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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

DATE, TIME November 10, 1981, 4:00-5:00 p.m.,
AND PLACE: The Cabinet Room

SUBJECT: Strategy Toward Cuba and Central America

PARTICIPANTS:

President Ronald Reagan

Vice President George Bush

State

Secretary Alexander M. Haig, Jr.
Deputy Secretary William P. Clark

OSD

Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger
Deputy Secretary Frank C. Carlucci

OMB

Mr. William Schneider

CIA

Director William J. Casey

USUN

Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick

JCS

General David C. Jones
Lt. Gen. Paul F. Gorman

The White House

Mr. Edwin Meese III
Mr. James A. Baker III
Mr. Richard V. Allen
Admiral James W. Nance
Ms. Janet Colson

NSC

Mr. Roger W. Fontaine

The Vice President's Office

Admiral Daniel J. Murphy

MINUTES

Mr. Allen opened the meeting by pointing out the two papers in front of us: the State Department paper and a DOD submission (which arrived this morning). He then outlined each phase and its component parts. Mr. Allen then asked Secretary Haig to make his presentation.

Secretary Haig explained the State paper was an interdepartmental effort over an extended period, and it faces up to the fundamental issue; namely, a deteriorating situation in Central America. If we wait much longer to act, then the price will be much higher.

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Review Nov. 10, 1987

DECLASSIFIED IN PART

NLS M05-016-#19125

By NOI, NARA, Date 12/21/05

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Real problems between State, DOD, and CIA are this: the steps outlined in Phase One are not enough. This plan -- all of it -- is designed to set up credible pressures on Castro to get him to talk. This is in contrast to the Carter approach which promised negotiations if he ceased and desisted his revolutionary efforts. The Secretary pointed out that what will be decided here will be known to the Cubans within weeks. Therefore, the message we must get to them is this: we mean business. If we don't do that, then we should not do anything. What we are deciding now is taking a course of action that is designed to stop Cuban adventures and we are willing to use any kind of pressures to succeed. This must be decided before we decide to do anything else. The Soviet threshold on Cuba meanwhile is very clear: it is the 1962 accords, the promise not to invade is the line. Invasion is the trigger for a serious Soviet response. Up to that point there is a free play area. Meanwhile, we are at a high point of Cuban and Nicaraguan concern and that is the result of only a few words from me, and some press stories. The Cubans are worried. They have made countless overtures to talk. Their vice president would like to talk to me or General Walters in Havana. The Secretary believes that is worth thinking about. Moreover, we can raise their anxiety levels further through phoney military communications traffic.

Secretary Weinberger then made his presentation. He opened by saying he believed that there was agreement on the nature and seriousness of the problem. There is a narrow point of difference between DOD and State. DOD cannot accept the decision to use unilateral force now. We must go step by step. We must prepare public opinion, and we must work on getting a coalition of Latin American countries to work with us. The Secretary emphasized that we should not make the up front commitment without doing the above first.

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But we cannot today accept a unilateral commitment of force. That is the basic disagreement.

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E.O. 12958
 As Amended
 Sec. 1.4(c)(d)

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General Jones said there is a need to build a coalition of support. He mentioned that even the Mexican officers at the recent American Army conference were concerned about the situation. Castro knows the President needs congressional support. General Jones also pointed out that General Woerner, who has been in El Salvador, is working on a strategy paper. That paper is designed to strengthen El Salvador's military forces. But the March elections also must take place. Colonel Garcia has assured JCS that the winner will be respected. Meanwhile, it is the belief of General Woerner if we do nothing, the junta is doomed to a slow defeat. We can, however, stabilize the situation indefinitely if our economic and security assistance is increased. We need to improve intelligence, command and control. We need to form a new quick reaction battalion out of country. We need to offer out of country training for officers. We need to give them basic interdiction equipment like metal detectors. We need to put pressure on Nicaragua that does not require a quarantine on the landing of U.S. forces. Of course, if the Cubans move in troops, then we are forced to do more.

Ambassador Kirkpatrick argued that the situation was deteriorating and action must be taken. What to do? Some decisions are more urgent than others. Decisions should have been taken months ago -- but clearly El Salvador is the first priority. The present government will collapse if the guerrillas continue to destroy the economy. Weak governments cannot survive that kind of action indefinitely. We do not have time to build coalitions. We can cooperate with individual countries, but they will never work together in time. We cannot wait for public opinion either to form. All of the items in Phase One without a commitment to use U.S. military force can be done. We need to focus on El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in that order. We can use covert action. We can employ proxy forces.

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Mr. Allen then asked for questions.

Mr. Meese asked how are we to operate politically with the government in El Salvador?

Secretary Haig observed in response to Ambassador Kirkpatrick that there was a lot of agreement around the table. Coalition simply meant getting anybody to help us. And we need congressional support. The Secretary further observed that any plan we adopt will leak therefore, we must not get onto any track unless we are ready to do something. If we do not and instead have a set of actions that merely do some damage -- they will leak too and Castro will use that against us. We cannot start another Vietnam in our hemisphere.

Mr. Allen then asked why can't we use Phase One actions and wait on Phase Two.

Secretary Weinberger further asked can we pull back at any time?

Secretary Haig said the President can stop at any point. But if you are not prepared to move right up to the threshold, then don't start down the path in the first place. We should go back and look at it again and do only the easy actions.

Mr. Casey then reiterated the principal target is Nicaragua.

Ambassador Kirkpartick disagreed. She argued that El Salvador had to be stabilized first. Then we should move onto Nicaragua and let others do the work for us.

Secretary Weinberger added that lots of Phase One can be done. Let's begin with that.

Secretary Haig agreed. But he warned against creating an insurgency in Nicaragua unless you are prepared to go all the way.

Mr. Allen observed that Cubans in Nicaragua do create opportunities for us. That's very different than going directly to Cuba with warlike actions.

Mr. Meese then summarized the situation. The key element is whether U.S. land forces and naval actions are to be contemplated. Would we use them?

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The President then asked should everyone -- Americans, Cubans, Nicaraguans -- feel that the U.S. will commit its forces?

The President then observed that what worries him most is this: if the people won't support the leader and the cause, then there will be failure. The President then said it was clear the press would like to accuse us of getting into another Vietnam. How can we solve this problem with Congress and public opinion being what they are? We are talking about an impossible option. Are there other things we can do? Can covert actions be traced back to us. How do we deal with the image in Latin America of the Yankee collossus?

Secretary Haig responded that the members of the OAS really want and need a sign of determination from you. All of them want action, and we must not give the Cubans an incentive to jump in.

Mr. Allen said one component could be the President making a statement to build consensus prior to taking action.

Mr. Baker said warnings have already been given.

Ambassador Kirkpatrick agreed and said President Carter tried that approach. But a speech on the nature of the problem and the character of the threat can be given. She also rejected the Vietnam analogy. The Vietnam war did not involve direct national security interests. The loss of Central America does.

The President said but then what. People will want to know, what are you going to do?

Mr. Meese then said it seems agreed that we do those things already listed to help El Salvador. As for Nicaragua, we can do political, military, propaganda/covert actions that do not require U.S. forces.

The Vice President asked if we could mine Nicaraguan east coast ports.

Mr. Allen said yes, but other shipping was involved.

Secretary Weinberger said that everything Mr. Meese outlined can be done without a prior commitment to use force.

Mr. Meese then said the dividing line is the use of naval forces to interdict Nicaragua.

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Secretary Haig said the dividing line is whether any plan will succeed.

The President then asked to hear more (at the next meeting) about various alternatives including mining. He added I don't want to back down. I don't want to accept defeat.

Mr. Meese then said we must continue the meeting on Thursday. He suggested we take each item short of the ultimatum to Nicaragua and the employment of U.S. forces against Nicaragua and find out what it takes to implement each action in terms of money and bureaucratic follow-up. He then said we should discuss what other steps could also be contemplated. Then finally we can go and discuss further the most serious actions both pros and cons.

The President then asked what other covert actions could be taken that would be truly disabling and not just flea bites?

Mr. Allen reiterated what were short-term demonstration steps to show our seriousness aside from mining.

The President asked can we take more training exercises? Can we introduce a few battalions into Panama or Honduras? Have we ever done that in Central America?

General Gorman said no, we have never done that.