MR. REYNOLDS: Senator Dirksen, you have been a consistent supporter of the President's broad objectives in Vietnam. Have the events in the past week and the current communist offensive there caused you to change your view and do you agree with the President that the communist offensive in military terms has been a complete failure?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, let's separate the question. First of all, I have not forsaken the President's position in respect to North Vietnam -- North Korea or with respect to South Vietnam. Let's look at that Korean picture for just a moment. Here were such delicate questions as
MR. REYNOLDS: Senator, how do we go about any military action and still achieve the objective of getting those men back?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: That is the reason I have not projected myself into a speculation about military action. We had a thing like this happen once before. I think in one of his press conferences the President alluded to that fact.

MR. REYNOLDS: In the case of the RB-47?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes. And you probably were there. It did take quite a while before that was negotiated. When you negotiate with other countries, it is not quite so expeditious, not quite so easy, and it is not quite so simple. And I make allowances for those things. But I do press the point that I think we were on good, defensible grounds that the North Korean action was absolutely inexcusable and for that reason I am very reluctant to ever give and utter an apology when no apology is called for.

MR. REYNOLDS: Senator, could we come back for a moment to Vietnam and in view of what has happened there in the current offensive, they still hold parts at least of some provincial towns. Do you agree with the President who said that their military campaign was a total failure, a complete failure?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, let’s not use the word “total” but let’s say that it was a failure. And as I analyze the
thing from time to time on the basis of the kind of information that is available to me, this looked like something that had been dictated by councils of both desperation and despair. I think you get that from the fact that as you look at these captives and you get reports on them -- youngsters, 12, 13, 14 years old -- what would that probably translate to the average citizen, or the average military commander? That they are running out of manpower.

Now then when it comes to weapons, maybe the same thing you can get there, namely that supplies are beginning to run short. So, put it all in the one thing. Wasn't it General Westmoreland who said "They are going for broke"? Maybe that is the expression that applies in this case. It is now or never.

MR. CLARK: One of your fellow Republicans, Senator Tower, said this might be the death rattle of the Viet Cong. Do you agree with that?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, I think I am inclined to go along with that general assessment, because this was a deadly, dangerous undertaking that they got into, and they wouldn't do it unless they were desperate. I can't imagine that they would.

* * * * *

(Announcement)
MR. CLARK: Your fellow Senator from Illinois, Charles Percy, seems to take a much more serious view than you do of the Viet Cong escapades these past few days in Vietnam. He says that the President has been misleading the American people about the extent of our military progress. Do you think there is any justification for this statement?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, it is difficult indeed to make a military assessment of something that is taking place 12,000 miles from home. In the first place, I am not a military man. In the second place, I have not been out there in a great many years, although I was there, even in North Vietnam, before Dienbienphu fell. That is when the French finally caved in. So who shall say whether we have enough troops, whether the deployment of our troops is very proper, whether we are adequately weaponed. Until I see in detail those reports, then I could better tell, I think.

MR. REYNOLDS: Well, Senator, does it not give you pause that they were able to mount this kind of a coordinated offensive that had obviously been planned in advance, and they were able to humiliate the United States in some measure by at least occupying part of the Embassy ground there?
SENIOR DIRKSEN: Frank, it does, but there is an offsetting factor there. Having watched people move in those countries like Vietnam, on foot, on bicycles, in motor lorries, in every way known to mankind, how easy it is for them to move into a city.

And then, of course, ethnically there is little substantial difference, if any, between a North Vietnamese and a South Vietnamese: not very much.

I remember the story they used to tell about how to identify a North Korean as against a South Korean, because they wear a different type of sandal and the strap came in one case between the big toe and the next toe; in the other case, between the second toe and the third toe, and thereon they found the callouses that determined who they were.

Now, with that kind of condition and with the hundreds of thousands of refugees moving in and out, I do not know that that is so surprising, that they could stage this kind of an assault. And particularly, if they were wearing uniforms that deceived the defenders of the place.

MR. CLARK: Senator, you have talked of the enemy's manpower problem in Vietnam. Secretary McNamara's only appearance this week, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, pointed out that North Vietnam has an army of 480,000 men and thus far has committed only about 50,000 of those troops to battle in South Vietnam. Does that
sound like a very critical manpower problem?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, are you mentioning now that the Viet Cong and North Vietnam have committed only 50,000—

MR. CLARK: No, that would be the North Vietnam. The total is something like 115,000.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: That is right. That is quite a different thing, because the Viet Cong are very much in there and for all practical purposes, they are the real military enemy out there.

MR. CLARK: Well, the expected assault on Khesanah will be mounted apparently mainly by troops from North Vietnam and still they have an uncommitted army of something like 430 thousand men.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes. Now the question is, who is in that uncommitted army? Because on the basis of what we have captured, these kids -- you have to call them kids--

MR. CLARK: I would have to cite again Secretary McNamara's report that 480,000 is only 3 percent of the population of North Vietnam, which is much lower than the percentage we had in our army--

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Oh, that might well be, but you are talking about a force of 480,000. What does it include?

MR. CLARK: Well, Secretary McNamara said basically that they are inducting each year into the North Vietnam Army the youths that are becoming of draft age that given
year, but his whole point is that there is a great reservoir
of manpower in North Vietnam that has not yet been committed
to the war.

SENATOR DIRKSEN: If you put it all together I have
no doubt about it. But if you include down to age 14 in our
own population, why look at what our potential would be
military-wise. We have never done it.

MR. REYNOLDS: But isn't that precisely the point,
Senator. Nobody in this country has any intentions of including
our people down to the age of 14 or carrying a thing of that
nature --

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, I cited the matter only to fortify
my conclusion. I said, was this a matter dictated by desperation
or not, then you take all the factors into consideration,
and that is certainly one of them.

MR. CLARK: Senator, many of your colleagues in the
Senate and in the House, too, are concerned that we are
already so overcommitted in Vietnam and other parts of the
world that we would be unable or certainly it would be very
hazardous for us to get involved in another full-scale war in
Korea. Do you share this sort of concern?