

MARCH 26, 1968 - 3:15 p.m.

99

CONTINUATION OF MEETING WITH FOREIGN
POLICY ADVISERS IN THE CABINET
ROOM

(Summary)

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March 26, 1968

SUMMARY OF NOTES

McGeorge Bundy: There is a very significant shift in our position. When we last met we saw reasons for hope.

We hoped then there would be slow but steady progress. Last night and today the picture is not so hopeful particularly in the country side.

Dean Acheson summed up the majority feeling when he said that we can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage.

That view was shared by:

George Ball
Arthur Dean
Cy Vance
Douglas Dillon
and myself (McGeorge Bundy)

We do think we should do everything possible to strengthen in a real and visable way the performance of the Government of South Vietnam.

There were three of us who took a different position:

General Bradley
General Taylor
Bob Murphy

They all feel that we should not act to weaken our position and we should do what our military commanders suggest.

General Ridgeway has a special point of view. He wanted to so strengthen the Army of South Vietnam that we could complete the job in two years.

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On negotiations, Ball, Goldberg and Vance strongly urged a cessation of the bombing now. Others wanted a halt at some point but not now while the situation is still unresolved in the I Corps area.

On troop reenforcements the dominant sentiment was that the burden of proof rests with those who are urging the increase. Most of us think there should be a substantial escalation. We all felt there should not be an extension of the conflict. This would be against our national interest.

The use of atomic weapons is unthinkable.

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Summary:

Ridgeway: I agree with the summary as presented by McGeorge Bundy.

Dean: I agree. All of us got the impression that there is no military conclusion in sight. We felt time is running out.

Dean Acheson: Agree with Bundy's presentation. Neither the effort of the Government of Vietnam or the effort of the U. S. government can succeed in the time we have left. Time is limited by reactions in this country. We cannot build an independent South Vietnam; therefore, we should do something by no later than late summer to establish something different.

Henry Cabot Lodge: We should shift from search and destroy strategy to a strategy of using our military power as a shield to permit the South Vietnamese society to develop as well as North Vietnamese society has been able to do. We need to organize South Vietnam on a block-by-block, precinct-by-precinct basis.

Douglas Dillon: We should change the emphasis. I agree with Acheson. The briefing last night led me to conclude we cannot achieve a military victory. I would agree with Lodge that we should cease search-and-destroy tactics and head toward an eventual disengagement. I would send only the troops necessary to support those there now.

George Ball: I share Acheson's view. I have felt that way since 1961 -- that our objectives are not attainable. In the U.S. there is a sharp division of opinion. In the world, we look very badly because of the bombing. That is the central defect in our position. The disadvantages of bombing outweigh the advantages. We need to stop the bombing in the next six weeks to test the will of the North Vietnamese. As long as we continue to bomb, we alienate ourselves from the civilized world. I would have the Pope or U Thant suggest the bombing halt. It cannot come from the President.

A bombing halt would quieten the situation here at home.

Cy Vance: McGeorge Bundy stated my views. I agree with George Ball.

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Unless we do something quick, the mood in this country may lead us to withdrawal. On troops, we should send no more than the 13,000 support troops.

General Bradley: People in the country are dissatisfied. We do need to stop the bombing if we can get the suggestion to come from the Pope or U Thant, but let's not show them that we are in any way weakening. We should send only support troops.

Bob Murphy: I am shaken by the position of my associates. The interpretation given this action by Saigon would be bad. This is a "give-away" policy. I think it would weaken our position.

General Taylor: I am dismayed. The picture I get is a very different one from that you have. Let's not concede the home front; let's do something about it.

Fortas: The U.S. has never had in mind winning a military victory out there; we always have wanted to reach an agreement or settle for the status quo between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. I agree with General Taylor and Bob Murphy. This is not the time for an overture on our part. I do not think a cessation of the bombing would do any good at this time. I do not believe in drama for the sake of drama.

Acheson: The issue is not that stated by Fortas. The issue is can we do what we are trying to do in Vietnam. I do not think we can. Fortas said we are not trying to win a military victory. The issue is can we by military means keep the North Vietnamese off the South Vietnamese. I do not think we can. They can slip around and end-run them and crack them up.

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