

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~
FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

SUMMARY NOTES FOR 581st NSC MEETING

~~September 7, 1968, 12:00 noon~~

February - original not corrected

Conte/Long and Symington Amendments--Vietnam

In the absence of the President, Secretary Rusk asked Under Secretary Katzenbach to present the issues confronting the government in providing military aid under the limitations imposed by the Conte/Long and Symington Amendments.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: State Department officials failed to convince members of Congress of the advantages of a flexible policy in dealing with military aid to poor or underdeveloped countries. The result is a series of amendments requiring the Executive Branch to limit military assistance and economic assistance if recipient countries refuse to hold down their levels of military spending.

The Vice President: We should get people in business and the labor unions to work on the sponsors of the restrictive amendments--i. e., Conte, Symington and Long. The Latin American Council, headed by Mr. Rockefeller, should be enlisted.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: Representative Conte and Senator Long won't listen to our statements concerning the effect of their amendments to the aid bill.

Secretary Rusk: The value of the amendments is as a threat to invoke on them. Once invoked, they are no longer useful.

The Vice President: We should get groups in local areas to put pressure on Congressmen. This is an election year. We should also lay it on the line with the Congressional leadership.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: Peru is the prize case. President Belaunde will fall if he says no to his military leaders' demands for modern jet fighters--Mirages or F-5's.

Secretary Fowler: The Treasury Department has kept a \$40, 000, 000 loan off of the agenda of the Inter American Bank because if it comes up for action we will have to vote no. We can delay no more than thirty days at which time we will have to fish or cut bait.

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Under Secretary Katzenbach: We could send a special envoy to talk to Peruvian President Belaunde. Belaunde could give a little and with this we could then explain to Congress how we intend to proceed.

The President entered the Cabinet Room at 12:25 accompanied by Mr. Clark Clifford. He asked General Wheeler to discuss the military situation in Vietnam following the Tet offensive.

General Wheeler: An estimated 50,000 enemy troops participated in the Tet offensive. The ARVN is reluctant to move in Hue against the sacred pagodas there which are still held by the North Vietnamese. In Cho Lon, two Viet Cong battalions are holding out and the enemy is attempting to reinforce them. In the vicinity of Saigon there are two Viet Cong divisions.

Gen. Westmoreland reports from the field that the Hue-Danang area is the most serious problem. Three ARVN battalions are running out of gas. New forces are needed. U.S. troops are outside Hue. The weather is down on the deck, meaning that there is no logistic resupply by air. A new attack on Danang is possible. The North Vietnamese Second Division is in the area. More U.S. and South Vietnamese troops are moving in. Highway 1, which was closed at the Ai-Van Pass must be reopened. A U.S. combat engineer battalion is moving up to open the Pass.

In the Khe Sanh area, the village of Lang Viet, four miles from Khe Sanh, was attacked and taken by the 304th North Vietnamese Division. The forces in Lang Viet held out until daylight when they moved back to Khe Sanh. Five enemy tanks were destroyed. Lao refugees constitute a problem. They need food and they were used by the Viet Cong as human shields. We are trying to get them out of the area and back to Laos. The Khe Sanh runway has been cratered but we can provide ample support to the outpost.

Up to today, casualty figures in the Tet offensive are:

670	U.S. KIA
3,565	U.S. Wounded
1,294	SVN KIA
4,448	SVN Wounded
24,199	Enemy KIA
5,000	Detainees
No estimate of civilian casualties	

The IV Corps has been relatively quiet.

In order to meet the intense activity at Danang, a field army type headquarters will be set up there. It will in effect be a forward headquarters of MACV. General Abrams will move up to command this headquarters.

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Secretary Rusk: The reaction in SVN to the Tet offensive has been reported by Ambassador Bunker in his weekly cable. After the initial stunning impact of the Viet Cong attack on the cities had passed, North Vietnamese leaders in Saigon began to show a more encouraging willingness to close ranks and work together. The enemy has suffered a massive military defeat. If President Thieu gives evidence of strong leadership and calls in all elements in support of his government, then what might have turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the Saigon government and its allies could be turned into a psychological victory as well. (see attached Bunker report for further details summarized at the meeting).

Secretary Rusk: There are many U.S. civilian casualties. About 30 U.S. civilians are missing in Hue.

Gen. Wheeler: The enemy made a point of acting against U.S. citizens.

Secretary Rusk: The estimate of 2,000 civilian casualties will undoubtedly turn out to have been low.

AID Administrator Gaud: There are 37 of his officials missing out of a total of 3,000 in South Vietnam.

CLA Director Helms: [REDACTED]

Secretary McNamara: Does the enemy have the potential to launch an air offensive?

Gen. Wheeler: IL-28's are moving into North Vietnam and there is increased activity of the MIGs which are engaging in bombing practice. The smaller AN2's are also active. It is surmised that the enemy might try to use the air, give massive ground support to an attack on Khe Sanh, try to knock down our B-52s or launch a raid on our airbase at Danang. All our Commanders have been alerted to possible enemy activity.

Secretary Rusk: Do you anticipate an attack on U.S. carriers off South Vietnam by IL-28s?

Gen. Wheeler: No. The IL-28s carry only light weapons and the U.S. carriers have a strong aircap. In addition, the weather is bad at the North Vietnamese airbase in Phuc Yen.

The President: Why do we not go in and get their planes?

Secretary McNamara: An air attack is a possibility but it probably would not be effective. It is possible that some spectacular action from North Vietnam is ahead of us.

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The President: We should assume that we are going to be surprised and disappointed. We may have to act quickly. We should know where our people are who can be moved now.

General Wheeler: A study is under way which will be considered by the Chiefs later this afternoon.

The President: Can our allies help?

General Wheeler: The Australians are incapable of assisting in the time available. Korea can offer no additional help. The Thai troops are in training and to move them now would be a detriment to our activity. The Philipinos are not combat troops.

The President: It narrows down to U.S. troops?

General Wheeler: Yes

The President: What about the possibility of a second front in Korea? What are the things that we might want to do?

General Wheeler: The bad weather along the Vietnamese coast around Hue is bothersome because we cannot engage in air logistic resupply. The First Cavalry Division, plus several thousand other U.S. forces depend on this LOC. It would be prudent for us to get Highway 1 open. General Abrams' plan to do so is acceptable.

The President: Do we have enough facilities for the wounded?

General Wheeler: Yes. We are moving wounded men out rapidly but we have the capacity of 6,400 hospital beds. Of these, 2,900 are occupied by military personnel and 1100 by Vietnamese civilians.

Secretary McNamara: We are in good shape to handle the wounded. In the last 24 hours the cause for serious concern is the area of Cho Lon, a part of Saigon where the enemy is staying and reinforcing. Their intention may be to seek to cut the area off from the rest of the city.

General Wheeler: The appearance of tanks is surprising. Apparently the North Vietnamese began moving these tanks from Hanoi about last September. It is an unusual logistic feat.

Mr. Walt Rostow: Can we supply Danang by sea?

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General Wheeler: The problem is to get goods from Danang north. The Ai-Van Pass from Hue is of major importance. The beaches in the area are excellent but there are no roads back from the beaches to the hard highways. Goods would have to be moved from the beach by waterways to the highways.

The North Vietnamese could engage in harassing rocket attacks on our base at Cam Ranh Bay but could not launch a major attack against it.

The President: What intelligence are we getting from the detainees?

General Wheeler: We are getting some tactical intelligence and stories that the present attack is a decisive action. Of the 15 Viet Cong main force units, ten are no longer combat effective. The North Vietnamese are heavily represented in the north, in I Corps, but none are in the IV Corps in the Delta. There are from 12,000 to 15,000 North Vietnamese troops within a day's march of Khe Sanh.

The President: Why can't we find them?

General Wheeler: The country is rugged jungle.

The President: Will bombing get some of them?

General Wheeler: Yes. We have observed secondary explosions which means that we have hit ammunition dumps.

The President: What effect does the weather have on bombing?

General Wheeler: We can fly some part of every day. The B-52s operate in any weather.

The President: Should we give way in the hill portion (of Khe Sanh)? Are you worried?

Secretary McNamara: Yes. We are worried but not about the possibility of a military defeat. The military judgement is that we should not withdraw.

General Wheeler: We should not take the situation around Khe Sanh seriously.

The President: We are trying not to.

General Wheeler: Khe Sanh can be held. It may mean heavy fighting because General Giap may be prepared to take heavy casualties.

The President: Has General Westmoreland asked for anything?

General Wheeler: No. The list of the things he needed are already under way to him.

The President: Asked Secretary Rusk to report on the Pueblo and on his appearance on the Hill. There are Giaps in this country.

Secretary Rusk: We have had four meetings at Panmunjom. We have obtained the name of one Pueblo crew member who died and the names of three other crew members who were injured.

Secretary McNamara: The evidence we have is that those wounded were hurt in destroying the sensitive equipment on the Pueblo and not by firing from the North Koreans.

Deputy Secretary Nitze: The coding cards were apparently destroyed and most of the sensitive equipment. However, classified publications may have been compromised.

The President: During this period it is important for State and Defense officials to watch the news tickers constantly. Every Senator or Congressman who makes an accusation should be answered. The leaders of the party should be asked to speak to other members of the Congress. Unless prompt replies are given, those who criticize get up a head of steam; it is like taking dope. Should General Goodpaster brief Mr. Nixon?

General Wheeler: There is an answer to one question being asked as to why the number of dead was so high in comparison to the number of weapons captured. Over 900 crew-served weapons were captured, each with a crew of four to five men. Suicide crews often have no weapons and are equipped only with satchel charges or grenades. Our experience is that we capture one weapon to three or four enemy dead. In addition, some enemy killed were not combat troops but porters and laborers.

Secretary Rusk: The day after tomorrow we expect to talk business at Panmunjom. An improvement in South Korean public opinion is near. As to the briefing of the Congress on the Pueblo, a statement was made to the Congressmen explaining the Panmunjom meeting and answering their questions, such as why this type of intelligence gathering is important, why there were no escort ships, why the North Koreans did not have the law on their side and why it is important for us not to make a bad case. We should not get into the question of why we do not escort such ships. A ship on the high seas is the least provocative way of gathering intelligence. We should not cripple our intelligence effort. The press misconstrued what was said on the Sunday TV program.

Secretary Rusk: Turning to Vietnam, silence had met our peace probes and the Tet offensive was a significant signal to us.

The President asked CIA Director Helms to prepare a paper outlining Communist use of statements made by US experts and for a summary of the peace probes made so far and whether we had received any significant word from the North Vietnamese.

Secretary Rusk: We have received no word which probably means we will get nothing. There have been no defections and further North Vietnamese attacks are likely. Referring to a story by Saville Davis recalling Dunkirk, he said he was puzzled by the attitude in the U.S. toward the Tet offensive. Obviously, pacification has been disrupted. Additional refugees are a burden. U.S. forces were on full alert for the attacks during Tet. Our forces are now in pursuit of the defeated North Vietnamese forces.

The President: What was our position on the eve of Tet?

General Wheeler: About 50% of the South Vietnamese troops were on leave for the Tet holidays.

Secretary Rusk: We were not surprised except as to the timing of the Tet attacks.

The President: Control is very difficult. Despite 300 White House policemen, people can get inside the White House.

Secretary Rusk: Returning to the Pueblo case, the answer to why we took no military action to get out the crew is that military action would have given us only the corpses of the crew and we wanted them out alive.

The President: At 1:30 P.M. the President turned to consideration of the Conte/Long and Symington amendments. The Vice President and Assistant Secretary Oliver should visit Latin America. Following Senator Gore's trip to Latin America he took a constructive attitude toward Latin American problems. We should send several Senators to Latin America within the next 60 days. Under Secretary Katzenbach should also go.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: Summarized the origin of the Conte/Long and Symington Amendments citing the Indian-Pakistan war, the Arab-Israeli problem, and the request for F-5s. The most serious problem arises with Peru and other Latin American countries. If we act to limit the sale of sophisticated weapons to Peru, they are liable to end up with a military dictator. Every other Latin American country will be against us. Serious problems also arise with Jordan and Morocco. Lesser problems arise with Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria and the Congo.

The President: Why don't you call in the legislators who are the roughest on this problem and talk it out with them.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: We are taking Congress seriously but some of our problems are summarized in the paper you have.

The President: Secretary McNamara and Clark Clifford should work on Symington.

Secretary Fowler: The Peruvian loan must be kept off the agenda of the Inter-American Bank for the present.

Under Secretary Katzenbach: The Symington Amendment creates a situation which is liveable but put together with the Conte/Long Amendment, we face an impossible problem.

The President: Get the Cabinet officers together with those House and Senate officials most concerned. A list should be made of those who would be most helpful and perhaps Clark Clifford should be added to those meeting with the legislators.