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Unconscionable Surrender

Nine years before North Vietnam achieved its 1975 conquest of South Vietnam, the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson clearly signaled to Hanoi that the United States would not seek to conquer North Vietnam.

Twenty years ago this month, on February 18, 1966, then Secretary of State Dean Rusk told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — less than a year after the first U.S. combat units had landed in South Vietnam — that the administration was willing to settle the conflict peacefully. Secretary Rusk outlined a 14-point proposal, which included an end to the bombing of North Vietnam, a withdrawal of all U.S. forces from South Vietnam, and the dismantling of all U.S. military bases.

“We would not expect or require a military alliance with a free South Vietnam,” Rusk said, adding that peace could be achieved if only Hanoi would agree to his proposal.

Rusk added that a social revolution in the south, not a military victory in the north, was the United States’ goal. “That was the meaning of President Johnson’s initiatives at the Honolulu Conference — to encourage the efforts of the South Vietnamese government to transform the country in a way that will correct ancient injustices and bring about a better life for its people,” Rusk explained.

The Honolulu Conference had taken place February 6-8, 1966 between President Johnson and South Vietnam Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, former Vice Air Marshal of South Vietnam. The meeting was attended by half of the President’s cabinet, and his top military advisers. Twenty-eight top South Vietnamese leaders were also present.

The transcripts indicate that the meeting dealt almost exclusively with U.S. plans for a social revolution in South Vietnam, not with military strategy and planning, nor with a comprehensive combined plan. “We want honestly and truthfully to say that this has not been a military build-up conference of the world here in Honolulu,” President Johnson told the attendees.

The American social revolution proposed for South Vietnam was not only unprecedented in the military history of any nation, but was presented at a time when there had been nine changes at the top of the South Vietnamese government between November 1963 and February 1966! Also, the American proposal to reform the social, political and economic institutions of South Vietnam was made when the country was in the midst of a vicious terrorist war. The American “social planners” did not take into account the destructive events already resulting from the government’s instability at a time when the military was attempting to fight a guerrilla war, with limited military support from the United States.

After the Honolulu Conference, the bombing of North Vietnam was intensified but with restrictions. Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, commander-in-chief of the Pacific, spelled out those limitations: “At



Haiphong, avoid damage to merchant ships. No attacks on craft authorized unless first fired on and then only if clearly North Vietnamese.”

Soviet, Eastern European and Red Chinese merchant ships — the primary source for North Vietnam’s military supplies — remained safe from U.S. air strikes and continued to supply the means to kill U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers in the south.

Then, in October 1966, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara sought to persuade President Johnson to scale back the bombing because it had proven ineffective. He also recommended a negotiated settlement. He conceded in his October 14th memo that the social revolution launched at the Honolulu conference — by now called “pacification” — was failing.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff sharply disagreed with McNamara. General Earl Wheeler, the JCS chairman, urged an all-out air and naval sea war against the North Vietnamese. Wheeler argued that the bombing pauses had not induced North Vietnam to negotiate; to the contrary, they were a signal to Hanoi, and to our allies, of “renewed evidence of lack of U.S. determination to press the war to a successful conclusion.”

In the same week that Wheeler pressed his arguments in his memo, General Curtis E. LeMay, who had retired the previous year as Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, published a critical evaluation of the conduct of the war. (See Opinion Past, page 42 for excerpts.)

LeMay’s views strongly reflected those of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had been effectively muzzled by the administration. He pointed out that the U.S. had saved millions of lives by the use of air power in the war with Japan. And that the fear that the Soviets and the Red Chinese *might* enter the Vietnam War was raising the American body count.

“It’s a losing game for the stronger side to deliberately drag out a conflict. I thought we learned this lesson in Korea where we sacrificed some 33,000 Americans for a bogus peace,” LeMay wrote.

The events of 1966 can be seen today as the beginning of the American surrender in Vietnam. As General Wheeler and the JCS warned Defense Secretary McNamara at the time: “The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the war has reached a stage at which decisions taken over the next sixty days can determine the outcome of the war and, consequently, can affect the overall security of the United States for years to come.”