

75. Transcript of Meeting¹

Washington, July 29, 1968, 7-8 p.m.

Cabinet Room Meeting of Monday, July 29, 1968, 7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. With the President, Secretary Rusk and Secretary Clifford and Tom Johnson

Clifford: You've got to look at it, too, of the possibility of there being some serious danger inherent in it. One quick reaction I would have would be that if by chance Czechoslovakia is still a pending problem, I don't believe I'd go near Kosygin during the time that Czechoslovakia is still hot. I don't. You could get caught up in that and I'm just afraid it would be difficult for you to extricate yourself. You could have a talk with Kosygin and the day you talked with him Soviet troops could move on Czechoslovakia or the day after you left, troops could move in Czechoslovakia. It would be, they'd be tied together in some way, whether that would suit Kosygin's attitude or not, I don't know. I think that we have to be careful about the reasons why the President was seeing Kosygin at this time. Is it because the President has a new plan that he is taking to Kosygin vis-à-vis Vietnam? Is there something new he wants to take to him? Is it because the President's concerned about the Middle East—some development there? Is he concerned about NATO? You know there's so much cooking right now. As far as starting off with Kosygin on a discussion of strategic limitation and ultimate reduction, I don't know. Right at this time, Mr. President, I wonder whether that's advisable. These are going to be long, difficult, exceedingly complex negotiations. Whether the President and Kosygin can do anything much at the very beginning of it, I don't know. I think that the general approach would be, well—I just wonder what they can do about it. And I think we have to be careful. The time that the President selects to see Kosygin. I would hope that there'd be a time when we didn't have a situation quite as inflammable as it is. I'm thinking of the Czechoslovakian problem. I think that's a terribly difficult problem. I know we can't get in it. I feel some concern that we can. Czechoslovakia is supposedly a free country and they can be under the heel just like Hungary was. I don't know for instance whether somebody might decide to bring this up in the Security Council in the UN—Czechoslovakia. Maybe some member of the Security Council could decide to bring it up. That would tend to exaggerate it. So, a second point I'm making is to sound a note of basic caution about going to see

¹ Source: Johnson Library, Recordings and Transcripts, Transcripts of Cabinet Room Meetings. No classification marking. The text printed here contains revisions that were made after the editor listened to the recording of the conversation. The recording is *ibid.*, Recording of a Meeting Between President Johnson, Secretary Rusk, and Secretary Clifford, July 29, 1968, 7-8 p.m. [Tape FC001, Side A].

Kosygin right at this time. I think it must be watched with great care. The third point I have: After Dean left Saturday afternoon, I just noted down thoughts that I had. Just in my own handwriting—I've not given them even to the girls. The third point I'd like to make has to do with the Convention. [Here follow 4 pages of discussion of the Democratic National Convention and Vietnam.]

[Clifford:] This is very prominent in my mind, as I look ahead. At this time, Mr. President, with the condition existing in Czechoslovakia, with existing in Vietnam we're waiting for the other shoe to drop over there, I can see more danger in a visit with Kosygin at this time, then I can see benefit. Now I think there will come a time when the President can see Kosygin. Right now it just seems to me that it's tempting fate too severely.

President: What time do you see that it could come?

Clifford: Well, I think there'll be a resolution of the problem in Czechoslovakia. These things don't go on indefinitely. The President is still President. Let's see, August, September, October, November, December, you're still President for six months, until the 20th of January. That's almost six months off. I don't know, it could be in a week.

President: You think it would probably be all right to have meetings in November and December?

Clifford: It wouldn't bother me a bit. It wouldn't bother me a bit. You're going right on being President and you're not bothering with politics. The fact that there's some new man or something, that wouldn't bother me a particle. I think in maybe a week, it could be a week. Czechoslovakia would be resolved one way or another. It could be two weeks, or three weeks, but I think it's going to be resolved that this thing has gotten so acute now, so inflammatory, that I think they're going to lance this abscess one way or another and I think it will be out of the way. Now, I think that we will all learn during the month of August whether there's going to be another series of attacks from the enemy in Vietnam. Maybe it will come and maybe it won't, and I think we get that out of the way so that that doesn't get too involved in it. It wouldn't disturb me at all if the talks on strategic weapons control were to start at some other level. It's going to go on for some time. I don't know that it has too much significance in having it started by Kosygin and the President and I'm not even sure that it's particularly valuable to just confine it to that at the starting. I think that the President when he goes to see, or arranges to see Kosygin under the proper circumstances in which Kosygin's comfortable, I would hope the two of you would be able to sit down and cover the entire mosaic of our problems. An announcement could be made ahead of time to that effect and something after it that could come out. Right now I believe that if I were Kosygin with this real nose bleed on my hands with

Czechoslovakia I think almost the last person I would want to see right now would be President Johnson.

President: Yes, I think there is something to that. I'm not necessarily trying to help him though.

Rusk: Well, Mr. President, I'd like to comment very briefly.

President: I agree. Let me comment on what Clark is saying. I think there is no reason why we have to act until the Czechoslovakia situation is cleared. As I indicated, that's number one. I don't know how. If it's two weeks, that's another matter. I would expect maybe it wouldn't be that long. I don't know. I can't tell. But I don't think it's essential. We don't say that I don't think that the President and Kosygin sit down together. We have though for four years urged this step upon them and we finally got them to agree now that there will be a meeting within a month or a month and a half. I would like to forthrightly respond to that and accept it and give him my views of what ought to happen. And I think there may be some merit in the four days of the Convention there waiting until it's over with, I don't care. And it may be that he won't want to start at this level. I'd rather think he wouldn't. Although I would like to because I would think that that would be the way. But if not, if you want to modify that part of it if that is a—, then you might say, or at the Foreign Minister level. One or the other of us ought to start it off. And I'm willing to rewrite the letter and use his phrase—not ours.

Rusk: Month, month and a half.

President: Yes, and I'm willing to and also add that if this doesn't suit you, that we'd be glad for the Foreign Ministers to start it off. We do think it is of sufficient importance. The very first proposal that we made to the Soviet Union we insisted on time and date and place and subject. There is so much that is pending that needs the attention of both countries. What I'm terribly afraid of is—I'm afraid that by our sitting with our hands in our pockets, just merrily, merrily going along, just reacting to all of their initiatives and their propaganda and their party line that we just finally catch ourselves just signing on which we have been doing most of the time and I think we're likely to be doing it again. I think we'll be having a Council meeting here in a week or so and everybody will pretty well agree in general that we ought to cut out something else we're doing in deference to these folks. That is what I am fearful of.

Rusk: Well, I agree with Clark. I think you do, too, about the possible connection between this Czechoslovakia business. I think, myself, that the chances are—

President: We won't have waited today if it hadn't agreed on that.

Rusk: That's right. That's right. I think we're likely to see here some sort of answer on the Czech business before then.

President: I think so.

Rusk: We did put in this draft: "If the general situation permits," a phrase that would cover the Czech business in our minds that if things really start in Czechoslovakia we'd just ourselves pull back even if Kosygin accepted this.

President: That is what that was intended to do. But I don't think that we even need to dispatch the letter until we see a little clearer than we do now.

Rusk: That's right.

President: I said that last weekend and I didn't ask for this meeting today.

Rusk: I asked for it. Now on this other—what would such a meeting be about. I think that we can make it pretty clear that it is about offensive and defensive missiles. That is a question which everybody knows the President's worked on very hard and worked on it personally. He tried very hard at Glassboro to get these talks started. He's also worked hard on the non-proliferation treaty which has in it an obligation on the part of the nuclear powers to get going and negotiate in good faith the elimination of the arms race. So from that point of view it seems to me that it would militate in favor of the President's launching these discussions. There's another factor and that is that, Clark, you may not like this one particularly. I think if the President initiated the discussions, this would be a sign to what General Eisenhower called the military industrial complex that Goddamn it, getting an agreement to limit offensive and defensive missiles is the national policy of the United States. We want people to think about how you do it and not think about how you'll avoid doing it. Looking ahead you look at these tens of billions that are going down this rat hole if we don't find an answer to this, you see. So there's an internal commitment involving the President's study. Now the danger is—the court of last resort getting it into session and Kosygin could turn up there with demands on Berlin or something—after all Khrushchev did drop the Berlin crisis in President Kennedy's lap when they met in Vienna. This did not happen in Glassboro partly because Kosygin was over here in the United Nations on a Middle East where, frying some fishes on his own at that time. And therefore, this was not racked up. There's little danger. I think it is not as great now as it might have been earlier if nothing had happened. So this is why—subject to Czechoslovakia—I myself come down on the balanced judgment that there would be real merit in the two meetings if it could be done under the appropriate circumstances.

Clifford: I find no disagreement with that, Dean, I think that President Kennedy's meeting in Vienna with Khrushchev was a calamity.

Rusk: It was.

Clifford: Boy, it was a real zero from President Kennedy's standpoint.

Clifford: Now I think conditions have changed. I think that the Soviets have shown an inclination to find some basis of cooperation with us. That's a very interesting sentence in the last letter of Kosygin that we will both find as we get into this that a savings can be effected to a very substantial degree.

Rusk: I would be for the President having a chance to talk with him very informally without pretending that the main subject is about Vietnam and about the Middle East.

Clifford: I would have no difficulty with that.

President: You know originally I thought we ought to say there and I took it out.

Rusk: Yes.

President: This is not the only subject.

Rusk: This refers now to—it will also give us a chance to discuss quietly and informally some of the problems or tensions that you referred to.

President: That just polished up, the very [inaudible] the three matters that we wanted to talk about and that also left us a getting out place even on Czechoslovakia or any other developments after it was set. And I don't think I would want to specify that I would not want to attend a meeting. Now, I don't see that this would do the damage to the Democratic Party that Clark does. I have a different viewpoint. I think it's the best thing that we could do for the Democratic Party, whoever is nominated at that time. I don't think we necessarily need to go at that specific moment, but I think most of them will be pretty glad that we're having a meeting. I would just leave it more in his hands on the month to month and a half basis.

Rusk: All right.

President: But I think we could do that after we see the situation.

Rusk: I would agree, too, that it would be of great benefit to the Democratic Party if it didn't take place on those very days that they were having their Convention.

President: Well their Convention is going to have all the television every hour. This meeting is not going to be taking much of it. And I would doubt that he would set the meeting. I would just leave it and say anytime within the month or month and half he mentioned, it would be agreeable with us. I'd be pretty agreeable to hear suggestions.

Rusk: All right.

Clifford: Does he have in mind that the President would like to start it off, personally with Kosygin because he said nothing about that in his last reply. And the President I think said nothing about that in this one. Does he?

President: Yes.

Rusk: Yes.

Clifford: Oh, I see. I didn't notice it.

President: He understood at Glassboro that we were pressing on this very hard, a little history would help us. Khrushchev wrote to me in December '63 a rather broad long letter and we responded January the 16th, '64 in which we discussed the perils of armament in the world and the two powers poised at each other and how much it would cost us and how much good could be done if we could only approach this problem of disarmament and particularly if we could have some agreement that would bring about the non-proliferation treaty. That was number one on the list and we listed a series of reductions in our armed strength and in our future investments in armaments. And we stuck it right up to him and said that we very much want to do this and then we followed that with a series of specific moves where we reduced our atomic reactors and asked him to do likewise and he held off to the last moment until ours was announced. I was actually at the microphone speaking when he notified us that he would issue an announcement at the same time. We suggested 2 o'clock on Tuesday. I started speaking at one forty-five and we hadn't heard from him and about one fifty-five they brought us a note that he was going to announce it at 2 o'clock, right at the last minute. He went out and our people, we pursued this up until we went in there with our bombing in '65 and things kind of tapered off. At Glassboro it heated up again, very strong. And we took the initiative and just almost wrestled him to have a meeting and said anytime, anywhere we'll send our men to Moscow or we'll meet in Geneva or we'll come back to Glassboro. We'll do anything, but this we must do. We thought we got a tentative, implied acceptance then and we thought it would be rather soon. He got back and subsequently came along and implied it again. What did he say in that language we got back? We announced it the day Bobby Kennedy made a speech and we didn't call him up to find out he was going to speak the same day or not so they charged us with bad motives. You remember that don't you.

Rusk: Yes, I remember it.

President: There was some indication that they would meet with us again but they never would set a date. So we have kept shoving 'em all during that period. Now we've come along and Kosygin has said yes a month or six weeks. Now if we don't want to talk or if we are hesitant to talk or if we want to just let it go through the regular channels of Bill Foster at Geneva. That's one thing. That's now my view. It hasn't been for four years and I think this is most important we could ever do.

Rusk: Mr. President, I tried to get Kosygin to accept McNamara in Moscow the following Wednesday after Glassboro. Well, they gave us that story—can't come then. Well then name a date. Pressed them very hard on this.

President: I think we'd better show them that it's just a few speeches and pressure are not going to do it. They are beginning to think we're jelly and we'll do it and I don't understand why he sent this wire after we told him how we felt about it.

Rusk: The trouble is that negotiators habitually—

President: It's not negotiations, hell—

Rusk: Get action to take the next step. That's one of the problems about American negotiators they're always in a little bit more of a hurry than the other side. I think they also—Averell is making some judgments about politics here at home.

President: A good deal and it looks like a good deal of it in Vietnam—the battle strategy too.

Rusk: Mr. President, on the longer range negotiations for this thing I'd just like to put it in the back of your mind. I think Clark and I would agree that the two chief people from our respective departments might be Brown. He's very knowledgeable in this field.

Clifford: Harold.

Rusk: Harold Brown and Butch Fisher he's with ACDA. I think we also feel there ought to be a principal negotiator on top of them. Maybe in the State Department. A man from the Defense Department would be the principal negotiator on disarmament I think it would be a mistake and the Pentagon would feel it even more strongly than I for ACDA to be the number one fellow on this particular subject. Now one possibility would be to bring Tommy Thompson out of Moscow for these talks in Geneva and let him be there for three or four weeks for the first round. And then they're bound to close off the talks for awhile and study each other's position in more detail. Tommy is not doing a great deal in Moscow these days and he would be a in a position to follow up. So he would be one possibility. Another possibility would be that is after the Foreign Ministers review would get through with it, another possibility would be Chet Bowen [*Chip Bohlen*]. I think in terms of negotiations and this kind of thing. Tommy Thompson would be, in some respect, a more competent negotiator because he's very familiar with all of these matters having worked with the Pentagon for years in that Deputy job over in my shop. I just wanted to mention that to you, because other names may occur to you to head up the delegations but we would suggest a head of the delegation plus Brown and Fisher and their respective staffs.

Clifford: We have to bring the Joint Chiefs along on this one, as you would know, they'd be very important and our record must be absolutely clear. They feel the responsibility, of course, as we all do, protecting the security of this country. They, I was telling Dean Saturday afternoon they paw the air when Bill Foster's name is mentioned. They think Bill is very soft and very fuzzy-headed. Now, Dean said, very frankly, well,

President: Now, it's been a year, during that time he's put off and put off during that year. During that time I've had to go up with my budget and I've had to put the ABM in the budget to stick it, to hold firm and not weaken with everybody wanting to shimmy a little bit. And then when he got up, a lot want to run away from it after it gets up there, as you've observed with Symington, and so forth, the fight that went on in the Senate. And now he's still holding back one Goddamn year and not doing anything and finally when the Senate vote gets out of the way and it looks like we are going ahead, and we hold out the hand of peace here but the hand of strength here so we're going to go on, we don't want to do this we'd like to save this 50 billion that the two of us are spending, but he's just got no sense at all. We'll go on. We are not going to let you destroy us. We're not going to let you be defended and us not defended. Then he comes up and says I'll see you in a month or month and a half. That's where we are. Then we say well we can't do it because we've got a Convention. That doesn't appeal to me. I'd go right back to him and say that you suggest a month or a month and a half and to me that is agreeable and a month or a month and a half is agreeable and we would suggest it on this level and if you're not satisfied, if you don't want to do it on that level, well then I'll arrange for the Foreign Ministers to meet.

Rusk: All right.

President: And then I'd let him say if he picks August 25th I wouldn't be worried. I don't think he will, but I'm sure that we can so arrange the agenda that we could get our man nominated and the American people would have all the Democratic Convention that they want. I think they will have. I think it will be the thing that is uppermost. We talked a lot with these folks. You have met with Gromyko a good many times. I have met with Gromyko and with Kosygin and it hasn't turned the world upside down. We know, just like Averell and Vance meeting with them over there, what I'm really worried about is they're more in command of our forces than I am. That's what really troubles me. These damned cables coming in like that. Because I read this record and I see these pictures and I see Javits get up and I see Morgan get up and I see all of them get up and I see the *New York Times* editorial and it just fits in to this whole damn facet. If I hadn't been watching it for four or five years I wouldn't be worried about it but it's not accidental. And I don't want to get hung on the rack. I just don't want to get caught on it.

Rusk: All right.

President: I want to make it so firm and loud I don't want my people to serve that up to me and then have Goldberg come along here and saying well as you know I felt this way.

Rusk: They can well concentrate on trying to get another private meeting, get an answer from Hanoi.

anybody could be head of ACDA would be viewed in that light by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

President: Just one second. [The President left the room.]

Rusk: My guess is the Russians will bite at the Foreign Ministers level like a [inaudible].

Clifford: You mean the ACDA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff problem?

Rusk: No, I said if we go back to the Russians to say, Kosygin himself, if not the Foreign Minister, I think the Russians will bite at a Foreign Ministers meeting like a shot.

Clifford: [whispering]: I don't think Kosygin will see the President now with all his difficulties.

Rusk: Because I don't see much of a meeting between the two after November with the President-elect in the wings. I think it ought to be before November. I think so too, I think it should be before November. The problems the Russians have seem to be Peking with Kosygin and the President meeting and all.

Clifford: I think they're awfully sensitive about this too. And of course, they'll get a hell of a lot of blast right now. Apparently, the President wants to start, however. Does he? Does he want to start?

Rusk: Yeah.

Clifford: Then, what is this alternative? What would the Foreign Ministers meet about. Just meet together to plan an agenda for the two?

Rusk: Well, to deal with that, we would try to agree on some general principles. [The President re-entered the room.] And we would make a proposal that we're working on now. We'll have it up to the President shortly after April—August 7th we hope.

Clifford: Just to finish this other point, if the President were to designate Bill Foster to be the chief negotiator then I think that he would be waited upon by Wheeler and the rest of the Joint Chiefs and I think they say we can't go along with it and there's no use taking on that kind of fight at the beginning I think. I believe they'd feel better about Butch Fisher than they feel about Bill Foster. I think they feel that Butch is a little harder nosed than Bill is. At the same time if you were to suggest that Butch Fisher was to be the chief negotiator I think that they'd be over here within the hour saying let us tell you why this must not be. Wheeler felt so strongly about it he called and made an appointment with me. He came and talked to me about it. Told about all the experiences that they had had with ACDA and it's one of those situations in which men get locked into a state of mind after a certain number of years. Now whether there's justification for it or not, I think it's beside the question. If it's a state of mind, it's one that we don't have to take on.

[Here follow 6 pages of discussion on Congressional relations and defense-related issues.]