I turned impulsively and tried to keep the emotion out of my voice as I said: “General, I just want you to know how all the free people of Europe and millions of others in the world will forever be in your debt for the leadership you provided in war and peace. You can always take great pride in the fact that no man in our history has done more to make America and the world a better and safer place in which to live.”

His eyes were closed as I spoke, but after a brief moment he opened them and lifted his head from the pillow. With an unusual formality he said, “Mr. President, you do me great honor in what you have just said.”

Then he slowly raised his hand to his forehead in a final salute.

**OPERATION BREAKFAST**

We had wondered whether a new President and a serious new peace overture would produce a breakthrough that would end the Vietnam war. The North Vietnamese gave us the answer in February when they launched a small-scale but savage offensive into South Vietnam. It was a deliberate test, clearly designed to take the measure of me and my administration at the outset.

My immediate instinct was to retaliate. Kissinger and I agreed that if we let the Communists manipulate us at this early stage, we might never be able to negotiate with them from a position of equality, much less one of strength. Johnson had made this mistake and had never been able to recover the initiative.

This view was shared by General Creighton Abrams, the U.S. Commander in Vietnam, and by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon. When the Communists stepped up their offensive, both Abrams and Bunker recommended B-52 bombing runs against their supply lines in the Cambodian sanctuaries.

Bill Rogers and Mel Laird opposed this recommendation. They feared the fury of Congress and the media if I expanded the war into Cambodia. But Kissinger argued, “What do we care if the New York Times clobbers us now if it helps us end the war sooner?” I agreed with him, but I decided to postpone a final decision about the bombing until I returned from the European trip, because a leak of plans to bomb Cambodia might have triggered serious antiwar demonstrations abroad. I directed that a cable be sent to Bunker through regular channels saying that all discussions of bombing should be suspended. I simultaneously sent a top secret “back-channel” message—a routing outside the official system—to General Abrams telling him to ignore the message to Bunker and to continue planning the B-52 strikes on a contingency basis even though I would have to withhold approval until after my trip.

While I was in Europe, the Communist offensive intensified. At a press conference two days after my return I was asked what our reaction would be. “We have not moved in a precipitate fashion,” I said, “but the fact that we have shown patience and forbearance should not be considered as a sign of weakness... An appropriate response to these attacks will be made if they continue.”

Ten days later, on the morning of my next press conference, the North Vietnamese mounted a new attack across the DMZ. In reply to a question about whether my patience was growing thin with this kind of provocation, I said, “You may recall that on March 4, when I received a similar question, at an earlier stage in the attacks, I issued what was interpreted widely as a warning. It will be my policy as President to issue a warning only once, and I will not repeat it now. Anything in the future that is done will be done.”

On Sunday, March 16, I met for two hours with Rogers, Laird, Kissinger, and General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to review the military and diplomatic situation in Vietnam.

I asked for the latest casualty figures. Because of the Communist offensive, they were high. Three hundred fifty-one Americans had died during the past week, 453 the week before, and 336 the week before that.

Our intelligence reports indicated that over 40,000 Communist troops had secretly been amassed in a zone ten to fifteen miles wide just inside the Cambodian border. Cambodia was a neutral country. We respected that neutrality, but the Communists were blatantly violating it by launching raids across the Cambodian border into South Vietnam and then retreating to the safety of their jungle sanctuaries.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “we have reached the point where a decision is required: to bomb or not to bomb.”

I assured everyone that I understood the problems and recognized the risks involved in bombing the sanctuaries, no matter how justified such action might be.

“But we have to look at what we’re up against,” I continued. “The state of play in Paris is completely sterile. I am convinced that the only way to move the negotiations off dead center is to do something on the military front. That is something they will understand.”

I said that short of resuming the bombing of North Vietnam, this was the only military action we could take that might succeed in saving American lives and getting the peace negotiations moving.

I concluded, “I have decided to order the bombing to begin as soon as possible. Tomorrow, if the weather is good enough.”

The weather was good, and on March 17, B-52 bombers struck the Communist sanctuaries inside the Cambodian border. The Pentagon gave the secret bombing the codename Menu, and the various target areas were designated by different mealtimes. The attack on the first
area was called Operation Breakfast. It was the first turning point in my administration's conduct of the Vietnam war.

Maximum precautions were taken to keep the bombing secret, for several reasons. We knew that Prince Sihanouk, the head of the Cambodian government, strongly objected to the presence of the North Vietnamese army in his country. As early as 1968, he had asked the United States to retaliate against the North Vietnamese, either with "hot pursuit" on the ground or by bombing the sanctuaries. We also knew that because of Cambodia's neutral status, Sihanouk could not afford to endorse our actions officially. Therefore, as long as we bombed secretly, we knew that Sihanouk would be silent; if the bombing became known publicly, however, he would be forced to protest it publicly.

We also anticipated that as long as the bombing remained secret, the North Vietnamese would find it difficult to protest since they were officially denying that they had any troops in Cambodia.

Another reason for secrecy was the problem of domestic antiwar protest. My administration was only two months old, and I wanted to provoke as little public outcry as possible at the outset.

In order to preserve the secrecy of the bombing, we informed only Richard Russell and John Stennis, the Chairman and the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Although Russell was beginning to have doubts about the war in general, both men thought that the bombing was the right decision, and both said that they would back me up in the event that it became public.

Soon after Operation Breakfast began, there was a steady decline in American casualties in South Vietnam.

EC-121

Less than a month after the secret bombing of the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia began, we were suddenly confronted with a major crisis from a completely unexpected quarter of the Communist world.

Just before seven in the morning on April 15, my bedside phone began ringing. It was Kissinger. He informed me of reliable but as yet unconfirmed reports that North Korean jets had shot down one of our Navy reconnaissance planes with thirty-one men aboard.

As soon as I got to the Oval Office, I read the fragmentary intelligence reports. The North Koreans had shot down a four-engine propeller-driven EC-121 Navy aircraft which was on a regular reconnaissance mission off the North Korean coast. Such flights had been made for almost twenty years under standing orders that the aircraft not approach closer than forty nautical miles to the coast of North Korea, well outside the international territorial limit.

It was remotely possible that the men aboard the EC-121 had been taken captive in North Korea as the Pueblo crew had been fifteen months earlier. All during the day we assumed the worst—that the men were dead—but hoped for the best.

I reacted in the same way and with the same instincts that I had felt when the North Vietnamese offensive began: we were being tested, and therefore force must be met with force.

At ten the next morning, Washington time, I met with the NSC in the Cabinet Room to consider how we would respond to our first international crisis.

Both Rogers and Laird urged restraint. They reasoned that this might be a completely isolated incident, and thought we should stay our hand until we were completely sure what had happened and why. Ted Agnew disagreed. With obvious frustration he asked, "Why do we always take the other guy's position?"

Nothing was decided that morning, but two serious options emerged. Option One involved retaliation by sending a military strike against a North Korean airfield. Option Two involved continuing the EC-121 reconnaissance flights but sending combat escorts with them to ward off any future incidents.

Neither option was ideal. The North Koreans were well armed, and if we chose Option One we would have to be prepared to suffer further losses and to confront the possibility of reopening the fighting in Korea. And Option Two, while it would clearly establish the principle of our right to fly reconnaissance missions in international airspace, was admittedly a very weak protest against what appeared to be the murder of thirty-one men and a deliberate affront to American honor. Americans would rightly wonder about the value of our costly overseas commitments if we could not adequately protect our men and our honor in a situation that was as clear-cut as this one.

In midafternoon we received word that two bodies had been recovered from the water, along with some of the debris of the plane, ninety miles from the coast. There could be no more hope that there had been any survivors nor could there be any doubt that the incident was a calculated and cold-blooded challenge.

Intelligence reports indicated that shooting down the EC-121 was an isolated provocation like the seizure of the Pueblo. One of them pointed out that April 14 was the birthday of North Korea's leader, Kim Il-sung, and it was even possible that this was his macabre birthday present to himself. The case against retaliation was strongly supported in an urgent cable from Ambassador William Porter in Seoul, warning that any major military action we took would end up playing into the hands of North Korea's extremist leadership.