



## “It’s Largely a Propaganda Effort”

**Date:** 1968-01-31

**Conversation:** WH6801-02-12617

**Participant:** Lyndon B. Johnson

**Participant:** Robert S. McNamara

**Start Time:** Unknown

**Duration:** 02:56

**Place:** Mansion

SCENE SETTER: Just hours after the start of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Robert S. “Bob” McNamara gave President Johnson an initial assessment of the attack and suggested its likely impact on American public opinion. McNamara would leave the administration in less than 30 days, and his frustration with the war was apparent in this early morning call.

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**Robert S. “Bob” McNamara:** But for a time it looked like we might have another nuclear incident on our hands. [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] The result is, Mr. President, I’m really not up to date on Southeast Asia. I can’t tell you anything.

**President Johnson:** What is the story behind the . . . well, what was your evaluation yesterday? I wanted to ask you to go in the office, and I looked at you, and you thought—I thought you were so damn tired you better go home to your wife.

**McNamara:** No, no. No, I was—

**President Johnson:** And we’d had—well, we’d start at that breakfast, but I just didn’t—

**McNamara:** No, I’m sorry. I would love to have come in. Well . . . I . . . I think it shows two things, Mr. President. First, that they have more power than some credit them with. I don’t think it’s a last-gasp action. I do think that it represents a maximum effort in the sense of, they’ve poured on all of their assets, and my guess is that we will inflict very heavy losses on them, both in terms of personnel and materiel, and this will set them back some, but that after they absorb the losses, they will remain a substantial force. I don’t anticipate that we’ll hit them so hard that they’ll be knocked out for an extended period or forced to drop way back in level of effort against us. I do think that it is such a well-coordinated, such an obviously advance-planned operation, that it probably relates to negotiations in some way. I would expect that were they successful here, they’d then move forward more forcefully on the negotiation front, and that—thinking that they have a stronger position from which to bargain. I don’t believe they’re going to be successful. I think that in Khe Sanh, where we’re going to have the real military engagement, I believe we’ll deal them a heavy defeat. I think in the other areas it’s largely a propaganda effort and a publicity effort, and I think they’ll gain that way. I imagine our people across the country this morning will feel that they’re much stronger than they had previously anticipated they were. And in that sense I think they gain.

The question in my mind is how to respond to this. Is there anything we should be doing we're not doing? I've talked to the [Joint] Chiefs [of Staff] about some kind of a reciprocal action, retaliation for their attack on our embassy, or in retaliation for their attack across the country. There just isn't anything they have come up with that is worth a damn. They talk about an area bombing attack over Hanoi. The weather is terrible. You can't get in there with pinpoint targeting. The only way you could bomb it at all at the present time is area bombing; I wouldn't recommend that to you under any circumstances. They just haven't been able to think of retaliation that means anything. My own feeling is that we ought to depend upon our ability to inflict very heavy casualties on them, as our proper response and as the message we give to our people.

*End of excerpt.*

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CITATION: "Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara on 31 January 1968," Conversation WH6801-02-12617, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Johnson Telephone Tapes: 1968, ed. Kent B. Germany, Nicole Hemmer, and Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4005940>

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Full information about this conversation: ["It's Largely a Propaganda Effort"](#)