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SERVICE SET

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE
FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

SUMMARY NOTES OF 559th NSC MEETING
June 17, 1966; 6:05 to 8:00 P. M.

Vietnam -- POL

The President summarized the actions required and the judgments which will have to be made in the next several weeks, emphasizing the decision to strike POL targets.

In general, we should seek, with minimum loss and minimum danger of escalating the war, to achieve the maximum effect on the North Vietnamese. We know that the North Vietnamese are dispersing their POL stocks in an effort to anticipate our bombing. The effect of not disrupting POL shipments to the North Vietnamese forces in the field is to pay a higher price in U. S. casualties. The choice is one of military lives vs. escalation.

A decision on bombing is not being made now and one is not imminent. The reasons for our delay include: the Secretary was at the NATO meeting, Canadian representative Ronning was visiting Hanoi, time was required to talk to Prime Minister Wilson and our allies, and some sounds have come from Hanoi. Every bit of information is needed in reaching a decision.

There is no uncertainty about my willingness to use the authority which is the President's.

There must be no discussion of this meeting. Everyone present can be trusted but we must be careful about talking to the press or even to staff members who might talk to the press. The highest security must be maintained.

Secretary Rusk: We have an elementary obligation to support our combat troops when they are carrying out an assignment. The American people have a feeling of impatience and, over time, they may demand a quick end to the war as the price for their continued support. This restlessness is evident in the public opinion polls. Opinion abroad hopes that no larger military measures will be necessary. It is difficult to separate in the minds of people attacks on POL supplies from attacks on the civilian economy. There is a major difference between a 2- to 3-day strike and strikes continuing over a long period. We are under constant observation by everyone abroad. We must get across to the public that if we widen the bombing program to include POL targets that this does not mean a change in our policy of making every effort to avoid killing civilians.

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8-6-85 TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE

Secretary Rusk (cont'd.):

Many people who have no responsibility for the conduct of the war oppose a wider bombing program. As early as we can we must get a check on whether the Ronning mission to Hanoi produced any change in the North Vietnamese position. Mr. Ronning is reporting only to Canadian Foreign Minister Martin. He declined to tell our Charge in Vientiane whether the Hanoi leaders told him anything new.

The President: We must get the news fastest about the Ronning mission.

Secretary Rusk: Prior to executing any new orders on bombing, we must give 24-hour advance notice to several Heads of State, including Korea, Thailand, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK.

If the decision is negative, we have no problem. A go decision will produce sharp reactions throughout the world. There probably will be attacks on our Embassies. The reaction will be less if a decision is limited to a short, sharp action.

We must try to bring Hanoi to a decision. There is no evidence of their willingness to talk now. We cannot guarantee what the Chinese Communist reaction will be. Our guess is that there will be no military reaction from the Chinese Communists or the Soviets. There will be many problems in the UN.

Secretary McNamara: Strikes on POL targets have been opposed by me for months. The situation is now changing and the earlier bombing decision must be reconsidered. POL targets are military targets. The military utilization of these targets has been greatly increased. The North Vietnamese dispersion of their POL is lessening our chance of ever destroying their POL supplies. Military infiltration from the north is up sharply. Consequently, the pressure on their lines of communication has increased. Their POL imports have doubled. The military importance of their POL system is way up and will increase further.

The reasons for attacking POL targets are:

1. Our guess is that such attacks will limit infiltration from North Vietnam.
2. Those North Vietnamese troops in the south will worry about their source of supplies.
3. Pressure will be exerted on the political leaders in Hanoi. This bombing program seems to be the least costly way to tell them of our serious intentions.

Secretary McNamara (cont'd.):

The reason against the POL bombing program is that it moves us further away from a termination of the war, thus costing more U.S. lives.

General Johnson: The number of Vietnamese trucks has jumped from 6,900 to 10,000. Approximately 2,600 are en route to South Vietnam. All need fuel to operate. North Vietnamese POL imports are up from 900 to 23,000 tons.

The President: What is coming in the next few weeks or the next 60 days?

General Johnson: The North Vietnamese will reinforce the military power they now have and make a drive into central Vietnam -- possibly even further south. Hitting the POL targets will hurt them in moving rice and weapons to replace those we have captured. They have to step up the rate of supplies from the north to the south.

We will lose 3 to 4-1/2 percent of planes used on these missions. (Secretary McNamara interrupted to say this amounted to 20-25 planes.) More U.S. troops will be lost on the ground in the same time period than will be lost in the air strikes.

The off-loading capacity of the North Vietnamese in the port of Haiphong would be struck. However, the Chiefs' view is that POL targets should be hit as a first priority. These attacks might play a significant part in bringing the war to a halt. If the POL targets are hit, the North Vietnamese will have to find alternative ways of delivering POL. Meanwhile, the dispersion of their petroleum supplies is continuing.

Secretary McNamara: Already we have identified 70-80 POL dispersal points. POL tanks are being put underground and more POL is being stored in small tanks. Existing large tank farms would be destroyed.

The value to us of the destruction of their oil supplies has greatly increased.

Following are the risks:

a. Civilian casualties would be very small. The estimate is for 50 casualties in the three prime targets. If, as is possible, our bombs miss their primary targets, we will undoubtedly hurt our cause. The casualty figure could go as high as 12,000. Six thousand of these would be civilians and of the civilians, three thousand would be killed. The casualties caused if the bombs land on-target would be less than those which would occur on targets now authorized to

Secretary McNamara (cont'd.):

be struck. Our operation orders to our commanders are to minimize civilian casualties by being certain of their targets, i. e., positive identification, visual bombing, etc. We have made clear our views to Admiral Sharp regarding civilian casualties.

b. As to the military reaction to the widened bombing, every expert says the risk of this is small.

c. If we do not widen our bombing, the morale of U.S. troops and of the American people will suffer. People will say: If you consider a POL target a military target, why do you not strike it?

d. The risk of hitting a Russian or a foreign ship in a North Vietnamese harbor is very small.

The President: Have we hit targets deeper into North Vietnam and nearer to civilian centers? There will be a psychological reaction because our bombing will be nearer to the center of cities.

Secretary McNamara: The POL bombing program would hit areas further north and nearer civilian centers.

Secretary Rusk: The cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, rightly or wrongly, are symbolic. Although we have hit oil storage areas in the city of Vinh, the reaction would be different if targets in Hanoi and Haiphong were struck.

Walt Rostow: The military and political payoff of a strike on the POL targets hinges on the success of the effort. We will never be able to get them all.

Secretary McNamara: We probably cannot do the job in one strike and would have to go back at least once. We do not know how quickly they would be able to restore the oil storage facilities, but we doubt that frequent strikes would be necessary to prevent rebuilding.

Mr. Rostow: Striking the POL targets is an extension of our bombing program, not a change in our policy. We have been attacking their LOCs. Because of our restraint, the North Vietnamese have changed their military planning to take advantage of our existing target system.

Ambassador Goldberg: Have we previously struck at the civilian economy as we would be doing if we destroyed their supply of oil?

General Johnson: We estimate that 60 percent of POL is used by the military.

Mr. Rostow: Our bombing program is forcing the North Vietnamese to divert laborers to the repair of roads and bridges. Our policy should remain steady and our actions should be cool and professional. We should not be on the defensive. Our military effort is based on the violation of the Geneva Accords by the North Vietnamese.

Ambassador Goldberg: The risk of widening the bombing program to attack POL targets is too great. The results will not be what we think. All of us want to save U.S. lives but will such air attacks achieve this objective?

The Chinese and Soviet reactions to the headlines reporting the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong will be a challenge to them to give all aid necessary to make up the loss. The Chinese Communists as well as the Soviets will not sit by. At the very least they will replace the petroleum and the facilities destroyed.

The Communist bloc is not going to let this outfit go down the drain. They see the Vietnam war as a confrontation. With minimum risk, they can make up for the damage we do to the North Vietnamese petroleum supplies. In addition, the world reaction would be strongly adverse -- even Canada would oppose our action.

During the President's absence from the meeting, Secretary McNamara estimated the probability of missing our targets as slight. This remark was in response to the Vice President calling attention to our having missed Mu Gia pass on an earlier air strike. Added that a high level of damage was assured if we bombed the POL targets. He acknowledged that more than one strike would be necessary to do the job.

When the President returned to the room, Ambassador Goldberg said that the maximum military risk is that Chinese Communists will move in troops. The decision to bomb POL will mean that we will be isolating ourselves internationally. If we lose Canada and Japan as a result of these strikes, we will lose the Chinese representation issue in the UN.

The domestic reaction will be very adverse if we strike these POL targets and then this act does not end the war. The reaction domestically will be to demand stronger military action by the President. The country's mood will turn at election time if the war is still going on. The American people are supporting the President because he is cool and reserved. My judgment is based not on an interpretation of the polls but on my travelling about the country. We must delay at least until after the Ronning peace effort is safely out of the way so that if we take additional action, Mr. Ronning will be unable to say that we got a peace feeler in Hanoi and wrecked it.

The President: No one has been reckless. Had we been, we would have struck these targets already.

The Vice President: We have been up and down this hill many times. If we authorize these strikes, our action will be considered and looked upon as a change in policy even though it isn't. The action will complicate our problems in the UN and in Europe. We should wait until Ronning is out of the way. If the air strike is done cleanly, there will be less reaction. The North Vietnamese will not come to a conference table but will slowly withdraw. We should keep up the punishment we are inflicting on North Vietnam while seeking peace.

It would be a catastrophe if a Soviet ship were hit and if Soviet personnel were killed.

I have come around reluctantly to accepting the wider bombing program. Not to attack the POL targets would be to contribute to North Vietnamese strength. The strikes will complicate their logistic problem and exert pressure on Hanoi. As to the political consequences, it will play hell. But we should go ahead with the additional strikes, exercising precautions.

Secretary McNamara responded to the President's question by saying that every precaution to avoid civilian casualties had been taken. He again summarized the limitations placed on the pilots carrying out the air strikes.

Secretary Fowler: We should recall the Korean experience where we failed to strike military targets because of geographic limitations and where we failed to use our predominant military power.

a. Operational judgment on the strikes should weigh heavily with us. It is a most persuasive case which has been made. (Secretary McNamara added that the military advice was unanimous and very strong in favor of the strikes.)

b. We need to accelerate progress toward ending the heavy fighting in South Vietnam. The only way open to us now is to weaken Hanoi.

c. Time is important because the North Vietnamese are dispersing their storage of petroleum.

We should move ahead.

Assistant Secretary of State Bundy: Ambassador Reischauer rather surprisingly said that he believed we could put up with the Japanese reaction which he thought would be steep but supportable. This view is different than that stated by Ambassador Goldberg as to the effect on Japan.

Assistant Secretary of State Bundy (cont'd.):

The recent meeting of our Ambassadors in Asia recommended that we undertake the expanded bombing program.

CIA Director Raborn: We estimate that the Japanese reaction will not basically affect our relations with Japan. As to the Chinese Communist reaction, we think that by no means would they invade. It is very difficult for them to move into Vietnam and to support troops there. As to Soviet reaction, it will be vigorous and sharp and might involve their moving oil ashore by emergency means.

We should recognize that this is not a one-shot operation. These targets will be a cause of continuing concern. If we took out the two major targets, there would be a terrific effect, but not overnight, on the confidence of the North Vietnamese troops.

We learned in World War II that we should step up pressure when the enemy shows signs of weakness.

USIA Director Marks: We should not decide this question on the basis of world opinion but rather on a military basis. We have created our own problem in part by developing what have become sacred cows. We should make a statement concerning the importance of oil off-loading facilities to the North Vietnamese military effort. We should ride out the reaction rather than take to the TV.

Director Raborn: No statement as to our plans should be made because to make public our intentions would result in the loss of more U.S. planes.

Secretary Rusk: If we make any mention of our intention to strike POL targets, we will have given the other side preventive warning time.

The President: In order not to be lobbied on the decision, not another soul should be informed of this discussion.

Deputy CIA Director Helms: The petroleum supplies are feeding the meat grinder in South Vietnam and this North Vietnamese military effort will continue unless we take out their petroleum supplies.

General Johnson: Must we tell all our allies in advance?

The President: This is very worrisome. The fewest number of allies should be told on the shortest possible notice.

Bill Moyers: We should be clear about what we say to the public. We should not oversell what we expect to accomplish. We should keep in mind what the increased bombing program will do as well as what it will not do. As to what it will do, we should stress the increasing burden and the cost of the war to Hanoi.

Secretary McNamara: The reality is that we are not going to get all of the petroleum supplies but the effect on the North Vietnamese will be to hoard the reduced petroleum supplies which remain.

Bill Moyers: No statement should be made to the public saying that we acted to shorten the war. If the air strike does not shorten the war, then later people will say we misled them.

Secretary Rusk: Will there be any public reaction to bombing SAM sites near Hanoi?

Ambassador Goldberg: There will not be a major reaction.

Mr. Rostow: The decision is a rational one. Taking out the petroleum supplies sets a ceiling on the capacity of the North Vietnamese to infiltrate men into South Vietnam. A sustained POL offensive will seriously affect the infiltration rate.

Each person in the room, during the course of the discussion, indicated approval of the recommendation to strike the recommended POL targets.

Brouley Smith

LIST OF ATTENDEES, NSC MEETING

June 17, 1966; 6:00 P.M.

Vice President Humphrey

Secretary of State Rusk
Ambassador Goldberg
Assistant Secretary Bundy

Secretary of Defense McNamara

CIA Director Raborn
Deputy Director Helms

JCS Acting Chairman General Johnson

Secretary of the Treasury Fowler

USIA Director Marks

Walt Rostow
Bill Moyers
George Christian
Bromley Smith

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