

3 May 1965

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Consequences of a Pause in Bombings
of the DRV

1. One of the principal dangers of interrupting the program of bombing the DRV lies in the interpretation the other side might put on such a move. The present self-imposed limits on these bombings must suggest to the Communists that US policy is already operating under considerable restraints. If these bombings were simply suspended, they might believe that their own estimates and convictions were being borne out, that US determination and will power were weakening under the pressure of Communist threats and of international and US domestic opinion. They might think that, by taking some superficial and minimal political moves, they could effectively tie up the US in debates and arguments about negotiating, thereby raising the political cost of a resumption of air strikes. And in fact it would not be easy for the US to resume its strikes.

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2. Whatever the Communists might conclude about further intentions, they would have the opportunity to reopen some infiltration routes, increase the flow of supplies to the VC, repair bomb damage, and regroup for further operations. They would certainly use the opportunity to improve their air defenses so that a resumption of air strikes would be more costly.

3. But the bombings are a means, not an end in themselves, and if they continue without interruption their effectiveness as a means may in fact never be tested. This is because it is psychologically and politically very difficult for the DRV to agree to any negotiations while under bombardment. And while strikes upon the northern part of the country would increase the hurt, they would also increase this difficulty.

4. It can thus be argued that one way to test Communist intentions would be temporarily to halt the bombings before extending them to northern North Vietnam. How the US presented such a pause would be important in its effectiveness. In particular, it would be important to convince both the South Vietnamese and the Communists that this was a limited concession and that the interruption was without prejudice to further action. In effect,

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to choose between some degree of accommodation, or a greater US commitment and heavier punishment of the North.

5. If, under these circumstances, the Communists chose to negotiate, the US would have some high cards which were not available in February; it would have demonstrated its readiness to bomb the DRV, to commit US forces, and to stay in the game. If they declined to negotiate or posed clearly unacceptable conditions, then the US would be in some respects in a stronger international position when the bombings resumed. This would be even more true if the VC launched its expected offensive during such a pause. In short, the pause would put various speculations and estimates of Communist attitudes to the test and might in certain respects strengthen the US international position.

Communist Attitudes to Negotiation

6. An intricate relationship is developing between Hanoi, Moscow, and Peking. Moscow seems to favor negotiations and China stoutly opposes them. Hanoi has offered little encouragement to the idea, but there is recent

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evidence, beginning in early April, that the DRV has softened its own position.

7. On 4 April, it was announced that the DRV Council of Ministers had met and discussed "the new situation and new tasks." We know nothing of what policies may have been adopted, but subsequent events suggest that the DRV may have decided to move closer to a negotiating position. One immediate result was a reshuffle of the DRV cabinet, not disclosed until 7 April, with a new Foreign Minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh. He is thought to be more sympathetic to the USSR than his predecessor and was included in the delegation sent to Moscow on 10 April. It would be a reasonable move, if negotiations were anticipated, to make such a change in Foreign Ministers.

8. Of equal significance was the meeting of the DRV National Assembly and the speech of Premier Phan Van Dong (delivered on 8 April and released the twelfth), which offered a four-point plan to be "recognized" as the basis of the "soundest" political settlement and for reconvening a conference on the Geneva pattern. The main

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point of this pronouncement was its failure to state, as Ho Chi Minh had done a few days earlier, that US withdrawal was a strict precondition for negotiations.

9. Meanwhile, the USSR seemed to be reviving some political initiatives which had been stalled since early March. On 3 April it proposed to the UK that they as co-chairmen call a conference on Cambodia. Shortly thereafter Gromyko, who had just told the French that Southeast Asian problems should not be discussed during his visit to Paris, reversed his position. It seems unlikely that the USSR would have made these moves without a green light from Hanoi, since it was generally understood that a Cambodian conference would be used for contacts on Vietnam. The proposal for this conference was approved in the Soviet-DRV communique at the end of the secret talks in Moscow (13 April). Finally, various Soviets have claimed that the DRV has become more flexible on negotiations and that Soviet influence has gone up.

10. These indications make a far from conclusive case, and the great bulk of Communist statements on negotiations have been heavily negative. It may be that

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more bombings of the DRV, not a pause, are needed to produce a willingness to negotiate. On the other hand, it may be that continuation or intensification of the bombings would be interpreted in Hanoi or Moscow as a rebuff to recent moves, in which case the consequences could be a hardening of the Communist posture.

Timing and Circumstances

11. The timing and circumstances of any interruption of bombing of the DRV could be crucial factors. As noted above, the cross currents on the Communist side suggest that a pause in the near future might be well-timed. It may be, however, that any pause would be effective only if Hanoi were convinced, by word or deed, that the US was willing to bomb the northern DRV if need be. Otherwise, the Communists might conclude that the US bombings in the southern part of the DRV had run their course and that the US was greatly reluctant to expand the war and bomb northward in the DRV.

12. A more immediate factor in the timing of a pause is the possible relation between US actions and the tactics of the VC, particularly the chance of a major

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offensive in the near future. Suspension of bombings of the DRV in the wake of a successful VC offensive would look like weakness. On the other hand, a pause after the VC had suffered a significant defeat might bring the DRV and VC to the negotiating table. If the VC had not yet attacked, the US move might inhibit their plans. If the VC attacked after the bombing had been suspended, it would place the US in a stronger position to justify the resumption and expansion of the bombings.

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SHERMAN KEVIN
Chairman

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