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Meyer & Berlin file

March 6, 1959

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MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
March 6, 1959, 10:30 AM

Others present: Vice President Nixon
Secretary Herter
Secretary McElroy
Mr. Allen Dulles
Senator Lyndon Johnson
Senator Everett Dirksen
Speaker Rayburn
Representative Halleck
General Persons
Major Eisenhower

The President opened the meeting by stating its purpose: to talk over the abnormal situation facing us in the Berlin situation and to assure that the Executive and Legislative Branches are thinking together. He did not desire the meeting to be so large as to necessitate undue publicity, and for this reason, he informed the members present that he planned to talk off the record with members of the Foreign Affairs Committees and others this evening.

The President reviewed briefly the policy of the U.S. Government on the Berlin issue. This policy is to warn the Soviets publicly that we will not be threatened or pushed out of Berlin and that we will not desert the 2.2 million free people in that city, but will, rather, execute our rights under existing agreements. At the same time, we will maintain an attitude of readiness to negotiate, to include discussion of a peace treaty. We do admit that other nations have interests in the Berlin crisis and we desire to explore the German situation in an atmosphere off the level of a crisis. There is no point at this time to discussing extreme measures such as mobilization. Mobilization of the entire nation's resources would be the most disastrous thing that could come about. Our situation in the world, vis-a-vis the Soviets, should be one with which we can live for many a year. Otherwise, we must go to a garrison state. Therefore, we are being alert; we are ready to take any decent opportunity to negotiate; and we stand with our allies.

The President finished his opening statement by reiterating his desire to see if the Legislative and Executive are thinking along the same lines.

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He emphasized that he does not desire to require anybody to sign on the dotted line, but desires to get their views.

At this time the President introduced Mr. Allen Dulles.

Mr. Dulles then briefed the Members of Congress by use of a map of East Germany. This indicated Soviet and GDR armed forces. (See summary of Mr. Dulles' briefing, attached.) At the end of this presentation there were brief questions. To Mr. Halleck's question regarding the reliability of GDR troops, Mr. Dulles gave the opinion that these troops are not overly reliable, but the Soviets would not depend on them in any serious action. From this Mr. Halleck concluded that any action of this type would, of necessity, involve participation by the Russians. Senator Dirksen, in confirmation of this point, asked whether the Soviets are patrolling in East Germany. The answer was affirmative. In this connection, the President mentioned that the Soviets are working on their jamming capability to interfere with aircraft as well as their capability to interfere with ground access.

Senator Dirksen questioned the distance from Berlin to Frankfurt, and clarified in his mind the fact that the city is well into the Soviet zone and that air corridors and ground accesses would be through their territory. Secretary Herter confirmed that the autobahn, the railroad, and the three air corridors are being maintained as an obligation of the Russians.

The group then reviewed the history of this current arrangement. This was of special interest to Senator Dirksen, who mentioned that there were two agreements, in February and in July of 1945, with the President pointing out that there had been no change since those dates regarding the status of the four powers in Berlin, but that following the Berlin airlift, the 1948 agreements on access routes had been renegotiated in 1949. He confirmed that these agreements had not specified a termination date.

At this time the President mentioned that he has a document which sets forth the legality of our position in Berlin and he would be willing to issue this document to the Members of Congress present.

In answer to a question by Senator Dirksen, the President clarified the relationship between the Soviets and the GDR. If, as of May 27th, the Soviets have carried through their intention to pass their authority for control of access routes to the GDR, this will make us obey GDR regulations for the transit, and we will be forced to go by their sufferance. It

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Mr. Rayburn then inquired as to the status of the proposals for a foreign ministers' meeting. He felt relieved on being advised that this meeting is expected to be held, stating that he would rather talk than fight. When the President pointed out that Khrushchev's message had been made public, in which he announced a willingness for a foreign ministers' meeting, Mr. Rayburn inquired whether Khrushchev had not done some changing of position. The President answered in the affirmative. On arrival of Macmillan in Moscow, a friendly joint communique had been issued, followed by an extremely harsh speech by Khrushchev in some area outside of Moscow. Since then, Khrushchev has apparently changed his position and has shown evidence of being willing to talk. The President quoted Khrushchev's expression from his recent speech in which he said, "Don't count your chickens before autumn." The President gave a brief estimate of Khrushchev's character in which he described him as stupid in some ways and yet exceedingly shrewd, and most certainly ruthless.

The President then warned the group of the danger of talk outside of this meeting, particularly with regard to the effect that loose talk would have on our negotiating position with our allies. It is extremely necessary to have the good will of such persons as General de Gaulle, who occupies such a vital strategic geographical position.

The Vice President then pointed out one problem with regard to our acceptance of a foreign ministers' meeting. This problem is how far do we go in insisting on our own terms for the meeting, or how far we make concessions on accepting those of the Soviets. We must not appear to want a conference at any cost. Therefore, we should avoid too much glowing public talk of a conference.

The President continued an estimate of Khrushchev's position, pointing out that Khrushchev, by his recent statements, has left himself little or no room to maneuver on the Berlin issue itself. He has gotten out of this position by broadening the context of his demands and agreeing to address the entire German problem. The President pointed out one difficulty with a foreign ministers' meeting, which is the low status of Gromyko. In the President's view, Gromyko is worse than Vishinsky. He is incapable of negotiating; he merely sits and glowers until he receives his orders from Moscow. There is, therefore, little hope of real negotiation with Gromyko. However, foreign ministers's talks will have the great value of affording us time and of easing the tensions.

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The President concluded by pointing out the vast investment we have in strengthening our relationships with Western Europe and the consequent requirement for conscientious negotiation.

Senator Dirksen then inquired as to our courses of action in the case of the worst situation. The President admitted that this decision will not be easy and that we must see what happens. However, the case will be negotiated to its fullest before we go to war. Fundamental in the President's view is that we have at stake 2.2 million free Germans who trust us and upon whom we may not turn our back.

Secretary McElroy, at the President's request, then pointed out some of the military actions which are being taken. He emphasized that much planning is being conducted, both in the Pentagon and in General Norstad's headquarters, on a contingency basis. He pointed out that any effort to bull our way into Berlin with ground forces alone requires more strength than we have available; therefore, no substantial reinforcement of our land forces in Europe is contemplated. For psychological reasons, however, some small reinforcements are being sent primarily to round out units and bring them up to strength. Secretary McElroy emphasized the improbability of moving into Germany without entailing hostilities directly with Russia. Therefore, since we cannot fight this battle on the ground, we are studying the matter of airlift as a fallback action. We are preparing our crews by way of familiarizing them with Tempelhof airfield and we are making electronic jamming studies. The Secretary emphasized that what we are making are normal preparations. He feels that the Congressmen present should know about them, but he requests that talk be avoided to enable us to bring our allies along with us. We are playing on the basis of "not much noise but carry a big stick." We must realize that the Russians will carry their threats "up to the line." We are therefore planning as if we will be required to carry out our contingency plans. We think, however, the country will be better served if we avoid saber rattling. Secretary Herter agreed in the light of coordination difficulties that we must not talk unilaterally.

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Senator Johnson then expressed the view that this is an extremely important meeting from a coordination viewpoint. He admits the infeasibility of fighting this enemy on the ground, but stated that he is interested

in knowing what other alternatives are available. He questioned the adequacy of our forces. While admitting that he would not desire to get into details, he requested the President's views. Looking at it from his own standpoint, Senator Johnson reiterated that his big desire is to be able to help. Senator Johnson went on to point out some of the difficulties he has in answering questions from constituents. As an example, he mentioned his difficulties in answering questions from constituents on the timing of a final decision on the future status of Secretary Dulles.

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Senator Johnson then returned to his question of alternatives to ground action. He asked how Members of Congress can aid the Executive, and whether the forces are adequate. He pointed out the seeming inconsistency of the current force reductions with the crisis atmosphere prevailing with regard to Berlin. To this the President answered that we are placing much money in our defense forces and retaliatory power. He emphasized that it is impossible for the United States to maintain manpower in service comparable to that of the Soviets, in the light of our own wage scale. He pointed out the possibility, therefore, that when we reach the acute crisis period, it will be necessary to engage in general war to protect our rights. He cited examples in the past of Communist tactics in which they have maintained a strong bluff to the last moment and then backed out. These examples included threats of general war with regard to Korea, Viet-Nam, Lebanon and the Taiwan Straits. In the President's view, the question is whether we have the nerve to push our chips into the pot. He is convinced that any appeasement means disaster. Senator Johnson hastily added that the Congress agrees that we shall have no appeasement.

The President admitted the possibility that this firm position could conceivably bring about a miscalculation and therefore general war; however, this is only a possibility. In the event we adopt a policy of appeasement, the President is absolutely certain that we are defeated. On the other hand, this does not mean that we will not negotiate. We will negotiate whenever we can and are making many efforts in that direction. All heartily agreed with this point.

Mr. Halleck then brought up the question of possible measures to condition the people of America to the eventuality that the "balloon may go up." To this the President asked whether Mr. Halleck was referring to a campaign to scare the population. Mr. Halleck continued by defining

his question in terms of how to precipitate hostilities in the event the GDR stopped a convoy. He admits that things would be simpler if the enemy would fire the first shot; but his question is how to make the enemy fire the first shot on the ground. He pointed out the great possibilities of nonviolent obstruction, and in this connection, the merits of the air corridors. The President answered this question by pointing out that a crisis will be precipitated only in the event the GDR closes off the corridors. Many studies are being currently conducted as to how to precipitate this crisis in the event of the close-off. These studies include such matters as breaking off of diplomatic relations and cessation of trade.

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The President, as a footnote to history, then gave a recast of his initial views with regard to occupation of Berlin when he was a military commander in 1945. He finds it somewhat ironic that he is now confronted with a crisis based on a decision against which he had recommended as a military commander.

The President went on to emphasize that studies are also being conducted on the means of applying counterpressures. He reiterated his conviction that if we stand firm on this issue and make our firmness obvious to the Soviets and the world, the Soviets will back down. Here Senator Johnson interjected that the alternative is to "push the button." Mr. McElroy agreed that there is no other way.

The Vice President stated the necessity of being firm, while avoiding such provocative measures (which have been suggested) as placing forces on alert or mobilizing. These actions present the problem of provoking and frightening our allies. He continued that the position of the United States government is by far the strongest in the free world, when we consider the backing which the Executive is receiving. Other free governments are in a difficult position because of the fears of the population, due to their proximity to the difficulty. Mr. Nixon reiterated that once we make noise we may militate against allied support.

Senator Johnson pointed out that two or three Senators have been waving resolutions to express the "consensus of the Senate." He pointed out his objection to this type of action and expressed the view that this type of meeting represents a middle-of-the-road approach, and, therefore, derives great importance, primarily because it illustrates that we are not split along party lines. The President emphasized that he does not

at this time desire a resolution in the Senate. When Mr. Rayburn called attention to the fact that the proponents point to the efficacy of the Taiwan Straits resolution, the President stated that this is a different type of matter. Mr. Rayburn stated that it will be easy to hold the House in control on this matter, but not the Senate. (Senator Johnson's volunteered statement that Senator Javits has proposed a resolution for a seven-man committee to tell our story to the Berliners brought an unpleasant reaction from the President.) They all reviewed again the importance of this meeting as a middle ground.

The President then stated his position as an advocate of peace and peace by negotiation. He repeated the necessity of being firm but not rigid when faced by an aggressor. We will not be served by ultimatum, since an ultimatum does not constitute negotiation -- but we will not be truculent. Again Senator Johnson posed a question as to the adequacy of our forces in the event negotiations break down, and the President again said that he could see no material needs which we do not already possess.

The President then continued by describing his satisfaction with our military instrument. He stated that we do in fact suffer under a problem of an excess of power. If we dump our entire programmed loads, comprising many, many megatons, on Russia, there is some question as to what will happen. He called attention to the current concern over levels of strontium 90 resulting from only a few weapons being fired in tests. To Senator Johnson's repeated question as to whether the Congress is doing all they ought to give the Executive all it needs, the President answered in the affirmative. The Senator then mentioned that he would like to see the Joint Chiefs of Staff be likewise firm in their support of this program when they testify, if they do in fact agree. The President pointed out that in the event of acute crisis, some forces might be called up if the Executive is warned some two or three days before the D-day of a general war. Under existing law, he could call up Reservists and National Guardsmen to supplement the police forces, largely to maintain order in the United States. He pointed out that Khrushchev does not desire war more than we. He cited his own experience in war that the enemy is always as frightened as we are.

Senator Johnson then posed the question as to whether we are telling the public all we should. To this Mr. Rayburn answered immediately in the

affirmative. In his view our people cannot understand the implications of this situation, and excessive warning on our part would cause undue alarm, not only to our own people, but to the Russians as well.

Mr. McElroy then mentioned that this particular crisis may not be the primary objective of the Soviets. In his view we may find that their true objective is a coup in Iran and that the Berlin crisis is only a diversion. This view appeared to be accepted by all.

The Vice President once more mentioned the great significance of this meeting, and the President suggested that a picture be taken. This was received most enthusiastically.

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The Vice President then went on to voice his concern with talk that we are bluffing. He recommends that the leaders reinforce the view that the United States has sufficient strength to deal with this situation. He recommends that such words as "prepared for any eventuality" be used.

The group then paused to pay tribute to Mr. Rayburn in his designation as the "most experienced" man in the House of Representatives.

The tack to be taken by Members as they speak to the press was then discussed. Various approaches were offered and the subject reverted to the value of this meeting to all present. Mr. Halleck pointed out that he had learned much that is highly useful to him. Mr. Rayburn expressed the same view, and pointed out that some of his constituents had complained that he was not being kept sufficiently informed. To this the President quickly answered. He accepted the possibility that he may sometimes incorrectly assume that everybody has been informed. He assured all present that if any of them ever develop the feeling that they are being left out, they should call him immediately and they would then be invited to come over and discuss the issues at stake. (Mr. Hagerty entered at this point.)

Senator Johnson tended to stress the idea that planning and forces are adequate to meet any eventuality, whereas Mr. Rayburn tended to stress the idea that we will spare no efforts to solve this matter by negotiation. In this connection, the Vice President pointed out that the Communists will attempt to becloud the issue of the Berlin accesses by emphasizing details. This they will attempt to do by making each additional restriction seem so minute as not to be worth our taking a stand. In all our

statements we should point out that what is truly at stake is not detailed procedures, but the freedom of 2.2 million free people. To this the President added that our capability of sustaining the free world is also at stake.

At this point Mr. Dulles inserted an opinion regarding the importance of Berlin in the overall world picture. In his view Western Europe is strengthening. The Soviets would not feel safe in turning elsewhere in the world to points such as Iran while we are in Berlin and Europe remains strong. This brought a question from Senator Johnson as to whether the allies are as strong in their determination as are we. The President answered that they are not, but stated that their progress is heartening. He pointed up the British Labor Party as representing a particularly weak element. Some of the recent proposals of Hugh Gaitskell could be comparable to those of Chamberlain at Munich. The President added, as assurance to Senator Johnson, that matters of international consequence of this type have not been discussed in GOP leaders meetings. Matters of international implication have been reserved to bipartisan meetings.

This brought on a question from the Vice President regarding informing other Members of Congress. This question he addressed to Mr. Rayburn, requesting guidance on what procedures should be followed. Senator Johnson expressed satisfaction with the meetings being held with Secretary Herter, and stated that such is very helpful. He further expressed satisfaction at the President's statement that we are capable of handling any contingency. He feels that it is most important that the Joint Chiefs of Staff back up this point of view when they testify. There are some people in the Pentagon who feed information through the back door to the legislators. Mr. Rayburn agreed. The President remarked that the munitions makers have this habit as well as people from the Pentagon.

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Senator Dirksen then reviewed his recommendations as to what points should be emphasized publicly. They are:

1. That we have explored the situation and we will maintain our rights and responsibilities to the people of Berlin.

2. That we have agreed to stand firm but are willing to negotiate.

3. The stand we should take on our actual military capabilities. The President thinks that this third point should be answered by stating that our capabilities are adequate for our particular position in the world.

We have maintained this position for some ten or eleven years and it is going well. Of course we cannot fight a 60- or 90-division war. We should emphasize that we are looking for peaceful solutions with honor and stress that we will not walk away from honor. He feels that the Members of Congress should not answer questions. This Mr. Rayburn said is impossible. The newspaper reporters will follow the Members of Congress and dog their steps. It was therefore agreed that: (1) a picture would be taken, (2) no statement would be made by the President, and (3) the Members of Congress would meet the press in Mr. Hagerty's office immediately following the meeting and each would make a statement.

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