

FEBRUARY 9, 1968 - 11:02 a.m.
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

Secretary McNamara
Secretary Rusk
General Earle Wheeler, Chairman, JCS
General Johnson, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army
General Leonard Chapman, Commander of Marines
General Bruce Holloway, Vice Chief of Staff
Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations
Paul Nitze
Clark Clifford
Walt Rostow
George Christian
Tom Johnson

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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

February 9, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Tom Johnson

Attached are the notes of the President's meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on February 9, 1968 in the Cabinet Room.

Attending the meeting:

The President
Secretary McNamara
Secretary Rusk
General Earle Wheeler, Chairman, JCS
General Johnson, Chief of Staff, U. S. Army
General Leonard Chapman, Commander of the Marine Corps
General Bruce Holloway, Vice Chief of Staff
Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations
Paul Nitze
Clark Clifford
Walt Rostow
George Christian
Tom Johnson

The meeting began at 11:02 a.m. It ended at 12:43 p.m.

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Meeting Began: 11:02 a.m.
Meeting Ended: 12:43 p.m.

NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING
WITH THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

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February 9, 1968
Cabinet Room

The President: I asked you to come here on the basis that we would hope for the best and expect the worst. I want to see what we should do in Vietnam.

We ought to look at everything that we should be doing. Get the requirements ready to do what needs to be done. Let's be fully prepared to move in the event we are required to do so.

We want to ask questions so that you can inform us of what the current situation is and so that we can determine what things we need to work on now in the event we get a call for additional help.

I want a military review of the problems confronting us if the enemy continues more of the same activities as during the past two weeks. I think we should anticipate all the surprises and determine what is going to confront us if the Viet Cong attack the cities, attack Khesanh, and pull off a few surprises elsewhere.

Two questions we will have to answer:

1. Will we have to put in more men?
2. Can we do it with the Vietnamese as they are now?

General Wheeler: During the past few days I have talked with General Westmoreland over the phone and received a number of cables from him.

Westmoreland reported the following:

-- The enemy apparently will start new attacks on the 10th.

SERVICE SET That is tonight our time. This is based on communications intelligence and prisoners of war.

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-- The ARVN fought well. There has not been any defections that we know of.

-- There is a question whether the ARVN can stand up after 12 days of heavy fighting if another series of heavy attacks occur.

-- The enemy's objective may be fragmentation of the ARVN and the Government of South Vietnam. This fragmentation would be accomplished by attacks against our air bases with an effort to keep U.S. men concentrated in the north.

Intelligence communications recognize this as one objective.

-- The enemy may not be ready yet to attack Khesanh, General Chapman can elaborate on that.

-- Westmoreland has moved the 1st Cavalry Division and elements of the 101st Airborne Division. These are his two strategic reserve elements which have been moved up North.

Those units are there to take care of contingency operations in the area.

-- Westmoreland has had to use other reserve elements to deal with the fighting around Quang Tri and north of Hue.

-- He is now moving by LST an airborne battalion to the Hue area. The major problem is a logistical one.

Westmoreland said he must have the use of Highway One in order to move supplies from Danang from the North and support Khesanh logistically.

-- He has moved an army engineer combat battalion to clear the road area.

-- He will move another battalion of the 101st to open "MACV Forward," his front headquarters. This will be done tonight our time.

-- Yesterday was fairly quiet although Lang Vei was over-run and 27 U.S. men were killed. They killed 100 enemy.

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-- There was also an ambush on a truck convoy.
It is obvious the enemy is trying to disrupt logistics.

-- We are using water board craft to move supplies.
The enemy is trying to disrupt this with frogmen.

The President: Are we doing all we can? Could we use civilians protected by military to help open that road? (The President also referred to civilian contractors who have been involved in construction projects.)

Secretary McNamara: I am sure that these units are being employed and I will check on this.

General Wheeler: Westmoreland needs reinforcements for several reasons. The reinforcements he has in mind are the 82nd Airborne Division and the Sixth-Ninth of a Marine division. This would total 15 battalions.

He needs these reinforcements for two reasons:

1. To prevent the ARVN from falling apart.
2. To give himself a reserve to use as quick response units to any initiatives by the enemy in Vietnam.

He said he would put the 82nd Airborne in Danang and north of Danang. That would permit him to move the 101st south and to keep the Highway One open.

The Marines would give two capabilities:

1. Reinforcement in I Corps permitting amphibious forces to be available at all times.
2. Make available troops for an amphibious landing north of the DMZ if that action is decided upon.

The 82nd Airborne and the Sixth-Ninth of Marine division can only be deployed if we eliminate the restrictions on frequency of tours and length of tours in Vietnam.

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Secretary McNamara: We should give some very serious thought to the proposal of scrapping the 12-month tour. It might have a very bad affect on morale.

Secretary McNamara: General Westmoreland said he needs the 82nd Division and two-thirds of a marine division. That would be 15 battalions.

In order to do that, it would be required to call up some Army divisions and the 4th Marine division.

General Wheeler: We would propose to move the 4th Marine Division to Okinawa and Hawaii for ready deployment.

The 2 Army divisions should be in the U.S. to be ready to meet any contingencies.

The JCS will address themselves to this matter this afternoon.

There are four options:

Option 1 -- Slow Movement - This would involve 265 air craft and no draw down on airlift capacity in Southeast Asia.

This would put the 12,500 men in Vietnam in 15 days. The cargo would arrive in 29 days under this option. (There is 11,600 tons of cargo.) under this option, the 5 Marine battalions would reach Vietnam in 8 days. Their cargo would get there in 17 days.

Option 2 - This would involve 334 aircraft and a 70% draw down in cargo airlifts to Southeast Asia. This would put the 82nd Airborn division in Vietnam in 6 days. The cargo would arrive in 17 days. The Marine battalions would reach Vietnam in 3 days, and its cargo in 10 days. Option 2 cuts by one-half the time as required under Option 1.

Option 3 - This would involve 670 aircraft and the call up of the Air National Guard and other air squadrons. This would place the 82nd Airborn in Vietnam in 5 days (its cargo in 14 days). This option would put the Marines in Vietnam in 3 days and the cargo in 9 days.

Option 4 - This would use civilian aircraft and would involve the cut down on airlift capacity to South Vietnam by 40% rather than 70%. General Holloway says the call up of Stage III craft would have no affect.

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There would be considerable lost motion in refitting these civilian aircraft for military use.

General Holloway said that by leasing aircraft we could cut down on time required.

I would add a K factor to the times specified in order to alert the men and to assemble the airlift. This K factor would be plus 2 days to all times given.

If this program is followed, it will be necessary for the President to get authority to extend terms of service (to call up individual reservists) and to extend existing authority to call up reserve units past the 1968 deadline.

Based on my conversations with General Westmoreland, I believe General Westmoreland is now dictating a message to ask for early deployment of the units I have now mentioned.

The President: How many men does this represent?

General Wheeler: 25,000 men in these units plus support personnel.

Secretary McNamara: The total would run about 40,000.

Normally, each battalion has 5,000 men. If one multiplies that times the 15 battalions, the total level would be 75,000 men. The difference between the 40,000 and the 75,000 is made up by the use of overhead manpower already in Vietnam which could be placed in these 15 battalions to raise them to full strength.

The President: How many men do we have there now?

General Wheeler: 500,000.

The President: Can we speed up the other infantry battalions we have already promised?

General Johnson: We have already curtailed training to the minimum. We must give these units proper training time. They are already squeezed. One battalion is scheduled to go the last week in March. Three battalions are scheduled to go the last week in April.

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Secretary McNamara: If General Johnson says that is the case then I will accept it. I would like to look more at this. Perhaps these units could be sent on short training into rear areas.

General Johnson: Mr. Secretary, there are no rear areas in Vietnam anymore.

Secretary McNamara: What we are considering is a massive force structure. I think it would be unwise to leave these forces out there if the contingencies we have discussed do not develop.

Apart from the immediate contingency I do not think we will need them. We do need to extend the tours, but this should be only temporary.

To call up the forces we are talking about would involve a total of about 120 men.

General Wheeler: This emergency is not going to go away in a few days or a few weeks. In 3 months we may still be in an emergency situation.

The enemy is not in a position to really assault Khesanh. He is going to take his time and move when he has things under control as he would like them.

The reserve divisions we are sending must have a period of training and shake down before they can perform well. I would estimate this to take about 8 to 12 weeks.

I want to point out, Mr. President, that if you do make a decision to deploy the 82nd Airborne, you will have no readily deployable strategic reserves. I know this will be a serious problem for you politically.

In all prudence, I do not think we should deploy these troops without reconstituting our strategic reserves in the United States.

The President: All last week I asked two questions. The first was "Did Westmoreland have what he needed?" (You answered yes.) The second question was, "Can Westmoreland take care of the situation with what he has there now?" The answer was yes.

Tell me what has happened to change the situation between then and now.

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General Wheeler: I have a chart which was completed today based on a very complete intelligence analysis. It relates to all of South Vietnam, Laos and the area around the DMZ. It shows the following:

-- Since December the North Vietnamese infantry has increased from 78 battalions to 105 battalions. Estimating there are 600 men per battalion that is approximately 15,000 men.

-- We have been able to get this information by 3 means:

1. Contact with the actual units
2. Communications intelligence
3. Captured documents and POWs.

-- This represents a substantial change in the combat ratios of U.S. troops to enemy troops.

-- This ratio was 1.7 to 1 in December. It is 1.4 to 1 today.

-- In the DMZ and I Corps area, there is a 1 to 1 ratio. There are 79 enemy battalions in the 1st Corps area (60 North Vietnamese and 19 Viet Cong).

In the same area there are 82 Free World battalions (42 U.S.; 4 Free World; and 36 ARVN),

This is about 1 to 1.

The President: What you are saying is this. Since last week we have information we did not know about earlier. This is the addition of 15,000 North Vietnamese in the northern part of the country. Because of that, do we need 15 U.S. battalions?

General Wheeler: General Westmoreland told me what he was going to put in tonight's telegram. This is the first time he has addressed the matter of additional troops.

Paul Nitze: I was not aware of this new intelligence.

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General Wheeler: The last report was that there was approximately 15,000 enemy near and around Khesanh.

As of today, our estimates range between 16,000 and 25,000. Their infantry has been built up.

In addition, Westmoreland is now faced with the problem of the impact of these recent heavy attacks on the ARVN.

We do not know what is going to happen to the ARVN after this second round of attacks. All ARVN units are on maximum alert.

But in Hue, the ARVN airborne units are down to 160 men per battalion. Their strength is far below that required.

The President: We have to get the Government of South Vietnam to increase its efforts. Why can't we get them to do as we do, call up 18 year olds and give the American people the impression that they are doing as much as we.

Secretary McNamara: When I was in Vietnam I talked with Thieu and Ky. They told me then they intended to call up 18 and 19 year olds.

The President: I saw where Senator Kennedy pointed out that the South Vietnamese voted not to call up 18 year olds.

General Wheeler: I met last night with this unnamed group chaired by Nick Katzenbach and Paul Nitze. We are pressing for the South Vietnamese to lower the age limit at least to 19 and Bunker is pushing this hard.

Secretary Rusk: We must keep in mind that they consider a child 1 year old when he is born, so, their 19 year olds are our 18 year olds.

The President: Has either House voted not to draft these men?

Paul Nitze: I am unaware of any vote on it.

Secretary McNamara: I will look into this and follow through.

The President: Are there some things that we can get the South Koreans and the South Vietnamese to do to match all of these things we are planning to do?

Walt Rostow: The men at Hue have been drawn down by the very intensive action there. What is the state of strength of the ARVN units?

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Mr. Rostow: What is the state of strength of the ARVN units?

General Wheeler: I do not have the answers precisely. They have been mauled. As of 11:00 p.m. our time last night, 1,698 ARVN were killed; 6,633 were wounded seriously. This totals about 10,000 ARVN lost.

Mr. Rostow: Has the enemy switched from a slow attrition strategy to a "go for broke" strategy? Would an extension of tours in Vietnam be understood as far as morale is concerned?

General Wheeler: For a temporary period we can sustain an extension of tours without losing morale. For any long period of time, however, you would face a loss of morale. We now have a rule that we will not send a man back without 25 months between tours in Vietnam.

General Johnson: We send men back now with special skills in less than 25 months.

As I see it there are two basic problems. The first is at Khesanh. The second is in the cities. What are they trying to do?

There are two postulates:

1. The enemy believed that the people would rise up. There were no withdrawal plans by the enemy.

2. The enemy suffered erosion over the last few months. They have seen a decoupling of its forces in hamlets and villages. U.S. troops have cleaned out the Viet Cong from many of the villages. So, he has concluded he must go for a psychological victory prior to negotiations.

We are in a critical stage. We expect new attacks will begin on the 10th. There are two essential questions facing us:

1. What strength does the enemy have to renew the attacks with?
2. What strength does the ARVN possess to resist these attacks?

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The President: What is the ARVN strength?

General Wheeler: Approximately 360,000 men now. Total forces about 600,000.

Secretary Rusk: I have been asking for several days if there was a new order of battle. This is the first time that I have heard of this.

The President: Because of their increase of 15,000 troops, is it true that we now need 15 battalions or 45,000 men? What mobile reserve forces does Westmoreland have between now and the time he gets more men?

General Wheeler: He has the bulk of the 1st Cavalry and one brigade of the 101st Airborne. Other than that, all of his forces are dispersed to meet the enemy. We are not getting much mileage out of the Australian or South Korean troops. They must go back to their home country for their orders.

The President: Do you mean that the Australian and Korean commanders have to go back to their capital before they can be deployed?

General Wheeler: Yes sir, they remain under the operational control of their government.

Secretary McNamara: I am under the very clear impression that they have been told by their home governments to do everything possible to hold down their own casualties.

Our losses are running six times the level of Korean losses on a percentage basis.

The President: We ought to try to bring all the allied forces under Westmoreland's command.

General Wheeler: In all fairness, the allies have operated well in areas where they have been located.

The President: Does Westmoreland have enough airpower to support his troops?

General Wheeler: Yes sir, we are moving in 2 more C-130 units.

The President: How is the supply problem at Khesanh? Will artillery and rockets knock this out? Can we rely on roads?

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Secretary McNamara: There is no road available up there.

General Wheeler: We moved in 214 tons of supplies yesterday with helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. As long as we use B-52's and tactical air, we will be able to keep our resupply up. They are keeping about 10 to 12 days supplies in storage.

The President: Wouldn't we have one big problem if the airfield at Khesanh was out?

General Wheeler: Yes, we would have to link up by road some way. Of course we can use air drops and helicopters. The air strip will be used from time to time.

The President: If you lost the air strip, would you evacuate Khesanh?

General Wheeler: That depends on the course of the fighting and their ability to resupply.

Secretary Rusk: When does the weather improve?

General Johnson: It is now beginning to improve. I have some concern about the loss of the air strip, because fixed wing aircraft carry so much more than helicopters.

Nobody can give a categorical answer. We think we have a 50-50 chance of sustaining our actions out there.

The men have 12 days of rations and 11 days of ammunition. Almost no cofram has been used.

Being cut off would hurt in the evacuation of wounded, but we can evacuate at night if necessary. This is one of the hazards you have to accept.

The President: How is the weather likely to affect actions along the border?

General Wheeler: The better the weather, the more it favors us.

The President: Have you anticipated air support from any of the communists?

General Wheeler: There is no evidence of any movement except the training flights and the Soviet bombers which were seen at Khesanh.

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The President: What is his air capability if he uses it?

General Wheeler: His capability in using air is a nuisance and has propaganda value rather than any great military threat. He has 8 IL 28's.

The President: What use does he have of these?

General Wheeler: I do not know.

The President: How many MIGs does he have?

General Wheeler: We know of 23 MIG 21's. There are other MIG 15's and 17's.

Most of these MIGS are in China.

The President: Keep the MIG's in sight at all times.

General Wheeler: We are doing the best we can. Admiral Sharp is moving a guided missile ship to the Gulf of Tonkin. It carries the Talos Missile. We are also sending in ships with the Terrier Missile.

The President: Get the JCS to work up all the options and lets review them together.

I want you to hope for the best and plan for the worst. Let's consider the extensions, call ups, and use of specialists.

Dean, should we have more than the Tonkin Gulf resolution in going into this? Should we ask for a declaration of war?

Secretary Rusk: Congressional action on individual items would avoid the problems inherent in a generalized declaration. I do not recommend a declaration of war. I will see what items we might ask the Congress to look at.

The President: Where are the problems in the cities?

General Wheeler: In Hue, we have one marine battalion operating on the south side of the river. The ARVN units at Hue have been shot down to 160 men per battalion. In Cholon there are enemy forces being met by 3 Vietnamese. There is one U.S. battalion in the race track area.

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The President: What would be the impact internationally to a declaration of war?

Secretary Rusk: It might be a direct challenge to Moscow and Peking in a way we have never challenged them before. There would be very severe international effects.

Secretary Rusk: How can we get as many Vietnamese as possible returned to duty?

General Wheeler: The men are coming back. We do not know what numbers.

Secretary Rusk: I have skeptics of the enemy's ability to hit us again. Some of them have been very badly mauled.

Secretary McNamara: There is no question that they have been hurt, but I believe they have the ability to restrike.

Clark Clifford: There is a very strange contradiction in what we are saying and doing.

On one hand, we are saying that we have known of this build up. We now know the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched this type of effort in the cities. We have publicly told the American people that the communist offensive was: (a) not a victory. (b) produced no uprising among the Vietnamese in support of the enemy, and (c) cost the enemy between 20,000 and 25,000 of his combat troops.

Now our reaction to all of that is to say that the situation is more dangerous today than it was before all of this. We are saying that we need more troops, that we need more ammunition and that we need to call up the reserves.

I think we should give some very serious thought to how we explain saying on one hand the enemy did not take a victory and yet we are in need of many more troops and possibly an emergency call up.

The President: The only explanation I can see is that the enemy has changed its tactics. They are putting all of their stack in now. We have to be prepared for all that we might face.

Our front structure is based on estimates of their front structure. Our

intelligence shows that they have changed and added about 15,000 men. In response to that, we must do likewise. That is the only explanation I see.

General Wheeler: The enemy has changed the pattern of the war. In the past, there have been instances of terrorism, but this is the first time they have mounted coordinated attacks throughout the country.

Secretary Rusk: I have a question. In the past, we have said the problem really was finding the enemy. Now the enemy has come to us. I am sure many will ask why aren't we doing better under these circumstances, now that we know where they are.

The President: Is there anything new on the Pueblo?

General Wheeler: No, except the North Korean Prime Minister says that North Korea is ready for another war.

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