

December 13, 1962

McGeorge Bundy, 'Last Conversation with the President before NATO Meeting of December 1962'

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Summary:

Kennedy, McNamara and Rusk moved ahead with the Jupiters matter by making plans to bring it up with Italian and Turkish defense ministers at the NATO meeting in Paris in December 1962. The goal would be to persuade them of the obsolescence of the Jupiters, the dangers that they posed during the Cuban crisis and in future crises, and the need for "better arrangements," such as "a rearrangement of Polaris deployments."

President Kennedy continued to monitor the Jupiter missiles problem. During a meeting with Rusk a few weeks later, McNamara explained that President Kennedy, who he had seen in Palm Beach on December 27, had asked him what steps were being taken "to remove the Jupiters." Consistent with that, McNamara favored the "earliest possible date" and asked whether a "deadline" could be set for April 1 to begin the removals.

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DECEMBER 17, 1962

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Last conversation with the President before NATO meeting of December 1962

Time: Monday, December 10, 11:00 a.m.

Participants: The President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and McGeorge Bundy

The two Secretaries brought to the President three questions which required last-minute review: Skybolt, the Avenger, and the multilateral interest.

On Skybolt, Secretary McNamara explained that he would go first to London for talks with Thornycroft. He intended to present the strongest possible case for the technical decision which was anticipated, and he proposed to offer the United Kingdom three alternative means of meeting its requirements. The British could meet the remaining development cost of Skybolt themselves and buy what they wanted for their own use; an adaptation of Hound Dog might be developed and supplied; or there might be UK participation in a multilateral system of some sort.

Mr. McNamara did not believe that the British would be pleased by any one of these three alternatives, at least at first. He indicated his substantial agreement with a suspicion I had expressed earlier, to the effect that the British might not have bought Skybolt, in the end, anyway. What he thought we might consider, at some stage in the negotiations, was a proposal to give the British access to a more up-to-date weapons system on the condition that the venture become multilateral if and when a multilateral force should be developed. Such a course might conceivably be taken, for example, with Polaris.

The Secretary of State, while not disagreeing with Mr. McNamara's presentation, indicated his own deep concern with the difficulties that would be posed for the British by a cancellation of Skybolt. He appeared to incline toward a major effort to assist them in meeting the remaining development costs, so that the cost of Skybolt to them would not be prohibitive, and they would at least have a fair shot at obtaining what they had been counting on.

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proposal, and said that he was not eager to join in a large share of further development costs for a weapon to be supplied only to the British.

On the Azores, the Secretary of State reported his strong conviction that it was important now to emphasize to the Portuguese that the United States could not allow itself to become a satellite of Portugal because of any base, even the Azores. The Secretary intended to say to the Portuguese that if the current Portuguese attitude was maintained, the United States would have to begin to comment more strongly on Portuguese behavior in various ways. The Secretary wanted that this course of action might possibly lead to an unannounced Portuguese decision to end the Azores agreement entirely. The Secretary of Defense and Mr. Bundy indicated their belief that this result was quite improbable, and the Secretary of Defense said that while it would be most inconvenient for a period of time, the Armed Forces could in fact survive such a blow, though the Joint Chiefs would probably not agree. The President approved the Secretary's planned position.

On the problem of the multilateral nuclear deterrent, it was agreed that Secretary McNamara would begin discussions in directing the attention of Mediterranean NATO members away from the existing obsolescent missile systems and toward better arrangements. The Secretary of Defense planned to begin with the Italian Minister of Defense, Andreotti, and to continue with the Turkish Defense Minister. As the discussion developed, it was agreed that in the light of the uncertainties surrounding the problem of multilateral and seabase deterrents, it might be well to begin the conversations simply with an effort to clear up the problem of the Jupiters itself, since any arrangement that would remove them would clearly be a step forward for the Alliance as a whole. The Secretary planned to point out to the Italians and the Turks that the Cuban experience had brought it home to us how dangerous these soft, vulnerable, first-strike weapons are. They are expensive as well as dangerous, and all the countries concerned could better apply the resources which they require to other military or civil undertakings. The Secretary of Defense planned to offer to the Italians, in this connection, an opportunity to participate in the manufacture of the M48 armored vehicle, and he proposed to discuss with the Turks the possibility of certain further deployments of fighter aircraft. It was agreed that he would also be ready to consider the problem of a strengthened Mediterranean deterrent -- perhaps initially in terms of a rearrangement of Polish deployments.

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In the course of this discussion there was also conversation about the planned speeches of the two Secretaries at Paris. Mr. Rank and Mr. McNamara indicated that comments and suggestions from the President could well be sent later in the week, and so there was no detailed discussion of the draft texts. The President did raise the question whether the planned argumentation for conventional forces was really well based, except in the context of Berlin. He wondered whether, absent the problem of Berlin, there would really be a need for large-scale conventional forces along the main lines dividing Europe. He suggested that after all, any invasion across this line would in fact lead promptly to nuclear warfare, and that for that reason the nuclear deterrent would be effective. Mr. McNamara answered that he himself would argue that the additional conventional forces would be needed even without Berlin. He thought the Soviets could find many other opportunities in Europe, over a period of years, which would not seem worth a thermonuclear war to the West and against which the only safe deterrent would be adequate conventional strength. The President did not seem persuaded, but he did not press his point.

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