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#59a notes	Notes from 2/12/68 - 1:45 p.m. Senior Foreign Policy Advisors meeting [Sanitized NLJ 83-13] Secret 10pp. <i>Sanitized NLS 98-2 8/17/99</i>	2/12/68	A

FILE LOCATION

Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Box 2

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FEBRUARY 12, 1968 - 1:45 p.m.

SENIOR FOREIGN POLICY ADVISORS

58

Secretary Rusk
Secretary McNamara
General Wheeler
General Taylor
CIA Director Helms
Clark Clifford
Walt Rostow
George Christian
Tom Johnson

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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

February 12, 1968

FOR THE PRESIDENT

Tom

FROM: Tom Johnson

Attached are the notes of your meeting with your senior foreign policy advisors on February 12, 1968 in the Family Dining Room.

Those attending the meeting were:

The President
Secretary Rusk
Secretary McNamara
General Wheeler
General Taylor
CIA Director Helms
Clark Clifford
Walt Rostow
George Christian
Tom Johnson

The meeting began at 1:45 p.m. The meeting ended at 3:50 p.m.

DETERMINED TO BE OF
ADMINISTRATIVE CHARACTER

BY Oct ON 10-28-72

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NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING
WITH
SENIOR FOREIGN POLICY ADVISORS

February 12
1968
Family Dining Room
1:45 pm

SANITIZED
E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.6
NLJ 98-02
By cb, NARA Date 8-2-99

The President: Just now I said in a speech that we should keep in mind that President Lincoln lost 600,000 men and faced all of the division and adversity in this country that is imaginable. He said then "we have got to stick it out." I said today, "so will we." One man told me this morning that it doesn't look like the same person wrote the Westmoreland wire today and the one Friday. What reaction do you have to it?

Secretary Rusk: It looks to me like Westmoreland wants to take advantage of an opportunity to exploit the situation. I do not read it as a desperate need. He wants to shorten the war with it, and that has a certain attractiveness to all of us. It bothers me that we do not know what is happening to the South Vietnamese and their determination.

I don't appreciate Thieu saying he needed more American troops. I would think he would be looking for more ways to get more of his own men.

But if six battalions will help him exploit this opportunity, I am for sending them without a permanent commitment.

Secretary McNamara: I read the Westmoreland cable differently from Dean. I read that he needs these six battalions in order to avoid defeat at Khesanh.

If he only wanted them to take advantage of the opportunity to do more, I would also send them.

I recommend today the following:

1. Send him the units he has requested.
2. Send the troops for the period of the emergency only, not a permanent augmentation.
3. Send General Wheeler out to meet with Ambassador Bunker, General Westmoreland and Cy Vance.

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The President: Where will these units come from?

Secretary McNamara: It will include a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division and Marine units.

The President: Do these units have Vietnam veterans in them?

Secretary McNamara: We will screen out the Vietnam veterans, those we can.

The President: How long will this take?

Secretary McNamara: 14 days.

General Wheeler: 14 days is correct.

The President: Are there any U.S. troops in the area we can use?

General Wheeler: No, sir.

Secretary McNamara: There is one battalion on the way.

General Wheeler: General Chapman wants to return that battalion to Hawaii because it includes some 17-year olds and it was operating in the area on an exercise only.

The units will be sent from the following locations:

One battalion from Camp Pendleton.
Units from Camp Lejune
The 82nd Airborne from Fort Bragg, North Carolina.
Possibly some army from Fort Benning.

The President: How many men does that total?

General Wheeler: 3800 from the 82nd and 6500 from the Marines, for a total of 10,300.

The President: Does that give Westmoreland what he needs?

General Wheeler: Yes, sir.

Secretary McNamara: The loss of one brigade of the 82nd will not affect our ability to handle severe disturbances.

Clark Clifford: I would like to get some answers to several questions. In General Westmoreland's cable he says, "If the enemy has changed his strategy, we must change ours." What change in strategy has the enemy made?

General Wheeler: The enemy has been on a protracted fighting basis. Now he seeks to "grab" for immediate success. I think the enemy overestimates the degree of support in the Vietnamese populace and underestimates our strength.

General Wheeler: He is taking both actions concurrently. He is attacking the cities and also launching conventional attacks for the first time.

Clark Clifford: In his cable, General Westmoreland also points out that it is national policy to keep the enemy from seizing and holding the two northern provinces. Hasn't that been the situation all along?

General Wheeler: General Westmoreland believes that it would cost more to withdraw and go back later than to stand and fight now. But he does know we can trade space for time and troops if necessary.

Clark Clifford: General Westmoreland says in his cable that he cannot hold without reinforcements. What change has taken place to keep him from holding?

General Wheeler: There have been wide-spread attacks in the South. General Westmoreland is unsure of the ARVN strength as a result of these attacks. He must also hold open Highway 1 and Highway 9. He has more troops committed around Saigon than he has in the past. He says that he cannot take more forces from the South without risk.

Secretary Rusk: Couldn't he take more out of the Delta?

General Wheeler: He does have contingency plans, both for taking units from the Delta and for, if necessary, withdrawal from Khesanh. But these are contingency plans only.

Clark Clifford: General Westmoreland also says that we are now in a new ballgame with the enemy mobilized to achieve quick victory. Is that something new?

General Wheeler: This thing has been building up for some time. There has been the greater build-up around the DMZ. There is a new determination for major attacks coupled with the TET actions. Prior to now, the enemy

the enemy has fought a peace meal war.

Clark Clifford: General Westmoreland's telegram has a much greater sense of urgency in it. Why is that?

General Wheeler: General Westmoreland realized that his earlier low-key approach was not proper based on a full assessment of the situation.

Clark Clifford: General Westmoreland makes it clear that he cannot permit the enemy to make gains in other areas. He does not want to permit a reduction in strength elsewhere.

But he has now sent what is clearly an urgent message.

General Wheeler: General Westmoreland has been conservative in his troop requests in the past. Now he finds that his campaign plan has been pre-empted by enemy action.

Secretary Rusk: Can it only be done by additional U.S. forces? Can't we press them to brigade U.S. troops with Vietnamese?

General Wheeler: Before I answer that I need to know what you mean by brigading.

Secretary Rusk: By putting one battalion of U.S. troops with one battalion of ARVN.

Clark Clifford: General Westmoreland said it was time to open up key roads, Route 9 and Route 1. Can we use civilians under military protection to do some of this work?

Secretary McNamara: I authorized General Westmoreland to use whatever civilians he wished to use. I do not think he would want to use civilians in I Corps.

The President: I want a cable sent to Cy Vance to tell him to examine this. We should put civilian road and construction experts to work and replace military construction personnel so they may be sent up north.

General Wheeler: Westmoreland wants combat troops in construction brigades. Frankly I think he has underestimated what is needed to open and hold those two roads.

The President: Let's try to use what is out there if possible. I wanted Cy Vance to talk with him about it.

I am worried about the North Vietnamese Air Force and the possibility that many of our choppers will be destroyed.

Clark Clifford: I learned with great surprise that General Westmoreland does not have authority to control Korean and Australian forces. If he is short of men, can't Cy Vance get an understanding with President Park for greater utilization of the Korean troops in Vietnam?

Secretary Rusk: I think we should strongly consider a combined Allied Command with President Thieu as Commander in Chief and General Westmoreland as Chief of Staff.

Secretary McNamara: There are benefits to this with the Vietnamese. We have not moved in this direction because of the political problems.

General Wheeler: We have a similar thing to that in Thailand. On this, I think we need to get the advice of Ambassador Bunker.

The President: I would sure try to do this for maximum control of the South Koreans, the Australians and the South Vietnamese.

Clark Clifford: Are there any U.S. troops in the area of Japan, Hawaii or Okinawa we could use?

General Wheeler: Zero.

Clark Clifford: From a psychological standpoint, this would be a good time to get more Thais and South Koreans.

The President: Get Cy Vance to tell the South Vietnamese that we are accelerating our program and they need to accelerate theirs. In addition ask Cy to see what he can do about getting that extra division moving from Korea to Vietnam. What is the hold-up?

Secretary McNamara: They say equipment, but the equipment is on the way. The Thais cannot possibly be ready before July 1.

General Wheeler: All of our military people in Thailand say July 1 is the earliest time.

Secretary McNamara: The Koreans would send a division if they wanted to.

The President: What actions are the South Vietnamese taking on getting those extra 65,000 men?

Walt Rostow: The Cabinet on Sunday voted to do two things. The first is to call back veterans. The second is that they moved the date to begin the drafting of 18 and 19 year olds. They moved back from April 1 to March 1 the drafting of 19 year olds. They moved back the drafting of 18 year olds from July 1 to May 1.

The President: What is our average draft age?

Secretary McNamara: It's either 20.2 or 20.4 years.

The President: Get me the exact answers on that, Buzz.

What is our situation with equipment? I hear we lost quite a bit out there lately.

Secretary McNamara: That was a misleading report that you received today. We have had 57 choppers destroyed and 48 choppers which will require replacement. There will be between 97 and 137 to be replaced this month. We are shipping this month 246.

The President: How about observation planes?

Secretary McNamara: We are fine on those.

The President: I want to ask all the questions that I possibly can now so that we get answers to them before a situation develops and we didn't have them. I hope all of you see what has happened during the last two weeks. Westy said he could use troops one day last week. Today he comes in with an urgent request for them.

I want to look at all of these things now. I want to anticipate that more will happen to us than we had planned. I have very serious concerns about our equipment.

Frankly, I am scared about Khesanh.

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I worry about that runway going out or those C-130s being knocked down. I think if the weather gets bad and if the runway gets knocked out we are going to have a hell of a problem on resupply. Then I guess we will have to use helicopters. I am afraid they will pick off the helicopters. So I want you to check the number of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft.

If we lose this big build-up we can't endure many losses. And we can look if we are out of ammunition, or out of fuel or didn't have medicine. I would feel better to get the answers here now. I have a mighty big stake in this. I am more unsure every day.

Secretary Rusk: Is General Westmoreland aware that he can choose his own place to fight?

The President: I want a crash program to get these men out there just as fast as they can. Dick, how do you feel about all of this?

Dick Helms: I have been meeting this morning with twelve of my top CIA people who have been in Vietnam. They believe the war is in a critical phase. They think Westmoreland should get the troops if he needs them. We cannot even find some of the forces. I am a believer in the old axiom "A stitch in time saves nine."

General Taylor: In my view, this is an urgent situation. The element of time bothers me. General Westmoreland seems to believe that he has time to open the roads. He seems to believe he has time to do all of the other things that are necessary. And I get the feeling that many of us here today feel the same way. I do not. This offensive could open up today. We should assume in our planning that it will open up tonight. I think Westmoreland's request is reasonable and we should act quickly to meet it.

The President: Do all of you feel that we should send troops?

Secretary McNamara: Yes.

Secretary Rusk: Yes.

Director Helms: Yes.

General Wheeler: Yes.

General Taylor: Yes.

Mr. Rostow: Yes.

The President: Is there any objection?

(There was no objection.)

General Wheeler: We will close these forces in Vietnam in 14 days.

The President: Is that the minimum time?

General Wheeler: Yes, it is.

The President: There is no schedule you can improve upon?

General Wheeler: We will move as quickly as possible.

We should maintain our current level of resupply to Southeast Asia. The Joint Chiefs will use these 62 aircraft which are normally withheld for emergencies. This is an emergency.

MAC and TAC will operate in war-time rates. We are utilizing voluntary civilian air lift.

We propose to call up the Air Force National Guard and Reserve C-124 squadrons. This will be augmented by 112 reserve aircraft and 48 Air National Guard aircraft. This would total about 10 squadrons.

The President: How many men?

Secretary McNamara: 2,000 to 3,000 men.

The President: Well, let's do it. Could you tell the Air Transport Association we will need to call up civilian aircraft?

General Wheeler: The Joint Chiefs feel that if you deploy these men there should be a call-up of the reserves.

If we send a brigade of the 82nd Airborne, we should call up two brigades from the Army National Guard. This would total about 30,000 men.

General Chapman feels that if we deploy this Marine unit, we should call up the Fourth Marine Division, one RLT now and the rest of the Fourth Division subject to call at any time.

The Marine reserves will be ready to go within two months.

The President: I want you and Bob McNamara to get together and come in with an agreed recommendation as to whom to call up. Let's not decide on that today. Go back and agree on what to call.

We must move as soon as we can. I was ready Friday. The clock is ticking. We may waste valuable time and money, but it is better to have them there when they are needed than to need them there and not have them.

General Wheeler: I will call now and get my men drafting the order.

(General Wheeler left the room.)

The President: What is the status of Buttercup? I see where Ky agreed on the release of prisoners. Get Vance to follow through.

Walt Rostow: President Thieu also has agreed to this.

Secretary McNamara: My position on Vietnam is very clear. I do not think it wise to go to the Congress asking for additional legislation. I do not think the call up is necessary.

The President: Well, if you can not agree with the Joint Chiefs on what is needed, then submit to me a minority viewpoint and your separate recommendations.

Secretary McNamara: Do you want General Wheeler to go to Vietnam?

The President: No, I want him here. I don't want anybody substituting for him at a time like this. I feel better with him here.

My feeling is that if the Vietnamese aren't able to carry the load alone we will have to do it rather than let them all get defeated. I think Westmoreland is confronted with a defeat or a victory.

Dick Helms: Are you ready to go over North Korea again with an Oxcart mission. It has been eight days.

Secretary Rusk: I have no objection to an East-West mission above the DMZ.

Secretary McNamara: I see no great risk.

General Wheeler: What kind of swath?

Director Helms: 60 miles.

General Taylor: I would do the whole area.

Director Helms: Secretary Rusk is concerned with China.

Secretary Rusk: I would reduce the risk. We do not want to do anything now, particularly getting an aircraft shot down. EO 12958
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The President: Didn't I see something this morning about North Korea getting ready to strike Seoul?

Walt Rostow: There was some [REDACTED] about a postponed strike on Seoul. This may be a maneuver or it may be an actual strike. It was garbled.

The President: Let's check this very carefully. Let's not be "out to dinner." They may be trying to get another Clark Field.

(Then was a general discussion about the need for security clearances for all people on the White House staff and on the Congressional Committees. The President asked that all of the staff clearances be re-examined and all of the requirements for committee staffs; particularly those who are assistants to Congressional committees hearing highly classified data.)

The President, Dick Helms, George Christian, General Wheeler and Tom Johnson then went to the office where the President showed charts reflecting the ratio of enemy KIA to friendly KIA.

The President said that General Ridgeway had told him that we are not prepared for another major problem elsewhere in the world. He said our preparedness is not that adequate.

The President said he would rather have more than is needed in Vietnam than to need something and not have it available.