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August 22, 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Czechoslovakia -- Talking Points for Today's Cabinet Meeting

You may wish to open today's Cabinet Meeting with the following points:

1. The [redacted] Cierna meeting indicated we should not assume there would be no military intervention by the Soviets.

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-- Our [redacted] continued to show Soviet forces massed for imminent invasion.

-- For several days prior to August 20 there were reports of increased tension and some indications of preparation for action.

-- We were provided with excellent reporting from Prague and Moscow, including our Ambassador Thompson's overall evaluation that "the Soviets will go to great lengths to push the Czechs back to something close to the pre-January situation," and the following interesting prediction by a Soviet intellectual on August 1: "No matter what our leaders have said at Cierna, or will say at Bratislava, sooner or later they will have to crush this thing."

-- The Tuesday lunch agenda carried the following item: "Soviet strategy in U. S. - Soviet relations at this stage, including the relationship to possible moves against Czechoslovakia." At the Tuesday lunch we discussed reports of a Soviet Central Committee meeting and Richard Helms reported that this might indicate a definite Soviet decision to move.

2. The Soviets probably decided to move for both foreign and domestic reasons.

-- Czechoslovakia protects the flank of Soviet forces in Germany and the viability of the Soviet position in the heart of Europe hinges on it. Without Czechoslovakia, the Warsaw Pact might well crumble.

-- The play-back effect of Czechoslovakia's experiment in democracy and freedom threatens Communist stability throughout the Bloc and in the Soviet Union itself.

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3. The events of Tuesday evening:

-- At 7:05 p.m. Walt Rostow relayed Dobrynin's request for a meeting. Secretary Rusk was immediately informed.

-- Dobrynin came to the White House, and read the Soviet statement advising us that troops were moving in alleged response to external and internal threats to the Czech Communist regime.

-- After his session with the platform committee -- during which ticker reports of the invasion started coming in -- Secretary Rusk returned to the White House.

-- The NSC meeting followed.

4. We believe there is no basic disagreement within the United States Government on policy.

-- We have no commitment to intervene militarily in Czech defense.

-- We do not believe an American military intervention is in our national interest.

(We also do not believe such an intervention could be in the Czech interest. Interestingly, the Czechs were sufficiently prepared for what happened to have issued explicit orders to their military forces not to resist an invasion.)

5. We must treat the present situation -- in all its tragedy -- in the broad context of world politics. The Cold War is not over, but we should also understand that we cannot simply return to it. As I said in my 1967 State of the Union Message, "Our relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are ... in transition" -- a transition that is complicated and dangerous. The ideological basis for Soviet power is fragmenting, and the Russians are moving toward a more pragmatic and normal society -- but they are still a great and jealous nation state. The work we have done in recent years has contributed to this process. In the long run, it will be vitally important to continue this work -- although no one can say with any certainty when it will be possible to resume our efforts in practical ways.

W. W. Rostow

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