Bryce N. Harlow, 13 October 1969

Bryce Nathaniel Harlow

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MEMORANDUM

The President asked that I transmit to you the attached copy of his letter to a university student discussing the events planned for October 15.

Most respectfully,

Bryce N. Harlow
Assistant to the President
Dear Mr. Dicks:

In reply to your comments about my press conference remark that "under no circumstances will I be affected whatever" by the demonstrations planned for October 15, I would suggest that there are several points you should bear in mind.

First, there is a clear distinction between public opinion and public demonstrations. To listen to public opinion is one thing; to be swayed by public demonstrations is another. A demonstration -- in whatever cause -- is an organized expression of one particular set of opinions, which may or may not be shared by the majority of the people. If a President -- any President -- allowed his course to be set by those who demonstrate, he would betray the trust of all the rest. Whatever the issue, to allow government policy to be made in the streets would destroy the democratic process. It would give the decision, not to the majority, and not to those with the strongest arguments, but to those with the loudest voices. It would reduce statecraft to slogans. It would invite anarchy. It would allow every group to test its strength not at the ballot box but through confrontation in the streets.

The planned demonstrations will tell us that a great many Americans are deeply concerned about the war; that some of these consider U.S. participation immoral; that many want U.S. troops withdrawn immediately and unconditionally. But all of us in the Administration are already well aware of this sentiment. We are already well aware that it is widespread -- indeed, that no matter how many people might participate, there would be many more who share their concern.

Therefore, there is nothing new we can learn from the demonstrations. The question is whether, in the absence of any new evidence or any new arguments, we should be turned aside from a carefully considered course. The policies we are now following reflect our own best judgment, based on exhaustive study of all the available evidence, of how to achieve that goal. To abandon that policy merely because of a public demonstration would therefore be an act of gross irresponsibility on my part.

One further point: I respect the right of each American to express his own opinion. I recognize that many feel a moral obligation to express their opinions in the most conspicuous way possible, and therefore consider such expression to be their responsibility. I respect that. However, my responsibility is different. I must consider the consequences of each proposed course of action -- short-term and long-term, domestic and world-wide, direct and indirect. Others can say of Vietnam, "Get out now!" when asked how, they can give the simple, flip answer: "By sea." They can ignore the consequences. But as I consider those consequences, in both human and international terms, I can only conclude that history would rightly condemn a President who took such a course.

One of the first acts of my Administration was to review, exhaustively and comprehensively, every aspect of the nation's policies in Vietnam. We have drastically altered the policies we inherited. We are on the road to peace.
That road is not easy. It is not simple. But I am convinced it is the right one. There is no problem to which I have given more of my time and thought. For nine months, we have worked every day for a just end to a conflict which has been building for more than eight years.

On October 15th, I understand, many will simply be saying: "I am for peace." I ardently join with all Americans in working toward that goal.

Sincerely,

/s/ Richard Nixon

Mr. Randy J. Dicks
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C. 20007

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Dear Mr. President:

I think that your statement at your recent press conference that "under no circumstances" will you be affected by the impending anti-war protests, in connection with the "Viet Nam Moritorium," is ill-considered to say the least. It has been my impression that it is not unwise for the President of the United States to take note of the will of the people; after all, these people elected you, you are their President, and your office bears certain obligations. Might I respectfully suggest that the President reconsider his pre-judgment.

Yours sincerely,

/s/ Randy J. Dicks

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C.