

## Conversation: Meeting Tape 112.2

**Date:** 1963-09-23

**Participant:** John F. Kennedy

**Participant:** Robert S. McNamara

**Participant:** McGeorge Bundy

**Participant:** Maxwell D. Taylor

**Start Time:** 10:00

**Place:** Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: "We Have Plans for Withdrawal"

SCENE SETTER: Speaking with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff chair General Maxwell D. Taylor just prior to their departure for Saigon, President Kennedy addressed the prospect of telling South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm of plans to withdraw American troops. While McNamara hoped to begin withdrawal "if the military situation improves," Kennedy thought it better to leverage Diệm by highlighting the depth and duration of U.S. support.

**President Kennedy:** What we want to try to find out is . . . we've been, now, somewhat confused, for about six weeks, because our reports have come so different. So we'd like to try to, based upon what you two find, to come to some final conclusion as to whether we—[the] [Ngô Đình] Diệms look as if they're going to be in power for some time, and [Ngô Đình] Nhu, and whether there's anything we can do to influence them or whether we ought to stop [unclear]. [*A fly buzzes in the background.*] [Unclear] reach out to the military, if it's going to sort of begin to unwind . . . and still Diệm is—that's what, I would say, is our worst situation. If the situation there were to continue to unwind and yet Diệm [unclear]—

**Robert S. "Bob" McNamara:** Is there in power.

**President Kennedy:** —[unclear] what the hell would we do?

**McNamara:** That's exactly—yeah.

**President Kennedy:** And then we're reall—then we'd have to take some rather desperate measures, because we're going to bear the responsibility six months from now as much as now.

**McGeorge "Mac" Bundy:** This is what John [A.] McCone . . . I think in some [unclear] now thinks is going to happen. The thing is we can't change Diệm, and yet Diệm can't win. [Unclear.]

**Maxwell D. "Max" Taylor:** Well, I think it's not only to check whether we're making progress, but are we making progress fast enough. I think we have to get across to Diệm that the United States as a country is not just willing to carry forward this enterprise indefinitely.

**President Kennedy:** Not only the threat of the—this country, which, I suppose, he's heard so many times, is maybe—but I think probably if you made it your—try seeing him after you've been there awhile, if you made it—if it comes to—if it is your judgment—you just—I'm just—"I was here two years ago, a year ago. I thought we were doing well, but now I don't think we are. I think you ought to know it." It's our feeling that we're getting—we're beginning to [unclear] that's going to lose. You have to decide what you're going to do about that. I think—feel more than any—saying the United States isn't going to go along, because I suppose he's heard that now for ten years. [*An unidentified speaker attempts to interject.*] I think if you just told him you think we're going to [unclear] it looks

lousy, and it may not work out, just based on—looking at it for his own sake, and the whole commitment everybody’s made, he ought to do something about it.

In addition, General, I think—Bob, I think he feels hostility, of course, to our help because he probably knows the coup—I think you ought to remind him that beginning with General Taylor’s mission, we went all—we went pretty far out compared to what anybody else was willing to do. This isn’t a struggle between us. We’re not—we don’t care what the hell he does out there, really. We’re not demanding—we’re not getting into a moral judgment about the Buddhists and the pagodas, and all their arrests; we’re getting into a—our better judgment, whether it helps with the war. This thing with [Arthur B.] Krock, that if we use a different moral standard for—we’re not—it isn’t a moral issue with us here. It’s just a question of whether we [*unclear*] to fight the war.

*End of excerpt 1.*

**President Kennedy:** I think probably it isn’t much use to threaten them on the aid. Or—

**Bundy:** Almost better to let those things happen than to talk about that [*unclear*].

**Taylor:** I don’t [*unclear*] it’s feasible, Mr. President, to set objectives, pinpoint where we ought to be a year from now or not, but it’d certainly be useful, I would think, to try to do that, and [*unclear*] adequate progress [*unclear*] so that if we find ourselves in this position next year, we could say, “Last year we did.” We have a feeling we’re not winning fast enough to meet our [*unclear*] objectives if we haven’t gotten [*unclear*].

**Bundy:** That’s too late, because everybody’s always been—and you’re right, I think—everybody’s always said that that [*unclear*] take a long time. Some of this criticism is based on the wrong timetable.

**Taylor:** Well, the thing is, the thought of trying to tell him that not only to win, but you have to win within a fixed time frame . . .

**McNamara:** Well, I think we can tell him we have plans for withdrawal of our forces when military success warrants it. We’d like to get them out, just as much as he’d love to get them out. We hope that before the end of the year, we can begin to withdraw if the military situation improves, as we hope [and] believe we can.

*End of excerpt 2.*

**President Kennedy:** Yeah . . . I think probably threatening on aid is . . . probably rather [*unclear*], as you say, unless we really just do something with it.

**Taylor:** I’d much rather lay out a schedule and show our plans to withdraw and say, “This is what we’re going to stay on. We have to win the war in this time frame.”

**Bundy:** It wouldn’t quite actually do that if we were going along [*unclear*].

**Taylor:** Well, if we really—if we were off a little bit, then we—but the timing is right, and the cooperation is right. We can’t win this war, Mr. President, unless we get back on a cooperative basis with whatever government we’re dealing with. This business now of running in two directions is pure [*unclear*].

**President Kennedy:** On the other hand, if you come to the conclusion that what they're now doing is going to bring inevitable defeat, that's what presents—[*Taylor attempts to interject*] the division in the—in Saigon is like the division here. [*speaking over Taylor*] It's not—it's nobody's fault because everybody just—see, it's kind of hard to make everybody decide the same way if they don't agree with it. But it's going to be the worst of all things combined; I don't know what the answer to that would be. Then you just have to, it seems to me, see Nhu and see Diệm, and be able to give them your considered military judgment that they're not going to win this way, and therefore, they got to do something else. They've got this—you know, all these things—the complaints against us, which really—we're not interested in. And I think we—it'd be better to emphasize that the United States has done for ten years and what we've particularly done in your turf out there.

*End of excerpt 3.*

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