

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DATE 1 March 1969

PLACE GRAND TRIANON PALACE, VERSAILLES  
AFTERNOON CONVERSATION

PRESENT

The President  
General de Gaulle  
Prime Minister Couve de Murville  
Mr. Andronikov  
MG Walters

DECLASSIFIED  
E.O. 12958, as amended, Sect 3.5

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By P. H NARA, Date 10-21-09

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This conversation followed the morning one which was reported upon separately. This is the report of the talks that occurred after lunch.

The President said that on Tuesday after his return the National Security Council would meet on the matter of an anti ballistic missile system. Subsequently he would meet with our legislative leaders and it was probable that his decision would be announced on Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning. He was speaking in great confidence.

General de Gaulle said that the President would be confident that there would be no indiscretion on the French side.

The President said that this was a difficult decision, there had been a lot of speculation concerning it and it had many political overtones and was related to possible talks with the Soviets in respect to limiting missiles. The General would remember that the Soviets had developed a limited anti ballistic missile system and they had deployed it only around Moscow. It was our understanding that they were delaying deploying it further around other cities hoping for further developments in this field. He was speaking to the General in great confidence as no one knew what his decision would be, and there was great speculation concerning it. After the Soviets had deployed their system last year the US had decided to go ahead with a limited system known as the Sentinel. This would be deployed around our major cities.

General De Gaulle repeated his assurances that no one would talk on the French side.

The President said that since the election and his inauguration great political pressures had been brought on the administration on two grounds. Some felt that we should wait until after we saw how things went in talks with the Soviets and the second ground was the fear expressed that in some of the protected cities that the presence of the missiles might endanger them. The 2nd ground was totally fictitious. The first ground had some basis of relevance. The argument had also been made that from the bargaining point of view that the US should also have something on the counter and since the Soviets already have something we should too. A third argument relates to the capabilities of the system. A thin Anti Ballistic Missile system would be effective only against an attack by a minor nuclear power like China and would not be effective against a major nuclear power like Russia which could launch enough missiles to penetrate it. Even between the US and the USSR whatever advantage no matter how small makes an attack by the other more difficult. It means more targets to take out. If missiles are deployed to protect cities then the argument can be made that the prime purpose of the system is to provide some assurance to a nation that might make a first strike. Today for example if another Cuban missile crisis were to occur and as a result the US struck first. The man making such a decision would be very heartened to know that no matter how many weapons the USSR launched that there would be a second strike. The argument could be made that it would increase the credibility of a US strike.

On the other hand if the US did not go forward with at least a minimal program the possibility exists that before the time of an agreement the Soviets might make significant technical breakthroughs that would give them a definite advantage. Credibility was both political and military. A majority of public opinion in the US would probably oppose the deployment of such a system because there was a trend of opinion against military costs and this combined with false fears. Another reason would be that some might fear that this would escalate the arms race. Actually he was leaning towards, though his mind was not definitely made up a limited system but in a sense different from the defense of cities. This involved planning to build an ABM system for the purpose of protecting the deterrent and our second strike such as the Minuteman sites and other non hardened sites. This would also avoid the risk of falling behind in ~~technical~~ development of the art. Secondly it would improve our bargaining position and thirdly it would not be provocative to the Soviet Union because it would bear no relationship to a first strike and would only be effective in protecting our capability for a second strike in reply to a first strike by the USSR. Pending any agreement the US must at all costs maintain the ability to make a second strike. Another good reason to choose this program rather than to deploy the system around cities was that the unprotected cities would complain that others were protected but not them. The Europeans would say this also

General De Gaulle said that this would also avoid having to choose which cities would be protected. The system would cover only those organisms essential to assure a US second strike so that the adversary would know that there would be a second strike. When Kosygin had gone to the US and seen President Johnson at Glassboro he had stopped in Paris on his way back to Moscow. He said that Pres. Johnson had told him that an ABM system would be ruinous for both of them and they should reach an agreement not to build them. Kosygin had said that maybe what was needed was an agreement against missiles rather than against anti missiles.

The President said that since 1962 the Soviets had widened the advantage in conventional forces between the forces of the Warsaw pact and those of the Western countries. and they had in great measure closed the gap in strategic weapons. Until an agreement was reached we had no choice but to maintain our credibility. General De Gaulle thanked the President for telling him about this.

The President said that to return to the question of Western Europe as he had indicated there were great political pressures for a substantial reduction of US Forces in Europe and more particularly in Germany. Before the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Senators Fullbright and Mansfield had present bills requiring the return to the US of two divisions. These would certainly have passed without Czechoslovakia. In the US people's memory was short and Czechoslovakia was nearly forgotten. Amidst the talk of detente people would probably favor a lessening of the US presence in Europe. The same kind of talk would lead some of our people to favor reducing our arms budget by substantial amounts. This is why it would be dangerous if the idea prevailed in the US that the only option was a nuclear exchange between the US and the USSR. People would jump to conclusions and feel that all of our problems were over. They would start asking why it was necessary to maintain forces in Europe.

General De Gaulle said that if a detente was achieved with the Soviet Union that's where the situation would end anyhow. He did wish to point out one thing. If the US decided to make substantial reductions in US strength in Europe that was the US business, but there was one thing he must point out. It would not be good if the idea arose that the departing US forces should be replaced with German units. This would have serious consequences. Even if the US decided to withdraw some of its forces in Europe it should still maintain a real military presence.

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The President said that one thing he wanted to emphasize to the General was the fact that we have not decided when the talks may begin, we want to get a little more out of the other side, on political matters. It was a delicate situation which might easily set off a precipitate demand to reduce our effort in Europe and in strategic weapons. He believed like the general that we should welcome a detente in Europe with the USSR. They may well want it because of their primary concern regarding China, but of this we cannot be sure until we see what they do in negotiations. Until then those of us who had responsibility for maintaining the ~~deterrent~~ primary deterrent had to see that it was maintained.

General De Gaulle said that he would permit himself to tell the President that he was quite right.

The President said that he would tell the general that he was surprised after his election when he saw the classified figures at how close the Soviet Union was to us in strategic missiles. We were still ahead but not by much. This did not mean however that the deterrent lacked credibility. Each side had a capability for a second strike, which meant that a decision would have to be taken in less than 20 minutes for something that could kill 60 or 70 million people. We were sure that the Soviets had the same concern and that therefore the deterrent was credible.

General de Gaulle said that there were two points related to the deterrent at the present time. The Russian government was obviously aware of its responsibilities, so was the US government, neither believes that the other will strike first. However changes could take place in Russia and less probably in the US which would make this situation no longer true. This was why the French were holding onto their weapons and refusing to sign the Non Proliferation Treaty. They were however favorable to as large a number of countries as possible signing the treaty. Quite frankly they hoped that neither the Germans nor the Israelis would acquire nuclear weapons.

The President said that when we think of men making these decisions we normally think of normal men but a man we would not consider normal-- Hitler-- started World War II. we must therefore also plan for the madman. He felt as he had expressed earlier that it was important for the good of the US that not only France should have nuclear weapons but in a broader sense that in the economic political and military fields that the European community have independent power and existence. This was one of the reasons why he had favored what is generally called integration but he was not wedded to any particular method. He felt that from the point of view of the United States that there be some collective power which can be a major economic political and military force apart from the US but with it we hope, was very important.

General De Gaulle said that this opinion was also theirs.

The President said that he had been talking to the Prime Minister at lunch and while the approaches to the Major Powers to which the general had referred were not along the lines we had previously approved we would welcome them if they could get things done. He wanted to emphasize that on European problems including those of the UK we would express our views at times but that things in Europe should be allowed to develop in their own way. Times had changed. 22 years ago Europe was prostrate, economically, militarily and spiritually. They had been thinking in terms of a military alliance and fear of invasion had brought them together. Times had required American leadership as the US had power and Europe did not. The US was still ahead in economic and military power, but the nations of Europe were stable and had developed political strength and substance and in some cases nuclear capabilities. He felt that the period in which the US could effectively exert leadership is no longer here. He did not mean by this that we would not assume our responsibilities for the common defense. We would continue our role in NATO and

do everything we could to draw the nations of Europe together. Political realities had changed and we would expect initiatives to come from Europeans. This was the way he meant to conduct the foreign policy of the United States.

General De Gaulle said that they took note of this and shared this feeling. Changes that would come were such that they would take time. The French will not oppose them. They are not opposed to rapprochement and even union. Because they were favorable to these ideas they were hostile to false appearances. They did not feel that Europeans should resign themselves to a subordinate position but rather that they should take over their own responsibilities. The US could do a great deal to help.

The President said he felt that we should seek areas where we can work together. He had the impression in his mind that in Europe and in the US there existed an idea that France and the US were at odds and this was mistaken. We did not always agree on everything but from these conversations it seemed that we were moving towards the same goals even though we might select different speeds and different roads. He felt that a good starting point might be if we could find in an appropriate way a common ground to work together in the Middle East. This would be a good start. We should seek something concrete, not something to put in a communique. That is not the way to do things. But if we could find a way through our experts to a symbolic act and a practical move. General de Gaulle said that we should try and find an agreement on the Middle East and make it prevail in the talks of the 4. The President then asked whether General de Gaulle believed that talks on Middle East would best be handled in framework of 4 working with United Nations and De Gaulle said that this was his view. The Four should actively seek to agree on a solution. It would not be enough merely to encourage Jarring to go on with his task. The French had outlined a possible solution and believed that the Soviets were not far from this. If the four could agree this would be important. If the French and US agreed it would be difficult for the Soviets to disagree said the President. De Gaulle concurred and the President said that the Soviets might be as alarmed about the situation in the Middle East as we were. Prime Minister Couve de Murville said that they might be even more frightened.

The President said that in the matter of monetary problems he felt that the most responsible way to handle this would be to have one of our experts talk to their expert to see what could be done in common. General de Gaulle commented that he was glad to hear that we recognized that there was a monetary problem. He did not believe that a large conference would be useful it would only engender speculation. We should talk on these matters with extreme discretion. French might find one person on their side to talk with our expert and they could advance cautiously and clarify the problems. The President said that whenever the French thought that this was the best way to handle things he hoped that they would let him know. He thought that if anything in recent years there had been too much speculation and publicity. Big meetings were rarely productive. General De Gaulle said that the monetary system had been set up at a time when the US had overwhelming financial and economic power. The French did not say that the monetary system is no good but times have changed and this should be considered. The French were ready to look into this matter with us with the greatest discretion and would study to see what person might be indicated to work with our expert. This could be done unofficially and without committing the countries in advance.

The President said that he had greatly appreciated this chance to talk with the General in such depth. He looked forward to seeing him again at dinner later and also on Sunday. He would like to ask one other question. He was going to see the Pope on Sunday. He had seen him twice before. The main problem in Italy was the strength of the communist vote this was the main cause of concern not only for the Christian Democrats but also for someone like President Saragat who was a socialist. He did not mean to sound indiscreet

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but could the Pope exercise influence on that very sensitive sector of the Italian electorate. This had in fact been done in 1948 and it had been very significant. Now the Church was opening to the left partly because of the ferment inside the Church and partly because of a feeling of detente etc.

General de Gaulle said that it was true that the Pope had great authority everywhere and in Italy above all. To the Italians he was a sovereign and the actions of the Pope, Episcopate and clergy had great political significance. Presently the Pope was being attacked from within the Church and that of course weakened his position. He has not however lost his authority and he will not let the communists win in Italy. There is a limit beyond which he will not let them go. General de Gaulle thought that the Italian Communists had reached the high tide mark and would go no further. The Communist Party of Italy was in fact drawing away from Moscow and was even condemning it on occasion something that would never have happened only a few years ago. He hoped that the President would tell the Pope what he had told him and would mention that they had talked about these things. He hoped that the President would encourage the Pope as the Pope would undoubtedly encourage him that all was not lost and that freedom will triumph. He believes that the US is not far from him and what the President was doing was an ecumenical gesture and a good one. General de Gaulle then said that in Italy there is a joke which says that it does not matter if there is no government there is the Pope, and for law and order there is the Corps of Carabinieri,

The meeting then concluded.

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