

Conversation: Meeting Tape 111.3

Date: 1963-09-17

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Dean Rusk

Start Time: 17:45

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: Dispatching the McNamara-Taylor Mission

SCENE SETTER: Having failed to generate a consensus appraisal of developments in Vietnam through the dispatch of mid-level officials from the State Department and Pentagon, President Kennedy decided to send the higher profile team of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff chair General Maxwell D. Taylor. Kennedy recognized that the mission would involve delicate diplomacy with both South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm and U.S. ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.

President Kennedy: So I don't worry about that. My guess would be not to bring back [Henry] Cabot [Lodge Jr.] yet, but I've talked with [McGeorge] Mac [Bundy] again and what I'd like to do is to have Secretary [Robert S. "Bob"] McNamara and General [Maxwell D. "Max"] Taylor, perhaps [U.] Alexis [Alex] Johnson and Walt [W.] Rostow, who went out there before, go out there again, see Lodge, and get his whole feeling about this thing. Also take a look at their judgment of how the war is going, and about whether the infection is spreading out of Saigon, and all the rest. That would seem to me to have two advantages. Domestically, we would have the advantage of having the military look at it and—a cold look at it—and an up-to-date look at it, and in the country, we'd be able to operate ourselves with a little better judgment.

Now, the fact is, we've really been sort of split for the last four weeks, between the Defense Department, which believes that there isn't clear evidence that the war is going to be lost on this basis with the Nhus, and that any action—and they're also—their feeling that we don't have a solid basis to replace [Ngô Đình] Diệm, and that, therefore, what we've been doing is rather futile, and these . . . [W.] Averell Harriman's view is that we can't win with the Nhus [Ngô Đình Nhu and Madame Nhu] and Diệm, and therefore we should do anything to bring a change. Well, now, actually, we did, for the first two weeks, it seemed to me, we did follow a policy of doing our best to encourage a coup. Now, we weren't successful. Whether we should or shouldn't have, I don't know. I think it was worth it, maybe. [*Rusk attempts to interject.*] We tried, but we didn't do it. We didn't do it. We weren't successful. I don't think Cabot has come up with any proposal to make it more successful.

End of excerpt 1.

President Kennedy: Really today, I think we do have the . . . I'm inclined more to think that you can't have as much disturbance as you have [*unclear*] without having it spread, and we've got such a tough war, anyway. So that I think there's some merit to Governor Harriman's. On the other hand, I don't think this would be said, but I just think that . . . we've got the—I think we've got a highly emotional situation in Saigon, and you've got a—and, of course, there doesn't seem to be any evidence of a military deterioration as yet, because of events in Saigon. But in any case, I think it would be advantageous to have somebody from the Department, and Bob and General Taylor, who—General Taylor's identified with the situation in the fall of '61—go out there. They see Lodge. They analyze all this with Lodge. Then they'll come back and make some proposals—perhaps some personnel out there. We may have to change some of our people, just because [*unclear*] . . . and then I think it would help us with the country. They can then go to the Congress and give a very much

more up-to-date report. And that would seem to me to be the best thing for us to do. And I think it would look well here and be valuable out there.

Dean Rusk: Well, I wonder, Mr. President, if we ought to get Cabot's comments on this—

President Kennedy: Yeah, but I would like you to really to get it—I'd really like to have them go. I mean, I want them to go. And I want General Taylor to go and [unclear] Alexis Johnson. I would send—I'd have Averell go—I think Averell's too high now that he's negotiated the Test Ban [Treaty]. He's too big a figure to be sent from the State Department. It looks like the more—I think the military review is really our primary cover. The State Department comes along. But their primary mission is to see where we're going militarily. I think if Averell goes, then it really looks like this is a . . . effort. So maybe Alexis Johnson represents the Department and can come back and cover the Department end. Now, I'd like to have—I think that's what we ought to do. And I think we ought to do it in the next seven days. I mean, I think you ought to plan to leave within a week. Then, behind that, let's send this out. But I don't think that planning to send them out interferes with this. So let's do it.

Rusk: What do you judge Lodge's reaction will be to that kind of a mission?

President Kennedy: Well, I'll just tell him that I want them to go out, because I think that we want to help him every way we can, and we don't think we're helping him fast enough. I mean, I don't care whether he blasts me. It doesn't—not going to make any difference whether he sold—told to him. And I'll write him a letter to say why I'm sending them. Just say I don't think [unclear] it, but I don't feel that perhaps Washington's giving you the kind of support you need. We're sending out Bob McNamara and General Taylor to make sure we give it. [Pause.] If he doesn't like it, that's all right, 'cause if this thing fails, everybody's going to be wrong. So I think let's just see what we can do to get it to succeed.

End of excerpt 2.

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