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 AGRESSION 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.

LBJ's Vantage Point

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

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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 thought 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."

"I don't think so," I said. "I disagree. I think it contains serious military risks. It is inaccurate to say suspension of bombing carries no military risks." McNamara and Bundy both pointed out that "we can resume bombing at any time."

"If we're confronted with 60,000 or 100,000 more men, and we didn't anticipate it, that's an error," I said. Secretary Rusk said he doubted that the pause would last a month, "unless we are well toward peace."

Associated Press

Premier Kosygin and President Johnson at Glassboro: "The Russians were giving no guarantee of their own."

"I agree," I said. "It could be of very short duration." I asked the Secretary of State to tell me what he thought would be accomplished by a pause in the bombing. His first concern, Rusk said, was Amreican opinion. He was convinced that our people would do what had to be done in a war situation if they felt that there was no alternative. We had to be able to demonstrate to them that we had done everything we could to find the way to a peaceful settlement.

"Haven't we done this?" I asked. "To my satisfaction," Rusk answered, "but perhaps not to that of the American people."

"Second," Rusk continued, "it is our deepest national purpose to achieve our goals by peace, not war. If there is one chance in ten, or twenty, that a step of this sort could lead to a settlement on (the basis of) the Geneva agreements and the 17th parallel, I would take it." Finally, the Secretary of State said he thought a bombing pause would place the responsibility for continuing the war where it rightly belonged, on Hanoi and on those who were saying that only our bombing of the North stood in the way of peace.

After all the main arguments, for and against, had been placed on the table, I turned to Justice Fortas and asked him to summarize the views presented and to give me an evaluation of them. Fortas said that he thought the key to the matter was whether other governments with influence in Hanoi would use a bombing pause to encourage the North Vietnamese to respond with deeds to our initiative. He said that he had heard no evidence that they would and, therefore, the net result would be negative, he thought. We would receive little credit for trying to find peace and failing. We would also face renewed pressure for drastic action if the peace move failed. On balance, then, Fortas believed that the arguments that had been made were not sufficient to justify a pause at that time.

Clifford said that he had tried to figure out the circumstances under which North Vietnam would talk peace. He thought that would happen only when the leaders in Hanoi believed that they were not going to win the war in South Vietnam.

"I don't believe they are at that stage now," he said. "I think they believe they are not losing. They are sending large numbers of men down. They have the example of the French before them. They believe that ultimately the United States will tire of this and go home, and North Vietnam will prevail. Until they know they are not going to win, they will not talk."

The arguments of two of our country's best legal mind were cogent, clear, and effective. Their opinions carried weight with me, and I was reluctant to overrule the judgment of these old friends and intelligent observers. But the opposing arguments were equally persuasive. This was another of those 51-49 decisions that regularly reach the President's desk and keep him awake late at night.

I left that four-and-a-half-hour meeting still weighing the advantages and disadvantages, but I was inclined to try a pause, at least a short one.

During this period of intense and open diplomatic activity, we did not abandon the channels of "quiet diplomacy." On December 28 we sent a message to our Ambassador in Burma, Henry A. Byroade, instructing him to contact the North Vietnamese Ambassador in Rangoon immediately and, through him, to inform the North Vietnamese directly of the bombing halt. He was also directed to say: "If your government will now reciprocate by making a serious contribution toward peace, it would obviously have a favorable effect on the possibility of further extending the suspension." In the absence of Hanoi's Ambassador, Byroade delivered our message to the North Vietnamese Consul General, who said that he would send it to Hanoi immediately.

In the middle of January we delivered the same message to the North Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow. We also urged Hanoi to enter into private and direct talks with us so that together we could find a way to work out a peaceful settlement. Hanoi's only immedate answer was to say that we had no right to bomb North Vietnam in the first place. Once again, the North Vietnamese insisted that we accept their four-point plan—including withdrawal of all American forces—as the only basis for peace. One week later the same message came back to us through the North Vietnamese Embassy in Burma.

At times we were in direct contact with Hanoi's representatives. At other times we reached them through a third government. In some cases, private citizens were encouraged to pursue contacts that we thought might lead to serious talks. We were in touch regularly with Hanoi either directly or indirectly from early 1965 to the opening of the Paris peace talks in May 1968.

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During this same period, early in February, Soviet Chairman Kosygin was visiting Prime Minister Wilson in London. Vietnam was one of the many matters they discussed. Wilson seemed to feel that he and the Soviet leader could serve as mediators and bring about a settlement of the war. I doubted this strongly. I believed that if the Soviets thought they had a peace formula Hanoi would accept, they would deal directly with us rather than through a fourth party. But I was willing for our British friends to try.

We thought that the sequence was clear: Hanoi would first stop infiltration; we would then stop the bombing and, in addition, we would agree not to increase our troop strength in Vietnam. That is what I told Ho Chi Minh in my letter. I recognized, of course, that the new proposal altered the Phase A-Phase B plan we had discussed earlier with the British and had offered to Hanoi. Instead of asking the North Vietnamese to promise to take steps to reduce the fighting after the bombing ended, I wanted them to begin cutting down their actions against the South before we stopped the bombing. I felt strongly that this change was justified by the hard fact that during the bombing pause then underway very large southward movements of men and supplies were taking place in the area above the demilitarized zone. I refused to risk the safety of our men in I Corps by stopping air strikes before Ho Chi Minh had acted. On the other hand, I went further than ever before by proposing to freeze U.S. troop levels in the South.

The British read our message differently. They considered it a restatement of the Phase A-Phase B plan, with which they were familiar—that Hanoi would have to agree to halt infiltration but would not actually stop until after the bombing was suspended. When Wilson discussed this with Kosygin, the Soviet leader asked for the proposal in writing. The British gave a document to him without specific approval from Washington, which was an error, though I am confident that they acted in good faith. The result was a diplomatic mix-up for which we shared a certain amount of the responsibility. The British, with some embarrassment, had to go back to Kosygin with the revised, and correct version of our proposal. That was the evening of February 10.

The hard but unfortunate truth was that the leaders in Honoi had snubbed the two-phase approach before the Wilson-Kosygin sessions, and they turned it down again late in 1967. So I could not share the Prime Minister's feeling, which he expressed in the House of Commons, that "a solution could now be reached."

When I met with Chairman Kosygin in the small town of Glassboro, New Jersey, on June 23, 1967, the Soviet leader told me that just an hour earlier he had received a message from the authorities in Hanoi stating that if the bombing of the North were stopped, Hanoi's representatives would talk with us. Kosygin said it was his understanding that those talks could start a day or two after the bombing ended. They could take place in Hanoi or New York, in Moscow, Paris, Geneva, or elsewhere. Kosygin's words made it clear that he was simply passing Hanoi's message on, nothing more. The Russians were giving no guarantee of their own. It was also clear that Hanoi was making no promises concerning its own actions, or its share of the war. Ho Chi Minh was offering only talk in return for real military restraint on our part, but Kosygin urged me to take the action Hanoi requested.

When I met Kosygin again on Sunday, June 25, my answer was ready. Tell Hanoi, I said, that the United States is ready to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. I told him we assumed that following the cessation of bombing there would be immediate discussions between our representatives and those of Hanoi. I said that those private talks could take place "in Geneva, Moscow, Vientiane, or any other suitable location."

I also asked the Chairman to inform Hanoi that American and allied forces in the northern provinces of South Vietnam would not advance to the north. We would expect that Hanoi's forces in and near the demilitarized zone would not advance southward.

I asked Chairman Kosygin if he had any comments. He said that although the proposal contained "certain qualifications," it looked all right to him "on the whole." He agreed to send it immediately to Hanoi, and I am sure that he did.

N response to our proposal ever came back, either directly or through Moscow. Despite many subsequent exchanges with the Soviets on Vietnam, they never gave us an answer. Nor did anything ever come from Hanoi. The door to peace was still tightly barred.

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In June 1967 a new possibility for contact with the regime in Hanoi developed, and we decided to follow it up in stubborn hope that it would produce results. A group of scientists and intellectuals from France, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States met in Paris that month. Among other subjects, they discussed the problem of Vietnam. A group of the participants decided that Herbert Marcovich, a French scientist taking part in the talks should go to Hanoi to sound out North Vietnamese attitudes toward negotiations. It was suggested and agreed that a second Frenchman, Raymond Aubrac, a friend of Marcovich and a man who had known Ho Chi Minh for many years, should accompany him .

The two set off in July. In Hanoi they met twice with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, and Aubrac talked once with the aging Ho Chi Minh. On their return to Paris at the end of July, they met promptly with an American who had taken part in the June discussions. He was Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, a professor of government at Harvard and now President Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs. The Frenchmen told Kissinger they thought Hanoi would negotiate as soon as the bombing of the North ended. They had the impression that the bombing halt need not be "permanent" or at least that the United States would not have to describe it as being permanent. A de facto stoppage would be sufficient, without public announcements.

Fuzzy as the "impressions" seemed to be, we decided to follow up the matter. After careful study, we authorized Kissinger to inform the North Vietnamese, through the French intermediaries, that the United States was willing to stop bombing the North if a halt would lead "promptly" to "productive discussions" between us. We were prepared to assume that while discussions were going on, either in secret or in public, North Vietnam would not "take advantage" of the bombing cessation. We were ready to discuss this approach, or any other that Hanoi might suggest, in private talks.

In mid-August Dr. Kissinger relayed our position to the Frenchmen, who found it a promising response. They immediately applied for visas to go to Hanoi. Two days later Kissinger told the Frenchmen that they could inform the leaders in Hanoi that beginning August 24 there would be a "noticeable change in the bombing pattern" in the vicinity of their capital. This, we felt, would provide strong proof of our seriousness and would erase any doubts Hanoi might entertain regarding the authenticity of the channel we were using.

But in a few days the North Vietnamese representative in Paris told the Frenchmen they were not going to receive visas. They appealed but obtained no satisfaction. When Hanoi's official in Paris argued that it was "too dangerous" for them to visit Hanoi, they told him that they had assurances on that and were not concerned. Finally, on August 25, when it was obvious that no visas would be forthcoming, the Frenchmen passed along to the North Vietnamese in the French capital the essence of our position as well as the notification of a bombing cessation around Hanoi. It took Hanoi more than two weeks to answer our message. When that delayed reply arrived, it was harsh and totally negative. "The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam energetically rejects the American propositions," it said.

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But Their Efforts Had to Be Doomed

By Chalmers M. Roberts

An appendix to today's excerpts from former President Johnson's memoirs lists 72 "major peace initiatives" in the period 1964-68 by the United States, the British, Canadians, U Thant and others with capsulized responses listing in each case either a turndown or only silence.

The body of this installment details some of the more important American efforts, including the one that first brought Henry A. Kissinger into active Vietnam diplomacy. Two deal directly with the role of Soviet Premier Kosygin—the London talks through Prime Minister Wilson and Mr. Johnson's meeting at Glassboro with Kosygin. Omitted from today's excerpts, because it already is well known, is the Polish initiative code named Marigold.

What we read today is an insight into Mr. Johnson's approach and details of the advice he received from such key men as Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy. In 1965 Rusk showed more reluctance than McNamara to gamble on a bombing halt, for example.

Here, too, the former President tells us of the advice of Justice Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford, then a private citizen. Clifford, as was well known, was then a war hawk. Fortas, about whose role Mr. Johnson has more to say later on in his book, summarized the arguments for and against what turned out to be the 37-day bombing pause. But Mr. Johnson tells us nothing to indicate that Fortas had any special knowledge of Vietnam; he simply applied a lawyer's approach which we now know was totally inadequate.

Henry Kissinger, Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas: to bomb or not to bomb.

Harold Wilson has since contended that the President, hardening his position while Kosygin was in London, lost a chance for peace. The story has been detailed in Chester Cooper's "The Lost Crusade" which supports the Wilson thesis more than that of Mr. Johnson. In his memoirs, the former President indicates he had no real advance faith in Wilson's effort but he does concede that he altered his earlier so-called "Phase A-Phase B" proposal. Wilson ended up furious; Mr. Johnson writes that "the result was a diplomatic mix-up for which we shared a certain amount of the responsibility."

It is evident enough now that the two sides were sparring. There simply was no basis for agreement because each sought victory. Mr. Johnson, of course, never puts it that way but he does open this chapter with the assertion that "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."

The United States wanted an "independent" South Vietnam; North Vietnam did not. The terms for an agreement, even for talks about an agreement, thus amounted to a demand by each that the other surrender its basic war aim. Hence it is no wonder that nothing was accomplished in this 1965-67 period except escalation of the war and stage-setting for what was to come in 1968.

What the former President tells us today generally fits with what the Pentagon papers disclosed. What is missing from the Presidential account, however, is the implication from the Pentagon papers that much of the support for the 37-day bombing halt that began in December, 1965, was based on the thesis that the pause would serve best to put more pressure on Hanoi.

Mr. Johnson makes no mention, for example, of the idea propounded by Assistant Defense Secretary John T. McNaughton that the pause could be a "ratchet" that coupled with the air campaign against the North would serve as a device to reduce tension and then increase it. That hope of pressuring Hanoi to accept American terms never was realized.

The Johnson account today emphasized that the key to the president's reluctance to agree to bombing pauses was his belief that "Hanoi would probably view a new cessation in the bombing as a sign of weakness." Mr. Johnson, already worried by American opinion, was determind to win the war. Each pause was agreed to reluctantly and over the protests of his in-house hawks. Only the fact that the alternative—more fighting, more men killed, more billions spent—was so grim led him to agree. And after each pause and each diplomatic probe proved fruitless he seemed more determined than ever to fight on and on.

It would take another year with its Communist offensive and domestic pressures to end the war before the President would try another tack.