-

sponse, but some wanted to go further than others. After hearing various points of view, I asked Katzenbach, Cliffords and Goldberg to go across the hall to the Treaty Room and draft a statement for our consideration.

"We have to prevent everybody from getting their hopes up too high," I warned. "We have to be aware that we're still far from peace." One adviser pointed out that "the debate in the Senate has been washed away by events." Another said: "Apparently it's easier to satisfy Ho Chi Minh than it is Fulbright." One adviser favored delaying any action until we had full agreement with the South Vietnamese and had consulted our other allies. "Let's not rush into this," he urged. "We are not rushing," I said. "But there are two things we have to do: One is to go out to (Ambassador) Bunker to explain what we are thinking; the other is to get out a positive statement now. I want to move, but I don't want to rush."

On the evening of April 3 I met in the Cabinet Room with congressional leaders from both parties to discuss the tax bill. During the meeting I received the draft of a message my advisers thought we should send immediately to Hanoi. The message said that we had read the North Vietnamese statement and would accept their proposal. Our representative, Averell Harriman, would be available immediately to meet their representative. We suggested they meet in Geneva on April 8. If that arrangement was not agreeable, we would accept "any reasonable alternative suggestions" by Hanoi regarding time and place.

What was Hanoi's official position? We decided the only way to find out was to ask. We also wanted Hanoi to

understand our position clearly, so we prepared another message. We pointed out that it would be difficult for us to meet in Phnom Penh because we had no diplomatic relations with Cambodia and no Embassy or staff there. There would be many technical problems with communications and other facilities. We sent the message for delivery to the North Vietnamese in Vientiane. But before it could be delivered, a "flash" message arrived from Ambassador Sullivan in Laos. A North Vietnamese diplomat had come to our Embassy and promised that his government would answer our proposal of April 4 that same afternoon. We stopped delivery of our second message until we learned what Hanoi had to say. Early the next morning, April 8, we had our answer. The North Vietnamese agreed to meetings at the ambassadorial level, but they were sticking to Phnom Penh as the site. They insisted it was an "appropriate" location. They did not mention Geneva or any other place, but their message left the door open for counterproposals.

At noon I met with Rusk, Clifford, and Rostow in the Cabinet Room. We studied Hanoi's reply word by word, line by line. Rusk said he thought the South Vietnamese would strongly prefer New Delhi as the site for contacts, and there was also a good case for Rangoon. We all considered it preferable to hold the talks in Asia, assuming that Hanoi would not accept Geneva. Clifford reminded me that I and oth-



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ers had frequently said we would meet "anywhere, anytime."

"We have to assume that there is drinking water there, don't we?" I said. You can't hold a formal international conference on a desert or a mountaintop. Both sides need housing and other facilities. The conferees have to be able to communicate quickly and securely with their home governments."

On the evening of April 8 I flew by helicopter to Camp David.

The next morning, I drove to the helicopter pad to greet my visitors from Washington. Ambassador Bunker had just arrived from Saigon. Rusk, Clifford, and Wheeler completed the group.

I was happy to see Bunker again. He was one of the steadiest and most intelligent men I knew. Now in his seventies, he was running our toughest world outpost. Bunker gave a comprehensive report on Vietnam, the good and the bad, the problems and the accomplishments. We talked at length about steps being taken to strengthen South Vietnamese military forces.

Averell Harriman and Bill Bundy joined us shortly after noon and during lunch we discussed the problem of negotiating with Hanoi. I wondered out loud whether Hanoi's move might not be a trap, another Tet truce, another effort to persuade us to drop our guard. Rusk thought Hanoi's principal goal was to "get rid of all of the bombing of North Vietnam," though the North Vietnamese seemed determined to continue their part of the war full scale, he said. "The talks are going to be tough," Rusk concluded. "We are going to have to hang in there. We either have to get them to make concessions or make it clear they are responsible for any breaking off of the talks."

Rostow said he thought the Viet Cong recognized they were in a weakened military position, but that they were convinced their political and psychological position, particularly in the United States, was strong. Bunker

agreed. "I think they are doing it to exploit our position here," he said. He had in mind the growing clamor in the Senate, in some editorials, and on many campuses in support of ending the war and withdrawing our forces.

Clifford said that "if they play us for fools" and we decided to resume bombing of the North, he and the Joint Chiefs had developed a list of worthwhile military targets.

Until some control mechanism could be agreed to by both sides, we would have to monitor North Vietnamese performance ourselves. That meant continuing aerial reconnaissance of the North after the bombing ended. As for a ground settlement, we agreed that our first goal should be reestablishment of the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam as provided in the 1954 Geneva agreement. We had one other minimum demand: Any talks on the future of South Vietnam had to involve the legal government of the Republic of Vietnam.

The next development concerning a meeting place came on April 11, when TASS, the Soviet news agency, reported that the North Vietnamese preferred to meet in Warsaw. If nothing else, this choice—the capital of a Communist country that strongly backed Hanoi—should have made it clear to everyone that the North Vietnamese were seeking every propaganda and psychological advantage. That was no surprise, of course, but it was ignored by many domestic critics. Even a few people in the State Department who should have known better decided that we should go to Warsaw.

By this time Senators and columnists who opposed our involvement in Vietnam were in full cry. They were insisting: "Go to Phnom Penh—go to Warsaw—go anywhere." They were anxious to get peace talks started under any circumstances, but that was not the policy of the United States. I knew that the North Vietnamese were testing us. If we accepted Phnom Penh or Warsaw, they would certainly conclude that we wanted any escape route we could find.

On April 30 I met again with my principal advisers. The Pentagon had selected four targets of military significance between the 19th and 20th Parallels that our military men felt were worth hitting.

The break came three days later. The North Vietnamese called our Embassy in Vientiane on the morning of May 3. They asked Ambassador Sullivan to come to their Embassy at 10 a.m. to receive a message from Hanoi. He did so, and his report reached Washington after midnight. Rostow called me immediately.

"Mr. President, Hanoi has suggested we meet in Paris," he said. "They have named a new negotiator, a minister. They also proposed that we meet on May 10 or a few days later." Rostow was calling from home and did not have the full text of the cable. I called the White House Situation Room and the duty officer read the message to me. I liked the way career diplomat Sullivan concluded his "flash" report. He said: "Congratulations to those in Washington whose eyeballs are made of such stern stuff."

Our negotiating team was ready to go. On Rusk's recommendation, I had originally selected Averell Harriman and Llewellyn Thompson, our Ambassador in Moscow, as our principal negotiators. However, there were several important arms control matters we hoped to work out with the Soviet Union, so I decided to keep Thompson in his post. To replace him I chose Cyrus Vance, who had handled many difficult diplomatic assignments. He was a tireless worker, and he got along well with people.

On the military side, I chose one of the ablest officers I knew, Lieutenant War College and had served President Eisenhower as staff secretary.

The political officer of the delegation was Phil Habib, a tough-minded and hard-working Foreign Service Officer from Brooklyn. He had directed the political section of our Embassy in Saigon and later was the State Department's highest-ranking officer working exclusively on Vietnamese affairs. The other full delegate to the talks was William Jordan, Far East specialist on my National Security Council staff. Jordan, a highly competent foreign affairs expert, whom I fully trusted, and a former newspaperman with long experience in Asia, would act as press spokesman for the delegation.

"I'm glad we're going to talk," I told them, "but I'm not overly hopeful. I think it is going to be tough going, very tough. . . . Some of you may think that we want a resolution of this because it is an election year. Now be clear, I want it resolved, but not because of this or any election. I don't want any of you to yield anything on the basis of that impression."

"There is just one thing I want you to have in mind," I concluded, "and that is our national interest—now and ten years from now."

We then had a detailed discussion of negotiating problems, our objectives, and the tactics the other side would probably use. There were many opinions, but I am certain no one left that meeting thinking that the Paris talks would be easy or short. I was perhaps the most skeptical person in the room.

Any optimism we felt as a result of the quick settlement of procedural matters in Paris diminished considerably after the full meetings began. The opening statement by the chief North Vietnamese delegate could have been an editorial in Hanoi's Communist party newspaper. We were the "aggressors." All right was on their side, all wrong on ours. Their solution was for us to stop the bombing and pull all our forces out. The Vietnamese—meaning the Communists—would then be able to handle things in their own way. As these denunciations and demands were repeated, meeting after meeting, week after week, our hopes for a fair compromise and an early settlement grew dimmer.

After the first week of the Paris talks, I asked Rusk to give me his personal and candid assessment of where we stood. In typical Rusk fashion he got to the heart of the matter:

The simple truth is that no one in the world can tell us what will happen if we stop all of the bombing of North Vietnam. Hanoi refuses to tell us and therefore no one else is able

to tell us. This is not a problem of diplomatic technique; there are any many ways by which Hanoi could let us know what in fact they would do if we stop all the bombing. This could be done without any loss of face on their part. It boils down to a question of will. Of course they would be glad to exchange some sort of (expanded) talks, somewhere, for a full cessation of the bombing while they go ahead with their part of the war full scale.

He added:

I realize that I am branded as a "hawk" and that this has been an embarrassment to the administration in some quarters. But looking at all of our experiences in the management of crises in the past three decades, I cannot for the life of me see how we can achieve any peace unless some elementary notions of reciprocity, fairness, and equity are maintained.

Early in June we suddenly saw what looked like a hopeful sign. I received a letter from Soviet Chairman Kosygin on the Vietnam situation. He urged me to halt the remaining bombing of North Vietnam. He and his colleagues thought—and he added that they had "grounds to do so"—that a complete halt would contribute to a breakthrough and produce "prospects" for peace. The action, would not damage either our security or our prestige. On Sunday afternoon, June 9, I met in the cabinet Room with my principal advisers to discuss Kosygin's message. What did it mean? How should we respond? Was it a "hint" or a "pledge" or a "trap"? Could the Soviets deliver on their promise? What were they really promising?

In one way or another, each of us regarded the note from Moscow as significant, but there were differences of opinion as to what it signified. Rusk thought the message lacked clarity and urged that we go back to Kosygin for more specific answers to questions. Clifford thought we should just "assume it means what we want it to mean" and proceed on that basis. I still remembered vividly Moscow's assurance late in 1965 that if we stopped bombing the North for twelve to twenty days, "something good will happen." On that basis we stopped bombing, not for twelve or twenty but for thirty-seven days—and nothing happened. As I said to one of my colleagues: "The burned child dreads the fire." What was Moscow saying now, that it had not said two and a half years earlier? Could the Soviets back up these vague promises? Just what would Hanoi do if the bombing stopped?

Our reply to Moscow included some of our questions. I told Kosygin that we were prepared to stop the bombing but that we needed assurance, which could be entirely private, that our action would result in deescalating the war. We needed that assurance to protect our men in the field and our position at home. We never received an answer to these crucial questions, from Moscow or from the North Vietnamese.

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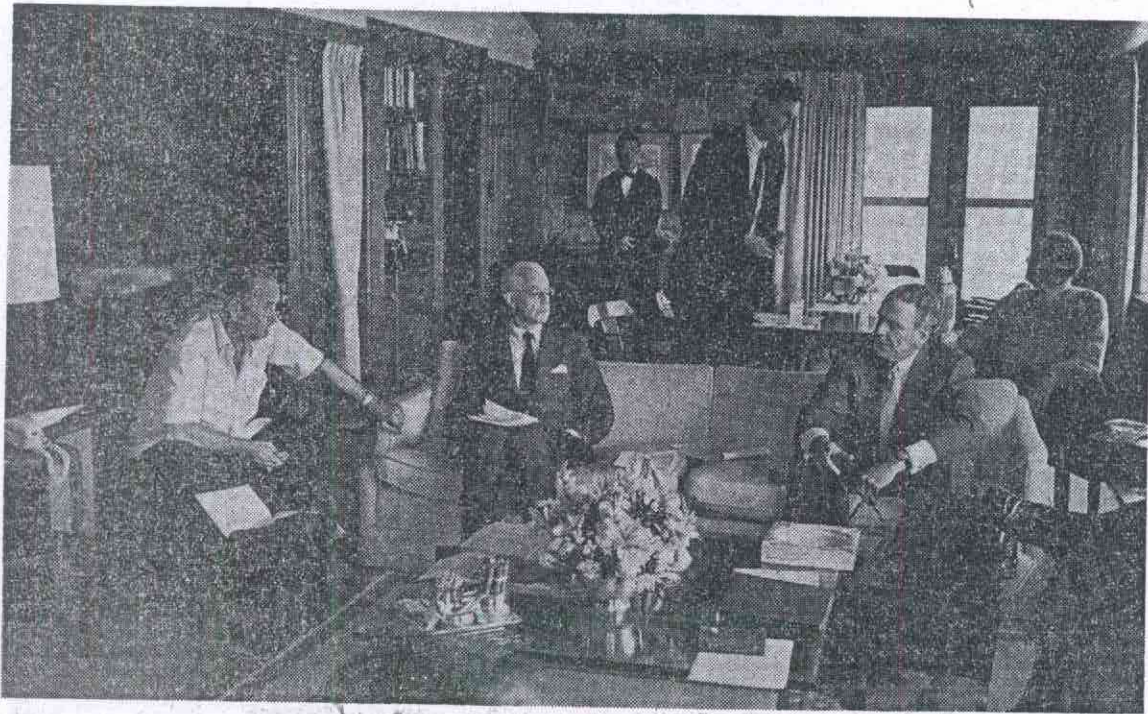
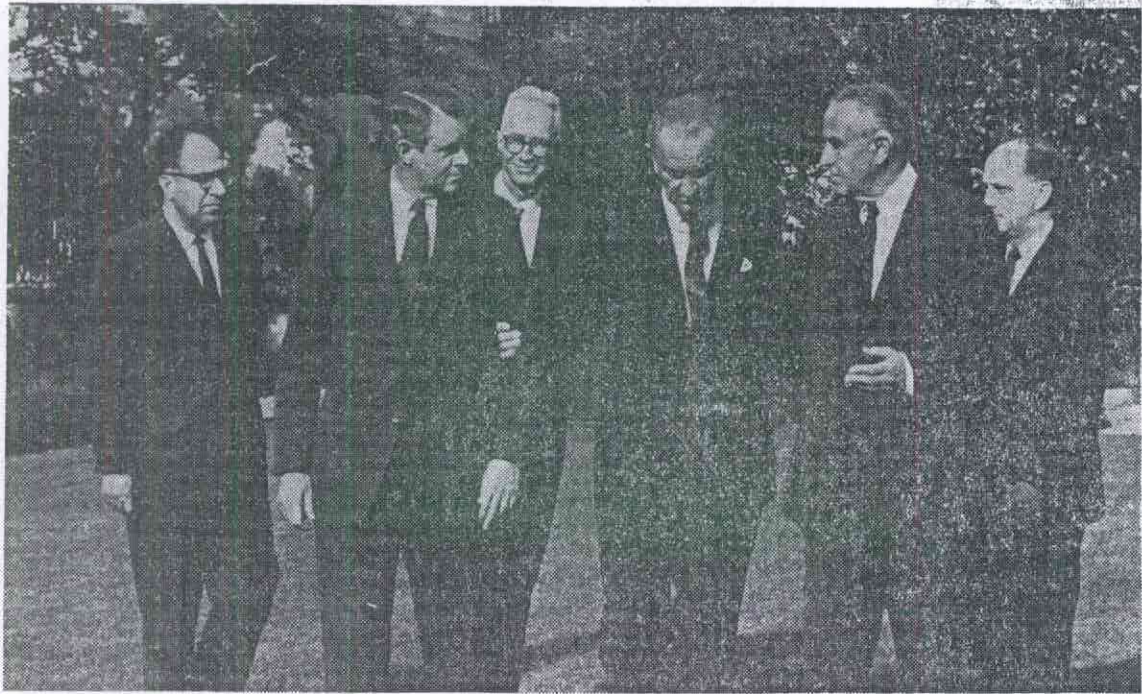


Photo by Y. R. Okamoto

President Johnson and his senior advisers, including Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker, center, gather at Camp David, Md., to map U.S. strategy for the 1968 start of Paris peace talks with North Vietnam.



Paris peace talks delegation meets with President Johnson and the press in the Rose Garden, May, 1968. From

left, they are Philip Habib, Cyrus Vance, Lt. Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, Averill Harriman and William Jorden.