

## **October 10, 1968**

### **Secret North Vietnam Politburo Cable No. 320**

#### **Citation:**

"Secret North Vietnam Politburo Cable No. 320", October 10, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archive of the Party Central Committee, Hanoi. Translated for CWIHP by Merle Pribbenow. <https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/113980>

#### **Summary:**

The Vietnamese Politburo briefs COSVN (the communist command in South Vietnam) on domestic politics in the United States and the possible impact of the upcoming US election. Based on the US situation, the Politburo had decided to adjust their current negotiation strategy and seek an immediate agreement with the US to end the bombing of North Vietnam.

#### **Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Henry Luce Foundation

#### **Original Language:**

Vietnamese

#### **Contents:**

Translation - English

To: COSVN

The Politburo has just completed an assessment of the situation and has decided on the following policy guidelines

#### I. Current Direction of U.S. Policy on the Vietnam War

1. The U.S. realizes it cannot win in Vietnam and that escalating or prolonging the war will only make things worse. Only by ending the war in Vietnam can the U.S. resolve its current problems and the strategic impasses it faces in its worldwide strategy. The U.S. must pay greater attention to its domestic problems than it has in the past, and it must view Europe as its first priority in foreign policy, especially after the events in Czechoslovakia.

For that reason, the current direction of U.S. policy is that it must deescalate and end the Vietnam War (although we still must be vigilant and guard against the possibility that it might expand and prolong the war). However, even if it ends the war, the U.S. believes it still must protect the interests and the position of its lackeys and it must ensure that South Vietnam remains within the American sphere of influence and that it is still a neocolonial possession of the United States. These are the fundamental similarities between the positions of the different American ruling cliques, between the positions of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, and between [presidential candidate Richard] Nixon and [Vice President Hubert] Humphrey. However, there are also some differences between these two individuals: Humphrey emphasizes peace, advocates ending the bombing of North Vietnam and withdrawing American troops, and has talked about a coalition government in which the NLF will participate. This is basically Johnson's position, although Humphrey is less rigid on certain points. As for Nixon, he advocates negotiating from a position of strength, he opposes ending the bombing of North Vietnam, and he ignores the National Liberation Front. Generally speaking, his position is one of continuing stubbornness. Although Nixon cannot go against the interests of the ruling clique and the American public, which are to end the war, if he becomes President, at some point in time and at some certain level, he might do something that would complicate the situation.

We criticize and oppose both presidential candidates for their aggressive and neocolonialist policy positions, but from the standpoint of our stratagem we must make a distinction between them. With respect to Humphrey and his followers, we should try to pull them farther toward our direction. As for Nixon and his followers, we must strongly attack his argument in favor of negotiating from a position of strength and [sic] attack his recalcitrant positions on ending the bombing, on the National Liberation Front, and on the question of a coalition government.

2. Our victories in the war have been very great, but they are still limited. Johnson believes that from now until the end of his term as president, and particularly from now until Election Day (5 November 1968), he can keep the U.S. from suffering a major defeat in South Vietnam and prevent America's problems from growing more serious.

At present, Humphrey's chances of winning the election are slim. If Humphrey fails, that means that Johnson's policies have failed. For that reason, Johnson may believe that he must take some action to deescalate the war in order to help Humphrey win the election and to make Johnson go down in history as one of America's "great Presidents."

If Nixon is elected, during the last months of Johnson's term of office (from 5 November 1968 to 20 January 1969) he might also make a number of decisions on Vietnam designed to create a situation in which Johnson would be seen as the

president who laid out the path toward restoring peace in Vietnam instead of being viewed as a war president. In that case, the new president would just be the person who continued and completed Johnson's peace policy. Or, if the new president decided to reverse course, the new president would have to take the responsibility and the blame for that decision.

## II. Our Policy Guidelines

We are now intensifying our efforts to accomplish our missions in the General Offensive and Uprising era in order to win a decisive victory. Following our formula of winning victory one step at a time, in the current situation our overall policy direction is to try to pull the U.S. down a notch in order to defeat them and to ensure that we will be able to successfully accomplish our political mission. We need to fully exploit the current direction of U.S. policy by skillfully employing our stratagem to pressure Johnson to deescalate the war in one important way, by ending the bombing of North Vietnam, in order to be able to begin de-Americanizing the war in South Vietnam and to seek an honorable way to escape from this war. The period from now until the day of the presidential election, 5 November 1968, will be a period when the conditions will be favorable for us to pressure the enemy into deescalating the war.

In order to be able to de-Americanize the war and to avoid suffering a serious defeat, a very important problem for the Americans will be to further strengthen the puppet government and to give it an important position in the resolution of the problems in South Vietnam. For that reason, according to [Personal Representative of the US President, W. Averell] Harriman, Johnson's condition for this step in deescalating the war is that the Saigon puppet government must be allowed to participate in the talks.

In order for us to persuade the U.S. to take this step of deescalating the war, our position is as follows:

1. The U.S. will unconditionally end the bombing and all other acts of war directed against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and will make a public announcement of this action.

2. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam will end all artillery shelling from North Vietnam across the Demilitarized Zone into South Vietnam and will reiterate our undeviating position that we always respect the 1954 Geneva Agreement, including the terms of the agreement on the demilitarized zone. (Once the U.S. stops the bombing of North Vietnam, our cessation of the shelling will be a natural consequence of the situation. It is not a "reciprocal action." However, the Politburo is leaving the final decision on whether or not to present this statement to the Americans, and the decision on when to present it, up to our Delegation in Paris).

3. We will agree to convene a four-party conference, but with two conditions. The first is that the U.S. must discuss this subject with the National Liberation Front, because the Front is the true representative of the people of South Vietnam, and it is the representative that is responsible for all issues involving South Vietnam. The second condition is that the Saigon government must change its policies, meaning that it will no longer view the National Liberation Front as an enemy, it will implement democracy in South Vietnam, it will take a positive attitude toward the question of a coalition government, it will recognize the path to peace and neutrality, and it will enter into good-faith discussions to resolve the problem. The question of changing the government's policy will naturally carry along with it the issue of changing individuals [in the government], but here we will emphasize the need to change policy. We do not want to propose a type of two-sided conference, with our side inviting the NLF and the U.S. inviting the Saigon government, because to do that would be to fall into the old American argument that the Vietnam problem must be settled by dealing with Hanoi.

For the immediate future, at least, the U.S. will not yet be able to accept both of these conditions, and the NLF will not yet agree to talk to the Saigon government, so the struggle on this will be protracted and there is not yet a possibility of reaching an immediate agreement on the four-party conference. Our raising of the idea of ending artillery shelling from North Vietnam into South Vietnam and making a public statement that we respect the 1954 Geneva Agreement is aimed at encouraging and pushing the U.S. to end the bombing of North Vietnam.

4. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam will continue to hold discussions with the American side on matters that each side has already raised or that they might raise in the future.

With regard to the four points outlined above, it is possible that the U.S. will accept them and that, after a period of bargaining, it will deescalate the war one notch by ending the bombing throughout the entire territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, it is also possible that the U.S. will not agree, in which case we have a plan to continue the struggle during the period from 5 November 1968 up to 20 January 1969, the final days of Johnson's term of office.

### III. A Number of Important Tasks in South Vietnam

The cessation of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam will be a victory of strategic significance for our side and a defeat of strategic importance for the United States. It will make the people of our entire nation happy and will strengthen their faith in our eventual victory. As for the puppet government, the puppet army, and U.S. and satellite troops, the cessation of the bombing will make them confused and fearful, and their confidence will be shaken.

In spite of these effects, the Johnson Administration will:

□□ Drive to exploit the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam in the election campaign and will make

□□

propaganda statements to the rest of the world about the "good will" shown by the U.S. This will, to some extent at least, increase a mistaken public belief in American "good will."

□□ Pressure us to agree to talk to the Saigon puppet government.

□□

□□ Concentrate the weapons and equipment previously used to bombard North Vietnam to increase the bombing in South Vietnam and of our transportation corridors.

□□

It will be easy for thoughts such as wanting to rest, fear of savage combat, negligence and a loss of vigilance, sitting back to wait for the results of the talks, etc. to develop in our own ranks, and this would have a negative effect on our resolve to

secure a decisive victory. Other kinds of misguided thoughts could also arise in the ranks of the NLF and in the Alliance, so we will have to keep a close eye on this problem.

Whenever the U.S. ends the bombing of North Vietnam, our government and the National Liberation Front will issue important public statements (Bay Cuong [COSVN Party Secretary Pham Hung] participated in earlier discussions about these statements).

The Politburo suggests that you carry out the following additional tasks in South Vietnam:

1. Increase ideological work among cadre, Party members, armed forces personnel, and the civilian population to ensure that every individual clearly understands the situation and the new mission, that everyone clearly recognizes that this is a victory for our side and a defeat for the enemy, and that everyone clearly recognizes the new plots and schemes of the enemy. Use this ideological work to instill absolute faith in the Central Committee and Chairman Ho, to increase everyone's spirit of revolutionary attack so that they are willing to charge forward on a tide of victory, overcoming every sacrifice and hardship, to complete their missions in an outstanding manner in order to secure a decisive victory. Heighten revolutionary vigilance and crush all enemy psychological tricks and efforts to sow division inside our ranks.
2. Intensify your puppet proselyting operations to make the puppets disintegrate and collapse quickly.
3. Step up the activities of the urban political movement to push our demands for democratic rights, that enemy thugs be purged, that the government recognize the NLF, and that a more representative government be formed.
4. With respect to the members of the National Liberation Front and the Alliance, you must do a good job of explaining the current war situation, of holding democratic discussions with them about policy directions and missions in South Vietnam, of strengthening and heightening their resolve, and of increasing solidarity and unanimity. The fact that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States are continuing to discuss arrangements for the four-party conference (arrangements about who will attend, about the ranks of the representatives, etc.) will also raise many delicate issues that will require explanations. The Politburo will send you additional guidance on this subject.
5. Immediately prepare a plan for the activities of the National Liberation Front during the struggle over the four-party conference, because the Front's voice on this subject will be very important.
6. Increase the external [foreign] activities of the NLF and study the development of a plan for the external activities of the Alliance.

If you have any additional thoughts on these matters, please send them to us.

[signed] The Politburo