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## Prologue

### **Mission Impossible? “Operation Lumbago” and LBJ’s Thirty-Seven-Day Bombing Pause, December 1965–January 1966**

You are behaving like bandits. But if you really want peace, then we are ready to help you!

—*Władysław Gomułka to Averell Harriman, Warsaw, December 30, 1965*

Why must the Americans go sticking [their] nose in others’ business? The American government has sent their military forces here and now they must stop the invasion. . . . The Americans must piss off! . . . We don’t want to become the victors; we just want the Americans to piss off! Goodbye! *Gút bai!*

—*Ho Chi Minh to Jerzy Michałowski, Hanoi, January 6, 1966*

God damn those Chinese!

—*Michałowski, on returning to Warsaw, mid-January 1966*

The president does not want to be treated like a “fool.”

—*Norman Cousins to a Polish UN diplomat, conveying the White House’s reaction to Polish arguments to prolong the bombing pause, January 30, 1966*

**O**n a cold night in the Cold War, in the depths of a Warsaw winter, a phone rings after midnight. One clerk calls another—their names need not detain us; they are bit characters in our story, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the ensuing intrigues—what matters is that, at 1:40 a.m. on December 29, 1965, a U.S. Embassy officer awakens a Polish functionary on “a very impor-

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tant and urgent matter.”<sup>1</sup> Their talk concerns a hot war in jungles and rice paddies half a world away. When he first took office, Vietnam had been a mere foreign policy migraine for Lyndon Baines Johnson. Anxious to block Communist gains yet pursue an ambitious domestic agenda (and secure election in his own right), he had kept the crisis on a back burner, despite upping military advisers by 10,000, to 25,000, in the year after John F. Kennedy’s assassination. But by late 1965, he could not mask that America was now in a major ground war, with nearly 200,000 troops engaged and more en route. Despite his efforts to downplay the intervention’s scale and gravity, and the usual rallying around the flag, a vocal, growing minority dissented. Vietnam, formerly a Cold War backwater, had vaulted atop the global agenda, and now some feared that it could shatter the superpower *détente* that had seemed to emerge in the final year of JFK’s abbreviated presidency, or even be the Sarajevo that sparked a nuclear World War III.

The nocturnal call alerts the Poles to a surprise aerial invasion from the west. This time it is not the Luftwaffe, as it was twenty-six years before, still living memory for many Varsovians, but a single U.S. plane bearing a special presidential emissary—W. Averell Harriman, the grizzled seventy-four-year-old statesman and former financier known as “the Crocodile” for his habit of erupting from seeming slumber at meetings to snap off a speaker’s limb. As World War II ended, Harriman had served as Franklin Roosevelt’s envoy to Joseph Stalin; then, as the Cold War set in, he had been Harry Truman’s commerce secretary; later, he had been elected New York State’s Democratic governor when Dwight Eisenhower took the White House; still later, he had been a State Department aide to JFK; and now he was serving as LBJ’s roving ambassador at large and self-styled oracle on the Communist world (to the annoyance of his nominal boss, Secretary of State Dean Rusk). His journey to Warsaw, one of a barrage of diplomatic forays in an LBJ “peace offensive,” aims to open talks with North Vietnam—or to rally public support for a sharp escalation in the coming year once Hanoi, as expected, rejected them.

When the midlevel apparatchik in the Polish Foreign Ministry’s Department III—all right, I will mention their names for the record—when Mieczysław Sieradzki groggily lifted the receiver, the voice he heard belonged to chargé d’affaires Albert W. “Bud” Sherer. Even as they spoke, Harriman’s Boeing 707 left Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington. Having received a “flash” telegram from Foggy Bottom alerting him to the impending visit, Sherer told Sieradzki that Harriman wished to see Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki to explain Washington’s latest peace terms; Rusk hoped the new U.S. ambassador, John A. Gronouski, could join them, but he was in Poznań attending a trade fair. Urgently requesting landing rights, Sherer supplied technical details about the flight and its anticipated arrival later Wednesday morning.

As Harriman sped over the Atlantic—to stop in Frankfurt, if needed, to await clearance to land at Warsaw’s Okęcie Airport—the rude awakenings continued. Sherer phoned Gronouski at 2 a.m. to summon him back to the capital;

and Sieradzki roused a deputy foreign minister, Józef Winiewicz, who reacted guardedly—it would be tough to consult the highest authority, given the late hour and absence of key figures on end-of-year vacations. Besides, as Sieradzki told Sherer, the talks' concrete aim seemed vague and their "overly spectacular" nature could attract publicity that might "hurt the cause."

But Sherer persisted and, using Washington's guidance, elaborated on the request's background. In the absence of a "major provocation," he explained, LBJ had privately resolved to indefinitely extend a brief Christmas "pause" in the bombing, whose unconditional halt Hanoi and the entire Communist world angrily demanded: "If the [North] Vietnamese side makes a serious contribution on behalf of peace, this will have a favorable effect on the future course of events. The U.S. government relays this message to the Polish government while being aware of its uneasiness and interest regarding the Vietnamese issue and expresses hope that the [Polish] government will make use of it as it sees fit." Analogous messages were being passed to Budapest and Moscow, Sherer added, implicitly prodding the Poles not to be left out of the action. He vowed that Washington would not publicize Harriman's trip and would do its best to limit the inevitable press notice.

Sherer's words had the desired effect. A Polish military counterintelligence officer awoke Foreign Ministry director-general Jerzy Michałowski, who in turn disturbed Rapacki and the man really in charge, Communist Party boss Władysław Gomułka, who decided to grant permission. Passing the news down the food chain, Winiewicz told Sieradzki that the responsible authorities had decided, given Sherer's clarifications, to let Harriman come. (Michałowski cabled Poland's ambassador in Hanoi: "We believed that our refusal could be exploited by the Americans in a predictable way.")<sup>2</sup>) While it was still hours before sunrise, Sieradzki called back Sherer, who thanked him profusely; the paperwork was hastily completed. Harriman landed at 10:30 a.m., still the wee hours by his watch. After a shower and shave at the embassy, he raced to the Foreign Ministry.

Intense conversations would fill the rest of Harriman's day, evening, and next morning, first with Rapacki and then Gomułka, whom he had met in Stalin's Moscow. They inspired Warsaw, despite its firm support for Hanoi and harsh criticism of U.S. "aggression," to send an emissary on a secret odyssey through the discordant Communist world, via the USSR and China, to carry Washington's proposals to the North Vietnamese; he even, Communist archives reveal, strongly urged them to enter talks.

These exchanges foreshadowed a year of intense hidden maneuvering between Washington and Warsaw, and between Warsaw and Hanoi—with Moscow, Beijing, and other capitals lurking in the background—over peace in Vietnam.

### **LBJ and Vietnam: "That Bitch of a War"**

Before plunging headfirst into the Vietnamese muck, Lyndon Johnson gingerly extended his toes. Having inherited a political, economic, and limited military

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commitment from JFK in November 1963, he at first hoped that the new Saigon junta that had ousted Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother in a United States–backed coup three weeks before Dallas would clean up the mess by establishing a popular, effective, and legitimate government and waging the anticommunist fight in earnest, letting the Americans remain in the background. Instead, the faction-ridden South Vietnamese military seemed more intent on staging coups, grasping for power and its spoils, than on fighting the guerrillas or setting up a rational state. The prognosis for preserving a noncommunist authority, which most U.S. officials judged a Cold War imperative, looked increasingly grim. In May 1964, after yet another Saigon shakeup, LBJ vented his doubts to his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy:

I just stayed awake last night thinking of this thing, and the more that I think of it I don't know what in the hell, it looks like to me that we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of there with once we're committed. I believe the Chinese Communists are coming into it. I don't think that we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home and ever get anywhere in that area. I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. And it's just the biggest damn mess that I ever saw.

Mentioning a military aide with “kids” being deployed to Southeast Asia, he wondered, “What in the hell am I ordering them out there for? What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is Laos worth to me? What is it worth to this country?” He mused presciently: “It's damn easy to get into a war, but . . . it's going to be awful hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in.”<sup>3</sup>

LBJ could hand-wring to Bundy or his old Senate crony Richard Russell, the conservative Georgia Democrat, but ultimately, he always reverted to Cold War orthodoxy, the antiappeasement axioms of Munich and the domino theory, and his innate terror—instilled during a hardscrabble Texas youth—of seeming “soft” or “unmanly.” All these entrenched factors dictated standing firm: “Of course,” he told Bundy, the ex-Harvard dean, “if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you right into your own kitchen.” (“If you let a bully come into your front yard one day,” he said on another occasion, “the next day he'll be up on your porch, and the day after that he'll rape your wife in your own bed.”<sup>4</sup>)

Still, Johnson put off the tough decisions until after he defeated Barry Goldwater in November 1964; during the campaign, a quick air strike against North Vietnam in reply to alleged torpedo attacks against U.S. ships in the Tonkin Gulf in August served the dual purpose of showing measured toughness to voters and securing an open-ended congressional resolution endorsing the use of force. Even then, the Pentagon Papers later revealed, secret planning and covert operations were building momentum for deeper involvement. By winter, LBJ's top advisers had judged that without sterner actions, the present course was headed for “disastrous defeat”—the weak, inept, divided Saigon regime would crumble and the Communists would waltz in, handing Hanoi and its Chinese and Soviet pa-

trons a dangerous triumph. In a famous “fork in the road” memo in January 1965, Bundy and LBJ’s defense secretary, Robert S. McNamara, argued that the only alternative to failure was “to use our military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy.”<sup>5</sup>

It was the moment of reckoning LBJ dreaded. “I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved,” he said after returning to Texas to lick his wounds. “If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.”

Recalling political shifts during previous wars, Johnson feared that right-wingers would exploit the Vietnam crisis to derail his domestic agenda. And he distrusted generals who “need battles and bombs and bullets in order to be heroic” and see “everything in military terms.” Yes, he insisted, “I could see it coming. And I didn’t like the smell of it.” Above all, the squabbling in Saigon sapped his confidence in the ally for which he was to send American boys to risk their lives to defend:

Yet everything I knew about history told me that if I got out of Vietnam and let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon, then I’d be doing exactly what Chamberlain did in World War II. I’d be giving a big fat reward to aggression. And I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country an endless national debate—a mean and destructive debate—that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy. I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.

For this time there would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine. Oh, I could see it coming all right. Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long, open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: “Coward! Traitor! Weakling!” They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up, . . . terribly shaken. But there was more. You see, I was sure as any man could be that once we showed how

weak we were, Moscow and Peking would move in a flash to exploit our weakness. They might move independently or they might move together. But move they would—whether through nuclear blackmail, through subversion, with regular armed forces or in some other manner. As nearly as anyone can be certain of anything, I knew they couldn't resist the opportunity to expand their control over the vacuum of power we would leave behind us. And so would begin World War III. So you see, I was bound to be crucified either way I moved.<sup>6</sup>

Persuaded—or, in his self-pitying nightmares, trapped—Johnson opted to spike the U.S. role. In February came a suitable provocation: A Viet Cong attack on a barracks in Pleiku in South Vietnam's central highlands killed eight Americans and wounded more than a hundred, and coincided with a Bundy inspection tour, adding an emotional tint to his advice to hit back hard. Retaliatory strikes against the North ("Flaming Dart") soon became an ongoing campaign ("Rolling Thunder") of what Washington termed "sustained reprisal" raids—misleadingly, because they aimed as much to stiffen Saigon as to punish Hanoi for backing the Southern insurgency or to impede infiltration. Marines waded ashore in March to guard an airbase near Danang, and in July LBJ announced that he would raise the number of troops from 75,000 to 125,000 (actually nearly twice that, though he did not say so openly); the mission thus crept from protecting U.S. installations to "search-and-destroy" operations to wipe out the elusive Viet Cong (the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, or the National Liberation Front, NLF, also commonly known as the Viet Cong).<sup>7</sup>

Washington felt weak on the ground and sensed only stubbornness from Hanoi, so diplomacy took a back seat to building up strength, retaking Communist-held territory, and bolstering Saigon—yet LBJ felt compelled to nod at least occasionally toward peace.

## Washington and Hanoi

Communicating with Hanoi was hardly simple, however; the two sides had never established diplomatic relations. For a fleeting moment, prospects for friendly ties had seemed bright. During World War II, operatives of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (the precursor of the postwar Central Intelligence Agency) and Ho Chi Minh's forces had collaborated against the Japanese, who seized direct control over Indochina from France in March 1945. The Viet Minh (Ho's national independence movement) helped rescue downed U.S. pilots, and the mutual warmth seemed in sync with Roosevelt's sympathy for granting Indochina independence after the war—the French had "milked" it for a century, he scorned—much as Washington had pledged self-rule for its own colony, the Philippines, once the Japanese were expelled.<sup>8</sup>

But FDR died in April, and Truman gave less priority to ending colonialism than building up postwar France, especially given strains with Moscow and the power vacuum on the continent left by Germany's defeat. On September 2, 1945,

agents of the Office of Strategic Services sat on the dais as Ho proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (quoting the Declaration of Independence), but Washington ignored his appeals for recognition and after vacillating backed French efforts to reassert control. Once Franco–Viet Minh fighting broke out in late 1946, U.S. aides debated Ho’s ultimate aims; some, stressing his ties to international Communism, urged full support for France’s bid to crush the revolt; others saw colonial rule as doomed and emphasized Ho’s nationalism, envisioning a potential “Asian Tito” able to keep his land from Kremlin sway despite ideological affinity. Squeamish about embracing the old order, Washington urged Paris to grant the Vietnamese real autonomy (much as it advised The Hague to accept Sukarno’s victory in the Dutch East Indies).

But by 1950, fears of a Communist tide overflowing East Asia swept such nuances aside—Mao Zedong’s victory in China’s civil war and forging of an alliance with Stalin, Ho’s now open entrenchment in the Sino-Soviet camp, and North Korea’s crossing of the 38th Parallel convinced U.S. policymakers to lump Indochina into the broad eastern front of the now global Cold War. Washington still gave lip service to eventual Vietnamese independence, but it now rendered Paris all-out political, economic, and military aid, short only of sending forces (which were otherwise occupied in Korea and also rushing to Western Europe, where a Soviet thrust was widely anticipated).<sup>9</sup>

Despite the U.S. help, the French faced defeat by early 1954, and the impending collapse of their besieged Dien Bien Phu garrison forced Eisenhower to grapple with the question he hoped never to face: Would Washington intervene directly to prevent a Communist takeover? With U.S. strategy geared to stemming Communist advances, a key Cold War ally in disarray and begging for help, a diplomatic showdown looming in Geneva, and politicians clamoring to confront the Red Menace, many Americans said yes; Pentagon planners even drew up “Operation Vulture” to use tactical nuclear weapons to obliterate the Communists in the jungle surrounding Dien Bien Phu.<sup>10</sup>

But Ike, having extricated troops from one Asian meat-grinder and fearing another once the flag was committed, said no.<sup>11</sup> Secretary of State John Foster Dulles grumpily managed the distasteful consequences; the French crumbled, and in July 1954, the Geneva Conference divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. In the North, the Communists set up the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as a functioning state; and the noncommunists established the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South. The Geneva Accords, a Cold War landmark, were signed by foreign ministers from both camps—Moscow’s Vyacheslav Molotov and London’s Anthony Eden, the cochairs; France and the DRV; and, in a dashing debut, China’s Zhou Enlai. Washington stood ostentatiously aloof—Dulles famously shunned a handshake with Zhou—and refused to sign the accord. Instead, it focused on bolstering the RVN and drawing a new line to quarantine the contagion; hoping to replicate NATO, it herded its allies into a Southeast Asian Treaty Organization and vowed to stem further Communist expansion in the region (see map 1).



Map 1. Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.  
Source: *Tour 365*, Winter 1968.



In theory, the 17th Parallel was a temporary demarcation to separate rival armies pending national elections within two years to unify the country; in reality, Washington supplanted Paris as the outside power propping up Saigon, and had helped Ngo Dinh Diem—a Catholic in a mostly Buddhist country—consolidate control over sects and Viet Minh sympathizers. Eisenhower encouraged Diem to ignore Geneva’s provision for elections, ostensibly because Communist strictures in the North precluded fair balloting, but also, he admitted in his memoirs, because Ho would have won 80 percent of the votes.<sup>12</sup>

As Washington tightened its embrace of Diem—hailing him as a Southeast Asian amalgam of George Washington and Winston Churchill—U.S.-DRV relations settled into a deep freeze; the acrimony sharpened during Ike’s second term with crises over Laos and the onset of a Communist armed struggle in the RVN.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy kept the policy of boosting Saigon (increasing U.S. military advisers to 15,000 from 1,000) and shunning Hanoi, with one notable exception. In July 1962, a second Geneva Conference agreed to form a neutral coalition government in Laos, a rare moment of Cold War comity. (Nikita Khrushchev and JFK were willing to defuse the issue despite rifts over Berlin, Cuba, Congo, and other hot spots.) Unlike the earlier Geneva gathering, this time Washington participated fully; Kennedy named Harriman his chief negotiator. Unlike Dulles, “the Guv” had no qualms about fraternizing with “Commies”—he prided himself on being able to deal with them, enjoying the bracing mixture of chummy gossip and trash talk—and gained Kennedy’s permission to see DRV foreign minister Ung Van Khiem privately even though Saigon would be infuriated if it found out. To elude reporters, he ducked through a back alley near the train station to reach the hotel where a Burmese diplomat hosted the talk. To break the ice, he harked back to the cooperation against Japan and asked after Ho’s health. Khiem said his people fondly recalled Roosevelt and rued Truman’s swinging behind the French; had he emulated FDR, much suffering could have been avoided.

After that promising start, the talk went downhill. Harriman warned Khiem against violating Lao neutrality, and they clashed over South Vietnam. Harriman insisted that the United States was merely helping a sovereign nation defend itself against outside interference; to his visible annoyance, Khiem called the conflict a popular “struggle” against foreign “aggression” and blamed Washington for violating the 1954 pact.<sup>14</sup>

There was no follow-up, no talk of setting up a communications channel, no further clarification of mutual perspectives or aims or probing a possible compromise deal. The furtive meeting turned out to be the *only* direct contact between high-ranking U.S. and North Vietnamese figures between the DRV’s founding and the Paris talks nearly twenty-three years later. “Let us never negotiate out of fear,” JFK had said at his inauguration. “But let us never fear to negotiate.” In this case, however, he had no desire to risk Republican or South Vietnamese wrath by opening an ongoing dialogue with Hanoi.

Had the Geneva Laos accord worked, it might have enhanced Harriman's stature and prospects for extending the neutrality model to Vietnam or opening contacts with Ho—who voiced readiness to “negotiate with ‘any’ South Vietnamese regime that was ‘willing to sit down with us at the same table and talk.’”<sup>15</sup> But it did not. Washington soon charged that Hanoi was consistently violating the pact (and had never intended to take it seriously), wrecking any slim chance that might have existed to consider the “neutral” solution that, most famously, France's Charles de Gaulle advocated.<sup>16</sup> The reflexive U.S. aversion to dealing with the North surfaced during the run-up to the November 1963 coup in Saigon. Besides the other grudges that JFK's aides nursed against Diem's regime—repression of Buddhists, corruption, resistance to reforms, diffidence in fighting Communists—they were alarmed by rumors that Ngo Dinh Nhu, his volatile brother, was secretly flirting with Hanoi.

To play footsy with Ho, Nhu allegedly conspired with a locally based Polish diplomat who periodically traveled to Hanoi to meet with DRV leaders: Mieczyslaw Maneli, Warsaw's ambassador to the International Control Commission (ICC). His presence was a unique Cold War anomaly: All Communist governments, including Poland, scorned South Vietnam as a U.S. puppet, and maintained embassies in Hanoi, not Saigon. So what was this senior Communist *doing* in South Vietnam's capital, and what was the ICC?

The 1954 Geneva Conference had created the ICC—formally, the International Commission for Supervision and Control—to monitor the Indochina pact, which set limits on military activities by both rival Vietnamese factions and foreign powers. In a delicate balancing act, the conference named as members Poland, Canada, and neutral India as chair—in the spirit of an earlier group (Switzerland, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Sweden) that made up the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission overseeing the Korean armistice.

Washington never had much use for the ICC, which was supposed to observe the 1956 balloting, and its scant regard dwindled as the group proved unable to function effectively. “This Commission was considerably better than the one arranged for Korea, in that no member had an automatic veto,” a State Department aide recalled, “but in practice, India's spinelessness, combined with the absence of real sanctions against North Vietnam's refusal to allow the Commission to travel freely, made it a paper tiger.”<sup>17</sup> Nor did U.S. officials particularly appreciate Ottawa's performance; “to watching Americans,” the historian Robert Bothwell has written of this period, “Canadians on the commission failed to act forcefully enough in combating Polish wiles.”<sup>18</sup> Citing the North's limits on the ICC to back Diem's refusal to stage national elections, the Americans proposed that the UN monitor them, but Hanoi rejected this idea as too pro-West.

By the late 1950s, the Geneva pact was effectively dead, but no one wanted to pull the plug on the ICC. It kept staff in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and Hanoi, but based commissioners and most personnel in Saigon, where logistics were easier. Because it was rarely able to reach unanimity except on minor procedural mat-

ters, it sank into a stalemate. Its meetings routinely degenerated into tabulating accusations from the warring sides and futile, if at times heated, squabbling. Occasionally, India voted with Canada or Poland, allowing a majority to slap one wrist or the other—for example, Washington’s for topping Geneva limits by sending more than 1,000 military advisers to the South or (in an unusual 1962 majority report) Hanoi’s for aiding the Communist uprising there. But New Delhi carefully rationed its alignments, alternately irking both Ottawa and Warsaw.<sup>19</sup> One reporter, calling the ICC’s staff “the loneliest men in Vietnam,” observed that both Saigon and Hanoi “tend to regard the International Control Commission with some embarrassment, but neither party apparently wants the commission to wind up its affairs.”<sup>20</sup>

Amid rising tension between Kennedy and Diem, rumors that Nhu was using Maneli to dally with Hanoi evoked the prospect, abhorrent to Washington, of the two Vietnams plotting to move the South toward neutralism. They helped convince JFK’s aides—including his new ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, a senior Republican—that Diem must go. The gossip, spread by Nhu himself, was overblown, Polish sources now confirm: Maneli spoke to both sides but was not mediating and even got into hot water with Warsaw when his name appeared in the press.<sup>21</sup> (Of course, the Americans would have been lucky if Diem *had* cut a neutralist deal with Hanoi and requested them to leave, but that was not how it looked at the time.) The Maneli intrigue made no progress toward peace, yet it served as a reminder that the ICC delegates, though unable to fulfill their nominal mandate, might still serve as critical communications links.

The need for such channels remained cogent, because LBJ had inherited an aversion to dealing directly with “Ho Chi Minh”—as Washington tended to personify the DRV leadership. Now in his midseventies, Ho had in fact mostly relinquished day-to-day decisionmaking to others, especially Le Duan, the powerful first secretary of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party (VWP; Lao Dong), and a militant Southerner who strongly backed the armed battle to unify the country—yet a figure unknown to most Americans.<sup>22</sup> In any case, U.S. officials believed, there was nothing to negotiate: Hanoi had no right to meddle in South Vietnam and thus should mind its own business. If it did not, it would suffer the consequences.

To transmit this blunt message, the inert ICC came in handy. In June and in mid-August 1964, after being briefed by U.S. aides, Canadian commissioner J. Blair Seaborn visited Hanoi, carrying a big stick (an implicit threat of force) and a hazy carrot (vague promises of economic aid should it desist). The formulation avoided the word “ultimatum,” but the DRV got the message. Courteously receiving Seaborn, Premier Pham Van Dong nonetheless insisted on a full U.S. pullout from South Vietnam before any settlement (e.g., neutralization); and on his second visit, Dong, angry after Tonkin Gulf, declared that Hanoi could not be cowed by “aggression,” rejected the *de facto* ultimatum, and forecast a Communist victory. As Washington expected, the rebuff set up a military showdown. Ottawa concluded sourly that it had been used to threaten Hanoi rather than seek nego-

tiations (Seaborn felt queasy being Lodge’s “messenger boy”). Seeing the whole exercise as futile, the Canadians flirted with ditching the ICC altogether, but in the end they gritted their teeth and awaited a more auspicious moment to reenter the diplomatic hurly-burly.<sup>23</sup> That autumn and winter, Washington also signaled a lack of interest in direct talks with Hanoi by responding diffidently to word from UN secretary-general U Thant that Ho had indicated he would approve face-to-face talks with the Americans. (We will return to this murky episode, which exploded into a public row, poisoning relations between LBJ and the Burmese statesman.<sup>24</sup>)

In early 1965, as hostilities intensified, diplomacy took a back seat. Repeatedly, Ottawa asked whether Seaborn might aid in communicating with Hanoi, but Washington said no thanks.<sup>25</sup> Johnson’s decisions to bomb the DRV and send more troops to the South alarmed U.K. prime minister Harold Wilson, who tried frantically to resuscitate the dormant Geneva process—to curb the violence, assure London a seat at the table, and dampen discontent in his own Labour Party. Moscow briefly seemed interested in reprising its cochair role, but Beijing and Hanoi shot the idea down and the effort collapsed. On April 7, LBJ publicly called for “unconditional discussions” with North Vietnam, but the next day, in a speech to the DRV’s National Assembly, Dong insisted that Washington first stop the bombing and accept Four Points at the core of any settlement:

1. “Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnamese people—peace, independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity,” which required the United States to withdraw all its forces from South Vietnam and cease all acts of war on North Vietnam.
2. Respecting the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords, intended to ensure the country’s neutrality as a prelude to unification, including, inter alia, tight restrictions on the presence of foreign military personnel which the United States had long since surpassed.
3. “The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves in accordance with the program of the NFLSV [National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, or National Liberation Front], without any foreign interference.”
4. Vietnam’s “peaceful reunification” should “be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.”<sup>26</sup>

Point three was the rub, because it implied scrapping South Vietnam’s existing regime and substituting a coalition which the NLF—Hanoi’s marionette, Washington felt—would dominate. Before talks, LBJ felt it essential to prop up Saigon, and in July 1965 he redoubled the U.S. troop commitment. Still, probing continued. In May, Johnson authorized a five-day bombing halt (“Mayflower”) that Hanoi predictably ignored. That summer, quiet soundings transpired in Paris

between a DRV diplomat, Mai Van Bo, and a retired yet authorized American official, Edmund Guillon; these intriguing “XYZ” talks covered key topics (e.g., what would actually happen if Washington accepted the Four Points), but Hanoi broke them off for unclear reasons.<sup>27</sup>

In the fall, as the violence intensified, LBJ came under mounting pressure to make—or at least seem to be making—a more strenuous bid for peace.

### Parsing the Pause

What moved LBJ to OK an extended bombing “pause” in December 1965—the first real breather to explore diplomacy after nearly a year of escalation—despite acute private doubts that it would yield any progress and fear that Hanoi would see it as an admission of weakness? The influences on him merged issues, personalities, and arguments that would resurface repeatedly during the Marigold peace initiative, so it is worth pausing, so to speak, to disentangle them.

The heart of the matter, of course, remained the war itself, and to Washington it was not going so well. The Americanization of the conflict had accelerated, yet not only had Ho failed to “blink” (à la Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis), but the Communists seemed to fight harder than ever. By autumn, top officials lamented the slow progress, and military commanders elongated earlier optimistic timetables, seeking more resources with no promise of ultimate success—“a sobering picture,” the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, William P. Bundy (McGeorge’s brother), later recalled.<sup>28</sup> In mid-November, the picture sobered up even more. In savage battles in the Ia Drang Valley, their first major clashes with the main units of the People’s Army of Vietnam, U.S. forces on a search-and-destroy mission lost several hundred dead, pushing the year’s toll near 2,000. Victory claims rang hollow; those Americans who had expected to cow the enemy with superior technology and firepower recoiled at this bloody show of tenacity and skill.

Yet, for most U.S. civilian and military figures running the war, the evidence of a tougher enemy just underlined the need to roll up their sleeves and get on with the job, send in more troops and weaponry, and keep at it until Hanoi caved. Amid louder grumbles about Vietnam at home and abroad, however, they worried about sustaining support for what they now realized was likely to be a prolonged, painful struggle. Americans still backed the war, polls said, overwhelmingly preferring escalation to withdrawal, yet a march on the Pentagon in early November dramatized dissenters’ intensity, even if their numbers were modest. McNamara watched in horror as the Quaker activist Norman Morrison set himself afire not “40 feet away from my window”; another protester immolated himself a week later.<sup>29</sup> LBJ rapped critics as unpatriotic or even Communist dupes, but his aides warned that support on Vietnam might wane, especially with rising costs projected and midterm elections nearing. On Capitol Hill, Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield and Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair

J. William Fulbright urged a bombing pause to test Hanoi before stepping up military action.

All that autumn, as concern about the war spread, LBJ secretly mulled a lengthy bombing break around the Christmas–New Year’s holidays to convince skeptics that he really wanted peace and to either open talks on acceptable terms or else get even more serious about prosecuting the war. As he vacillated and Rusk also wavered on the fence, internal battle lines congealed. The debate pitted advocates of a long pause—led by McGeorge Bundy (if only to set the table for later escalation), McNamara (fast losing faith in the bombing), and Undersecretary of State George W. Ball (the house maverick), seconded by White House aides like Jack Valenti and Bill Moyers—against hawkish military figures and advisers (Clark Clifford, Abe Fortas, and Lodge, whom LBJ had sent back to Saigon for a second term as ambassador in August). The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, decried anything beyond a token hiatus as a futile gesture that would gratuitously give the enemy a breathing spell and be hard to reverse. Hanoi would interpret any unilateral move as weakness, Lodge warned, and Saigon was too “fragile” to enter negotiations or even survive an open-ended bombing halt.<sup>30</sup>

### Hints from the Soviet Bloc

Meanwhile, some diplomats from the Soviet Bloc hinted that Hanoi might respond to even a relatively brief bombing halt. Their claims fueled momentum for a pause among top LBJ aides—not that they really believed it would lure North Vietnam to the table, but because they perceived new side gains to a conciliatory gesture: Calling the bluff might prod the Kremlin to pressure Hanoi, exacerbating its already strained ties with the Chinese, who stridently opposed talks, and tugging it toward Moscow’s more moderate stance.<sup>31</sup>

On October 7, in New York for the UN General Assembly, Hungarian foreign minister János Péter had told Rusk that if Washington ceased bombing, even for a few weeks, “conditions will improve, and negotiations leading to peace will be possible.” Despite Rusk’s probing, Péter cagily refused to say if he had recently visited Hanoi or reveal the basis for his “firm conviction” that the DRV was ready to talk.<sup>32</sup> “Everything that I have said to you I can state with the most complete responsibility,” he insisted. “We are in intimate contact with Hanoi; we are completely familiar with the intentions of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.”<sup>33</sup>

Rusk remained skeptical. But in late November and early December, Moscow’s ambassador to Washington, Anatoly F. Dobrynin—to U.S. officials a much more reliable source—seemed to corroborate the Hungarian’s claims. In a “candid and cordial” chat on November 24, the gregarious Soviet diplomat told McGeorge Bundy that to take a break of “only 12 to 21” days would produce “intense diplomatic effort,” though he could not guarantee results.<sup>34</sup>