

74. Transcript of Meeting¹

Washington, July 27, 1968, 3–4:30 p.m.

*Meeting in Cabinet Room, Saturday, July 26 [27], 1968, With the President and Senator Dirksen. They Were Joined Later by Secretary Rusk From 3:00 to 4:30.*²

[Here follow 28 pages of discussion of domestic politics.]

Dirksen: How the hell did the *Wall Street Journal* ever write that editorial on the subject of Czechoslovakia? To do anything there looks very dim.

Rusk: Any time you want to call me, just pick up the phone and call me because the situation changes on a daily basis. The issues between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union are really fundamental issues. The Soviets are deeply concerned about the future of the entire Communist world in Eastern Europe as a result of what is happening in Czechoslovakia. They raised the question on the monopolization of the Communist Party. The Czechs raised the question on the arrangements within the solidarity of the Warsaw Pact. They have eliminated censorship to the extent that there is more free expression now in Czechoslovakia than there has ever been present in any Communist country including Yugoslavia. I think the Soviets are concerned both on the security grounds of a country that is on their border and also borders on the west. But they're even more concerned about the possibility of contagion—how is Czechoslovakia affecting Poland, Hungary, West and East Germany and even the Soviet Union itself where they have important troubles with their young people and with their nationalities. Our people who visit the Soviet Union or live there say there's enormous apathy around Moscow. It is just like a dead lump of dough and it's stirring all through that part of the world. Matter of fact, John Foster Dulles used to talk about this possibility in '53 and '54. Now publicly we've taken the line that these charges by the Soviet Union that we are somehow concocting this thing in Czechoslovakia are false. The Soviet Union knows them to be false and that, of course, the Soviet Union knows what the American people think about an issue of this sort when it is raised anywhere in the world. We think

¹ Source: Johnson Library, Recordings and Transcripts, Transcripts of Cabinet Room Meetings. No classification marking. The source text comprises pages 28–32 of a 34-page transcript. The text printed here contains revisions that were made after the editor listened to the recording of the conversation. The recording is *ibid.*, Recording of Meeting Between President Johnson, Senator Dirksen, and Secretary Rusk, July 27, 1968, 3–4:30 p.m. [Tape FC002, Side B].

² The correct date, July 27, is from the President's Daily Diary. (*ibid.*) The diary also indicates that Rusk joined the meeting at 3:45 p.m.

people ought to determine their own affairs. Privately we have been much more stiff than that with them and have specifically said so. Now look, if you're trying to build up a pretext by your charges against us for action against Czechoslovakia, cut it out because that's going to have very serious effect on our relations. They denied they're doing it which is sort of interesting, but nevertheless now on the problem that he will face down there during at least three or four days will be how to handle it in such a way not to get in the way of the Czechs, not to hurt the Czechs. Now we've been told by the Czechs this is their final remark that they consider that our public handling of this question has been about right from their point of view. If we would go on much more dramatically in supporting the Czechs this would create real problems for them in their attempt to deal with the Russians. Now there is another reason why we might want to be a little careful about this problem. The chances are that the Czechs will make some compromises here to keep the Russians off their backs. It may be we pledge fidelity to the Warsaw pact, it may be some changes in personnel, it may be the reimposition of censorship. We just don't know. But you just might want—before you lock up any comments you make about Eastern Europe, you just might want to give me or give Chip Bohlen a telephone call and see if there are any later developments that could possibly have any bearing on what you are thinking about. On the general idea of détente—this thing the so called détente—there's very little basis for any generalization on it. On the one side we have such things as the civil air agreement and the Consular Agreement, the Space Treaty and the nonproliferation treaty and the possibility of talks on the strategic offensive and defensive missiles. But on the other hand you have got Berlin and Germany and Vietnam and the Middle East so you've got many dangerous questions that have not been resolved. So one can't speak of détente, one can't speak of the opposite. It's pragmatic kind of situations. [Here follow 1-1/2 pages of discussion of domestic politics and Vietnam.]