

Meeting Began: 6:04 p.m.  
Meeting Ended: 7:55 p.m.

NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING  
WITH  
SENATOR DIRKSEN  
AND  
CONGRESSMAN FORD

January 30, 1968

36c  
SANITIZED  
E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.6  
NLJ 92-143 appeal  
By cbm, NARA Date 6-5-01

The President: A man's judgment is no better than his information. I think the American people should have a chance to see their elected representatives face to face. We need to get the Congress out of session before December so all of you will have an opportunity to go out and campaign.

I think we need better coordination. Some of the problem is a weakness in the Executive Branch. Some of it is a weakness in the Legislative Branch. I need your cooperation. First we need to agree on the time the Congress will take off this year, especially the holidays.

Congressman Ford: The Speaker has not announced it but I think he will make the announcement on holidays tomorrow.

The President: We have 18 authorizations, including some which aren't so controversial. They include AEC, NASA, Foreign Aid, and 3 Defense authorizations. We need to get our committees meeting on these authorizations now. People are mad because they don't know what funds they will have for their education and poverty programs. We need to get working on these. I will have the Cabinet officers get the messages to you no later than the end of February.

Senator Dirksen: Don't let the lack of authorizations affect the appropriations. We have had all too many interim resolutions. Congressman Ford will talk to Congressman Bow and Mahon tomorrow. Are your people ready to testify?

The President: They will be if you will give me the dates.

The President: We will go and see Wilbur Mills later this week on the tax bill.

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- 2 -

The President then read a memorandum on the need for a tax bill. This memorandum, from an unnamed authority, pointed out that there is a very bad situation in world trade. Britain is in trouble financially.

The President said we need to show the international financiers that we intend to live within our means. We need a tax bill and the gold cover legislation.

I am hopeful we can find the basis to defend the dollar.

General Goodpaster once served under General Eisenhower in the White House. Now he serves with General Wheeler. General Goodpaster contacted General Eisenhower last week. The General was anxious that his name not be used, stating that he was only thinking out loud. But I asked if I could quote him to the two of you on the four suggestions he made.

The General said we should consider everything. He said he sees no danger of a nuclear holocaust in this situation over the Pueblo. But he said he would explore the possibilities of a quarantine. He would also look at the possibility of attack on the lines of communications in North Korea. He said we should move air into South Korea to strengthen the units already there. He said we should bring the ground units up to strength.

President Eisenhower said we should press for diplomatic action in the United Nations, and intensify the bombing in North Korea.

I want to ask Secretary McNamara to review exactly what happened. We will ask Secretary Rusk to review the diplomatic situation. Dick Helms is here to answer any of the questions you may have.

General Eisenhower said there is nothing partisan when American lives are at stake. He said he wants to see the President win this war. I think all of us feel this way.

We did want you to have all the facts about this explosive situation.

General Wheeler: On January 8 the Pueblo sailed from Sasebo, Japan, to its position off North Korea. It had these instructions:

To remain 13 miles outside of the mainland

To maintain radio silence

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- 3 -

To stay 500 yards from any ship

To keep its guns stowed

To use arms only if survival was at stake.

At 6:15 on January 22 the Pueblo said two North Korean ships closed to 30 yards.

At 12:00 on January 23 the Pueblo was challenged by a North Korean vessel and it said, "Heave too or I will open fire."

The Pueblo responded: "I am in international waters."

At 12:10 the North Korean vessel had radioed it had an American ship on radar.

At 12:52 the North Korean vessel radioed back that it was 18 miles off shore. The Pueblo radioed that it was 17 miles off shore.

At 1:05 the North Korean radioed he intended to board the ship and silence her.

At 1:15 the North Korean vessel was reported by the Pueblo to be backing up with fenders rigged. It reported 2 MIGs overhead. He said he intended to depart the area.

At 1:28 the Pueblo reported "they planned to open fire on us."

At 1:45 the Pueblo reported we are being boarded. Request help.

At 2:10 the Pueblo reported we have been requested to follow them into Wonsan. Have three wounded and one man with his leg blown off. Have not used weapons. How about some help?

At 2:25 Pueblo reported "Have been directed to come to a stop. Destruction incompleated. Some publications will be compromised."

At 2:32 the Pueblo reported going off the air. Four men injured, one critically, destroying this gear.

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- 4 -

Secretary McNamara: There are a number of questions which I know are on your minds.

First, why are there such missions.

These missions play an important role in our intelligence collection. The mission of the ship was to draw emissions from North Korean communications. The importance of this was demonstrated during the Cuban missile crisis when one of these ships gave us information on which we could base a major decision on how we respond.

The Soviets have a series of these ships, presently 18. We have 5.

It is important for the Soviets to do this too. In the Mediterranean, the Soviets found the Egyptian claim of our bombing to be in error because of their ship.

Second, why was this vessel not escorted?

These ships are harassed all the time. Were we to escort them, it would be more provocative than without. It would add to our force requirements. Piracy on the high seas is not something we are prepared to handle. Neither are the Soviets.

Third, should we have reacted differently?

I believe all of the commanders acted with good judgment. The weather was poor. There was a superior enemy air force. Daylight was disappearing. It probably would have escalated the fight. We may have sank our own vessel. The Joint Chiefs of Staff felt that the commanders acted with prudence.

Fourth, why were there only four aircraft in South Korea?

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We have very rapid response forces in Japan and Okinawa. Four jets are kept in South Korea [REDACTED] primarily as a show of force. <sup>1.5a 1.5d</sup>

The President: Nobody has been able to say to me that the commander thought it was anything more than routine harassment.

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- 5 -

Congressman Ford: Would you write this scenario the same way if you could? Would you do it the same way with the benefit of hindsight?

The President: No, I always would change things. I would not have waited 52 minutes to file the first message. I have looked into the background of this commander. It was his first command.

Congressman Ford: Would you do it differently?

The President: I would notify my people earlier. I would not wait 52 minutes. But this is one time in a hundred. They are harassed all of the time. Before the commander knew he was in trouble it was too late.

We called up the reserves for use because of this incident in Korea, not because of Vietnam. We are sending 300 planes to South Korea. The reserves we called up here will fill the vacancies made by the sending of regular units to South Korea.

Congressman Ford: I would have gotten rid of all that equipment, even if it required sinking our own vessel.

The President: Probably the luckiest thing that happened to us was that we did not send people in there and have another Bay of Pigs. Darkness was approaching. Snow was falling.

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Congressman Ford: To be a Devil's Advocate, my general reaction was that we were prudent and did the right thing. But I would like to ask a few questions. First, why was there no more certain way of destroying the ship?

The President: For the same reason that a passer keeps the ball a second too long and gets tackled.

Secretary McNamara: We must also examine this man's conduct against a record of at least 1000 harassments. In one incident last year, the Pueblo's sister ship (the U.S.S. Banner) was encircled by eleven harassing ships.

The President: Last year there were 50 incidents along the DMZ. This year there have been 570 incidents. Does this mean we should put more men in South Korea and soup up our air power. We are moving the air in. You will remember when we had the Guam Conferences there was a Soviet communications ship sitting off the island.

Congressman Ford: Was this the best course of action for us to follow on the Pueblo incident.

The President: The Captain had his orders, he was in international waters, he had the right to be there. They harass ships all the time. If we had had the ship covered we would not have received the information.

Congressman Ford: I think you should take a good look at where we made mistakes on this.

The President: I think the mistake was made by the North Koreans. History may prove it wrong. I do not think the mistake was made by us.

Congressman Ford: I believe we were outside territorial waters. Should the ship have reacted more promptly? Their job is to carry out their mission.

The President: How would you have done it?

Congressman Ford: If I had known what was on that vessel I might have blown it out of the water myself.

The President: Read a memorandum from General Earle Wheeler stating that he did not believe air power would have saved the ship. In fact, General Wheeler said it would have hurt more than helped.

Congressman Ford: How could it have been more harmful than having the ship in the hands of the North Koreans.

All of you seem to have a good reason for not doing something. We need a thorough going over of this matter to see what were the facts. I would have thought of sinking the ship. It seems to me your attitude is one of excuse rather than how to prevent it from happening again.

The President: You cannot prevent a man from shooting you tonight as you go home or even prevent a man from killing the President. The North Koreans were the outlaws. You can do the same thing to any ship at anytime.

Congressman Ford: I do not like the attitude that this was a helpless ship.

The President: Here is the very best military mind our nation has produced. These men are current. This is the judgment of the Joint Chiefs. I would not have wanted to go through the Bay of Pigs again. Here is the best professional we have. He has given his judgment.

When you send out a spy he sometimes does not come back.

Congressman Ford: This was a planned operation. You people knew the kind of men and equipment we had. It appears we should have been better prepared, with a contingency plan. We ought to raise some very serious questions. I am not talking about Buzz Wheeler. He was over at the Pentagon. I am concerned about the field commanders. Those men should be called in from the field to give an accounting of themselves.

The President: If this ship had escorts, we could not have gotten the information we wanted.

Secretary Rusk: That is correct. If we protected these individual ships with aircraft and other naval units, we would not get the information. We would be driven out of this electronics war. I approve these missions. If one criterion was that we must protect every ship we may as well get out of the intelligence business.

Congressman Ford: Maybe there is a different means and a different method. All I am saying is Damn it, find out. I know any Monday morning quarterback can play the game better -- but he should be able to learn a few lessons. Why was it only a 12 knot ship?

Secretary McNamara: I agree with you, Jerry, that we should go back and look at this whole matter. We are doing that. We have used the most advanced means in the world to get intelligence. We went in the day after this incident and made a reconnaissance run. We could

have lost that aircraft. If we had we would have been asking some very different questions tonight. There always are high risks with intelligence.

Congressman Ford: All I am asking is that you check it. We must be able to do better next time.

Secretary McNamara: Sending the message 52 minutes earlier would not have made any difference. There is a real high risk in this type of work. For example I lost 112 agents in North Vietnam. We have lost many C-130's, C-123's and C-154's on these. Nothing came of any of it.

But we do have our very best people working on it. We are going to try to learn some lessons from it.

General Wheeler: There were three critical times. The first was at 1200 when the ship was first challenged. The second was at 1300 when three more boats and two MIG's showed up. We will review the guidelines about when a Captain is to move out of the area. The third time was at 1345 when the Pueblo radioed "we are being boarded." This is when he initiated the destruction of classified documents. We will review the class of the vessels, the speed and the orders which are given the commanding officers. I have talked to our best men. I gave them the mission to find out the facts. We asked what could aircraft do to help.

In my judgment, aircraft would have been of little use in aiding the Pueblo. We must review our procedures from stem to stern. We will look at the danger areas. There is a scare factor.

The President: The sister ship had seven incidents. Do we shoot each time there is an incident or a harassment? Do we begin blowing up intelligence information and equipment each time there is harassment.

Senator Dirksen: What information do we have about the Captain?

The President: We have reviewed Captain Boucher's background [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. It revealed there is no question about Bucher's loyalty. Bucher did not sign the statement on his own. The tape of his voice was spliced considerably. Bucher did have certain emotional traits which might have been exploited.

Congressman Ford: How many ships do we have like this?

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- 9 -

General Wheeler: Five.

Congressman Ford: Shouldn't we have the very best skippers?

General Wheeler: Yes. On the U.S.S. Liberty, the skipper has been recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to receive the Medal of Honor. He handled himself especially well aboard the same type of ship. He is an outstanding one.

Congressman Ford: From what you have told me Bucher seemed to be quite average. You had better have an outstanding man on these ships.

General Wheeler: We are looking at this in our overall view of this program.

The President: You can always see tomorrow how you could have done something better today.

The facts remain that we do want to avoid this from happening again. I think this whole matter is tied in with Vietnam. They want to keep Korea from sending in that other division of troops to Vietnam. But the person to blame is North Korea. What we want more than anything else is to get the boys back.

Secretary Rusk: Within minutes after the incident we drafted a message and sent it to the Soviets. We have kept in touch with them closely. They are more active than in the situation before. They have a stake in this. The United Nations also has taken up the matter. There is some chance for the machinery at Panmunjom to effect some change in the situation.

We have been in touch with many nations in the world including the 16 who had troops in Korea. Some of these countries have taken this up with the Soviets. The Soviets have been given urgent advice to get North Korea to give up the men and the ship. Diplomacy is the only way we will get these men back alive. If we use military force we will only get back corpses.

The President: Then reviewed three messages received from the Situation Room at 6:20, 7:05 and 7:25. They described the attack on the United States Embassy in Saigon. The messages reported that Viet Cong are in and around the U. S. Compound.

General Wheeler: Then outlined the various actions which had taken

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- 10 -

place throughout the day including Da Nang and Pleiku. In Saigon the Presidential Palace was hit, also the Embassy, a BOQ, the Second Field Corps headquarters, the 4th ARVN Corps headquarters, and the Philippine Embassy.

Viet Cong dead were wearing National Police and Military Police uniforms.

United States forces are putting a platoon on top of the U. S. Embassy to go down and clean it out.

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