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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Speculation on Hanoi's Motives

1. Consistent with its past reactions, Hanoi might have been expected to reject President Johnson's initiative or any other move short of an "unconditional" cessation of bombing. Or it could have stalled for a time, while testing various international currents, and perhaps sounding out its Allies in Moscow and Peking. Instead, Hanoi moved quickly and invented a new stage called "contacts" with the US.

2. Assuming that such contacts are actually intended, several different interpretations are possible for a move of this significance. These rest on alternative appraisals of the total situation which Hanoi may be making. The basic factors which would enter into such appraisals would be the course and prospects of military

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action, the viability of the GVN/ARVN under continued pressure, and the effects of election year political currents on the US will to continue the struggle.

3. In theory, Hanoi's appraisal of the situation could range from high confidence through uncertainty to near desperation. In the following paragraphs we consider each of these cases in turn.

CASE I. Hanoi's Appraisal is Highly Optimistic

4. This hypothesis rests on a judgment by Hanoi that the military-political results obtained since Tet and those in prospect in the near future are turning the balance of the struggle in its favor. Hanoi has always said that at such a stage it would be correct to begin talking while still fighting. The fight-talk tactic has been portrayed as a forward move to exploit major military and political successes and leading to the final resolution of the conflict on Communist terms. What could not be known by Hanoi was when the most propitious moment would arise to employ this tactical line; there is considerable evidence suggesting that it believed 1968 would be the "decisive" year, and that it expected the Tet offensive to contribute greatly to this result.

5. The North Vietnamese could read the President's statement as confirming that a decisive stage had, indeed, arrived. They could interpret his decision not to stand for re-election as an admission of failure for his policy in Vietnam, just as they claimed that General Westmoreland's departure indicated a "comprehensive defeat" for his military strategy. They could believe the failure to send large reinforcements to South Vietnam vindicated their predictions that US international commitments plus domestic pressures would eventually limit the US buildup. And they could view the bombing restriction as a concession forced by increasing domestic pressures for peace in Vietnam.

6. The experience of the North Vietnamese leaders in 1953-54 would strongly incline them to such interpretations of American political developments. Even if the Tet offensive fell well short of its hopes, Hanoi would still regard its position as quite strong and Saigon's position as significantly weakened. They would expect negotiations to accelerate the decline of the GVN and exacerbate US-GVN tensions. And they would believe that continued and perhaps intensified military pressures would strengthen Hanoi's bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States. Thus, the confluence of events in South Vietnam and the United States could be regarded as having created optimum conditions for beginning the

"fight-talk" phase. Hanoi was able, with little time lost in deliberation, to move in the direction already anticipated by its basic strategy.

CASE II -- Hanoi's Appraisal is Uncertain

7. An alternative explanation would be that Hanoi is not entirely confident of its overall position and foresees a long and increasingly costly struggle. While able to endure this, it would prefer not to do so and the President's initiative offered an opportunity -- though not an ideal one -- to give greater emphasis to the political aspects of the struggle. Even if Hanoi believed the US position was weakened and Saigon shaky, it would also recognize the risk of escalation if the President's move had been totally rejected. Hanoi might calculate that by removing himself as a candidate the President was in a better position to adopt new military measures against North Vietnam if necessary. Added to these risks, Hanoi might have seen a certain loss in failing to respond when international reaction to the US move was generally favorable.

8. Under this hypothesis, Hanoi would still have some expectation of being able to combine the talks with fighting in such a way as to force a favorable settlement. They would recognize that

both sides would be under certain pressures not to allow a complete breakdown in the discussions. They would also recognize that some further concessions would probably have to be made to gain a complete cessation of the bombing; and though their forces would still be capable of further military successes, these would not likely be decisive in bringing about the collapse of the GVN/ARVN.

9. Nevertheless, Hanoi would still see advantages to opening discussions with the US. The bombing restrictions would be prolonged, at least for a while. Saigon would be more and more apprehensive about a secret deal at its expense. In this atmosphere even local military success might have a strong psychological impact on the Allied side. The pressures for continuing the talks would probably be greater on the US than Hanoi. And if, in the end, the talks failed, Hanoi would at least be no worse off.

CASE III - Hanoi's Appraisal is Pessimistic

10. A third alternative is that the North Vietnamese view the overall balance of forces as distinctly unfavorable and are more or less compelled to settle on whatever terms can be negotiated. The results of the Tet offensive might have forced a reappraisal of their military capabilities, leading to the

conclusion that the strains of the war were too great and the prospects of success too doubtful. Though physically capable of further fighting, it is conceivable that they have concluded that another round of attacks would almost surely fail, would be devastating to morale and raw capabilities and might force them to end the war on highly unfavorable terms or fade away, or call on the Chinese to help. On the other hand, a failure to deliver the promised "second wave" would be encouraging to the GVN and the US. The President's statement provided a way out. As long as Communist forces remained intact, negotiations might still hold some prospect of salvaging the Front as a legitimate political instrument and causing an eventual American withdrawal.

CASE IV -- Other Contingencies

11. A final explanation is that there has been some dramatic change in Hanoi. For example, the North Vietnamese populace could be far more restive than we can determine. This of course might prompt concessions to end the bombing, if not the war. Or it could be that there has been a change in the top leadership itself. There has always been the chance of a struggle to succeed Ho Chi Minh. Hanoi's quick move to establish contact with the US could thus be a move in an internal contest or even the first act

of a new and more flexible political leadership. While such a change in command would not in itself have to lead to a change in basic policy, it could explain a shift in tactics.

Conclusion


12. Among the alternative explanations suggested above, our current evidence suggests that the truth lies somewhere between Case I and Case II. This would mean that Hanoi considers that it can register further military successes at costs it can afford to bear even if it would prefer not to, that it believes the will to persist is beginning to crumble on the US/GVN side, and that hard bargaining combined with continued military pressure can bring a favorable outcome eventually.

13. If our interpretation is generally correct, then it is probable that Hanoi had for some time been preparing to make a diplomatic initiative -- that the President's statement merely offered an unexpectedly hopeful opportunity to get on with a policy already substantially determined. This is not to say that Hanoi's position in meetings will be conciliatory; on the contrary its representative will probably take a hard line,

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demanding an unconditional halt to all bombing and reconnaissance over North Vietnam. We do believe, however, that Hanoi probably wants to talk, and that it will not seek pretexts to back away from establishing contact with the US.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ROBERT SMITH  
Chairman

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