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THE CABINET MEETING

OF

SEPTEMBER 5, 1968

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THE WHITE HOUSE

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A T T E N D A N C E

Cabinet Meeting of Thursday, September 5, 1968

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

Vice President Humphrey

Secretary Rusk

Secretary Fowler

Secretary Clifford

Attorney General Clark

Postmaster General Watson

Secretary Boyd

Secretary Udall

Secretary Freeman

Secretary Smith

Secretary Wirtz

Secretary Cohen

Secretary Weaver

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STAFF

Joe Califano

Douglass Cater

Ernie Goldstein

Bob Hardesty

Harry McPherson

Mike Manatos

Larry Temple

Harry Middleton

Charles Maguire

Charles Murphy

George Reedy

Walt Rostow

Barefoot Sanders

OTHERS

Leonard Marks

Charles Zwick

Arthur Okun

"We are all grateful as Americans that you raised this nation up at a time of terrible tragedy. If we have problems in this country they are problems on. The Vice President in his acceptance speech at Chicago said that you had achieved more than any other President. He was just stating the facts.

"We at this table perhaps know that best of all. We know that you have taken gigantic and historic steps at home and abroad. In the world you have helped men turn aside from hostility across the board to cooperation and contacts for finding peace. You have seen also that there can be no peace in the world if aggression builds momentum and its appetite goes unchecked.

"With those thoughts, Mr. President, all of us offer you our warmest best wishes on your 60th birthday. We offer them with great respect to Lyndon Johnson the President and with great affection to Lyndon Johnson the man."

The Cabinet then presented the President with a silver pen set and desk blotter, inscribed with the names of the Cabinet members and a record of the landmark laws passed in the Johnson administration. The President responded briefly and warmly, expressing his appreciation for the gift and his personal esteem for every member "of this devoted Cabinet."

The President informed the Cabinet that he had met with the Congressional leadership this morning. He planned a further meeting with the bipartisan leadership sometime tomorrow. Secretary Rusk then proceeded with his foreign policy review.

"We see no sense in giving up our probes for peace. There could be important developments ahead. The prospects for a North Vietnamese military victory are slight and they must know it."

Turning to the situation in Eastern Europe, the Secretary underscored the gravity of the existing situation.

"The gravity is apparent because the Soviet leadership decided to take a step despite great and obvious cost to themselves. The cost includes the enduring enmity of the Czechs, damage to many bilateral relationships, our own among them... the cost of creating major divisions within the Communist Bloc and within the world... the cost of restlessness among the peoples of those countries that joined in this action -- for example, the people of East Germany.

So the fact that they made this decision despite these costs indicates that the Soviets are either changing their basic attitudes, or are nervous and fearful and therefore dangerous.

"We were posted on their troops and movements... But they were able to make their move efficiently... They may have been surprised by the strength of the Czech reaction and world outrage. They have been unable to set up a puppet government in Czechoslovakia.

"It was possible that the Soviets could have moved elsewhere. Last Friday evening, the President had many ominous indications [] There were fears and rumors about Roumania circulating in many Eastern and Central European capitals. On Friday evening also, Dobrynin asked to see me on Saturday morning, while the President was in Texas. The President decided -- and I think rightly -- to issue a strong statement about the dangers of unleashing the 'dogs of war.'

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"The President also instructed me to see Dobrynin that night, not Saturday morning. I did so. I told the Ambassador that any new move could have the most serious consequences. []

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"There is another ominous factor. The Soviets went to great lengths to build up a pretext for their action by saying that imperialists were aiding the Czechs. They have made these bitter attacks on West Germany. It is for all of us to stay alert.

"I want to say clearly to every member of the Cabinet that at no time, in no way, actively or passively, has there ever been any understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union regarding spheres of influence. The Yalta agreement ran contrary to that. It is true that we have NATO and they have the Warsaw Pact, and that conflict between them would mean war. But that doesn't give us the right to put troops into Denmark or give them the right to put them into Czechoslovakia. We have urged long and strongly that all the nations of Eastern Europe are entitled to the rights of Nations promised in the United Nations."

Secretary Rusk then discussed the implications of the Soviet seizure of Czechoslovakia on NATO and US-USSR bilateral relations.

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"These troop movements and dispositions pose serious consequences for NATO. If the Soviet armies remain where they are, NATO must take appropriate action. These troops have had a great impact throughout Western Europe. They have shaken people out of their euphoria.

"Our bilateral relations have been set back. We must be careful now and calculate the new realities, without any return to Cold War hostility. We cannot be happy with the Czechoslovakian situation, but there are other large questions, and they will remain: nuclear treaties, the arms race, Vietnam, the Middle East. We have got to find a middle ground where no doors will be closed to peace -- without giving Moscow any impression that they can move with impunity.

"We have special problems in the Senate now with the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This should not be a problem because this is a multilateral treaty affecting the security of many nations, not just the US-USSR. But the Czechoslovakian situation does affect our hopes and plans now. It would be terrible if the Treaty were pulled apart or defeated in the Congress now. We need to proceed with great care."

Secretary Rusk continued with some comments on the Biafra problem.

"We have apparently gained a ten day agreement now during which air relief will operate. There is no problem in getting food and help. The problem has always been getting them in. Now we have a small step forward. The Federal troops now occupy two-thirds of Biafra... Our readiness and willingness to help is not an issue... We have raised more than \$8 million already and we have people ready to help too. But it is the situation on the ground that is giving us the trouble."

THE PRESIDENT (11:40a - 11:45am.)

"Our two parties have convened and acted now. I think our party chose the best man and I hope that he will lead our forces now and in November, and our country after January.

"I think we can say that we have all conducted ourselves properly up to and through the Convention. We saw some good and some bad come out of that Convention..."

"Now it is clear where my choice is. It is just where it was four years ago when I picked the man that I thought was best equipped to lead this country. I picked the Vice President. I didn't often have to say so -- but if I could have appointed a... it would be."

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