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12704a

**PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S NOTES ON CONVERSATION WITH
GENERAL WHEELER FEBRUARY 5, 1968**

The President reported that we were in the middle of a crisis--and a very serious one. He said his general inclination was not to change horses in the middle of a stream. He said he had never believed a bit in the Honolulu operation. He said he felt it was an obstruction in a clear channel, but that we were in the middle of a war and the President said he was afraid anything may be interpreted as a change or a getting-even type of thing or us getting back at someone. He referred to his conversation with Admiral Sharp the day before and said he wanted to go into that more thoroughly.

The President went on to say that he thought Westmoreland had been there a long time, and he never had more confidence in a man than he did in Westmoreland, but these people--particularly the communists--would like to cast a doubt on that confidence. He said he did not feel intimate toward Sharp as he did Westmoreland but thought he ought to be allowed to continue. He then asked General Wheeler if Sharp would have to be appointed for another two year term, to which General Wheeler replied no; that he was due to retire by age; that it would require a determination by the Secretary of Defense, that in the best interest of the service, he should be retained on active duty for the time being. He said he did not think the President need appoint him for another two year term. The President then discussed how best to tell him and General Wheeler said it was not necessary to tell him at all right now; that he does not retire until the first of May and you can finesse it by refusing to make a decision at this time.

The President said that would be good and after the crisis was over then he would look at Wheeler's term, as well as Westmoreland and Johnson.

The President asked when Wheeler and McNamara would be through testifying on the Hill and he told him the next day. The President asked him if he was going to give a copy of the same report to Rivers and he said that he would.

The President said:

"That's good. Each time you see him salute him and say it's on the President's instruction--we're beginning a little policy of getting along a little better and bringing out of hiding the generals and the secretaries. We want to share the Clifford load a little bit."

127046

The President (A)
to General Wheeler (B)
12x 1:01p Feb 5, 1968

A Appropos our conversation on Sharp yesterday, I want to go into that much more thoroughly, but here is my information. We are in the middle of a crisis -- and a very serious one. My general inclination is not to change horses in the middle of a stream. I never have believed a bit in the Honolulu operation. I think it's an obstruction in a clear channel, but we are in the middle of a war and I am afraid anything may be interpreted as a change or a getting even type of thing or us getting back at someone.

B I understand, Mr. President.

A I think Westmoreland has been there a long time, and I never had more confidence in a man, but these people -- particularly the communists -- would like to cast a doubt on that confidence. I don't feel intimate toward Sharp at all, but why don't we let him continue. Do you have to appoint him to another two year term?

B No sir. He is due to retire by age. It would require a determination by the Secretary of Defense, that in the best interest of the service, he should be retained on active duty for the time being. I don't think you need to appoint him for another two year ^{term} time.

A That's what I would like. I imagine you and Bob will be testifying more and I think I would quietly go out to him and say the President wants you to stay on, and let's wait until we get out, and when Clifford comes in, let's follow that line.

B We don't even need to tell him. He doesn't retire until the first of May. You can finesse it by refusing to make a decision at this time.

A Good -- and we'll look at all these other things -- your term, and Westmoreland's term, and Johnson's term -- after we get shaken down and get through with this crisis.

What happened in the committee this morning?

B Bob spent most of the time reading. We started off with my giving a report on the situation in VietNam. I told them of the attack and other hot spots. They appeared to be satisfied. They asked Bob a couple of questions about Pueblo because Sen. Dominick in particular felt through press reports that we are prepared to make an apology whether we were right or wrong in order to get the crew back. The rest of the time Bob spent reading.

A When do you finish?

B Tomorrow.

A And go to the House?

B Not until the 14th - we have a date with Mahan.

A When is Rivers?

B He hasn't made his mind up yet. He and Bob are still dickering on that.

A Okay -- you're giving Rivers a copy of the same report you give the Senate, aren't you?

B His Committee gets a briefing from DIA which is what I give the Senate every morning.

A That's good. Each time you see him salute him and say it's on the President's instruction -- we're beginning a little policy of getting along a little better and bringing out of hiding the generals and the secretaries. We want to share the Clifford lead a little bit.

B Yes sir.

A Okay - thank you.