

“We’ll Get a New Date”

Date: October 2, 1963

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Participant: Maxwell D. Taylor

Participant: George W. Ball

Start Time: 11:00 and 18:05

Place: Cabinet Room

Over the course of two meetings on 2 October 1963, President Kennedy and his national security team discussed the merits of a plan to withdraw 1,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam by the end of 1963 and virtually all of them by the end of 1965. Segments of those meetings reveal Kennedy’s concerns about the plan and the language the administration was considering to explain it to the public.

President Kennedy: You think this thousand reduction can really . . .

Robert S. “Bob” McNamara: Yes, sir. We—

President Kennedy: Is that going to be an assumption that it’s going well, but if it doesn’t go well [*unclear*]?

McNamara: No. No, sir. One of the major premises—two major premises we have: first, we believe we can complete the military campaign in the first three corps in ’64, and the fourth corps in ’65. But secondly, if it extends beyond that period, we believe we can train the Vietnamese to take over the essential functions and withdraw the bulk of our forces. And this thousand is in conjunction with that, and I have a list of the units here that are represented by that thousand.

President Kennedy: Bob, have they—

McGeorge “Mac” Bundy: What’s the point of doing it?

McNamara: We need a way to get out of Vietnam. This is a way of doing it. And to leave forces there when they’re not needed, I think, is wasteful, and it complicates both their problems and ours.

End of excerpt 1.

Bundy: The question that occurs to me is whether we want to get publicly pinned to a date in 6(a)?

McNamara: Well, that goes back to paragraph 2, Mac.

Bundy: Yes, it does. It’s . . .

Maxwell D. “Max” Taylor: Well, it’s something we debated [*McNamara acknowledges*] very strongly. I think it is a major question. I will just say this: that we talked to 174 officers, [South] Vietnamese and U.S., and in the case of the U.S., I always asked the question, “When can you finish this job, in the sense that you will reduce this insurgency to little more than sporadic incidents?” Inevitably, except for the Delta, they would say “’64 would be ample time.” I realize that’s not necessarily . . . I assume there’s no major factors—new factors entering [*unclear*]. I realize that’s . . .

President Kennedy: Well, let’s say it anyway. And then ’65, if it doesn’t work out, we’ll get a new date.

Taylor: Sixty-five for the Delta.

McNamara: I think, Mr. President, we must have a means of disengaging from this area. We must show our country that means. The only slightest difference between Max and me in this entire report is in this one estimate of whether or not we can win the war in ’64 in the upper three territories and ’65 in the fourth. I’m not entirely sure of that. But I am sure that if we don’t meet those dates, in the sense of ending the major military campaigns, we nonetheless can withdraw the bulk of our U.S. forces, according to the schedule we’ve laid out—worked out—because we can train the Vietnamese to do the job.

End of excerpt 2.

Bundy: Mr. President, there is some difference of opinion in paragraph 3. The last sentence—“by the end of this year.” Again, I think the State Department’s feeling is that there may be—that this signal may be ambiguously read, and we’re not quite sure what people will think it means. Bob has a strong reason for stating it. I think you want to hear the arguments—

George W. Ball: Well, let me say that I think we don’t—will not make any serious objections to this. We’ve—I’ve told Bob just now I can see certain advantages, and [*unclear*] and I’ve consulted with [W.] Averell [Harriman] who feels, too, [*unclear*].

Bundy: That’s fine—

President Kennedy: My only reservation about it is that it commits us to a kind of a ch—if the war doesn’t continue to go well, it’ll look like we were overly optimistic, and I don’t—I’m not sure we—I’d like to know what benefit we get out at this time announcing a thousand.

McNamara: Mr. President, we have the thousand split by units, so that if the war doesn’t go well, we can say these thousand would not have influenced the course of action.

President Kennedy: And the advantage of—

McNamara: And the advantage of taking them out is that we can say to the Congress and people that we *do* have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel to the guerrilla actions in South Vietnam—actions that the people of South Vietnam should gradually develop a capability to suppress themselves. And I think this will be of great value to us in meeting the very strong views of [J. William “Bill”] Fulbright [D–Arkansas] and others that we’re bogged down in Asia and will be there for decades.

End of excerpt 3.

“John F. Kennedy and National Security Advisers on 2 October 1963,” JFK Meeting Tapes 114/A49.2 and 114/A49.4, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Kennedy and Vietnam]*, ed. Ken Hughes and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URLs:
<http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4022293>
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