

Conversation: Meeting Tape 111.5

Date: 1963-09-19

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Participant: Maxwell D. Taylor

Start Time: 16:00

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: “We’re Not Here Forever”

SCENE SETTER: Meeting with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff chair Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, President Kennedy discussed the agenda for their upcoming mission to South Vietnam. Their trip would include an audience with South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm, who would hear about a U.S. plan for withdrawing American troops.

President Kennedy: Of course, now, if you were decided—Let’s say everything’s going well. I mean, if it’s not going well, then the question would be . . . seems you want to try to make an assessment of how it can be improved. [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] seems to think most of the demands we’re making on [Ngô Đình] Diệm or [Ngô Đình] Nhu are unrealistic and can’t be accomplished. We’ve got to decide what it is that is really essential to make the war go well and then figure out how we’re going to accomplish it.

McGeorge “Mac” Bundy: [*Unclear.*]

President Kennedy: Why don’t we just say, “If in your judgment the prognosis of the war is not hopeful, then we should determine what action must be taken to improve that prospect by the Vietnamese government and what steps the United States should take to compel that action.”

Bundy: Bring it about.

Maxwell D. “Max” Taylor: What are the missing ingredients required for victory.

President Kennedy: What is it we should do to make them do what they have to do.

End of excerpt 1.

Taylor: In talking to Diệm, would there be any merit in taking this point of view with him: “It’s not only that we have to win with you, Mr. President, we have to win fairly soon. Because this cannot be an indefinite proposition. Hence we oppose the no—we have the feeling that many of your measures are indeed slowing up victory, and we just can’t continue on this basis because of the pressures we’re—being generated at home.”

Bundy: “You don’t have forever. We’re not here forever and [*unclear*]—”

Taylor: “We’re not here forever.”

Bundy: On a fixed basis.

Taylor: “And furthermore, just to show you, [*Bundy attempts to interject*] we have a plan, which the Secretary has, showing how we expect to phase out of here. And we need to do this in a—in some finite period of time. This isn’t forever.”

McNamara: I’d particularly tell Diệm that at some point. I suspect we’re going to have to see Diệm several times. [*President Kennedy acknowledges.*] And one of these occasions, I’d like to show him that we *do* have a plan for getting out of there at the time of success. We have worked it out in some detail.

Taylor: It might have two effects: one, to remind him we really don’t intend to stay. We’re not going to be permanent boarders.

President Kennedy: What about Madame . . . [*unclear*]—

Taylor: And secondly, that we’d expect him to get on with the war and to understand we’ll be moving out anyway.

End of excerpt 2.

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