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By Lyndon B. Johnson: First Steps Toward Peace

INSTALLMENT X

Following is the 10th of 11 installments of excerpts from Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoirs of his Presidential years, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 1 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

Wednesday, April 3, 1968, began like most days in the White House. I was up early and read through the morning papers over breakfast. I listened to the radio news and glanced again at the front pages. One item, which I had heard broadcast the previous afternoon, was receiving considerable attention. In a speech on Tuesday Senator J. William Fulbright had told the Senate that the partial bombing halt I had ordered three nights before added up to only "a very limited change in existing policy." He forecast that the halt would not move Hanoi in the direction of peace talks.

I was surprised by Fulbright's reasoning and by his timing. We had stopped bombing over more than three-fourths of North Vietnam, an area where 9 out of every 10 North Vietnamese lived. That was much more than a "limited change" in our actions. Moreover, I believed Hanoi was perfectly able to judge the significance of our move without advice from Americans.

In the Senate discussion following Senator Fulbright's speech, Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and other Senators spoke up strongly in defense of our action and disputed Fulbright's charges. Senator Mansfield recalled the long talk he and I had had on the evening of March 27 and he disclosed that I had informed him on that occasion that we were going to stop bombing north of the 20th parallel.

To my mind, the principal issue was not where the precise line marking the no-bombing area was drawn but rather how Hanoi would react to our self-imposed restriction. The key question in the Senate discussion, I believed, was raised by Senator Frank Lausche of Ohio: "How can Ho Chi Minh give any affirmative action when the Senator from Arkansas and others attack the Government before Ho can respond?"

While Fulbright's allegations dominated the news stories and headlines, Lausche's pertinent question received scant attention. I saw it mentioned only once, in The New York Times on April 3, and then only in the 30th and last paragraph on Page 14.

These reflections put me in a bad mood as I prepared to leave for the

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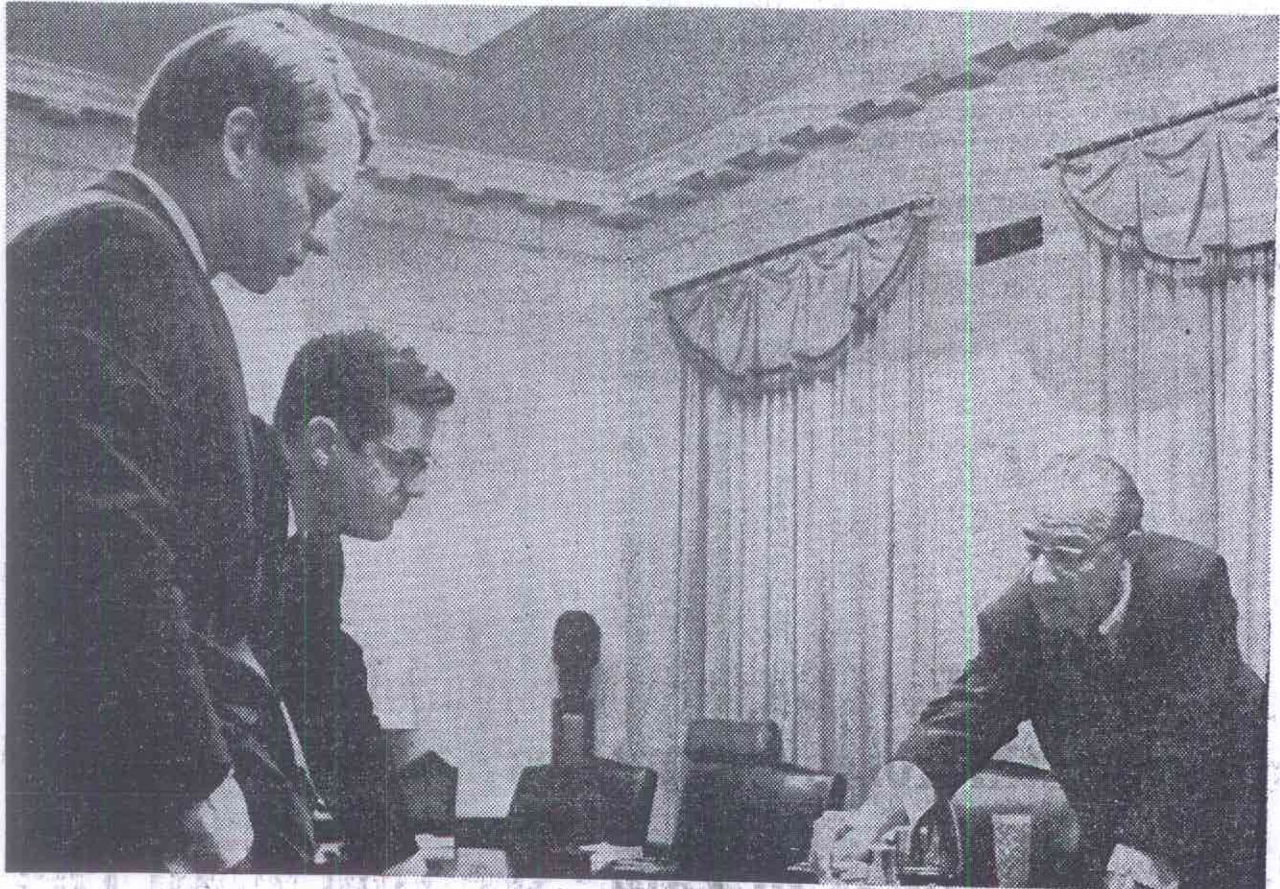

Y. R. Okamoto

President briefing Robert F. Kennedy, candidate for Democratic nomination, and aide, Theodore Sorensen, on April 3, 1968. On the same day, he received bulletin, "Hanoi is ready to talk."

Y. R. Okamoto

President Johnson with Premier Aleksei N. Kosygin in June, 1967, at Glassboro, N. J., a compromise between Washington and New York

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Oval Office, but I cheered up when my grandson Lyn came in.

Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson of Washington came in 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 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."

We sent another message to Vientiane for delivery to Hanoi. We noted that we had proposed Geneva as a meeting place; Hanoi had suggested Pnompenh. We pointed out that we had no representation in the Cambodian capital and therefore were suggesting alternatives convenient to both countries — namely Vientiane, Rangoon, Jakarta or New Delhi. We would accept any of these if the host government agreed. We advised them we were ready to meet on April 15 or as soon after as would be convenient to Hanoi. We asked for an early reply.

Hanoi's official message arrived from Vientiane in the early morning of April 11. The North Vietnamese suggested April 18 as the date for contacts, proposed Warsaw as the place and named Ha Van Lau, a veteran of the Laos talks in 1962, as their representative. In a short time news-agency bulletins were quoting diplomatic sources as saying the United States would probably give "quick approval" to Warsaw. Once again a handful of people in Washington were ready to read the President's mind, and a few reporters were ready to assume that people who knew very little knew a great deal.

I was opposed to public meetings with the North Vietnamese in an openly pro-Hanoi capital. The deck would be stacked against us, just as it had been in the early peace talks in Korea. The South Vietnamese and our other allies had no relations with Poland, no representation in Warsaw. The Communists would control all facilities and arrangements and would have the local press 100 per cent on their side. Poland was supplying arms and other support to the North Vietnamese and could not pretend to neutrality. In addition, Poland was then conducting an anti-Jewish campaign, and I refused to meet in a place where some members of our delegation or our press corps might be refused entrance or be unwelcome. It surprised me that some members of the press never understood this.

On April 18 we tried again to solve the problem with Hanoi. We had already offered to meet the North Vietnamese in one European city and four cities in Asia. We asked them now to consider other possible sites. We suggested six in Asia—Colombo, Kabul, Katmandu, Kuala Lumpur, Rawalpindi and Tokyo, and four in Europe—Brussels, Helsinki, Rome and Vienna. We informed Ho Chi Minh that our negotiators would meet his at any of these 15 places "at the earliest date suggested by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." The next day, Radio Hanoi criticized all our proposals and then, with the twisted logic Communists have mastered, claimed that any delay was our fault.

To break the deadlock, we contacted Hanoi once again. In substance, we said: "Let's consider capitals neither of us has yet mentioned. Our representatives could meet privately in one of them to work out agreement on a place for the contacts. If you nominate three places, we will answer promptly." Hanoi's reply was to suggest again that we meet in Warsaw. Later the Indonesians tried to solve the dilemma by offering an Indonesian ship as a meeting place. There could hardly have been a more neutral site than a neutral ship on international waters. We accepted; Hanoi refused.

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."

I called Dean Rusk, waking him from a sound sleep. We agreed that this move looked like the development we had been hoping for, and Rusk thought we should accept immediately. At 8:30 that morning I met in the White House with Rusk, Clifford, Rostow and George Ball, who was succeeding Arthur Goldberg at the United Nations. We agreed on our answer to Hanoi.

OUR negotiating team was ready too. 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. Harriman had more experience dealing with the Communists than almost any man in government.

The American delegation flew to Paris the next morning. On Friday afternoon, May 10, I received word that the first contact had been made with the North Vietnamese. Cy Vance and several colleagues had met for almost two hours with Ha Van Lau and his aides. Their purpose was to arrange for meetings of the full delegations, and they hammered out agreements on most matters during that first session. Vance reported that the atmosphere had been "cordial and businesslike."

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.

The break in the stalemate came during the second week of October. In a private meeting with our delegation the North Vietnamese asked if we would stop the rest of the bombing if we had a clear answer concerning South Vietnam's participation in the next stage of talks. Harriman said that he would consult Washington. When the report came from Paris, we felt the ice was beginning to melt.

Ambassador Bunker and General Ab-

rams agreed with our proposal to instruct our Paris negotiators to tell the North Vietnamese we were ready to set an early date for total cessation of armed attacks against the North. We planned to suggest that "serious talks" begin the day after the bombing halt and would insist that representatives of the Republic of Vietnam take part.

Harriman and Vance would also emphasize that we could not maintain the total bombing halt if North Vietnam used the area in and near the demilitarized zone to attack our forces or otherwise take advantage of our restraint. Nor would we maintain a bombing cessation if the North Vietnamese and Vietcong continued to strike at the major cities in the South.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously favored the halt, provided that we continued aerial reconnaissance over the North and would resume bombing if Hanoi grossly violated the understanding.

We received agreement from all our allies. Then we went ahead with the North Vietnamese in Paris. But the arrangement we had agonized over so long and so patiently began to fall through. The North Vietnamese had said earlier that once the bombing stopped a meeting could be held "the next day." Now when we proposed exactly that, they balked. It was impossible, they said. They would have to consult the Liberation Front. They did not know how long that would take. They charged us with raising new "conditions."

Then the whole arrangement, so painfully developed after so much time, began to unravel not only in Paris but in Saigon and even, in a way, in Washington.

In Paris we went through two weeks of stalling and haggling and new demands from Hanoi's delegates. They wanted more time. They wanted us to sign a paper stating that the bombing halt was "unconditional." They wanted us to agree to a conference of "four parties" rather than the "two sides" we had consistently demanded.

Finally, step by step, hour by hour, argument after argument, we worked out a new arrangement with the North Vietnamese. They dropped the idea of a written agreement. They shortened the time between the bombing halt and the first meeting from "weeks" to two weeks, to one week, to about three days. They also understood we would regard the meetings as "two-sided" and would not recognize the Liberation Front as an independent entity.

Once all the differences were resolved and Hanoi had met our essential requirements, we felt obliged to go forward on the pledges our negotiators had made. But as we reached accord in Paris, our agreement with President Thieu fell apart. We had planned a joint announcement with the South Vietnamese on the bombing halt. As late as Oct. 28, when Ambassador Bunker and Thieu had gone over the final version that both Governments had worked on long and hard, the South Vietnamese President had said: "I don't see how we can ask for anything more." By the next day, however, the South Vietnamese were asking for more—more time and assurances that they could deal with Hanoi, not the Liberation Front. Neither demand was practical.

I believe South Vietnam's failure to move with us on the bombing-halt announcement and to send a delegation promptly to Paris had at least as much to do with American domestic politics as with Saigon politics. Thieu and Vice President Ky and their colleagues had become convinced, I believe, on the basis of reports from their embassy in Washington, that Mr. Nixon would win the Presidential election. Also they had been shaken up by Vice President Humphrey's speech in Salt Lake City on Sept. 30, in which the Democratic candidate had said that he would stop all bombing if he were President.

I believe Thieu and his colleagues were eager to get on good terms with what they thought would be the new Administration. I had reason to believe they had been urged to delay going to the Paris meetings and promised they would get a better deal from a Nixon Administration than from Humphrey. I had no reason to think that Republican candidate Nixon was himself involved in this maneuvering, but a few individuals active in his campaign were.

ONE other feature of the planned bombing halt deserves mention, and that is aerial reconnaissance. We had decided, even before our delegation went to Paris, that we would have to continue reconnaissance flights after a bombing halt. Until we had some effective system for inspecting and policing our arrangements with North Vietnam, we needed those flights to make sure Hanoi did not take military advantage of our restraint and endanger our men south of the demilitarized zone. The instructions given Harriman and Vance included this sentence: "The U.S. intends to continue certain reconnaissance flights, and the record should not preclude such flights."

At Paris the North Vietnamese demanded from the outset that we stop not only the bombing of the North but "all other acts of war" against their country. They indicated that they regarded reconnaissance as one of those "acts." To meet this point, we proposed a new formulation in July. We told Hanoi's representatives we were prepared to stop all bombardment of the North as well as "all other activities that involve the use of force." Clearly, that would exclude reconnaissance by unarmed or even unmanned flights. We knew, of course, that the North Vietnamese would never formally agree that our reconnaissance could continue with their blessing. We hoped that by making our intentions clear the North Vietnamese would find it possible quietly to accept our actions. We felt reassured on this when, in October, Hanoi's negotiators finally agreed to drop their "acts of war" formula for our "acts involving the use of force."

Once the October decision had been made, we explained to the press in background sessions in Washington and Paris that we would continue aerial reconnaissance. This was mentioned in press stories all over the world, and the North Vietnamese knew precisely what to expect. After the total bombing halt went into effect, however, the North Vietnamese pretended there had been no understanding on this matter. They began shooting occasionally at unarmed reconnaissance flights. When that happened, we protected the flights by sending armed escorts to accompany them and by retaliating against antiaircraft sites that were attacking our pilots and planes.

I regretted more than anyone could possibly know that I was leaving the White House without having achieved a just, an honorable and a lasting peace in Vietnam. But during those final days of transition I felt that I was turning over to my successor a situation more promising and manageable than it had been for years.

A certain degree of violent disagreement with our Vietnam effort was inevitable, but I am convinced that it passed the bounds of reasonable debate and fair dissension. It became a self-inflicted wound of critical proportions. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that this dissension prolonged the war, prevented a peaceful settlement on reasonable terms, encouraged our enemies, disheartened our friends and weakened us as a nation.

Those who created division, who opposed decisions and who made it more difficult to accomplish the job need to reflect on the consequences of their actions. Those who burned draft cards, waved Vietcong flags and shouted obscenities at the police need to think objectively about whether their activities did not make longer and harder and more dangerous the job of the brave men fighting for us all—and the job of Asians fighting for the independence and dignity of their nations. Those who wrote of these events—whether of war or of protest—should search their consciences to see whether their assessments were accurate, fair and objective or whether their personal feelings affected their private versions of history and thereby the balance in public opinion.

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Tomorrow: Johnson's last year in the White House