

**U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN 1968  
IN THE CONTEXT  
OF THE VIETNAM WAR**

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the effort by US foreign policymakers to predict Moscow's intentions at the end of Lyndon Johnson's Administration in the context of the Vietnam War. The war in Vietnam, which became – due at least partly to his own fault – the main problem of the last years of his presidency (1963–1969), shifted his presidency in an unintended direction – from the improvement of American society at home to the Vietnamese jungle. Immediately after the Tet Offensive, which ended with the heavy military defeat of the Vietnamese pro-communist forces, but with a great propaganda victory for them, Johnson decided not to run for reelection. He gradually lost his interest in events outside of the United States and Vietnam. In this situation, the Czechoslovak crisis – the worst in the Soviet bloc in the 1960s – came at a rather inconvenient time.

US – Soviet negotiations concerning Vietnam in 1968, in which Johnson expected Soviet diplomatic encouragement of the North Vietnamese in order to persuade them to enter peace talks, weakened the American negotiating position, and practically prevented any reaction other than a rhetorical one to the August Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. This resulted in the fact that, in 1968, the United States was simply unable to come up with a “meaningful alternative” to challenge the reality of Soviet power and rule in East-Central Europe.

**Keywords:** United States, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, Soviet invasion, relations, 1968

*“We agreed, if the Czechs stay quiet for a week, LBJ will send a message to Kosygin to revive a meeting with K. on Strat[egic] weapons & he'll try for an*

*assurance with K. that we'll stop bombing if the other side will give certain assurances".*

George Elsey<sup>1</sup>

### **To Fight 'That Bitch of a War'**

By the end of Johnson's presidency, no other issue absorbed his Administration more than bringing the war in Vietnam to a successful conclusion. Johnson became obsessed with this war. Unable to sleep, he visited the White House War Room in the middle of the night to learn whether the American bombers in Vietnam had returned safely. This obsession prevented the Administration from dealing more effectively with other problems at home and in the world. Ironically, just as the United States escalated the war in Vietnam, the Johnson Administration deescalated the conflict with the Soviets.<sup>2</sup>

Was Johnson's effort to pursue *détente* motivated by his key desire to induce the Soviet Union to put pressure on North Vietnam to start peace talks, or were Johnson's hopes badly misplaced? Did Brezhnev and Kosygin really have the means to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table? And was the final result of the United States effort to engage the Soviet Union, the largest supplier of military goods to North Vietnam, in peace talks persuasive? These questions are difficult to answer.

In January 1968, both President Johnson and his top commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, said that the war was being won. Then, in late January, a sudden and surprising event changed the existing course of the war. On January 30, 1968, the Communist National Liberation Front (NLF) launched a massive surprise offensive, taking advantage of a holiday lull during the lunar New Year (Tet). Hand-to-hand combat took place even in the United States Embassy compound in Saigon. The North Vietnamese troops suffered tremendous losses (probably 30,000 men) during the "Tet Offensive" and were eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, George Elsey during regular 8:30 a.m. staff meeting of Secretary of Defense Clifford, Notes of Meeting, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. VII, doc. 15, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/15.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/15.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>2</sup> LaFeber, Walter. *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1992*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993, pp. 255-257.

driven back. On the other hand, they managed to accomplish something they had never succeeded in doing before, namely they shattered the illusion held by many in the United States that the war could soon be won.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the “Tet Offensive” on the American public was immense. Press reports pointed out that the North Vietnamese forces had achieved a strategic victory. In retrospect, it became clear that they had suffered a devastating tactical defeat with the death rate of nearly seventy percent of their cadres in the South. In the immediate aftermath of the offensive, public opinion polls reflected a sharp shift in American public opinion against the continuation of Johnson’s efforts in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> On American television, the public began to question whether the conflict could ever be won. The war had become “at once, a human and national tragedy in the United States”.<sup>5</sup> The situation became even worse when the news was leaked that General Westmoreland, who publicly claimed a great victory, had asked President Johnson on February 27 for about 200,000 more troops. The power of American technology seemed to prove less potent than the willingness of the North Vietnamese to die for their cause.

The offensive became a turning point for the antiwar movement. American support for the war dropped drastically and, in the spring of 1968, the country was visibly divided. It became apparent that Johnson could no longer run for reelection and effectively continue the war in Vietnam at the same time.<sup>6</sup> After the “Tet Offensive”, American business and financial circles also exerted pressure on the Johnson Administration to limit the American commitment as it was their concern that budget deficits, as well as the gold and dollar crises, spawned by the war, had already damaged America’s position and further escalation of the war

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<sup>3</sup> For evaluation of Tet’s military and political effect on US foreign policy see McMahon, Robert, J. (ed.). *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1990, Chapter 9, pp. 348–399. For literature describing Tet as the major turning point of the war, see Wirtz, James J., *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991; Berman, Larry, *Lyndon Johnson’s War*, New York: Norton, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Editorial Note, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 33, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/33.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/33.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Berman, Larry. *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*. New York: Norton, 1982, p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the 1968 United States Presidential Election*. Senior Project submitted to the Division of Social Studies of Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 1976, p. 28.

would only make matters worse.<sup>7</sup> The “Tet Offensive” also reflected “probably the worst intelligence failure of the war”.<sup>8</sup>

The President started to lose support even among his associates. Clarke Clifford, Secretary of Defense, originally a strong supporter of United States Vietnam policy, became a Vietnam skeptic. When General Westmoreland put in a request for more troops, Clifford and other aides thought it was time to speak out.<sup>9</sup> Shaken by this new troop request, Johnson was surprised to learn that so many of his aides were ready to abandon the expectations of a military victory in Vietnam.

The United States found itself in a situation where it did not have “enough strength to meet a new crisis”, considering its alliances and responsibilities in Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East<sup>10</sup>. The additional expenses required for drafting more soldiers to Vietnam, as General Westmoreland requested, also meant imposition of wartime taxes. An ongoing increase in manpower and resources in the war against an abstract Communist monolith certainly did not help the situation.<sup>11</sup> As the ‘inevitable defeat’ in Vietnam became increasingly evident, it became Johnson’s primary objective to withdraw without losing face.<sup>12</sup> He was also forced to reassess his policies.

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<sup>7</sup> Kolko, Gabriel. A Decisive Turning Point. In McMahon, Robert, J. (ed.). *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1990, pp. 383–399.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from William (Bill) Jorden, a member of the National Security Council staff. Jorden regarded these events as a setback because the Viet-Cong and North Vietnamese moved probably 30,000 men into place for attacks in all parts of the country without being detected. Memorandum from William J. Jorden of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow), Subject: Situation in Viet-Nam February 3, 1968, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 49, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/49.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/49.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>9</sup> Clifford, Clark M. A Vietnam Reappraisal: The Personal History of One Man’s View and How It Evolved. In *Foreign Affairs*, July 1969, pp. 609–612, 613.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from General Matthew Ridgway, informal adviser to President Johnson. Notes of Meeting (President’s Meeting with his Foreign Policy Advisers at the Tuesday Luncheon), March 19, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 142, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/142.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/142.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>11</sup> Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the 1968 United States Presidential Election*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> On the Vietnam War during Johnson Administration see e.g. Cohen, Warren I. – Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy (eds.). *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963–1968*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 31–173; Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the 1968 United States Presidential Election*; McMahon, Robert, J. *Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; *Ibid.* (ed.). *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*:

On March 31, the President scheduled what appeared to be an ordinary speech on national television. However, he surprised the country by announcing that he would not “seek and will not accept the nomination” of his party for another term as President of the United States.<sup>13</sup> Officially, Johnson said that, in addition to personal health reasons, his decision was an attempt to heal some of the wounds caused by Vietnam. However, he had little in the way of alternatives. Only 36 percent of the American public thought that the President was doing a good job.<sup>14</sup>

### Breakthrough with Soviet Help

On March 31, Johnson declared a unilateral halt to the bombing of North Vietnam, except for a narrow strip above the demilitarized zone, and called on Hanoi to agree to peace talks.<sup>15</sup> However, the proposed peace talks in Paris did not bring much progress in the first months of 1968.<sup>16</sup> The North Vietnamese viewed the helpful American proposal as a sign of weakness and responded to it with another offensive. North Vietnamese May “Mini-Tet”<sup>17</sup> was understood to be aimed at the unleashing of “as much terror and havoc” to cause ‘as much trouble as possible’ to impress

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*Documents and Essays*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1990; Young, Marilyn B. *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991 (esp. Chapter Six to Eleven).

<sup>13</sup> See Johnson’s Television Address to the American People, March 31, 1968, *Public Papers of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–1969*, vol. I. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1970, p. 469–496; also Johnson, Lyndon B. *Vantage Point: Perspectives of Presidency, 1963–1969*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, p. 427 and McMahon, Robert J. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*, pp. 366–371.

<sup>14</sup> Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the 1968 United States Presidential Election*, p. 43 and LaFeber, Walter. *The American Age*, p. 586; Berman, Larry. To Avoid Defeat. In McMahon, Robert. J. *Major Problems of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*, p. 260–261.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Consultant (Taylor) to President Johnson, May 13, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 231, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/231.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/231.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>16</sup> Secretary Rusk, Notes of Meeting (Tom Johnson): Notes of the President’s Meeting with the President-Elect Richard Nixon, November 11, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 211, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/211.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/211.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>17</sup> A second 1968 North Vietnamese offensive known as “Mini-Tet” began at midnight on May 4, 1968. Notes of Meeting, May 4, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 222, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/222.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/222.html)>[2004-09-01].

upon and cause more despair to the American public and show the North Vietnamese “continued ability to mount substantial campaigns”. Another obvious purpose was also the possibility of influencing the Paris peace talks. However, in this case, the American military authorities were confident that they would bring the situation under control. This was made possible by the fact that the United States managed to utilize information on a preliminary warning of military action by Hanoi.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, Johnson’s offer to take the first step to deescalate the conflict was wasted by the “Mini-Tet” offensive. The North Vietnamese took maximum advantage of this and conducted infiltrations at an ever-growing rate together with the resumption of attacks on South Vietnamese cities.<sup>19</sup> The “Mini-Tet” also thwarted the United States’ basic negotiating position during the preceding months (the so-called San Antonio formula<sup>20</sup>), although it was not possible to declare that publicly.<sup>21</sup>

Lyndon Johnson, facing public pressure to end the war immediately, which was a wish shared also by some members of the Government and Congress, had high hopes in Soviet Chairman Kosygin. “As we saw it, it was through Moscow’s influence that these [peace] talks have started in Paris against Peking’s wishes”, stated Averell Harriman, Ambassador-

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<sup>18</sup> North Vietnamese Lt Colonel Tran Van Dac (until that point the highest level North Vietnamese defector who defected on May 8, 1968 near Saigon.) revealed to the Americans plans and timing of the May “Mini-Tet”. He also referred to the morale in the North as ‘not being as good as it was’ as well as to declining confidence that the Viet Cong could win. The North Vietnamese were sent to the battle with little military training. There was some evidence, allegedly, that Hanoi was moving toward the offer for the peace talks even before Johnson’s March 31 speech and was, as US Ambassador to Saigon Ellsworth Bunker believed, “anxious to continue the talks”. Quoted from Telegram from the Embassy (Bunker) in Vietnam to the Department of State, May 10, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 228, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/228.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/228.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Consultant (Taylor) to President Johnson, May 13, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 231, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/231.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/231.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>20</sup> Johnson outlined the basic American negotiating position in his September 29, 1967 speech in San Antonio, Texas. It proposed the cessation of bombing in the months to come without a demand for formal concessions from North Vietnam. In exchange for this unilateral concession, Johnson supposed that productive discussions would begin quickly and that the Communists would not engage in any buildups during the cessation period. Small, Melvin. *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Secretary Clifford, Notes of Meeting (President’s Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisers in the Cabinet Room), May 6, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 225, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/225.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/225.html)>[2004-09-01].

at-large and Head of the American delegation to the Paris peace talks.<sup>22</sup> American diplomats tried to engage the Soviets further in this matter,<sup>23</sup> and President Johnson himself stressed the need for Soviet cooperation in bringing about a peaceful resolution of Vietnam even publicly (in his speech given at Glassboro State College in New Jersey on June 4, 1968).<sup>24</sup> The following day, Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoliy Dobrynin, delivered a letter from Kosygin to Johnson stating that the Soviet leadership “believed” on the basis of solid grounds that the full cessation of US bombardment<sup>25</sup> “could promote a breakthrough in the situation”. The breakthrough could further “open perspectives for a peaceful settlement”. The Soviets, moreover, acceded to the United States’ wish that the Soviet Union should provide “some assistance” to the establishment of unofficial contacts between the United States and North Vietnamese delegations in Paris.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviet commitment to promote “unofficial contacts” with Hanoi was positively received in Washington. Walt Rostow, Special Assistant to the President, stated that this could be “a breakthrough”.<sup>27</sup> On June 9, Rostow proposed to Johnson that the United States should go further and

<sup>22</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 14, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 274, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/274.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/274.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>23</sup> Averell Harriman personally reported about this issue to President Johnson on June 22: “I told Zorin the Russians have a stake in this. We must get Russians engaged in this. You have got to go to the top, to members of the Politburo. Top Soviets are involved. Zorin came to see us. He said they don’t know what would happen if the bombing stopped”. Quoted from Notes of Meeting (Tom Johnson’s Notes on President’s Meeting of Foreign Policy Advisers), June 22, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 279, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/279.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/279.html)>[2004-09-01]. Under Secretary Katzenbach commented on it similarly on June 25: “Ambassador Harriman has a theory about the Soviets which has merit. There is no use in dealing with them anywhere except at the top”. Notes of Meeting (Notes of the President’s Meeting with Tuesday Luncheon Group), June 25, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 282, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/282.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/282.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>24</sup> Johnson delivered the speech at Glassboro, New Jersey, in commemoration of the first anniversary of his meeting with Kosygin. For the text of the speech see *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–69*, Book I, pp. 679–684.

<sup>25</sup> ...and other acts of war in relation to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson (includes Letter from Chairman Kosygin to President Johnson (Attachment)), June 5, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 262, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/262.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/262.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>27</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson (includes Letter from Chairman Kosygin to President Johnson (Attachment)), June 5, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 262, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/262.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/262.html)>[2004-09-01].

suggest to the North Vietnamese, through Moscow, that it might be advisable for them to undertake “informal contacts” with the South Vietnamese Government as well as with the United States.<sup>28</sup> As a potential “breakthrough”, an “extremely important letter” and “an extraordinarily definite statement for the Soviets to make”, Kosygin’s statement was also valued by chief US negotiator in Paris Harriman. Ambassador Harriman, being skeptical about the dialogue with the North Vietnamese, recommended to Johnson that he “[K]eep dialogue going with Kosygin” since he strongly believed that only “[T]hat [would] end this war” and not “[O]ur dialogue with North Vietnam”. Also, the other members of the US executive branch believed in cooperation with the Soviets. Secretary of Defense, Clifford, found Kosygin’s letter “very remarkable” and “promising” and recommended that Johnson “accept it in good faith” because it was in the United States’ “own interest” to do so. He believed that the United States “should take serious advantage” of this opportunity because he was sure, like Harriman, that they would not end the war by negotiations with the North Vietnamese. Clifford also remarked that the costs of the war were “becoming heavier” for the Soviets, too. Secretary Dean Rusk and Cyrus Vance shared a similar view. This perception gave rise to the hope that “[I]t may mean the Soviets are willing to assist with resolution of the conflict”.<sup>29</sup>

### **Firmness and Clarity**

US Ambassador in Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, was one of the few officials who had a somewhat different opinion on the resolution of the conflict. He did not share the belief that Washington was in a weak bargaining position and, therefore, he recommended that this fact should be reflected in the American reply, together with the evidence of the United States’ desire to move towards mutual de-escalation and peaceful settlement. He felt that the proposed reply, which suggested American readiness to stop the bombing in return for Soviet assurances, was “much in need of strengthening” if it was to be “convincing to Hanoi and Moscow” as well as to the United States’

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<sup>28</sup> Notes of Meeting (Tom Johnson’s Notes of the President’s Meeting With Foreign Policy Advisers), June 9, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 265, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/265.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/265.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>29</sup> Quoted from Cyrus Vance. *Ibidem*.



allies. In Bunker's opinion, the American experience with dealing with the Communists over the past twenty years was that the Communists understood only "firmness and clarity" and were "quick to take advantage of vague and uncertain actions". He warned that "to stop bombing in return for Soviet assurances" could be understood by the North Vietnamese as a demonstration of the United States' "weak position".<sup>30</sup>

In the end, no real strengthening of the United States' position occurred. In his reply to Kosygin, Johnson stated that Washington was prepared to stop the bombing of North Vietnam provided that the North Vietnamese inform Washington of what steps they would take toward further de-escalation of violence and that the Soviet Union was in a position to tell the United States privately and precisely that there would be no adverse military consequences to American and allied forces as a result of a cessation of the bombing. He also assured Kosygin that the American delegation in Paris was ready for unofficial contacts between the respective delegations and he accentuated to the Soviets the importance of keeping in close touch with one another on this matter.<sup>31</sup> But, in his conversation with Deputy Under-Secretary Bohlen, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin said<sup>32</sup> that the Soviets were somewhat "disappointed" over the United States' answer to Kosygin's letter. The reasons were Washington's alleged conditions and a lack of authentic American responsiveness to Soviet suggestions. This had left the Soviets dissatisfied.

### **Private Talk "After Dark"**

The situation changed when Harriman and Vance telegraphed from Paris about the results of the talks with the Soviet Ambassador to France,

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<sup>30</sup> US Ambassador to Saigon Ellsworth Bunker warned Washington that the North Vietnamese regarded the American bargaining position as weak – which meant that Hanoi was in "a strong position" – and recommended to Washington that the United States had to act with "genuine confidence" in the strength of its bargaining position, otherwise he feared the outcome of the negotiations. Telegram from the Embassy (Bunker) in Vietnam to the Department of State, May 10, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 228, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/228.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/228.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>31</sup> Letter from President Johnson to Chairman Kosygin, June 11, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI doc. 269, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/269.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/269.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>32</sup> Deputy Under-Secretary Bohlen met Anatoliy Dobrynin, on June 12. See Memorandum of Conversation, June 12, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 272, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/272.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/272.html)>[2004-09-01].

Valerian Zorin.<sup>33</sup> The results stemming from the talks were that the Soviets, namely Kosygin, were reportedly willing, as Harriman put it, “to pitch in and help” with the question of a Vietnam and Southeast Asia settlement after the bombing stopped totally.<sup>34</sup>

Harriman further presented Zorin with ‘certain points’ of common interest to Washington, Moscow, and Hanoi. One of them was, for example, the desire to keep North Vietnam free from Chinese domination. In this context, Harriman expressed his certainty that the United States “could readily agree” that North Vietnam “remains a socialist state” and South Vietnam “neutral and non-aligned”. The unification of the two states was to be left to the future and would be determined by both. Harriman also suggested that the Soviets “could play a crucial role in getting the two sides together in a private talk, after dark, at the Soviet Embassy, or elsewhere. However, in that matter, Zorin insisted that no private talks would take place until the total cessation of the American bombing”.<sup>35</sup>

Although Washington was aware that well-balanced mutual de-escalation with the North Vietnamese would still be “very tough to negotiate”, the United States hoped that the Soviets, or more specifically, Kosygin, might “come back with an acceptable mutual de-escalation formula”.<sup>36</sup> At the end of June, as a result of Harriman’s talk with Zorin

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<sup>33</sup> Harriman and Vance telegraphed on June 14, 1968; the meeting with Zorin took place the day before.

<sup>34</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 14, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 274, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/274.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/274.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem. Both Harriman and Vance asked Washington for further instructions in the cause of “Soviet help”. According to a notation in the President Johnson’s Daily Diary, Ambassador Harriman asked for the President’s guidance on the subject of “[T]he need for Soviet help in getting private talks going and later to obtain their future involvement in the situation”. The President discussed it with Harriman on June 25. Quoted from Notes of Meeting (Notes of the President’s Meeting with Tuesday Luncheon Group), June 25, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 282, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/282.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/282.html)>[2004-09-01]. Vance suggested to the Department of State “to consider what should be done in the Russian channel to follow on” in the morning of June 28. Quoted from a Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 285, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/285.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/285.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, June 20, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 277, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/277.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/277.html)>[2004-09-01].

on June 14, the Soviets seemed to have fulfilled, to some extent, their mission as mediators.<sup>37</sup> Soviet Ambassador, Dobrynin, indicated to Harriman that the Soviets “had received word” that the North Vietnamese would talk privately to the United States, without specifying when.<sup>38</sup>

### Zorin Formula

On June 24, the American Ambassador to France, Sargent Shriver, telegraphed Washington that Zorin, “*hitherto silent and frozen*”, suggested a private exploration of the so-called A-B-C formula,<sup>39</sup> which the United States viewed as a “possible turning point (notably if [weapons] shipments were not coming through China)”.

<sup>37</sup> In Dobrynin’s opinion, Zorin was not necessarily the best choice (as a Soviet envoy), since he spoke neither French nor English and was a rigid, “old school” diplomat. But the Soviet Ambassador did not agree with Moscow Harriman’s idea of sending someone more ‘modern’ from the Soviet Foreign Office, familiar with Far Eastern Affairs, to talk with the United States in Paris. Memorandum of Conversation, (Participants: Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador, W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador at Large), June 22, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 280, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/280.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/280.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>38</sup> Dobrynin told Bohlen allegedly already on May 31 that “Hanoi told Moscow they would meet with us [the United States, V.F.] privately”. He repeated it to Harriman on June 22. Both sides discussed the conditions of the cessation of the US bombing. Harriman feared that “Hanoi would not take any action of restraint” even if the United States fully ceased it. Both negotiators agreed on a two-phase cessation proposal. Dobrynin also told Harriman that the Soviets wanted to see the war ended in Vietnam in order to “get on to other matters” with the United States. Memorandum of Conversation, (Participants: Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador, W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador at Large), June 22, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 280, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/280.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/280.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>39</sup> According to point A, the United States was to give Hanoi a ‘certain date’ for the cessation of bombing, i.e. a date to come into effect when B is agreed. According to point B, the United States was to negotiate what would be done when the bombing stopped. And according to point C, the United States was to stop and the North Vietnamese were to stop, doing what both sides negotiate after a pre-negotiated interval. Zorin recommended to Shriver that the US delegation should utilize after a “coffee break” to propose to North Vietnamese directly the Phase A – Phase B plan. Besides, he promised that the American agreement in principle to stop bombing on a certain date was to be followed by the willingness of the North Vietnamese to enter into unofficial, i.e. non-public talks. The unofficial US-North Vietnamese non-public talks should have looked for a decision on the circumstances following Phase B. Upon deciding the circumstances of Phase B, Phase A was to be executed and accordingly in due course Phase B actions were to proceed. Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 24, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 281, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/281.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/281.html)>[2004-09-01].

After consultations with Hanoi, the Soviets rendered a new Zorin proposal on June 28 (it became known as the “Zorin formula”).<sup>40</sup> In the Department of Defense, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International and Security Affairs, Paul Warnke, recommended working out a formula for cessation within the framework of this proposal.<sup>41</sup> However, it was simultaneously agreed in the White House that the United States would not submit concrete proposals but would only ask the North Vietnamese if they were prepared to engage in talks based on the proposal.<sup>42</sup> (In the meantime, the United States continued to fear putting forth a proposal that would scare Hanoi off by being “too tough”).<sup>43</sup>)

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<sup>40</sup> According to it, the United States was first about to ‘stop bombing’ and then the North Vietnamese should have taken ‘de-escalatory steps’ among with the other steps taken by the United States. For Washington, the key issues were to negotiate firmly phase 2 before stopping the bombing and what the North Vietnamese do in phase 2 would compensate the United States “for the bombing cessation plus the additional actions that Zorin suggests”. Quotations are from Walt Rostow’s covering note transmitting a copy of Vance’s telegram to President Johnson. See Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 286, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/286.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/286.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>41</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 286, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/286.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/286.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>42</sup> Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, July 1, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 288, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/288.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/288.html)>[2004-09-01]. Walt Rostow’s covering note transmitting a copy of Vance’s telegram to President Johnson. See Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 286, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/286.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/286.html)>[2004-09-01]. The problem was also whether Washington should have asked the Hanoi on the following occasion if it was prepared to sit down with the Americans and work within the Zorin framework, or whether the United States should have filled in what it wanted and was prepared to do in the Phase 2. On July 2, the Department of State informed the US Peace negotiating delegation in Paris that “it would be premature to table a possible second phase package at this point” until a basis of understanding was developed with the North Vietnamese. Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, July 2, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 289, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/289.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/289.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>43</sup> Dean Rusk suggested to only mention the structure in principle, whereas he aimed to fill in Phase 2 only if the North Vietnamese showed interest. The Soviet Union informed Washington then that it “was critical that the columns in Phase 2 be filled out in detail” as without them the Zorin proposal “would mean nothing”. The United States meant to recall the US intentions – Demilitarized Zone, reduced infiltration, no shelling of Saigon and continued reconnaissance. However, as Walt Rostow resumed, it was “just barely possible” if Washington framed the proposal in this way, “with familiar items but Phase 2 filled in”. He feared that in that case the United States “could advance the pace of movement”. Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President

Hanoi, however, reacted to the Zorin proposal with “no commitment” to the Soviet negotiation framework and with “no willingness” to recognize the South Vietnamese Government as a legitimate interlocutor. Furthermore, Hanoi was not prepared to honor the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. The United States, therefore, acquired no real knowledge of Hanoi’s principal intentions.<sup>44</sup> In July, the two delegations meeting in Paris were left without an agreed agenda.<sup>45</sup> Hanoi continued to refuse to accept Johnson’s offers of March 31. Washington believed that the Soviets would discuss matters with Hanoi, but could not push Hanoi “because of a danger holding it in the arms of Peking”.<sup>46</sup>

### Requirements for a Bombing Halt

The problem occupying the minds of American leaders during July and August was the bombing pause. The speculations centered around the question whether the bombing should really be stopped, and if so, for how long.<sup>47</sup> Washington, however, also feared another offensive. Shortly before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the North Vietnamese struck again. The second of the “Mini-Tet” offensives started on August 18 and intensified over the next several weeks. On August 22, Saigon was the target of North Vietnamese rocket attacks. The peak of the offensive occurred during the final week of August and the campaign continued further into mid-September.<sup>48</sup>

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Johnson, July 2, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 289, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/289.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/289.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, July 8, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 293, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/293.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/293.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>45</sup> The United States was there on the basis of Johnson’s March 31st speech, Hanoi on the basis of its April 3rd statement, whose only purpose was to get the Americans to make a decision if all the bombing was to be stopped.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Dean Rusk, Notes of Meeting (President Johnson’s Notes on Meeting in Cabinet Room with Richard Nixon; joined later by Secretary Rusk, Tom Johnson and Walt Rostow), July 26, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 310, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/310.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/310.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>47</sup> Johnson considered seven days, eight days, twelve days, twenty days, thirty days, and thirty seven days. It was symptomatic that Nixon did not agree with a pause and said that if the President was going to move in the direction of a bombing pause or something in that same venue, he did not intend to advocate it. *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> Notes of Meeting (Notes on President’s Meeting with Tuesday Luncheon Group, August 20, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 333, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/333.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/333.html)>[2004-09-01].

In the fall of 1968, peace appeared to be beyond President Johnson's grasp even though the talks were still taking place in Paris between the United States and its North Vietnamese adversaries. The negotiations were deadlocked over Johnson's insistence on reciprocal guarantees for the complete cessation of the bombing of North Vietnamese territory. Although the groundwork for bringing the two parties together in formal talks on substantive issues of peace settlement was finally created, the talks struggled to move to a formal session due to the upcoming presidential elections in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

However, the North Vietnamese, who had refused to discuss any assurances of reciprocity throughout the late spring and summer of 1968, started to change their position during the fall. A breakthrough in the negotiations was nervously awaited in Washington. President Johnson insisted, after the "Mini-Tet", that any breakthrough had to meet his three minimal requirements for a halt, specifically: (i) withdrawal of enemy forces from the demilitarized zone, (ii) termination of attacks on major South Vietnamese cities, and (iii) admission of the South Vietnamese Government to a seat at the conference table.<sup>50</sup>

Johnson tried to meet his own obligations not to stop the bombing without concessions from Hanoi. Yet, he had to face his Secretary of Defense who had tried repeatedly, although without success, to persuade the President to end the bombing for the sake of moving the peace process forward.<sup>51</sup> This question, together with the rightness correctness of working on the question of Vietnam with the Soviets, still remained controversial within the Administration. Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Nitze, thought that "it'll undo the N. Atlantic Alliance if LBJ gets into bed with Kosygin". Another member of Secretary of Defense' Staff, Paul Warnke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International and Security Affairs, also felt – although less sharply than Nitze – that a "[peace, V.F.]

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<sup>49</sup> *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01]. The Democratic and Republican candidates, and the President himself, were, namely, suspicious that their respective opponents were using the peace process to influence the election.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*. According to Clifford, Johnson believed that if he stopped the bombing "without something from the other side," he would be "God-damned". Notes of Meeting, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 15, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/15.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/15.html)>[2004-09-01].

movement is going on without the Russians".<sup>52</sup> Simultaneously, the Soviet Union began to exercise greater initiative in pressing the North Vietnamese to change their attitude towards the assurance of reciprocity in exchange for a bombing cessation. A meeting between the President's Special Assistant, Rostow, and Soviet Ambassador, Dobrynin, on September 9 resulted in a message from the Soviet Government that appeared to indicate the Communists' preparedness to move forward if the United States terminated its bombing and related military actions.<sup>53</sup>

### Vietnam and the Czechoslovak Issue

Even though, immediately after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, mutual United States-Soviet relations were frozen, the problems of the Vietnam War (and also the Middle East) had a permanent impact on American and Soviet policies. Nonetheless, the exchange of opinions on Vietnam between the United States and the Soviet Union was maintained to a certain extent. As mentioned earlier, because of Hanoi's insistence on the total cessation of the bombardment of North Vietnam, the peace talks had not produced any significant progress toward permanent peace or even reduced

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<sup>52</sup> In September during a turbulent regular Secretary of Defense' Staff Meeting, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, George Elsey, resumed the existing situation: "We agreed, if Czech stays quiet for a week, LBJ will send a message to Kosygin to revive a meeting with Kosygin on Strat[egic] weapons & he'll try for an assurance with K. that we'll stop bombing if the other side will give certain assurances". At this point, however, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Nitze exploded with the words which need no commentary: "It's asinine—it's 'pissing' away an advantage we have! It'll undo the N. Atlantic alliance if LBJ gets into bed with Kosygin". Also other members of the staff, such as Paul Warnke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International and Security Affairs, felt, although less sharply than Nitze, that a "[Peace, V.F.] movement is going on without the Russians". Secretary of Defense then blamed Nitze that he was, too, the person, who "wanted to get the Russians into act". Nitze replied: "Yes, but that was before Czechoslovakia & before NVNams [North Vietnamese V.F.] started to move!!!" Clifford then got irritated and stated that he is for anything that would get President Johnson to stop the bombing in Vietnam with which Nitze did not agree. For Deputy Secretary of Defense this was going against the national interests of the United States and he feared the consequences of such a movement for the North Atlantic Alliance: "Wrecking NATO by playing footsie with Kosygin would do so!" stated Nitze verbatim. Clifford, however, was ready to "take risks elsewhere, anywhere!" Notes of Meeting, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 15, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/15.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/15.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>53</sup> *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01].

hostilities until September. The moderate mood in Washington, however, persisted. Secretary of Defense, Clifford, suggested a halt to escalation and a limited halt to bombing. Later, the Democratic candidate for president, Hubert Humphrey,<sup>54</sup> suggested the possibility of American troops being brought back from Vietnam as early as 1969.<sup>55</sup> At last, Johnson agreed to stop the bombing. To make sure that the North Vietnamese would not take advantage of the situation, he planned to obtain assurances (either in Paris or via the Russians) that the cessation of the bombardment by American forces could take place under conditions that posed no increase in the risk of casualties to the United States.

On September 13, Ambassador Dobrynin verbally delivered a message from his government to Rostow.<sup>56</sup> The Soviets suggested that, if the United States completely stopped the bombing and other military actions against North Vietnam, this could create a turning point at the meeting in Paris, thus paving the way for serious negotiations regarding the political issues to be settled. Dobrynin directly indicated that Washington should “[come] back with a proposition which ‘Kosygin and his colleagues’ might press on Hanoi”.<sup>57</sup> Moscow also expressed its positive attitude to the idea of meeting between Chairman Kosygin and President Johnson. The Soviets wanted to know where they stood in Washington insofar as the Czechoslovak issue was concerned. They wanted to see if Washington would ask for a commitment from the Soviet Union about an announcement of Soviet troop withdrawals from Czechoslovakia before the supposed missile talks – especially, if Washington was making this an American condition. Rostow flatly refused that the United States intended to request this. He said that the United States was imposing no conditions and no ultimatums upon Moscow and was “searching to make good on an

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<sup>54</sup> In a speech given on September 10.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, October 2, 1968, p. 1. Johnson seemed to have grown impatient with Humphrey’s defensive attitude toward the war. In turn he told the assemblage of American Legionaries, “No one can predict when US troops will come home”. Humphrey’s aides called it sabotage and rightly so. Johnson actually did not care who won the election at the time being. Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the United States Presidential Election*, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> NSA, Soviet Flashpoints, Record no. 71446, Copy of Ambassador Dobrynin’s Handwritten Paper, September 13, 1968. Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, September 13, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. XIV, doc. 296, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xiv/296.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xiv/296.html)>[2001-09-26].

<sup>57</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson September 13, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. XI, doc. 297, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xi/297.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xi/297.html)>[2001-09-26].



agreed proposition” since it was essential for the United States to “make a meeting at the highest level a success”. No wonder that Dobrynin appreciated this American message as “clear and positive”.<sup>58</sup> The White House answered three days later, on September 16, and President Johnson emphasized his readiness to stop the bombardment of North Vietnam.<sup>59</sup>

The question arises in this context as to whether the United States intended, to any degree, to ponder the possibility of actually changing its attitude towards the Soviet Union vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia. Already at the end of July, i.e. before the invasion, Richard Nixon brought up the question of whether or not there was “any way that the Czechoslovak situation could be put on the scales in the Vietnam situation”, whether or not there was any way that the United States could “play the game”, or whether this was “too dangerous”. According to Rusk, who recapitulated the Administration position, “there was not much room” in dealing with the Soviets even in the event of an invasion.<sup>60</sup>

### Through the Special Channel

In mid-September, Johnson, acting through a special channel,<sup>61</sup> presented his three basic items to the Soviet leadership.<sup>62</sup> At the beginning

<sup>58</sup> Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. XIV, doc. 300 [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xiv/300.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xiv/300.html)> [2001-09-26].

<sup>59</sup> NSA, Soviet Flashpoints, Record no. 71448, Replay to Ambassador Dobrynin’s Memorandum Regarding the Strategic Arms Control, the Question of Vietnam, and the Middle East Problem, September 16, 1968. Also Memorandum from the Government of the USA to the Government of the Soviet Union, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. XIV, doc. 299, [online] URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xiv/299.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xiv/299.html)> [2001-09-26]; see also Memorandum from the Government of the USA to the Government of the Soviet Union, September 16, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. XI, doc. 282, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xi/282.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xi/282.html)> [2001-09-26]; and Telegram from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, September 22, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. XIV doc. 305, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xiv/305.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xiv/305.html)> [2001-09-26].

<sup>60</sup> Notes of Meeting (President Johnson’s Notes on Meeting in Cabinet Room with Richard Nixon, joined later by Secretary Rusk, Tom Johnson and Walt Rostow), July 26, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VI, doc. 310, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/310.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/310.html)> [2004-09-01].

<sup>61</sup> The special channel was a Rostow-Dobrynin line through which top secret communication ran between Washington and Moscow. *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> Notes of Meeting (Tom Johnson): Notes of the President’s Meeting with the President-Elect Richard Nixon, November 11, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 211, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/211.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/211.html)> [2004-09-01].

of October, the delegation from Hanoi in Paris indicated its interest in the question of the South Vietnamese Government participating in the talks and its relation to the cessation of bombing. A Soviet diplomat in Paris confirmed to the United States that Hanoi would accept the Government of Vietnam's participation. However, when this proposition was submitted to the Hanoi delegation in Paris, other issues were raised.

On October 9, the United States delegation in Paris reported that the North Vietnamese had addressed the issue of South Vietnamese participation in the talks, an issue that had remained deadlocked for months. Two days later, Hanoi asked Washington to clarify whether the United States would end the bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi accepted the Saigon Government's presence at the talks.<sup>63</sup> The next day, the Soviets sent a message that strongly accentuated the North Vietnamese agreement to hold substantive talks.<sup>64</sup>

The question remains to what extent the Soviet efforts were sincere. The reports provided to the American press at that time (clearly being released by Soviet diplomatic sources) stated that the Soviets and United States were very close to reaching an agreement. Washington not only feared that these reports may generate unjustified optimism, but that they may also provoke sentiments among American anticommunists that the United States was being led into some sort of trap, which would complicate the situation for Johnson.<sup>65</sup>

On October 12, the Soviets indicated to the United States that the right time for a breakthrough in the talks had come. A Soviet intermediary, Valentin Oberemko, a Minister-Counselor of the Soviet Embassy in France, stated verbatim: "We consider now is the right time to act. The situation is most favorable right now and this opportunity should not be lost".<sup>66</sup> The long-awaited breakthrough in the negotiations finally took place on

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<sup>63</sup> *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>64</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France (Vance) to the Department of State, October 12, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 60, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/60.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/60.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>65</sup> *NSA*, Soviet Flashpoints, Record no. 71458, Situation in Vietnam regarding the United State's Cessation of Bombing and the Peace Talks in Paris Between the Soviet Union, the United States and South Vietnam, October 25, 1968.

<sup>66</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France (Vance) to the Department of State, October 12, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 60, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/60.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/60.html)>[2004-09-01].

October 27. Although a final peace treaty was still far away, Hanoi dropped all the unacceptable demands it had been pressing upon the United States. Of the above – mentioned three points of Washington, the North Vietnamese accepted a gap of three days and sixteen hours between the bombing cessation and the first meeting.<sup>67</sup> Throughout the month of October, Kosygin urged Johnson to stop the bombing of North Vietnam in order to provide an incentive to the Paris negotiations between Washington and Hanoi.

### Buying Time

In October, certain progress was made in Paris. Moscow assured Washington that it was “deeply interested in finding a solution” in Vietnam<sup>68</sup> and announced a strong desire to see the crucial talks begin quickly.<sup>69</sup> Johnson was buying time. Day after day, he was losing and the United States was getting closer to the elections.<sup>70</sup> On October 25, Kosygin assured Johnson that the position of the two sides on the cessation of bombardment “was much closer” and the possibility of reaching an agreement on this question was “quite real”.<sup>71</sup> However, the North

<sup>67</sup> Washington’s three points: 1. Hanoi shall recognize the government of South Vietnam and let them participate in the talks; 2. Hanoi shall restore the Demilitarized Zone to its demilitarized state; 3. Hanoi will not shell on the cities of South Vietnam. Notes of Meeting (Tom Johnson): Notes of the President’s Meeting with the President-Elect Richard Nixon, November 11, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 211, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/211.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/211.html)>[2004-09-01]. Richard Nixon announced ‘peace with honor’ in Vietnam on January 23, 1973. The ceasefire began at midnight of Hanoi time on January 27, monitored by international forces made up of troops from Canada, Poland, Hungary and Indonesia. Last American troops left Vietnam on March 29, 1973.

<sup>68</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in France (Vance, Harriman) to the Department of State, October 24, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 119, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/119.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/119.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>69</sup> Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Clifford, October 22, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 106, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/vol\\_xvii/106.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/vol_xvii/106.html)>[2004-09-01]; *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>70</sup> NSA, Soviet Flashpoints, Record no. 71458, Situation in Vietnam Regarding United State’s Cessation of Bombing and the Peace Talks in Paris between the Soviet Union, the United States and South Vietnam, October 25, 1968.

<sup>71</sup> Information Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, October 25, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 122, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/122.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/122.html)>[2004-09-01].

Vietnamese were still reluctant to agree on the issue of the conditions and timing of the bombing halt.<sup>72</sup> Advancement toward a breakthrough speeded up during the last week prior to the election. On October 27, the North Vietnamese proposed that talks begin on November 2 with the proviso that the United States terminated the bombing on October 30.<sup>73</sup>

It was at this moment that the South Vietnamese Government began to refrain from participation in the developing talks. It informed Washington that November 2 was too soon for them. Johnson decided to postpone it by a few days. At that time, he also assumed that the South Vietnamese move had been motivated by Nixon's conspiracy to divert the negotiations in order to help the Republicans to win the election.<sup>74</sup>

On the contrary, by October 30, the North Vietnamese had obliged the United States. Hanoi definitively dropped its request for the secret minutes of the proceedings. In light of these developments, the Johnson

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<sup>72</sup> Johnson instructed Walt Rostow to ask the Soviet Ambassador for help. "Perhaps Chairman Kosygin can help. Perhaps he can try to help move us closer," Johnson said verbatim and the Special Assistant fulfilled his request. *Ibidem*.

<sup>73</sup> *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01]; Notes of Meeting, October 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 139, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/139.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/139.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>74</sup> Anna Chennault, Chinese-born widow of an American World War II flying ace, and Nixon's associate, had been in contact with Bui Diem, South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States. Although Nixon denied any knowledge of the affair, Johnson documented proof of a Republican connection to the South Vietnamese Government. Nixon negated any involvement with the affair. On the other hand Johnson did not wish to reveal the whole range of his Government's surveillance and wiretapping of Anna Chennault and the South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States. Therefore finally a decision was made not to release the information gathered regarding the Republican-South Vietnamese connection. *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01]; Notes of Meeting, October 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 139, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/139.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/139.html)>[2004-09-01]; Milman, Douglas S., p. 82–83; Editorial Note *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 186, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/186.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/186.html)>[2004-09-01]; Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Richard Nixon, November 3, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 187, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/187.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/187.html)>[2004-09-01]; Telephone Conversation Among President Johnson, Secretary of Defense Clifford, Secretary of State Rusk, and the President's Special Assistant (Rostow), November 4, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 192, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/192.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/192.html)>[2004-09-01]; Telegram from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, Washington, November 4, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 194, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/194.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/194.html)>[2004-09-01].

Administration started to object to South Vietnamese efforts to delay the talks and Johnson made a resolution to proceed with the bombing cessation on October 31.<sup>75</sup> On October 31, Rusk informed Dobrynin that Johnson would announce the complete cessation of the bombing. Later that day, the American President asked the Soviet Chairman, Kosygin, to utilize Soviet influence in Vietnam in order to achieve peace. Johnson stated verbatim: “Now that the bombardments of North Vietnam are halted, I hope and expect that the Soviet Union will use its influence to exit the impasse and bring about a reliable and durable peace in Southeast Asia as soon as possible”.<sup>76</sup> In the evening, in a nationwide broadcast, Johnson stated that the bombing of North Vietnam would cease on November 1 at 8 a.m., Washington time.<sup>77</sup>

The quick resumption of the expanded talks proved to be elusive. On November 2, the South Vietnamese proclaimed that they would not send a delegation to the expanded talks in Paris, thus effectively preventing the four-party meetings from convening. Hanoi then refused to accept any further successive meetings merely between American and North Vietnamese representatives. Although Johnson was doing everything in his executive power to arrange a bombing halt, on the eve of the election and with only two months in office ahead of him, Saigon remained blind to his efforts.<sup>78</sup>

The shift in Vietnam policy, however, came too late to save the Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey, although the differences in the Vietnam policy between him and his Republican counterpart were not very profound.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The cessation was to be followed by talks on November 6 in order to give the South Vietnamese the maximum amount of time to consider joining in the expanded negotiations. *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)> [2004-09-01].

<sup>76</sup> Quoted from Dobrynin, Anatoliy. *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents*. New York: Times Books, Random House, 1995, p. 186.

<sup>77</sup> Editorial Note, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 169, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/169.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/169.html)> [2004-09-01].

<sup>78</sup> *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)> [2004-09-01]; Notes of Meeting, October 28, 1968, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, vol. VII, doc. 139, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xvii/139.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xvii/139.html)> [2004-09-01].

<sup>79</sup> One or two per cent of the 1968 vote can be attributed to an individual Vietnam policy since the voters were unable to distinguish any Nixon-Humphrey Vietnam differences and were likely to perceive candidates based on their own personal preferences. Republican “hawks” viewed Nixon as pro-war, Republican “doves” saw him as anti-war. The same could be said for Democrats in relation to Humphrey. Humphrey managed to do better with those advocating the end of the fighting in Vietnam, and worse with those who were in

Richard Nixon won the presidential election.<sup>80</sup> The agreement between both governments on their common position relating to negotiating issues was not worked out until the end of November and the official talks did not begin on schedule. Only after pressure from Washington and after the involvement of Soviet diplomats was the stalemate finally overcome.<sup>81</sup> On January 18, the first meeting between the four parties was held<sup>82</sup> and the Johnson Administration left office two days later, knowing that peace talks were finally underway.<sup>83</sup>

### **Vietnam and Czechoslovakia on the Eve of the End of Johnson's Presidency**

On the eve of the end of his Presidency, Lyndon Johnson, instead of attempting to keep pressure on Hanoi, de-escalated the war in Vietnam, gave up his candidacy, and proposed negotiations. In doing so, he united "all possible disadvantages".<sup>84</sup> With the bombing break coming in exchange for "merely" procedural talks, Hanoi basically seized the

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favor of escalation. Nixon, on the other hand, reversed these statistics. The fact that the advocates of escalation outnumbered those supporting de-escalation two to one might be accountable for Nixon's slim majority. Milman, Douglas S. *Vietnam and the 1968 United States Presidential Election*, p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> For Moscow, Humphrey would have been preferable. He was preferable to Nixon since the latter had built his career on opposing communism and was considered profoundly anti-Soviet. Soviet Ambassador to Washington Dobrynin mentioned in his memoirs that the Soviet leadership was seriously concerned that Nixon might win the election. Its concerns went to that extent that it took an extraordinary step, unprecedented in the previous history of Soviet-American relations, and secretly offered Humphrey "any conceivable help in his election campaign-including financial aid". Dobrynin received an instruction from Gromyko and offered the aid to the Democratic presidential candidate. Humphrey, however, refused the Soviet offer. Dobrynin, Anatoliy. *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents*, p. 176.

<sup>81</sup> On January 13, the Soviet Ambassador in Paris directed to propose a resolution. There should have been a round table with two smaller rectangular tables at opposite sides, no flags or nameplates and speaking order was to be arranged by the drawing of lots. The North Vietnamese and American delegations agreed to this proposal on January 15. The South Vietnam and the National Liberation Front agreed the next day.

<sup>82</sup> It focused, however, only on modalities for the substantive talks.

<sup>83</sup> *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. VII, Summary, [online], URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vii/Summary.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vii/Summary.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>84</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *Umění diplomacie. Od Richelieua k pádu Berlínské zdi [Diplomacy]*. Praha: Prostor, 1996, p. 703.

opportunity to rebuild its infrastructure in the South. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese had no reasons to settle with Johnson and instead had every incentive to repeat the same showdown with his successor.<sup>85</sup> Nixon, though, was more reluctant to deal with the Soviets in the aftermath of the Czechoslovak invasion and he planned to negotiate with Brezhnev from a position of strength.<sup>86</sup>

The war in Vietnam influenced America's East European policy in spite of the Administration's efforts to deny that such a relationship existed. The connection was clear from the moment when President Johnson decided to carry out military escalation. The matter of war kept resurfacing during American diplomatic contacts with their East European counterparts.

Dubček's Czechoslovakia, being in the position of a Soviet satellite state (and one of the largest suppliers of military goods to North Vietnam), remained opposed to United States involvement in Vietnam and American bombing.<sup>87</sup> The Czechoslovak reform administration clearly did not want to conduct its foreign affairs independently of the Soviet Union. One can only guess if fear of the Soviets or a sincere belief of the reform Communists in "socialism with a human face" (or both) were the cause. Of all the East European satellites, only the Romanians were willing to serve as diplomatic intermediaries between Washington and Hanoi, hoping for future advantages in relations with the West. Such cooperation, combined with their support of American policies on other issues, earned them significantly more help from the Johnson Administration.<sup>88</sup> This became obvious when rumors concerning Soviet attack on Romania appeared after the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Johnson's obsession with Vietnam was undoubtedly "at least partially responsible for Czechoslovakia".<sup>89</sup> This preoccupation, along with the problems occurring in his own country in the spring of 1968 (strong demonstrations against the Vietnam War, racial discrimination problems,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibidem. p. 703.

<sup>86</sup> In 1969 Nixon announced that US troops would leave Vietnam in a phased withdrawal. The peace treaty was signed in February 1973 although the agreement that Kissinger negotiated with North and South Vietnam had never worked. LaFeber, Walter. *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1992*, p. 274 and 283.

<sup>87</sup> Aspaturian, Vernon V. *The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: The Aftermath of the Czechoslovak Invasion*. In: Zartman, I. William (Ed.). *Czechoslovakia: Intervention and Impact*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 15-46.

<sup>88</sup> Ibidem. pp. 15-46.

<sup>89</sup> Pierre, Andrew. *NATO After Czechoslovakia*, In: Zartman, I. William (Ed.). *Czechoslovakia: Intervention and Impact*, New York: New York University Press, 1970, pp. 59-83.

Robert Kennedy's and Martin Luther King's assassinations, etc.), prevented the Administration from dealing more effectively with the other problems in the world. Under these conditions, the Administration's problems in Vietnam were necessarily linked to its goals in Eastern Europe.<sup>90</sup> The final result of Johnson's effort to engage the Soviets in order to influence the North Vietnamese was not persuasive enough.<sup>91</sup> As Dobrynin wrote in his memoirs, Johnson "could not fully realize the depth of the Soviet leadership's blind ideological adherence to the idea of 'international solidarity', which paralyzed any mediation efforts by Moscow itself".<sup>92</sup> The continuation of the Soviet influence in Southeast Asia increased day by day, and the war went on. The Moscow leadership might have been willing to talk, but it was not necessarily forced to talk about Vietnam. This notion seems to be supported, among others, by the fact that the cost incurred by the Soviet Union had been relatively small compared to American the United States' expenditures in Vietnam.<sup>93</sup> Johnson's style of compromise and consultation (proven useful in domestic policy) turned out to be "disastrous" in his foreign policy.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> LaFeber, Walter. *The American Age*, p. 58.

<sup>91</sup> It is interesting that US Ambassador to France, Shriver, was presenting Johnson to his Soviet counterpart (in comparison with his potential successors Humphrey, Nixon, McCarthy or Rockefeller) as "much freer, more knowledgeable on details and thus in better position than any successor to reach understandings with the Soviet Union on subject Vietnam". Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, June 24, 1968, FRUS, 1964-1968, vol. VI, doc. 281, URL<[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_vi/281.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_vi/281.html)>[2004-09-01].

<sup>92</sup> Quoted from Dobrynin, Anatoliy. In *Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents*, p. 189.

<sup>93</sup> LaFeber, Walter. *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1992*, pp. 256-257; Thompson Gale Declassified Documents Reference System ([www.gale.com](http://www.gale.com)) [online], URL<[http://www.ddrs.psmedia.com/tplweb-cgi/fastweb?getdoc+ddrs\\_img+ddrs\\_img+365567+...:text](http://www.ddrs.psmedia.com/tplweb-cgi/fastweb?getdoc+ddrs_img+ddrs_img+365567+...:text)> [2001-11-05], *Main Issues in Soviet Military Policy*, National Intelligence Estimate(NIE) 11-4-68, September 19, 1968, p. 15.

<sup>94</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *The White House Years*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1979, pp. 17-18.