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Notes of Meeting of March 20, 1968

Authority NLJ 83-24

Cabinet Room

By is, NARS, Date 11-4-83

Present: President, Vice President, Rusk, Clifford, Fortas,
M. Bundy, B. Bundy, Bill Jordan, W. Rostow, G.
Christian, H. McPherson, Amb. Goldberg, Tom Johnson

President: I asked all of you here to help me prepare a well thought out, well-balanced statement. Let's explore ways to strengthen our ways militarily and diplomatically; let's find new ways to strengthen our society and our nation. You are people of good ~~experience~~ experience, imagination and initiative. Let's look at every suggestion. Let's see what we could do we haven't done better. Let's see how we can improve ourselves. Let's do what we said we would do at Johns Hopkins. If we are silent and nothing new is said, people really will think we are stale. Harry has drafted a statement. Economic people believe we must have a tax bill if we are to have a dollar. 10-10-5 billion. 10 billion in Taxes 10 billion in appropriation cuts 5 billion in expenditures We know it is going to be tough. Last year we put in a 10-2 formula. We have a strain on the economy, not just by Vietnam. We must add on \$5 Bill. for Vietnam. This speech ought to have in it for our needs to get: --military strength --economic strength --diplomatic strength --peace I want war like I want polio. What you want and what your image is are two different things. --let's meet emergency needs in strength --a reasonable offer on peace

I want McGeorge Bundy and Arthur Goldberg and the Vice President and Rusk and Clifford and Fortas and B. Bundy (what not to do). Mac and Harry will have ...

M. Bundy:

~~xxxxxx~~ Let's not worry over draft. Let's go around room.

--What troubles people most

--what can we do

--a lot of easy answers are being peddled on other side of street.

President: Any suggestions?

Rusk: Major peace proposals aren't promising unless there

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SERVICE SET

is a cessation of bombing. There are serious political and military risks to bombing halt. We have been exploring bombing limitations in North, leaving open bombing above the DMZ, It also would look bad to segments here at home to have bombing halt at same time as calling up reserves, We are being divided by rejections by Hanoi.

(Rusk read statement he proposed that the President use.)

Unless we are prepared to do something on bombing, there is no real proposal for us to make.

We put two ideas to Bunker:

- 1) San Antonio formula without any indic. from other side
- 2) limited cessation in northern part of NVN

He was negative on both.

You can't couple a reserve callup with a bombing cessation. Let's make a generalized speech without a major move.

Rostow: Criticism ~~fixxxxx~~ (should be Critics) of our position believe we're intent on creating a constitutional and democratic government by pursuing last VC until he is dead.

They see capacity of VC to hit the cities.

I do not think we can move Thieu to a Greek solution-- offer of VC coming into govt.

Part of peace thing:

--Communists have tried to overthrow GVN and ARVN. They failed.

We are seeking one-man, one-vote constitutional system. We need to turn war to the ballot box.

Rusk: Public opinion has taken element of hope from so many people.

N. Bundy: I think the problem is to have to make a statement when weight of feeling is well, another...
--tax issue
--more troops
--more costs (\$3 Billion)
Is there a way of conveying an impression that we are more willing for peace. Or say "this is about it."
It will get better. Moral of TET was GVN...(sic).
It would be irresponsible to say we could, but we want to.

Clifford: 3-4 important functions:
1) Need reiteration of importance of Vietnam. People are asking themselves that question again.
2) Danger that is inherent if we lose all SEAsia. Those who have the simple, easy solutions are not visible (viable?).

3) Why are we sending more troops.

Sen. Stennis said I am not in favor of sending more troops to VN unless we ~~xxxx~~ expand the war.

Stennis said he was against another buildup. Enemy

has moved in more troops in northern I Corps.

SERVICE SET

There are indications that next 3-4 months could be critical period in the war.

1. Support Marine bases
2. Increase our effectiveness
3. Critical period

Must answer charge that this is becoming an American war.

People are very concerned about ARVN sitting back and letting us do the work.

Coupled with needs of military we do have sm (?) to offer.

We have made reasonable offer to Hanoi.

They have made no effort in that regard.

Offering a program of de-escalation of the war.

We could offer a beginning of gradual deescalation.

We could...stop bombing 75 mi S of Hanoi-Haiphong (20th) parallel.1

We would stop all bombing N. of 20th if enemy would stop artillery, mortars and rockets in DMZ area.

This would be acceptable trade for the military.

They would get some benefit out of it.

This couldbe considered reasonable.

Then we will have another.

This takes edge off "war candidate" vs. peace candidate.

Rusk: We would expect them to stop bombing in DMZ.

M. Bundy: Suppose you turn it around.
Say you can't stop bombing without their doing something.
Idea of getting something started is good.

Clifford: Could say Hanoi would withdraw its men from DMZ.

M. Bundy: Arren't you better off if you do this privately.

Clifford: Value of it is psychological.
They are not likely to accept any proposition.
Kennedy and McCarthy aren't coming up with much.
"Let's try something like this."

M. Bundy: That's OK.

Rusk? Whether or not this is a step toward peace is up to Hanoi.

M. Bundy: President is not about to escalate like you say.
But what do you lose.
Bombing that far north doesn't do that much good.

President: It brings fury and violence from abroad.

M. Bundy? Risk is that our campaign friends will say we have President running.

- Goldberg: Our problem is profoundly serious. I am going to talk frankly. I have a different approach. If a peace move is to be made without hope...You have tried to use both hands. It has not been successful in convincing world opinion or domestic opinion. Peace move must be realistic one. Say I cannot offer you the prospect of anything better. Let's don't go with a proposition which will not be acceptable. Let's be realistic. Only thin Hanoi wants is suspension of bombing. Where it will lead nobody knows. Hanoi sees it as a possibility for starting talks. I think we should do that.
- M. Bundy: I agree with you on a full suspension.
- Goldberg: I thought militarily we could do it. Cessation doesn't mean...Khe Sanh would be unprotected. Reinforcements could continue. No departure from San Antonio. To move this way would be a meaningful thing. You yourself have made this point. Hanoi said they wanted government in South to settle issue. We could put on agenda
--Hanoi stop aggression against South
--U.S. stop bombing against North.
- President: Would I combine this with talk on reserves?
- Goldberg: I would not combine it with troop speech. I would make peace proposal or a support of war speech. I would not combine the two. In UN, Eastern Europeans are fed up with being taxed by this war (Czechs, Poland). Do know it is costing USSR over \$1 billion a year. They may have their Bill Fulbrights too.
- Clifford: If that was fruitless, would that interfere with an all-out effort later on?
- Goldberg: It won't be seen in good faith if you couple it with troops.
- Rostow: In world opinion, bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong has impact. One Soviet indication, he made distinction between bombing battlefield and around H-H.
- M. Bundy: Restraints have not been made clear.
- B. Bundy: They were disclosed on background.
- President: We paused 6½ months around H and H.
?: Russell said he would support callup only if we take out Haiphong.
- President: You won't change Bobby or McCarthy ~~xxx~~ by this.

Goldberg: You have made many approaches.

President: 30 of them.

Clifford: Is it your feeling that the President could make this proposal of stopping the bombing...

Goldberg: Doesn't use 'permanent'.

Clifford: Is it your belief they would talk?

Goldberg: It is my hope. I think talks...should talk.

Rusk: Why shouldn't they talk. They get talks and put in men and a sanctuary.

?: I never said anything about Laos.

President: You have another Panmunjom.

Goldberg: On Panmunjom, commonly assumed we lost more men when talk started.
Suppose you had continued with no Panmunjom, how many men would we have lost?
We have lost handful of men since Panmunjom. We get more out of this.

President: Marines,...
Wouldn't you remove one of ~~xxxxxx~~, one of their most protective elements?

Goldberg: I would double sorties around troops. Use more effective sorties in South.

Clifford: As of now, would not have an appreciable effect.
By mid-April weather will improve.
Would mean giving up more then than now.

President: Think bombing keeps lead out of our men's bodies.

Clifford: It is not a clear-cut case. Military thinks it adds to difficulty of NVN getting supplies to South.
Airpower is not proving to be very effective in this war.

M. Bundy: If we lost at Khe Sanh while stopping bombing we would be in a hell of a shape.

Rusk: Moscow cares more about what ~~happens~~ is happening in NVN than what is happening in South.

President: Bunker says you are trying to crawl. He says let's pour steel to him.

Fortas: 1) Speech should have limited objective
Reasons for callup
Economic impact
No architectural plans for conduct of war and search for peace.

2) This is time when we must be firm and courageous. It is possible to make some bad mistakes of timing. No time for a major offer. It will be seen as sign of weakness.

3) National concern is a question as to whether SVN affairs are being maturely, competently handled. It is a feeling of insecurity.

This is due to mixture in carb(uretor?). It is because of our own sensitivity to criticism, our own dislike of bloodshed.

In my opinion--on this speech--Clifford lined up points well to sending more troops. Must be in framework of strength and resolution.

I can consider it most unfortunate to state offers now. Senators Kennedy and McCarthy will see it as empty gesture. Hanoi will see it as an admission floundering around in an effort to get a bigger piece of candy.

On that point, problem of a cessation of hostilities... we can never handle except on the merits.

Time may come in June or July. Meanwhile, we must be firm in our hearts and in our resolution. We must avoid unilateral proposals.

I weigh evidence.

Cessation of bombing. I don't see it/

That is a one horse-one rabbit deal. That is wrong time and wrong occasion for that/

Should stress what SVNese are doing.

Can we get a SVN General placed on Joint Council.

Our people give SVN little credit for their victories.

Clifford:

I feel a great sympathy for that approach.

We must talk about ultimately we will prevail.

Conditions were susceptible. That did lead to ultimate victory.

Continued application of strength and power does not show us the road to ultimate success.

?:

That disturbs me.

?:

Mere application of physical force doesn't do it.

?:

You must stop the supply lines.

?:

You can't unless you go with force into Laos.

Then Cambodia.

?:

Then Haiphong. What about docks-harbor at Haiphong.

Doesn't stop. Would make it more difficult, but they could still bring them in.

Clifford:

I don't ~~think~~ believe any approach to Hanoi at this time will be accepted.

Portas:

Neither do I.

Time and sequence of events is not right. Very little is to be gained from unilateral moves at this moment.

The task is to give this country confidence in the competence ~~texxxxxxxx~~ of handling this war.

Need feeling of calmness and soundness of military side.

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President: How can you give them confidence?
--more troops
--more taxes
--more reserves

Fortas: Let's don't show lack of confidence in our competence.
People don't understand.

President: Bill, what is your...

B. Bundy: I see alternatives as Goldberg.
Hanoi is not ready to do anything.
Hanoi really doesn't want to talk.
I would defend the record.
We should explore 3rd PARTY efforts.
Let's give SVN front and center and let them build themselves.
Stress somber picture.
I find it somber, indeed.
Enemy has more maneuver bns. than we in I Copps.

M. Bundy: Could you add in language of Thieu notion we are trying to get their proportion of the effort increased.

B. Bundy:

Goldberg: Isn't real issue if we continue our effort with additions with SVN additions, can we do it without erosion of public support be far more difficult.
Aren't we in a race for time if we continue as we have?
Isn't continuing the effort and increasing it--the economy is involved--wage and price controls may be required. Can we do it?
I don't believe we can.

President: I visit with folks who have worked on this problem.
I will meet with group in coming days.
I agree with ~~xxxx~~ what Goldberg started out with. Real question is that we may be misleading them.
Let's separate peace things. Do it right. Take Italian proposal--Clark proposal--Let B. Bundy to get all they have got.
Let's work up an agenda on possibilities. See which are worth pursuing.
Harry, you get with the 2 Bundys.
Get two proposals.
Rusk (?) Proposal.
Reasons
1) support our men
2) meet their new troops
3) different strategy
Let's look at this tomorrow.

President: Is there any advantage of having Souvanna Phouma here to discuss danger to his country.
There is nobody ~~xxx~~ but us who will stand up.
British won't.

Theories of our treaties was that ^{we} would stop the Hitlers of tomorrow.

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If they march, they will be met.
Let's get peace out of it except we're ready to talk.

Situation at moment is very serious~~one~~. We must
support the men we have there.

(Meeting began at 5:08 P.M., ended at 7:20 P.M.)

(Transcribed by W. Jorden from T. Johnson notes-72/13/70)