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#26 meeting notes	meeting 12/17/65 in cabinet room - on Vietnam possible classified info. 5 pages	12/17/65	A
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Meeting of December 17, 1965

Cabinet Room

Present: President, Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, Ball, Valenti
(The following is taken from notes by Jack Valenti.)

The meeting opened with a discussion of the visit of Prime Minister Wilson. Then the President turned to Secretary Rusk, who had just returned from NATO, and asked:

Did you bring back any peace proposals:

Rusk: No. After moving around in NATO, I find Wilson is a paragon of courage. The rest are doing nothing. I really can't see why the British can't put in men to support the Australians.

President: Wilson is going to do nothing. He wants a DSC for fending off his enemies in Parliament. I think this man Cameron's articles are having a large effect on this country. I wish I could see to the end of the gun barrel in Viet-Nam.

The Viet Cong atrocities never get publicized. Nothing is being written or published to make you hate the Viet Cong; all that is being written is to hate us.

Ball: There is a racial element in what we do to the North. It's not there when the North hits the South.

President: They do a far better propaganda job than we do. On NBC today it was all about what we are doing wrong. We've got to find some way to do another Baltimore speech. Not desperate, but proper. Wilson says his line has been steady since the Baltimore speech. Wilson tells his opposition to bring the Viet Cong to a conference table and he'll produce the President.

I'm willing to take any gamble on stopping the bombing if I think I've got some hope of something happening. We must evaluate this very carefully. You have no idea how much I've talked to the Fulbrights and Lippmanns, They're not coming aboard.

McNamara: We will increase bombing. It is inevitable. We must step up our attacks.

President: (The President read an editorial by Norman Cousins.)

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Authority ERVS 64-68, vol. III, item 231

By JW Date 3/2/98

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Ball: I am holding ^{an heretical} ~~a radical~~ view but I think the bombing in the North is having a negative effect.

McNamara: We just don't know if we are hurting the North Vietnamese or the Chinese. We may be able to hurt them enough with out 400,000 men to make them behave differently. If we don't, what should we do? We shouldn't be doing anything that has a one-in-three chance.

Perhaps a cease-fire in place.

Bundy: Not now. It takes time.

Rusk: It could cause the ^{dissolution} ~~disillusion~~ of South Viet-Nam.

McNamara: Our military has a one-in-three success orders.

Bundy: I'm more optimistic. Our military is hurting them.

Ball: No one can say. If we look hard at bombing in the North, it isn't producing a salutary effect. We started bombing:

- 1) to raise morale
- 2) to interdict supplies
- 3) to get Hanoi to change its mind

The first is not needed any more. Bombing hasn't served the other two reasons. We can restrict supplies only to a critical level, no lower.

Obviously we are not breaking the will of North Viet-Nam. They are digging in. A hardened line. I was in charge of bombing surveys in World War II and bombing never wins a war. We are driving the North Vietnamese into a greater dependency on China -- and boxing in the Soviets. We are also making plans for negotiation more difficult.

I think the risks of escalation are very great -- and the risk is in the North, not in the South. The one hope we have is to stop bombing and seizing every opportunity not to resume. Meanwhile, (We should) conduct the war in the South with redoubled vigor.

President: That has some appeal to me. The problem is the Chiefs go through the roof when we mention this pause.

McNamara: I can take on the Chiefs.

President: I don't think you can sell the American people on the merits of stopping the bombing.

McNamara: The Navy and the Air Force are conducting 3,000 sorties in North Viet-Nam. There is no way to stop bombing in the North except as part of a political move.

Rusk: On Ball's remarks, I don't think bombing has caused North Viet-Nam to escalate. They are determined to do so.

We tell the Russians: you ask us to pause -- we pause -- now what would you do for us?

McNamara: You need several of these moves. We had one pause; we need more.

Bundy: Look at what would happen if there wasn't any bombing from the from the day before Christmas until the day after New Years.

President: I have no objections. What are the objections?

Rusk: The Russians need more time to get something on with the Chinese.

McNamara: If the press asks us why no bombing, we answer we are increasing our effort in Laos and the South.

Ball: Only 40 per cent of the missions are going on now. Concentrate in the South.

President: Shouldn't we have someone moving throughout the world trying for peace?

McNamara: All the time this is being done we will move toward increasing our forces in Viet-Nam.

(President thinking -- thoughtful, quiet, obviously concentrating deeply.)

President: Is this what you want to explore with the Chiefs?

McNamara: No, I need to know what you want. The Chiefs will be totally opposed. (Problem with Wheeler -- he has eye trouble and needs to be operated on.)

We decide what we want and impose it on them. They see this as a total military problem -- nothing will change their views. They will answer: we are better off now with bombing than without it.

President: We are there now because of the bombing. We wouldn't be there without it.

McNamara: I know exactly what the arguments of the Chiefs are. Before you decide, I cannot deliver. After you decide, I can deliver.

Rusk: Work on specific suggestions and get back to the President later.

President: I am opposed to announcements of a pause. If you pick weather as an excuse and Christmas as a factor -- the position of the allies also -- take a poll where they say we are not doing enough to find peace.

Take all this -- try to sell our enemies that we want peace. We owe this to the American people. We can't do this if we are dropping bombs on the enemy. (Like Kosygin in Hanoi.)

Anything with bombs is bad for the peace effort. Let's put off bombing until we can talk to others.

Because of weather, receiving thousands more people, solidifying our position, we can have a pause. Let McNamara say to the Chiefs: we've got a heavy budget, tax bill, controls, danger of inflation, kill the great society. With all these things, we've got to make ^{sure} the diplomats can talk. They claim they can't talk with bombs dropping. Period: 22 December through 22 January.

Sometime during this period have Westmoreland and Lodge come here to the U.S. -- or the President go to Honolulu -- and look at it -- letting the people know what we're doing.

Then on the 23rd of January, tell the people where we stand. Meanwhile, try to figure out how to cut losses. Don't believe that bombing will help us.

They are right: the weakest chink in our armor is public opinion. Our people won't stand firm -- and will bring down the Government.

We're going to suffer political losses. Every President does in off years. But it is because of ~~how far~~ damn fool liberals who are crying about poverty (which funds I doubled in one year). But we need money for all

these programs. How do you divide up this money? Every hangover Kennedy columnist is sniping about Johnson cutting off Great Society programs.

The only man that helps me survive is Jim Webb. He is trying to reduce funds in his agency. Orville Freeman is a soldier --he's trying.

Meeting ended at 11 a.m.

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