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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PLACE: General De Gaulle's Office - Elysee Palace, Paris

DATE: March 2, 1969

PRESENT: The President, General De Gaulle, Mr. Andronikov,
Major General Walters

General De Gaulle opened the talk by stating that Mr. Nixon had now come to the end of his journey in France.

The President replied that, with the exception of the visit to the Pope, he had come to the end of his journey. It had been very helpful to him to have these discussions in depth with General De Gaulle. He was happy that the General would be coming to the US in January or February or next year. He was hopeful that the date could be agreed upon between them.

General De Gaulle said that they could agree on a definite time later.

The President said that he would like to have an understanding with General De Gaulle that if either of them wished to communicate directly with the other they could do so by private letters and such relations need not necessarily pass through the usual diplomatic channels. For any private matters below the Chief of State level, General De Gaulle could have his people communicate with Dr. Kissinger.

General De Gaulle asked whether Dr. Kissinger himself would bring the letters.

The President said that this would not necessarily be so, but he might find the need at some time to send Dr. Kissinger over. He said that sometimes it was useful to avoid communications that were too formal in nature.

General De Gaulle agreed and said he would bear this in mind.

The President said that, insofar as discussions on monetary matters were concerned, he felt that the suggestion that these could be handled privately and discreetly through a special representative was a good one, and we would be prepared to talk with whoever the General might designate to represent France on such matters.

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E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

By thm/kw NARA, Date 2/7/00

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2

General De Gaulle said that after the President returned to Washington he would let him know who the French would appoint. This person, of course, would have an unofficial mission and would not be charged with settling matters but rather to take contact with his American counterpart.

The President agreed to this.

General De Gaulle then asked whether the President had made similar arrangements with the British and the Germans.

The President said that this had not been done. We would talk with them in a more formal way. Both the British and the German Finance Ministers would be coming to the US, but he wondered whether the General felt it might be better to handle these matters with them in the same way as the French.

General De Gaulle said that he did not see any reason to do this.

The President then said that it was better if the conversations were conducted somewhat discreetly as formal discussions gave rise to speculation on the price of gold and so forth. The discussions would be initially exploratory.

General De Gaulle then repeated that he would notify the President, after his return to Washington, who the French representative would be and reiterated that this man would be an unofficial representative.

The President said he felt that one could not make much progress when one was working in a goldfish bowl. On other matters of consultation, our Secretary of Commerce, Mr. Stans, would soon be coming to Europe. His discussions would be strictly on matters of trade and in a broad sense. He would not get into matters such as the Common Market and who should belong to it. Rather he would discuss such matters as trade and restrictive practices which we or others might have. His policy would be not to have our Government play as active a role as in the past in attempting to determine the shape and form of Europe. We had ideas which we would submit, but we felt that this was essentially a matter for Europeans.

General De Gaulle said that there was GATT and it was normal for our Ministers to speak of this agreement and its application.

The President said that this was correct and that now we might perhaps talk about Viet Nam. He had had a long discussion earlier that morning

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3

with Ambassador Lodge and with our negotiating team. We desired to develop a program that would lead to the end of the war on a basis that would not bring on another similar war in that area if possible. He would be interested in knowing the General's views concerning this problem.

General De Gaulle then asked what the President expected him to do-- to tell him what he (General De Gaulle) would do if he were in the President's place? But he was not in the President's place. Frankly, however, he knew what he thought would be best for all, especially the US.

The President said he was thinking more of the future than the past and while he might have handled the matter differently, he wanted to look now towards the future.

General De Gaulle then said that if the President wanted to get rid of this bad affair and make peace, he believed he could do so. He believed that the only way was to do so by conducting political negotiations at the same time as military negotiations and establishing a calendar for the departure of US troops.

The President asked whether the General felt that we should conduct political negotiations at the same time as military negotiations and General De Gaulle replied affirmatively.

General De Gaulle said that he felt this should be done simultaneously. If the US attempted political negotiations without a calendar for military departure there would be no political negotiations. If, on the other hand, the US merely announced it was going to withdraw, there would be no political negotiations. It was therefore best to conduct both at the same time. In regard to a political settlement, there existed, prior to the intervention of the US, the 1954 agreements and they were still in effect. They had never been disowned. These had attained the acceptance of all of the countries as well as North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam, which are what they are and what goes on there is basically their business. There were also guarantees contained concerning the frontiers and the fact that there would be no further foreign intervention. Everyone accepted these in 1954, even China, and the General felt that this was the basis on which an arrangement could be found which would be both acceptable and natural. He believed that the US could say that they intended to withdraw their troops if all agreed to the validity of the 1954 agreements and gave a calendar for the departure of the US forces. He did not believe that the US should depart with undue haste (en catastrophe). We should say that we will do this when the '54 agreements are applied. He wished to

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4

recall that there had been Control Commissions of which the UK and Poland had been co-chairmen. Others had been involved, including France. If desirable, the composition of these International Control Commissions might be changed. He did not believe the Vietnamese would refuse. He felt that the application of the 1954 agreements with control and guaranties was the best road to a solution. What would happen then in South Viet Nam would not be very bright. In any case, things will not be good in South Viet Nam. The French knew the Vietnamese well. The US had now gotten to know them also. There are all sorts of people there. There are Buddhists and Christians and some who are neither--they are a mixture. But he believed and would tell the President, weighing his words, that he did not believe that it would be absorbed by North Viet Nam, at least not initially. He did not believe that initially the South Vietnamese Government which would follow the events described above would be dominated by Ho Chi Minh. It is possible this might happen in a few years, but this would then be their responsibility and not that of the US. For a certain time after the departure of the foreign troops he thought there would be a South Vietnamese Government in which there would be people of all sorts represented in the Government. He did not think that this Government would do anything very dramatic. He did not think it would want to be under Ho Chi Minh. The South Vietnamese would not want to be under Tonkin. The Cochinchinese and the Annamites felt themselves quite distinct from the Tokinese. He would recall that the 1954 agreements called for elections in South Viet Nam with supervision by the Control Commissions. Because Diem had come to power there had been no elections, but if one went back to the 1954 agreements and held elections this would probably result in a coalition government in which people of all sorts would take part. This government would have some force. The US had given equipment to the South Vietnamese forces which would still exist and would be there. This arrangement would not condemn to death the South Vietnamese who are not Communists. He did not believe this.

The President asked at this point whether this did not mean that there would also be elections in North Viet Nam.

General De Gaulle replied that this was theoretically the case, but in fact elections in North Viet Nam would be a swindle run by the Communists. But in the South it would mean something. We should not forget that the whole of Viet Nam, especially North Viet Nam, was in a very difficult situation and needed help. If there were such an arrangement, it should not be difficult to have contact and influence in North Viet Nam. The General said that he understood the extraordinary difficulty of the situation for the President. If he spoke frankly it was because he had been in a similar situation

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5

himself. It was not a parallel situation but a similar one. He had had to take cruel decisions when he decided to evacuate Algeria. French troops had been in control of the terrain, but he could not solve the political situation with the Arabs in Algeria and elsewhere, and that was why he had taken the decision to go. He had kept troops in Algeria for two years and still had some at Bou Sper near Mers el Kebir. But he had withdrawn the troops. He still believed that this was the best decision. The situation, however, was not the same. The US did not have a million settlers in Viet Nam. The US had not been in Viet Nam for 130 years as the French had in Algeria. Viet Nam was far from the US and not on its doorstep, the way Algeria was to France. He knew the difficulties that such a settlement would entail for the President. There would be attacks at home and needles from the outside, but he felt that this would still be better than to continue a struggle to which there could be no real issue. If this problem was settled, the US would then have its hands free to come to grips with the Soviet Union and to see what could be done towards having normal relations with them. So long as Viet Nam continued this could not be done. It is true that if this takes place the Communist system will not have been crushed in Viet Nam. Perhaps the Communist system was helped by enabling them to identify themselves with the independence movements, and it might be better not to present them with this possibility. France, he recognized, had had some part in this as she did not give the Vietnamese freedom early enough and thus enabled the Communists to pose as the champions of national independence first against the French and then against the US. He felt the US could make such a settlement because its power and wealth was so great that it could do this with dignity. It would be better to let go than to try and stay.

The President said that he agreed with the first part of the General's position that we must try and end a war in a responsible way. The Vietnamese war had poisoned our relationship with many of our friends. It was a problem in negotiating with the Soviet Union. By ending it in a responsible way, he meant that we could not rush out in a panic. The credibility of the US in the world would suffer badly. We need time to work things out so that the people of South Viet Nam could choose their own destiny. The use of the 1954 agreements is one method that could be studied. For the General's private information, he was going to issue new instructions to the US negotiators during the following week. We were going to try to explore with the other side all possible avenues to achieve a responsible settlement. This would require hard bargaining and take some time, and we needed some time in terms of public opinion. We were going to hold private talks with the other side as this seemed to be the best way to handle things rather than in public meetings.

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6

General De Gaulle said he thought this was a good idea.

The President then said that they had to save face and we had to save face, and it was difficult to do this in front of television cameras.

General De Gaulle then agreed that the President was right in viewing things in this way. General De Gaulle then said that because the French knew the Vietnamese and because the negotiations were taking place in Paris, they did know certain things. Hanoi and the NLF sincerely desired peace. If the US would accept to define a political solution, this is what they want. If there were political negotiations this would lessen their military actions on the terrain and change the atmosphere in the South. He was telling the President this because he knew it to be a fact.

The President then asked whether General De Gaulle felt that the North Vietnamese believed that the US wanted peace.

General De Gaulle said that they believed the US wanted peace but were not sure that they could go through with it. They saw the US in terms of Communist ideology with great influence being exercised by monopoly and anti-Communism so they felt the US, while wishing peace, might not be able to make it. In a totalitarian country such things could be done quickly.

The President then said that if De Gaulle had contact with them, he could reassure them on this one point. The President said that they must understand that we cannot accept what appears to be a defeat just as they cannot.

General De Gaulle said that he felt the best way to achieve results was for direct contact between the US and the North Vietnamese without involving third parties.

The President then said there was one point he would like to make if the General were in contact with them. If we were to make moves in terms of reducing forces, a reciprocal move by them, perhaps in terms of prisoners, would be well-received by public opinion. There was one other point he wished to emphasize. We were prepared, and it was his policy, that once a settlement was reached we would make a major effort to assist them in rebuilding their cities and give them economic assistance and would assist them as well as South Viet Nam in non-military areas.

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7

General De Gaulle then noted that time was running out and that the President must depart if he were not to keep the Holy Father waiting. The meeting then concluded.

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