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INVITATION FROM THE DRAGON
CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING OF CHINA, 1968-1972

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Introduction

Whether a satisfying historical perspective and dimension will ever be imparted to the mystery that is China's post-war internal political history is unknown. It is less likely that the individual roles and motives of China's various leaders will be any more clearly discerned in the future than they are today by reading between the lines of carefully veiled public polemics. Yet the figure of Chou En-lai stands in stark relief to this unrelenting ambiguity. His tenure as Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China for a period spanning three decades has left his unmistakable imprimatur on China's difficult postwar history. When all is said and done, it is he who will be described as the skillful architect of China's successful acceptance as a modern nation into an international community ideologically hostile to the premises of its very existence. Moreover, it is a feat he managed with no compromise or sacrifice to China's clarity of dedication to its Marxist-Leninist roots, and in a manner which resulted in the ultimate redress of many outstanding grievances -- UN admittance, US recognition, avoidance of a "two Chinas" policy -- and the successful stalemate of an increasingly belligerent Soviet Union.

How long the duality that now exists in China can persist, with its limited embrace of market economics and the yearnings it engenders offset by harsh unyielding political repression, is unclear. But it was Chou En-lai's efforts that set those forces in motion. Whether Chou saw the unique constellation of political forces coming together at the end of the 1960's clearly enough to orchestrate them to achieve longstanding goals, or whether he simply recognized the imperatives of the threats facing China both internally and externally and skillfully seized the opportunities which were presented, is unclear. What is clear is that his efforts provided the fundament upon which the current China is predicated. China re-emerged as a full-fledged member of the family of nations, but on its own terms, immune to external pressures for internal reform.

China's National Interest

Differing, ultimately irreconcilable, views of China's national interests were precisely what were at issue among Chinese leaders by 1968. More than one observer has characterized Chou's attitude toward the Chinese Cultural Revolution as, at a minimum, ambivalent. Originally conceived as a means of revitalizing the revolution, to counter what was perceived by Mao as excessive Party and bureaucratic rigidity, the Cultural Revolution cultivated dislocation and upheaval in every aspect of Chinese life. The effect was to shut down the country for a period of close to three years while it engaged in paroxysms of ideological fervor. While Chou joined political forces with Mao and Lin Biao and emerged politically victorious from the turmoil, the three did not share common cause.

Chou viewed China as exhausted by "permanent revolution." He represented a faction of moderate administrators who saw China as a nation in shambles, and who viewed a period of consolidation and restoration of civil order as essential to China's healing and future social and economic development. The obstacles to achieving this breathing space were many. Foremost internally was the opposition posed by the "Maoists," the radical leftist faction represented by Mao himself, and his even more radical anointed successor, Lin Biao. Whereas Chou supported strong tactics both to restore order and Communist Party control, including the forcible defeat and subjugation by the PLA of the Cultural Revolution's Red Guard, Mao and Lin Biao appeared to support continuing (in Mao's case) and permanent (in Lin Biao's) revolutionary struggle within China.

Chou also regarded respite from a burgeoning Sino-Soviet confrontation and continuing Sino-U.S. vitriol as essential in order to permit China its inward focus, while Mao and Lin Biao appeared adamantly committed to a vocal and uncompromising struggle against the "dual adversaries" of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism. These critical differences among the ruling factions were to wax and wane, but ultimately persist and intensify over time, creating a tactically complex and shifting backdrop to Chou En-lai's efforts at foreign statesmanship that made every element of Chinese foreign policy tentative.

tenuous and susceptible to upset

The Outside World

The Dragon and the Bear The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution literally had disbanded the government bureaucracies, and with them any organized means of formulating or implementing foreign policy. At the same time, its proponents conjured the specter of China's external enemies in order to galvanize the populace ideologically. The harsh invective levelled at the Soviet Union for the sin of perceived ideological heresy had for some time surpassed even that aimed at the U S , which was still engaged in a war in Indochina with a primary Chinese ally

Yet whereas Mao and Lin Biao appeared content to continue to issue taunts and rail against the "dual adversaries," Chou's actions by this time suggest that he viewed China's dispute with the Soviet Union as increasingly grave -- so grave in fact that he was willing to consider and then promote accommodation with the United States on issues that had been unyielding principles of China's foreign policy at least since the end of the Bandung Period (1955-57) ¹

By late 1968, China's situation vis-a-vis the Soviet Union was indeed alarming. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968 was unremarkably similar in situation to the 1953 and 1956 revolts in East Berlin and Hungary where the USSR was also threatened with losing vital parts of its sphere of influence, except in one respect. Its novelty lay in its accompanying clear enunciation of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" - a policy which, though familiar in its application, never before had been spelled out

In short, in contrast to "bourgeois" concepts of sovereignty which acknowledge the supreme jurisdiction of each state regarding its foreign and domestic affairs, the Brezhnev Doctrine held that "socialist" sovereignty was limited and stipulated that a socialist country remains master of its house only so long as it preserves the model approved by the Soviet

Communist Party in its domestic affairs and maintains solidarity with the Soviet Union in its external policies ²

Justifying as it would Moscow's military intervention in the affairs of any fraternal socialist regime it judged to be revisionist, Chou En-lai openly accused the Kremlin of contemplating just such a step toward China on September 30, 1968. He claimed not only stepped up armed provocations against China and the buildup of "massive" troop concentrations in Mongolia and along the Sino-Soviet border, but also increasing Soviet violations of Chinese air space ³

Tensions between Moscow and Beijing had increased by early 1969 as, in anticipation of the approaching pivotal Chinese 9th Party Congress, China kept up its militant anti-Soviet rhetoric. In fact, some manner of confrontation seemed to be inevitable. By March 1969, the Soviet Union had completed a massive transfer of troops to its Far Eastern border, increasing its former 15-17 divisions to an estimated total of 40-45 divisions in order to offset Beijing's 35-36 division equivalents (approximately 450,000 men). Were any conflict to occur, it would be expected somewhere along the Sino-Soviet border, elements of which were in an ownership dispute (islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers). For years, this had been the locus of Chinese demonstrations of defiance, which always tended to parallel the state of Sino-Soviet relations ⁴

The most authoritative account of what followed indicates that two armed clashes took place, the first on March 2 and the last on March 15. The first was a small skirmish instigated by 20-30 armed Chinese shouting Maoist slogans approaching a contested island in the Ussuri River, who opened fire on a Russian platoon. Despite the deaths of 31 Russian soldiers, it does not appear that China anticipated a great retaliatory response ⁵. Yet on March 15, a Soviet-initiated engagement of an entirely different nature took place, in which mortar and artillery fire was exchanged, resulting in the deaths of some 800 Chinese and 60 Soviet troops.

These events marked the nadir of Sino-Soviet relations, and were a prime influence in improving the relative political position of the moderates internally, thus giving Chou both reason and room to modify China's tactics toward the United States. For not only could China ill afford a "war on two fronts," there was always the possibility that the U S , engaged in detente with the USSR, might acquiesce or even aid in a Soviet offensive. As a direct result, the Ninth Party Congress, which convened just 2 weeks after the clashes, reconfirmed Chou's heretofore uncertain position as the nation's third ranking leader, permitting him to resume his leading role in shaping Chinese foreign policy and the USSR supplanted the US (ever so slightly) as China's immediate, first order enemy.

Dragon and Paper Tiger Despite these events, there is little reason to believe that Chou would have considered an overture to the U S , but for his evident calculation that America itself was in profound turmoil with respect to its foreign policy. Once before, during the Bandung Period, when China had adopted the theme of "peaceful coexistence" in its external relations, Chou had made an extremely conciliatory overture toward the U S only to be rebuffed in an incident made memorable by John Foster Dulles' refusal to shake hands.

No doubt critical to Chou's current calculation was the perception that the U S had sustained a decisive setback to its foreign policy goals following the Tet Offensive in January 1968, both in military terms but also in the effect of the continuing war on the confidence and mood of the American people. Evidence of disaffection was everywhere, and perhaps best reflected in Lyndon Johnson's March, 1968 announcement that he would not seek reelection to the Presidency.

An American defeat in Indochina would effectively remove any lingering doubt that the U S could harbor any military designs on China herself. Moreover, if a Vietnam settlement (and subsequent U S withdrawal from Southeast Asia) was imminent, it was undoubtedly important to Chou that China not be excluded from its formulation. There was a strong desire that a U S withdrawal not create a power vacuum that Japan might fill. More than one observer has speculated that China could afford politically to appear magnanimous

to a U S brought to its knees in Asia

Most importantly, much had changed within the U S over the previous decade. The extreme reluctance of the Democrat administrations of Presidents Johnson and Kennedy to take any action toward China that might be labelled "appeasement" had precluded any real steps toward accommodation. By 1968, however, American anti-Communist ideological fervor had perceptibly lost its force, with the image of China as the perpetrator of "aggression by proxy" lost in the blur of growing popular antipathy toward continued military involvement in Asia. The American public was demanding a re-examination of American commitments - not only to the defense of South Vietnam, but to NATO, and to the continued containment of China.

Thus, for a Presidential aspirant such as Richard Nixon in 1968, a substantive reassessment of U S Cold War policies was a political imperative. Yet what could Chou En-Lai have expected. In the vanguard of the old "China bloc," with attitudes born of the McCarthy era and a reputation built on the conviction of Alger Hiss, Nixon's record singled him out as one of the most belligerent of Cold Warriors. What Chou En-Lai undoubtedly watched was the radical transformation in Nixon's attitude revealed in his 1967 Foreign Affairs article entitled "Asia after Vietnam," which outlined a post-war Asia policy for the U S. Astonishingly, Nixon departed from statements of even his recent past and asserted that American policy "must come urgently to grips with the reality of China," and concluded that, in the long run, the U S could not afford to leave China outside the international community.

Richard Nixon and America had indeed undergone a strange metamorphosis for Nixon to be able to say upon accepting the Republican nomination in Miami:

To the leaders of the Communist world we say, after an era of confrontation, the time has come for an era of negotiation. We extend the hand of friendship to all people. To the Russian people. To the Chinese people. To all the people of the world.

None of this could have been lost on Chou. The first public Chinese acknowledgement of President Nixon's election was muted and did not even mention his rabidly anticommunist background.⁶

Strategy and Statecraft

Those who have dealt directly with Chou En-lai ascribe to him an oriental inscrutability which veiled an unvarnished pragmatic rationalist. Certainly Kissinger's faintly romanticized descriptions leave an impression that he felt that he had found a kindred, master practitioner of the art of realpolitik. Perhaps he had.

Certainly, during the delicate minuet that followed, Chou En-lai compromised no Chinese national interests, nor sacrificed ideological prerogatives. Even when crippled by domestic political intrigue and unable to play out his hand, whether by serendipity or design, he was able to cast the United States in the position of demandeur, yielding outcomes fully consistent with his own terms.

It was a dangerous game that he sought to play -- to attempt to quiet the Russian Bear by calling the American Tiger. Moreover, it was a game of wits, where his only instrument was his skill at diplomacy -- his assessment of motives and incentives, and his ability to wait. The dangers were indeed immense. In early June, 1969, Soviet diplomats were reported probing western capitals to ascertain probable reactions in the event a Sino-Soviet conflict resulted in the use of nuclear weapons.⁷

Although there had been an exchange of subtle cues between the U.S. and China, in the form of oblique statements through third party intermediaries, and some change in American rhetoric, it is difficult to believe that Chou En-lai's goals vis-a-vis the U.S. were not tentative and limited initially. Thus, merely the fact of restarting the long-standing Sino-U.S. Warsaw Talks, which had been in hiatus since prior to the U.S. election, could be a form of political deterrence, sufficient to inject uncertainty and discomfort into Moscow's calculations,

both with regard to China, and with respect to its own burgeoning detente with the U.S.

However, even this small step initially proved impossible for Chou En-lai to take. His public proposal of November 26, 1968 to restart the Warsaw Talks on February 20, 1969 with the new American administration fell victim to the radical Maoists whose political tactics intensified in the lead up to the Ninth Chinese Communist Party Conference, scheduled for March, 1969. By January, a propaganda campaign of great scope and vehemence had been launched against the U.S. There were no more proposals from Beijing.

U.S. Interests Kissinger, preoccupied with the beginning of SALT and a solution to the war in Vietnam, nonetheless approved a new U.S. policy toward China of "atmospheric" initiatives and "systematic de-isolation." This policy was characterized by a profusion of conciliatory statements and legalistic policy changes removing long-standing restrictions on contacts.

Abstractly, Kissinger believed that international stability was not served by forcibly excluding a state from the international community. That state would likely view the system as oppressive, and having no stake in its maintenance, could seek to upset the status quo. Thus, he felt that a more stable world order could potentially result from an improved relationship with the People's Republic of China. More pragmatically, there was the possibility of exploiting a triangular strategy, using China for subtle pressure on Moscow, and through Moscow, on Hanoi.

Even so, U.S. efforts were comparatively desultory until August, 1969 when compelling intelligence brought home to Kissinger the degree of Chinese alarm regarding the Soviet threat. The decision was then made to seek active improvement in relations -- rather than a simple resumption in contacts. The theory was that, if China really valued a U.S. reassurance that it would refuse to support a Soviet offensive, or even state its open opposition to a Soviet attack, Beijing might remove Taiwan as an obstacle in other areas of negotiation.⁸ A few days later in Canberra, Australia, Secretary Rogers delivered an

extremely forthcoming public statement designed to address China's concerns

Finally, preceded by two months of cryptic references in the Beijing press, Chou En-lai signalled in October, quietly this time, Chinese readiness to reopen the Warsaw Talks. With little fanfare, on January 20, 1970 and again on February 20, the two sides met in meetings described as "pivotal" ⁹ and "mind-boggling," when in a reversal of previous policy, the Chinese proposed that the talks could be moved to China, with a high-ranking U S official as Head of Delegation. Ironically, the U S was so stunned, that both Kissinger and the bureaucracy, debating possible motives, dragged their feet on a response.

Cambodia Intervenes The overthrow of Prince Sihanouk and subsequent U S invasion of Cambodia put Chou En-lai in an untenable situation. Just two days before the next scheduled Warsaw meeting (scheduled for May 20, 1970), China cancelled, leaving the impression that there would be a quick resumption. In fact, the silence lasted months.

Within a few days of the withdrawal of the last U S soldier from Cambodia (July 1, 1970), President Nixon departed radically from Washington's publicly even-handed policy toward the USSR and China, and stated unequivocally his opposition to Soviet military pressure on China and his desire to normalize relations with Beijing explicitly as a restraint upon Moscow.

Little did Washington realize that the overthrow of Sihanouk and the U S invasion of Cambodia would precipitate a showdown between Lin Biao and Chou En-lai. Lin's still effective leverage was reflected in the cancellation of the May 20 Warsaw meeting. Throughout the summer and fall, political stalemate precluded any Chinese moves toward the U S. At the same time, tensions with Moscow began to lessen after the Soviet border dispute negotiator (Kuznetsov) was given authority to concede Chinese sovereignty over a few of the disputed islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. On July 1, China and the USSR agreed to resume ambassadorial representation for the first time since 1966.

In August, Mao moved toward final resolution of the domestic conflict. The moderates had gained significant ground on both the domestic and foreign policy fronts, but conflict with the Maoists still polarized the country. Sensing a loss, supporters of Lin Biao called a new National Assembly, obviating regular procedures, which he hoped to dominate. As Chou En-lai recounted much later (during the Tenth Party Congress on August 24, 1973), Lin Biao had attempted to "start a counter-revolutionary coup d'etat, which was aborted" ¹⁰ The Chinese Politburo deferred control to Chou En-lai.

The Tables Turn The irony of Chou En-lai's victory was that, while he was now free to move toward the U S , the strategic imperatives of the previous year no longer pertained. There had been incremental improvement in Sino-Soviet relations and a careful avoidance of border incidents. Improved relations with the U S were no longer so urgently necessary as to warrant speedy resolution of outstanding issues on terms favorable to Washington. In fact, the trend of events were such that delay could only improve Beijing's position.

The Cambodian debacle, the effectiveness of the China-sponsored Hanoi coalition and insurgent forces in Cambodia and Laos no doubt convinced Chou that Nixon would now be forced to end the war, whether under favorable conditions or not. Once the U S took a final decision to withdraw, an understanding with China would be imperative to a successful withdrawal and enforcement of the "decent interval." Chou En-lai could not only afford to wait, he could bargain from a position of strength.

If this was Chou En-lai's assessment, he was correct. November, 1970, marked President Nixon's lowest approval ratings yet. In lieu of other alternatives, Nixon was coming to believe that a breakthrough with China could be as politically lucrative as it was strategically necessary to the U S withdrawal from Vietnam. A concerted campaign of secret exchanges was mounted by the White House through the good offices of Pakistan and Rumania, designed to convey the earnestness of Nixon's new outlook on Asia. This time there were strong indications of Chinese receptiveness.

The U S -sponsored invasion of Laos by ARVN forces on January 15, 1971 once again could have derailed the budding Sino-U.S relationship had it widened the war, or even been moderately successful. It was a rout. What it did accomplish finally was to impose powerful domestic pressure from the political center on Nixon to set a final deadline for the withdrawal of American troops. That Washington made no attempt to salvage the situation was perhaps the decisive factor in Chou En-lai's decision to actively engage in high-level negotiations with the Nixon Administration.

The Chinese tactic of delay, whether by accident or by design, had paid off. Whereas Beijing had needed the U S in 1969-70, as Mao so astutely observed to Edgar Snow, Nixon would need the Chinese soon because "the Presidential election would be in 1972, would it not?"¹¹ By March, the Chinese made it dramatically apparent that its attitude toward the U S had undergone a major sea change. Ping Pong diplomacy was only one of many atmospheric initiatives that now began to emanate from Beijing.

Opening China Interestingly, Chou apparently was acutely aware of the implications of Nixon's flagging popularity, enough so to consider playing the field. He assiduously courted opposition candidates from West Germany and Australia, whom he quizzed on the merits and reliability of Democrats versus Republicans.¹² In April, Life finally published Edgar Snow's December, 1970, interview with Mao in which he stated that he would be happy to talk to Nixon, either as President or as tourist; that he should just get on a plane and come. A flurry of messages were directed at Beijing, reaffirming not only Nixon's interest in coming, but his expectation that any breakthrough in relations must include a summit between Nixon and Chinese leaders.

It was only a few days later that the White House learned of Beijing's intention to receive at least one of the three contenders for the Democratic nomination in June.¹³ Concluding that they could be put in the position of following the Democrats on a trip to China, the White House accelerated its wooing of Chou En-lai. If an American envoy could be rushed to Beijing and an invitation for a Presidential visit to occur before the election

obtained, and then announced, the Democrats would be preempted

Nixon was betting that a Presidential visit to China could even overshadow Vietnam, thereby deflecting attention from the greatest obstacle to his reelection. Such an act of statecraft, Kissinger suggested later, was "so great, so historic, that the word Vietnam will only be a footnote when it is written in history." ¹⁴ In early May, Pakistani economic advisor M.M. Ahmed brought the invitation they had been waiting for -- Kissinger was to go to Beijing in July.

Secrecy was the hallmark of both planning and implementation on both sides. Secrecy would hold open the option that, were the trip unsuccessful, both sides could avoid embarrassment. Moreover, for Nixon, it was critical lest his political foes denounce the policy and the bureaucracy muddle it up. The damage of leaks had been brought home just a month prior when the so-called "Pentagon Papers" were leaked by Daniel Ellsberg. For Chou En-lai, as it turned out, there was also reason for caution.

For the U.S., however, secrecy had the drawback of limiting the amount of vetting. Kissinger's strategy to achieve a successful demarche received. In retrospect, this left a vacuum that Chou En-lai readily filled. In fact, there was apparently no expectation on the U.S. part that substantive agreements would be reached or even that a conceptual framework would be discussed. The only two issues that were clear were that both sides were in agreement about beginning a high-level dialogue aimed at seeking a normalization of relations and that Kissinger went to Beijing to confirm a Chinese agreement that the talks begin at the level of a Presidential summit meeting. ¹⁵ Chou En-lai affirmed the invitation on July 10, 1971, and Kissinger accepted on Nixon's behalf.

Results

Chou En-lai clearly gained more than he risked in agreeing to the opening. The bilateral announcement to seek a normalization of relations alone would throw Moscow off

balance and be extremely divisive to U S relations both with Taiwan and Japan. Moreover, a significant amount of prestige would accrue to China simply because an American President, at his own request, would visit China. The downside would be Hanoi's anxiety and the loss of credibility with some Third World revolutionary elements.

The long-range benefits to China were potentially much greater. With his July 15, 1971 announcement, Nixon publicly had made his proposal to visit China for the purposes of normalizing relations unconditional. In essence, Nixon had pitched his trump. The Chinese could sit back and wait. From Chou En-lai's perspective, for Nixon to have a successful summit would depend on the substance of his proposals to resolve outstanding differences. Moreover, Nixon's actions would be held hostage to the possibility that the Chinese could cancel the summit, thus embarrassing him. In fact, Nixon sacrificed his ability to maneuver for the ten months preceding the summit for fear some event would again derail relations. News reports of the time indicate that Nixon curtailed all activities that could be interpreted by the Chinese as hostile or provocative.

For his part, Chou En-lai, in an interview with James Reston just three weeks after Kissinger's trip, made clear that progress toward normalization required, at the least, resolution in principle of Taiwan and Vietnam. Nor did he indicate any give on either issue. If Nixon wished to accept Beijing's formulation on Taiwan, fine, normalization and diplomatic relations could follow, if not, dialogue might continue, but normalization would not. As he stated simply: "We have already waited for more than twenty years and we can wait another year. That doesn't matter. But there must be a just solution." ¹⁶

Whatever Nixon's predilections may have been regarding resolution of the Taiwan issue, constraints on his flexibility were still formidable, both politically and legally. The formulation arrived at by the Nixon Administration, that the status of Taiwan and its ultimate disposition should be settled by direct negotiations, conceded much to Beijing's view that Taiwan was an internal matter, but as a practical matter, changed very little. However, during Kissinger's October 21-26 visit to Beijing, the U S withdrew its opposition in the United

Nations to the so-called "Albanian Resolution" to seat the PRC and expel the Republic of China and the resolution was carried

While the fact of President Nixon's February 18-26 visit to China was in itself historic, it is fair to say that neither the U S nor China reaped much of substantive significance at the meeting. Certainly, President Nixon received the political boost he had anticipated, although there was no evidence of Chinese aid toward settlement of Vietnam. The mere fact of a Sino-U S rapprochement limited the amount of influence China could be expected to have with Hanoi.

Yet, what Chou En-lai achieved on behalf of China as a result of the opening was indeed tremendous: an end to China's isolation, both politically and economically, UN acceptance, U S recognition of Beijing as the legitimate government of China, even if Taiwan has yet to be resolved, and a timely counter to Moscow's continuing intransigence. For his part, Chou En-lai neither softened his position, nor conceded anything in his communique language. In fact, the Chinese statement is openly intransigent. Despite his diplomatic successes, Chou was true to his word. Without a solution to Taiwan, Nixon walked away without even an agreement on permanent diplomatic representation in capitals -- only a permanent "contact" in Paris.

1 Ironically, a key issue in the original split between Moscow and Beijing had been how to handle the United States. Khrushchev's 1959 summit with the US had made it clear that the Soviets preferred accommodation with Washington to confrontation. The decision was thus made to embark on an independent course of open defiance against both Soviet leadership and Soviet diplomacy which had grown too conservative for a China still in the throes of revolution.

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3 New China News Agency, September 30, 1968

4 Thomas W. Robinson, The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development and the March, 1969 Clashes, (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corp., RM-6171, PR, August 1970), p. 61

5 Harold C. Hinton, "Conflict on the Ussuri: A Clash of Nationalisms," Problems of Communism, January-April, 1971, p. 47

6 New China News Agency, November 8, 1968

7 Paul Wohl, Christian Science Monitor, June 5, 1969

8 Private interview with Allen Whiting

9 Private interview with Richard Solomon

10 Reprinted in Peking Review, Nos 35-36, September 7, 1973, pp. 17-25

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12 Ross Terill, 800,000,000: The Real China, (New York: Delta Pub. Co., 1971), p. 142

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15 Allen Whiting, op. cit.

16 James Reston, New York Times, August 5, 1971

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