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26 September 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Possible Rapprochement Between North and South
Vietnam

1. Summary. The information, rumors and interviews on which Joseph Alsop's article in the 18 September Washington Post was based are but the most recent signs that the GVN, the DRV, and the French may have been engaged of late in exploring the possibilities of some kind of North-South rapprochement. It is highly unlikely that any such explorations seriously concern imminent reunification, since Hanoi's frequently stated conditions for unification would entail the capitulation of the GVN and the handing over of South Vietnam to the Communist North. We consider the chances less than even that the GVN is now seriously interested in some form of rapprochement of lesser dimensions than reunification -- e.g., de facto cease-fire, formal cease-fire, or some variant of neutralization. Nevertheless, there is sufficient possibility of serious Ngo family interest in such latter rapprochement to merit continuing close attention. A variety of motives could induce (or may have already induced) the Ngo's to explore the possibilities of rapprochement with Hanoi: (a) a desire to develop their own "sanction" to counter threats of US aid cuts and provide the GVN some maneuverability in face of US pressures; (b) a general interest in maximizing available options during a crisis period (e.g., one in which they might find themselves losing the military support necessary to prevent total defeat); and (c) a new willingness to listen to long-standing French arguments or overtures. We would expect such exploratory activity to subside if US/GVN relations or the course of the war against the Viet Cong should improve--and, conversely, to increase if either of these should further deteriorate.

2. The Alsop article. On the basis of information available to us, Alsop's facts would appear to be essentially correct, but his conclusions should be examined in the perspective of considerations he does not mention. A chain of events somewhat similar to that which Alsop recounts occurred last year: In March 1962, Ho Chi Minh indicated in an interview with Wilfred Burchett his interest in a peaceful

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25X1 solution to the Vietnam problem. (It should be noted that the last confirmed visit of Burchett to North Vietnam occurred in March 1962. Hence it is possible that Alsop is referring to the 1962 visit, not a more recent one.) In September 1962, [redacted] Ho had said he was prepared to extend the hand of friendship to Diem ("a patriot") and that the North and South might possibly initiate several steps toward a modus vivendi, including an exchange of members of divided families. There is an appreciable difference, however, in the GVN response to the 1962 situation and its present behavior. Though rumors of some form of contact between Nhu and the Viet Cong have been extant for years, the existence of such contacts has heretofore been denied. Now, however, Nhu acknowledges contacts with the North and has dropped transparent hints that the GVN would not necessarily refuse to consider overtures from Hanoi.

3. Although none of the recent rumors and speculations concerning an arrangement or accommodation between the DRV and GVN has been spelled out in any detail, we believe the principal factors affecting any meaningful rapprochement would be the following:

a. Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nhu is a brilliant, shrewd and ambitious man, with a consummate interest in maintaining his political power and all the accoutrements necessary to its exercise. He has a deep antipathy toward the Hanoi regime, reinforced by the fact that the Viet Minh probably tortured and killed his oldest brother. Nevertheless, it would be quite in character for Nhu--and Diem--to seek some measure of maneuverability vis-a-vis the US to avoid being boxed between two unacceptable alternatives: abject surrender to US demands or a loss of all political power. It is within this context that the likelihood of Ngo family dealings with North Vietnam should be assessed. We believe that if Nhu and Diem feel themselves soon to be faced with such extreme alternatives, they might well be moved to cast about for some sort of agreement with Hanoi. Diem would be less likely to accept an arrangement with Hanoi than his brother, but circumstances are now more propitious than before for Nhu to argue this course. Nhu's acute appreciation of Communist tactics and untrustworthiness would probably set limits to the nature of any agreements with the DRV to which he would be a willing party. Nhu would not be likely to consider unification an acceptable alternative. However,

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if the Ngo's were moved to seek a rapprochement with the DRV on terms less drastic than reunification--e.g., a ceasefire--they might seriously entertain the almost certain minimum DRV demand for the removal of US forces.

b. The DRV. Although recent progress made by South Vietnam in waging the war against the Viet Cong has caused Hanoi to extent its timetable, no available evidence indicates that the Communists are anything but confident of ultimate victory. Thus, Hanoi is not yet in a position where it feels any pressure to seek a rapprochement with the GVN on any but its own terms. So far as reunification is concerned, the DRV's minimum conditions--as frequently spelled out by Ho--include the termination and withdrawal of all US military support from South Vietnam and the establishment of a national coalition government within South Vietnam to include all political groups, including the Viet Cong. The coalition, in turn, would negotiate with Hanoi on terms of reunification for all Vietnam. These conditions would be patently unacceptable to Diem and Nhu. However, Hanoi might be willing to consider something less than reunification, particularly if it thought that its aims could thereby be achieved more quickly and cheaply than by continuing a campaign of armed insurgency. Hanoi's conditions for such a more modest rapprochement might be considerably less stringent.

c. The French. Despite present stresses in Franco-US relations, it is unlikely that France would offer to replace US assistance to the GVN (even if the French felt able to make such an offer, which they probably do not). In fact, France is not likely to make any aid offer sufficiently substantial and concrete for Nhu to feel sanguine about casting the US aside and turning toward negotiations with the DRV under an umbrella of French support. On the other hand, France would certainly not discourage--and may well be actively abetting--overtures from Saigon or Hanoi exploring the possibilities of a rapprochement and a neutralization of South Vietnam. At least some key French officials probably feel that Hanoi is almost certain to dominate the Indochinese peninsula eventually since the army and political organization which vanquished France is not going to be defeated by the South Vietnamese, even with US assistance. To persons of such persuasion, it probably appears that France's long-

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term interests lie in seeking a posture which wins Hanoi's friendship and may one day enable France to serve as Hanoi's bridge to the West. One indication of the existence of such sentiments is the degree of French support enjoyed by Tran Van Huu--a former French puppet premier under Bao Dai who now resides in Paris and actively advocates a neutralist solution for South Vietnam. French attitudes toward Vietnam are colored by a desire to regain as much influence as possible in Indochina, reinforced by a dislike at seeing US predominance in South Vietnam and Laos. Officials holding such views are likely to receive a sympathetic hearing from De Gaulle, for there is little in such lines of argument that he would not find appealing.

d. Attitudes within South Vietnam. Even if Nhu himself were inclined in this direction, he would find "selling" a deal with Hanoi to key elements of the Vietnamese population a delicate and difficult problem. The difficulties, in fact, would appear virtually unsurmountable at the present time. Nhu could not reasonably expect to effect any real rapprochement with the North without signalling his intent to the ARVN generals--and the US intelligence community.

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[redacted] Nhu's adroitness and skill in political manipulation cannot be ignored, however, and if he were genuinely anxious to pursue such a tack, he might believe, rightly or wrongly, that he could outmaneuver even his military opponents, particularly if he had some commitment of French assistance.

4. Caveat. The preceding argument is based on the assumption that Diem and Nhu, although operating under tremendous pressures, remain essentially rational. Some observers, including Alsop, feel that both Ngo brothers may no longer be rational. Should this be the case, the likelihood of Nhu's endeavoring to seek an accommodation with Hanoi must be assessed considerably higher than indicated above, for Nhu's essential judgments of his own capabilities, his country's interests, and the degree of the Communist threat would no longer be balanced or realistic. To a somewhat less extent, the same would also have to be said of Diem--though he would be more likely to withdraw totally from the world (e.g., into a monastery) and leave all political decisions to his brother.

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