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May 17, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. ROSTOW

SUBJECT: Meeting of the Viet Nam Task Force on  
Monday, May 15, 1961

After briefings on the military and political situation in Viet Nam and surrounding areas in Southeast Asia, Mr. Cottrell summarized actions taken over the weekend, referring to a series of outgoing and incoming telegrams. These covered the following matters:

a. The establishment of the Task Force in Washington and a request to the Ambassador in Saigon to form a similar Task Force there.

b. A message to Saigon containing the substance of NSC Action Memorandum No. 52 and indicating that these actions would be reviewed further at an NSC meeting on May 19.

c. A message to Saigon summarizing the substance of the Task Force report for the field advising that the report itself would be pouched.

d. A message to Saigon indicating that the JCS was making the study called for by paragraph 4 of the Action Memorandum (relating to commitment of U. S. forces).

e. The Secretary of State had authorized the dispatch of 93 additional MAAG personnel from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines to Saigon.

I asked whether the status of the Task Force report had been clearly indicated in sending it to the field. It developed that the status had not been indicated in the messages and I was asked to prepare a brief statement of the points that needed to be made for inclusion in a subsequent message.

In connection with the reference to NSC discussion of the Action Memorandum, Mr. Cottrell asked that agencies make known at the Wednesday meeting of the Task Force any views they plan to express on the Memorandum. (I subsequently emphasized to Mr. Cottrell the fact that this Memorandum was being scheduled on the agenda for information and that it was intended that the Memorandum should stand and that there would be no discussion of it in the NSC unless an agency had a serious point that it wished to argue in front of the President. Mr. Cottrell agreed to make this point to Defense and at the beginning of Wednesday's Task Force meeting.)

Mr. Cottrell referred to the fact that it was planned to add an additional individual to the Public Relations Staff of the Far East Bureau to handle public relations on Viet Nam; that is, to put out information on South Viet Nam and to be available to answer questions. In response to a question, Mr. Cottrell indicated that there would be no connection between this public relations man and the Task Force. Mr. Cottrell also noted that this Task Force would be running the Viet Nam desk, although the former Assistant Desk Officer would now be named the Desk Officer and would handle routine matters.

Mr. Cottrell asked me whether the planned weekly status report should not be so timed that it could be scheduled on a Friday NSC agenda. He also noted that a separate status report would be prepared on covert activities and transmitted to the NSC. I pointed out that there was no established meeting time for the NSC and that, therefore, it would be difficult to relate work on the report to NSC meetings. I indicated that I would check on the matter of scheduling such reports on NSC agendas. (This matter subsequently taken up with you and with Mr. Bundy.)

A question was raised as to whether portions of the Task Force report could be downgraded or de-classified. I pointed out that we ordinarily proceeded, in handling NSC documents, on the principle that the agency having primary responsibility should make determination as to the classification of a particular item in an NSC document and had the authority to downgrade or de-classify as necessary in the course of implementation.

Reference was made to the fact that a meeting was scheduled in the White House on Thursday (under Mr. Dutton's leadership) to discuss the fate of "Project Hope". Although this hospital ship is supposed to be a private enterprise, the Government (ICA) has been picking up the tab for some time. It is said to have considerable public relations value, but there is considerable doubt as to whether it makes economic sense -- it costs \$5,000 a day to operate the ship. It was the consensus of the meeting that, in view of the preparations that had been made to receive the ship in Saigon, it would not be desirable to cancel the stop in Saigon, although, if necessary, it could be kept short.

Robert H. Johnson

cc: Mr. Smith  
Mr. Komer