

Conversation: Meeting Tape 85.4

Date: 1963-05-07

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Start Time: 16:32

Place: Oval Office

SCROLLER TITLE: “Bringing a Thousand Men Home”

SCENE SETTER: This tape captured Secretary of Defense Robert S. “Bob” McNamara speaking with President Kennedy in a moment of optimism about the war in Vietnam. McNamara had just returned from Honolulu, Hawaii, where U.S. military and civilian officials reviewed a plan to phase down U.S. forces in Vietnam from a projected 15,600 soldiers for Fiscal Year 1964 to 1,500 by the end of Fiscal Year 1968. Following the conference, Pentagon spokesman Arthur “Art” Sylvester proclaimed that “the corner has definitely been turned” toward victory.

Robert S. “Bob” McNamara: If you saw the weapons that they’re using, the ammunition they’re using, I think you’d agree most of the effort is indigenous. It is true they’re getting Communist—Chinese Communist mortar shells in over the border but not very many. And they’re still using literally handmade weapons. We’ve captured three what they call “arms factories” in South Vietnam, which are simply hand-operated lathes that shape pipe to be used for guns—gun barrels, and things of that kind. So most of the effort, most of the recruiting, and most of the matériel is coming from—it’s from South Vietnam. Some of the matériel from Cambodia—they buy sulfur and miscellaneous chemicals for use in making powder from Cambodia, for example.

But, in any case, I believe that we will be able to get it under control. It may take two years, or three years possibly, but we should now be looking to the time when we’ll have a normal military program there.

Instead, they’re proposing fantastic Military Assistance Programs. I think we ought to take 75 to 100 million [dollars] out of the ’65, ’66, ’67 Military Assistance Programs they’re talking about and be looking to a normal relationship so we don’t build up another [South] Korea. When I look at what’s happened to Korea, in the way of U.S. aid, and how difficult it’s going to be to scale that aid down, we certainly don’t want to let another Korea develop in South Vietnam, and we’re well on the way to doing that.

President Kennedy: Yeah.

McNamara: So, I—this was one of my major points of yesterday. And secondly, I think that, as I mentioned before, that both for domestic political purposes and also because of the psychological effect it would have in South Vietnam, we ought to think about the possibility of bringing a thousand men home by the end of the year. Now, I’ve asked them to lay out that plan, without at the present time making any decision to—

President Kennedy: [*speaking over McNamara*] That’s right [*unclear*]—

McNamara: —put it into effect.

President Kennedy: If it isn’t in very good shape, you don’t want to make it [*unclear*]—

McNamara: Absolutely. [*President Kennedy acknowledges throughout.*] It would be—have a negative influence. But, on the other hand, if we had two or three victories, this would be just exactly the shot in the arm we ought to have. So they're going to do that.

End of excerpt.

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