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AUGUST 24, 1967 - 5:33 p.m.

Secretary Rusk  
Secretary McNamara  
General Johnson  
General McConnell  
Under Secretary Nitze

MEMORANDUM

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 25, 1967

7:00 P.M.

EYES ONLY

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FOR THE PRESIDENT

Tom  
FROM: Tom Johnson

Attached are the notes of your meeting on Thursday, August 24, 1967, with Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, General Harold Johnson, General John P. McConnell, and Under Secretary Paul Nitze.

The meeting began at 5:33 p.m. The meeting ended at 6:25 p.m.

Attachment

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Meeting began: 5:33 p. m.

Meeting ended: 6:25 p. m.

NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING  
WITH  
SECRETARY RUSK  
SECRETARY McNAMARA  
GENERAL HAROLD JOHNSON  
GENERAL JOHN P. McCONNELL  
UNDER SECRETARY PAUL NITZE

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August 24, 1967  
In the Mansion

The issue was whether or not to authorize air strikes of the Phuc Yen Air Field.

General Johnson: Admiral Sharp has strongly recommended again an air strike of Phuc Yen. He still recommends Gia Lan. General Wheeler has recommended Phuc Yen and hitting Gia Lan after warning. General McConnell and I recommend the strike.

President: How many aircraft are there?

General Johnson: At one point there were 25-27. Many have gone back into China.

General McConnell: There are approximately 11 there now, latest intelligence and photos show.

President: Why is it so important to get 11 airplanes?

General McConnell: There are three types of defensive problems we encounter: 1. MIGs 2. Antiaircraft guns 3. SAMs. Pilots concerned with all three. Pilots have to watch for all three. If we can eliminate one (MIGs) we can perform more effectively. The pilots will have a better chance to survive.

Pilots have a growing frustration against our not knocking this MIG base out. If we could, it would permit us to focus on the other defensive systems. It hurts to see those planes on the runways and not be able to strike them, yet they appear shortly afterwards firing at our planes.

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President: Can you knock out more on the ground than you lose by going in after them.

McConnell: We estimate three to five losses.

President: What about restrikes?

McConnell: We may have to.

McNamara: We have 85-23 ratio of enemy loss to friendly loss in air. We have a better ratio in air on kills than we would have on this one.

President: Bob, are you for this.

McNamara: No, Mr. President, I am not. It will cost more pilots than it will save. It puts more pressure on the Chinese and the Soviets to react. Even assuming that MIGs affect the missions, their effects are small. They will move their planes to Gia Lan, and we won't have accomplished anything.

General McConnell: It will make the problem a lot simpler (if we attack Phuc Yen). It will give the men more confidence. All the senior military people recommend it unanimously.

McNamara: That is true, the senior military people do recommend it without exception. The pilots have been exposed for two years. For them, it is SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) to attack the bases from which the planes originate. The pilots feel strongly on this issue too. I feel they are wrong. There are very significant risks associated with it.

President: Paul (Nitze), how do you feel?

Nitze: Same as Secretary McNamara, except for different reasons. On purely military basis, we won't get many planes on the ground. They will go to another base, or operate out of China. Although it may improve morale, when you add up all the factors it is not worth it. But I am not sure that it would affect the Soviet risk of intervention.

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McNamara: But it is added pressure. We do not know where the breaking point is. If we accomplish our objective with this base, we will pay a price. The Soviets would have lost some of their MIG defense they are supplying. They would rebuild, and add more support. This also applies to China.

General McConnell: This base contains maintenance facilities, control installations, and good POL facilities.

President: I'm inclined to hit it. How do you feel Dean (Rusk)?

Secretary Rusk: I have some problems with this. Why can't a cap handle it?

General McConnell: It would take more aircraft. We would have to have a larger cap.

Secretary Rusk: On Phuc Yen, there is a thin margin. It would be a serious problem if the planes had to operate out of China. In the minds of many people, this would be Chinese intervention. It also would be a question of how you deal with those MIGs coming in from China.

It would have to be a campaign against the base, including several attacks to take it out effectively. It would be costly. If you gentlemen (the generals) will excuse my putting back on my uniform for a minute, it is my opinion that the military advantages do not outweigh the political disadvantages.

General McConnell: I'd rather face them from China. They would have only one half the time over target because of fuel.

Secretary Rusk: This would be considered Chinese intervention. We have braced ourselves for a major reaction from the Soviets and the Chinese. We've got to brace ourselves on this one. This doesn't mean that we should cut and run. But we should know what the margins are. The losses would not be made up with what we gain.

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In my opinion, we can control this two ways: First, with caps;  
Second, with air-to-air combat.

For those reasons, Mr. President, I recommend against it.

The President: Well, that's two for and two against. As I see it, by some estimates, we could lose 11 planes for the 11 planes we knock out. We could have many civilian casualties because of the location (This was pointed out by showing the President a map of the area before the actual meeting started). We may have to hit it every three days or so to effectively knock it out. There are possible problems with China and Russia. It could be handled by other means.

For those reasons, I am not going to authorize it today. Personally, I am inclined to hit it. I know that it is a constant danger and a constant threat. I think we have to get in now and knock out everything we can get. We have got to prevent our being hobbled out there. We also have problems here at home. It is better to hit these targets now than wait. So much of the people believe this pure propaganda which is coming out about the war.

We can't take it much longer. It really becomes a question of whether you hit Phuc Yen or pull out. We have anticipated this condition, Bob, for many months.

My instinct is to take it out. You know that I have great confidence in each of you. But you divide, 2-2, and throw it in my lap.

Secretary McNamara, you go back with General Johnson and General McConnell and notify the field commanders that this MIG base is under "serious consideration." But tell the men that it may honestly cause us serious political problems. Tell them you believe you can get the same results with less costs by using the caps. Point out the Rusk arguments about this. Then, let me know what their reaction is.

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It was agreed this was the best course of action.

The President asked about putting former Ambassador Lodge in charge of the election observer team going to Vietnam. All agreed he was an excellent choice.

The President asked General Johnson to provide a more up-to-date explanation of why the two U.S. jets went over the Chinese border.

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