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October 4, 1961

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Tuesday, October 3, 1961, 4:30 PM

Present: President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense
General Taylor, General Norstad, General Lemnitzer,
Admiral Anderson, General Smith - (Vice Chief of
Staff of Air Force), Lt. Gen. Munn - (Assistant
Commandant, Marine Corps), Mr. Allen Dulles,
Secretary Gilpatric, Mr. Kohler, Mr. Nitze,
General Eddleman, Mr. Bundy

The President asked Secretary McNamara to summarize the results of his discussions with General Norstad. Secretary McNamara reported that agreement, and some disagreement, had been clarified in four categories.

1. It was agreed that our capability for different kinds of war would be increased, but there was disagreement as to how conventional warfare could or should be sustained. General Norstad thought this would be a matter of days, while the Department of Defense were thinking in terms of about a month.

2. The response to a block-off of ground access had been discussed. There was agreement about response to interruption of air access, but not on response to a blockade of ground access. The Department of Defense was inclined to non-nuclear and diversified responses, while General Norstad was undecided.

3. The broad needs of a military build-up were agreed, and there was also agreement that there need be no immediate deployment of additional U. S. divisions to Europe. General Norstad had asked that two to three divisions be on call in the U. S., for delivery within ten to fourteen days, and that six to eight divisions be on call for delivery in thirty days. There was doubt in the Department of Defense that the second request could be met. On the other hand there was agreement on the trading of air squadrons so that those which could be rapidly deployed would be in the U. S., while squadrons with a slower reaction time would be transferred to Europe now.

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4. There was clear agreement to prepare a catalogue of plans for a response in various contingencies.

At this point the President asked for General Norstad's views. General Norstad began by stating that he was often astonished to find how little resemblance there was between his real views and those which he read about in newspapers or in memoranda. In general, he had always advocated a balanced NATO force. All NATO programs call for strong conventional forces. There was no misunderstanding of the need for such forces, and they should -- if possible -- be used first. But once major forces were engaged, the United States must be in a position to use whatever forces were necessary.

General Norstad believed that words often become rigid and misleading, and he felt this way about the words "graduation" and "escalation". He thought he himself had the responsibility for injecting "pause" and "threshold" into strategic discussions, and he wished he had not done so. "Graduation" and "escalation" suggest a serial progression in which we move easily and by prepared steps from one stage to another of a development within our own control. This seemed to him unrealistic; he believed that in normal war escalation is apt to be explosive.

General Norstad had himself initiated LIVE OAK planning, two and a half years ago. These plans now include a series of probes graduated up to the battalion level. He had planned the probes for use, but you could not decide which one to use today. The probes, of course, include conventional weapons only.

General Norstad noted the interest in expanded planning expressed to the North Atlantic Council by the Ambassadorial group. Two months ago, with his NATO hat on, he had asked General Speidel to plan for a raised level of action, to be used if other responses had failed and if the probes were unsuccessful or indecisive. These were selected offensive efforts, in three categories: 1) the purely conventional; 2) conventional with selected nuclear weapons; 3) a separate and selective use of nuclear weapons. General Speidel had presented six plans. General Norstad did not like them all, but they did show what could be done.

General Norstad emphasized that we do not yet know whether there will be a form of action available between the battalion probe and general war. This is not a matter which we can control. The Soviets have at least an equal voice in the matter. General Norstad himself suggested that action at the division level would in all probability mean general war. He had reviewed a division, and it included a lot of people and tanks and trucks.

In concluding his opening statement, General Norstad emphasized that the deterrent has no meaning except in the context of the readiness to use atomic weapons. Repeatedly the question is raised in Europe whether the United States is in fact ready for such use. The Germans and the Chancellor ask the question again and again. These doubts, in General Norstad's view, could be straightened out by a sentence or two in public. The one central point of concern is this: do we intend to use our nuclear power if necessary?

The President said that in his judgment statements were not the answer to this problem. We had indicated our position often enough. He had done so himself at the UN; the Attorney General had done so recently; and earlier statements by himself and others had repeatedly emphasized the will of the United States on this point. In his judgment, what was creating uncertainty was not statements or silence in the United States, but the facts of the developing balance of capabilities. It is the growing relative atomic strength of the Soviet Union, and the increasingly terrible character of any general war, which is affecting the expectations of our allies. The President asked for comment on what we could usefully say or do in addition to what we have done. The Secretary of State asked what the Europeans themselves thought of the prospect of nuclear war. General Norstad said that the United States could avoid the submission of documents which, by emphasizing strengthened conventional capabilities, appeared to cast doubt on the importance of nuclear warfare. Later in the meeting he indicated again that while conventional weapons should be strengthened, along with all NATO forces, the specific indication of absolute priority on this point was dangerous to the confidence of our allies. Mr. Nitze, in this later discussion pointed out that in fact it is conventional reinforcement which we do want from our allies at present, but the consensus appeared to be that we could work for specific improvements in the build-up without indicating a theoretical commitment to one kind of weapons, or one specific strategy as against another.

The President asked why General Norstad himself could not indicate the determination of the U. S. to use nuclear weapons if necessary, and General Norstad said that he could find an opportunity to make such a statement, informally and on his own responsibility. He would, however, like to have such a statement cleared and approved by the Secretaries of State and Defense.

Discussion then turned to the circumstances in which nuclear weapons would or would not be used. The President pointed out that a general war was a form of "pulling the house down". We clearly would not do it unless we had no other choice. General Norstad said with emphasis that he would not use nuclear weapons if there were any other alternative. As to when such weapons could be used, he noted that when you have started a serious ground action, you cannot afford to get thrown back.

The President asked whether General Norstad felt that tactical nuclear weapons might be used in a limited area. General Norstad believed that this was possible, depending on the situation. He himself doubted whether the situation would develop in this way, but in some circumstances it might give one more chance of action before proceeding to general war. It was not impossible that the use of a limited number of small-yield weapons, precisely delivered on specific targets, would be a sensible course, and though it was unlikely, we should be prepared.

The President then asked whether we ought not to have a clear decision ahead of time on our proposed responses. General Norstad said that if he had to respond today he would choose Probe C, from his LIVE OAK plans. This is a probe of engineers and cars. A month from now he might want a battalion probe instead. The President asked what would happen if Probe C was stopped, and General Norstad replied that at that point he would force a fight with the battalion. If the battalion was beaten, there would have to be a prompt and larger reaction. Although he did not say so flatly, it was clear in the context of the discussion that General Norstad believed it would probably be necessary at this point to move rapidly toward nuclear warfare.

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The President then asked Mr. Nitze what other governments' responses are, and Mr. Nitze reported that all LIVE OAK plans require government decision at the moment of action. There is no agreement in advance to approve any one of them. The President then asked how we could get our allies into agreement on political and military planning. General Norstad reported de Gaulle's belief that there must be consultation on every decision. Couve de Murville had recently called him in to say that the French were "tough as hell" on the Berlin question, even while reporting their unwillingness to give advanced approval for procedures for use in the event of interruption of air access. The British have done well on air access but have reserved the right to respond to anti-aircraft fire, probably on Macmillan's own decision. Other countries have insisted on a rightful opportunity to share in the responsibility of planning. The President asked if we can't somehow get some definite agreement on planning. General Norstad responded that planning is going forward. The President noted the French refusal to make an advance commitment and General Norstad thought that when we knew our view we should give them a further chance to make such commitments.

The Secretary of State believed that we could not get allied agreement in advance for decisions implying open war. What we could and should seek is agreement to 1) a catalogue of plans; and 2) taking of steps to put forces in proper position. General Norstad remarked that we have plans up to the level of division probe which are accepted as reasonable by other governments, subject to later decision on execution. The President asked whether General Norstad believed in the division probe. General Norstad answered that we should have plans for such a probe, and repeated his conviction that we must have a fight if ground access is interrupted.

The President remarked that as soon as somebody gets killed, the danger of major involvement is very great.

Returning to the question of allied agreement, the President asked how we can get them to say what they will do if there is a fight. The Secretary of Defense said that in his view we should get the NATO planning directive approved and passed to General Norstad so that the catalogue of plans could be developed in response to this directive. Then the President asked about our own views on these options, and especially our view of proper action once a

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probe is beaten. The Secretary of Defense reported that the Department of Defense has views but has not discussed them with our allies and does not think they should be discussed in this way. The President asked whether we ourselves should not make such a plan and take some decision. General Norstad commented that if we know what we are going to do -- if we take the lead and show that we mean it -- we can carry these people. Even Adenauer is ready to lean on someone who knows his own mind.

General Norstad asked if we are firmly decided among ourselves on some form of probe in response to an interruption of ground access. The President said that we had considered reliance for a period on air supply but that we ought to decide. The Secretary of State said that there was a lot of paper on this point, that our current plan was that if there were interruptions there should be an airlift and not a ground probe and that there must be a delay before any such drastic action is taken. General Norstad disagreed, stating that if there is an interruption next week, it will be necessary to act, not wait -- to engage ourselves in a fight -- and not to let the interruption of our rights stand unchallenged. You have to react immediately, in order to see if the other man means war. Where will your allies be if you wait?

The Secretary of State said that the Western world is not ready for decisions which would mean a clear road to general war. There should be many other actions in between, like complete economic sanctions, a naval blockade and air action. General Norstad replied that he hoped before there was any such proposal, the European temperature would be taken. He does not believe that the Europeans are in favor of this course. He believes that they want a nuclear reaction. The Secretary of State said he doubted it. General Norstad said we should find out. Mr. Nitze remarked that it might be dangerous to find out. The President indicated his own doubt that Europeans would wish to go so far so fast. General Norstad offered in support of this conclusion the fact that countries are taking actions which are politically tough. The Chancellor held people in service before the election (but it was asked whether this action was not to his advantage politically). The Italians are taking steps,

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although the British are not good. But it was noted again that there was no decisive agreement in advance on the battalion probe.

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The President then turned the discussion to the build-up of conventional forces. General Norstad said that in strictly military terms he ought to ask for six to eight divisions now but that he did not wish to ask for them. There followed discussion of specific modest adjustments of other forces, and it became plain that in the view of the Department of Defense an on-call limit of thirty days for six divisions was not feasible. General Norstad then indicated that what he meant to do was ask for the best available time.

The President remarked upon the importance of the gold drain and the need for obtaining German help on this point. General Norstad said it was a great question whether enlarged U. S. forces would lead Europeans to do more or relax. He thought the Germans need another "good, hard crack" taken at them soon, and he thought that we might, by hitting hard and early, get something substantial. The President returned to the question of nuclear weapons and asked General Norstad if he would use them quickly. General Norstad said that you have to use them if necessary. The President asked how secure our nuclear weapons are. General Norstad replied that his policy was to keep nuclear weapons out of the immediate control of the man on the firing line, because the temptation to use them in a desperate situation might be overwhelming. Arrangements for their security were steadily reviewed and inspected, and he thought that a recent inspection team from Washington had found that perhaps the security was so tight that the weapons might not be available in time if needed.

General Taylor then asked General Norstad under what conditions he would want these six to eight divisions in the light of his statement that by the military book he should want them now. General Norstad thought the book answer was wrong in this case. He thought it was useless to stack up more forces on both sides in a situation in which the end result would leave us still outnumbered. He thought it not unreasonable to look at this situation as one of two snowballs in which an addition to the mass and acceleration on one side led to similar action on the other. He doubted whether this movement would psychologically be a good thing for our allies. He believed that we were in a poker game and he pointed out that when this card has been played, we will

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not have it left to play later. When General Taylor asked under what circumstances he would play the card, General Norstad replied that he would do it only when the situation seemed bound to deteriorate. He remarked that there was no great desire in Europe for these forces, and although he did not say so directly, he may have believed that an early deployment would appear to indicate a shift away from reliance on nuclear weapons if needed. The President repeated the American position: we will not accept anything that we regard as a defeat, and we are just as determined as de Gaulle. We would proceed to meet both our nuclear and conventional goals under MC-70; we would defer the debate on MREMs; we would avoid abstract discussion of absolute priorities, and we would seek agreement on the things which we immediately need to do on the military build-up. The President had earlier stated his conclusions from this meeting as follows:

We must privately clarify our own decisions on contingency planning.

General Norstad will press to clarify European understanding that we will use nuclear weapons if we have to.

McGeorge Bundy

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