



“More War” or “More Appeasement”

Date: 1964-02-25

Conversation: WH6402-21-2191

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Start Time: 11:45

Duration: 04:09

Place: Oval Office

SCENE SETTER: In advance of a congressional reception at the White House that evening, President Johnson requested remarks on Vietnam from Secretary of Defense Robert S. “Bob” McNamara. Johnson then offered his own description of U.S. policy and his options going forward, as well as a critique of his predecessor’s approach to reducing U.S. personnel in Vietnam.

President Johnson: But find two minutes in there for Vietnam.

Robert S. “Bob” McNamara: [*Pause.*] Yeah, the problem is what to say about it.

President Johnson: All right, I’ll tell you what I would say about it. [*Unclear comment by McNamara.*] I would say that we have a commitment to [South] Vietnamese freedom. Now, we could pull out of there, the dominoes would fall, and that part of the world would go to the Communists. We could send our Marines in there, and we could get tied down in a third world war or another Korean action.

The other alternative is to advise them and hope that they stand up and fight. Now, we think that by training them and advising them, that by training them in the period of three years, we can have them trained. And we removed some there who were guarding establishments that didn’t need to be guarded anymore, were absolutely no need. We’d put in 10,000 more if they could be useful and could—if we needed them for the training. But this thousand we didn’t need, because they were guarding whatever they’re guarding [*McNamara acknowledges*], and that’s why we pulled them out.

Now, we estimate that with the 15,000 we’ve got left, that all the rest of this year and a large part of next year, that we can just train anybody in that period of time. And for that reason, we’ve said that we can reduce that number after they’re trained. [*McNamara acknowledges.*] Now, this nation has made no commitment to go in there to fight as yet. We’re in there to train them and advise them. And that’s what we’re doing.

Nobody really understands what it is out there. And they don’t know, and they’re getting to where they’re confused, and they’re asking questions, and they’re saying, “Why don’t we do more?” Well, I think this: you can have more war, or you can have more appeasement. But we don’t want more of either. And it’s their war, and it’s their men, and we’re willing to train them.

And we have found that over a period of time that we kept the Communists from spreading. We did it in Greece and Turkey [in 1947] with the Truman Doctrine, [*clears throat*] by sending them men. We did it in Western Europe by NATO [in 1949]. We've done it there by advice. We haven't done it by going out and dropping bombs, and we haven't done it by going out and sending men to fight, and we're not—we have no such commitment there.

But we do have a commitment to help the [South] Vietnamese defend themselves. And we're there for training, and that's what we're doing. And they say the war is not going good. Well, there are days when we win; there are days when we lose. But our purpose is train these people, and our training's going good, and we're trying to train them.

McNamara: All right, sir. I'll get—

President Johnson: I don't know if I've said anything there that I shouldn't say. I wouldn't do it, but—

McNamara: [*speaking under President Johnson*] No, no. No, I think that—

President Johnson: —I . . . that's the way you said it to me.

McNamara: Yeah.

President Johnson: And it appealed to me when I say why in the hell—I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President [John F. “Jack” Kennedy] thought otherwise, and I just sat silent. Now, you've made them, and when you—and I asked you for your explanation, you give me a good explanation: there's not a damn bit of use of having a thousand people sitting around guarding something that they don't need to guard.

McNamara: No question about that, Mr. President. The problem is really beyond [*unclear*]

President Johnson: All right, then the question—the next question [that] comes is: How in the hell does McNamara think, when he's losing the war, that he can pull men out of it? Well, he—McNamara's not fighting a war. He's training them [*unclear comment by McNamara*] to fight a war, and when he gets them through high school, they will have graduated from high school and have 12 grades behind them next year. And he hasn't taken on any agreement to keep them the rest of their life. He's just . . . he's made a commitment to train them to fight. And if he trains them to fight and they won't fight, he can't do anything about it. Then he's got to choose whether he wants to fight or let them have it.

McNamara: This is the problem exactly. And what I fear is that we're right at that point.

End of excerpt.

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