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June 19, 1953

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Discussion at the 150th Meeting of the
National Security Council, Thursday,
June 18, 1953

Present at the 150th meeting of the Council were the following: The President of the United States, presiding; the Vice President of the United States; the Secretary of State; the Secretary of Defense; and the Director for Mutual Security. Also present were the Secretary of the Treasury; the Director, Bureau of the Budget; Admiral Fechteler for the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Director of Central Intelligence; Robert Cutler, Special Assistant to the President; Lewis L. Strauss, Special Assistant to the President; C. D. Jackson, Special Assistant to the President; the Military Liaison Officer; the Executive Secretary, NSC; and the Deputy Executive Secretary, NSC.

There follows a summary of the discussion at the meeting and the chief points taken.

1. AGENDA FOR 150th NSC MEETING

The opening of the Council meeting was delayed three-quarters of an hour while the President conferred with the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Chief of Naval Operations and Assistant Secretary of Defense Frank Nash, with regard to the contents of a message from the President to Syngman Rhee. When the President entered the Cabinet Room at 10:45, Mr. Cutler suggested that, in view of the recent developments in Korea, the President might wish to postpone Council consideration of the regular agenda, since the agenda was largely concerned with items on the Far East which could not be considered until there was a clarification of the situation in South Korea.

The National Security Council:

Agreed that, in view of the developments in Korea and East Germany, action on the items scheduled for consideration at this meeting should be deferred.

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2. PRESIDENT RHEE'S RELEASE OF NORTH KOREAN PRISONERS OF WAR

The President's first remark concerning the release by President Rhee of North Korean prisoners of war, was that we seemed to have acquired another enemy instead of a friend. President Rhee had welched on his promise not to take unilateral action without consultation with the UN Command. Moreover, his action in freeing some 25,000 North Korean POW's was deliberate, carefully planned in advance, and carried out in defiance of the UN Command and of Rhee's own promise. Of course, said the President, it left us in a most difficult position, and he and his advisers had been composing a message which, by implication, informed Rhee that if he continued in this course it was "goodbye" to Korea. General Clark, said the President, cannot undertake to fight Rhee. Moreover, we are almost obliged to publish to the world what we are going to say in this message to Rhee. The whole free world is puzzled and dismayed. They realize that Rhee is in no position to carry on long by himself, and therefore they blame us, however unjustly, for what has happened. He had just heard, said the President, that there had been an uproar in the House of Commons when the news broke in London six hours ago. The President invited any suggestions from members of the Council as to how to handle this terrible situation. He said that he had not himself wholly realized the scope and magnitude of this release of prisoners, but he was now concerned lest the possibility of an armistice be completely destroyed. The only possible mitigating circumstance in Rhee's behavior was the fact that our own people had a few weeks ago considered such a move as Rhee had now actually made. In any case, said the President, they were drafting a very blunt telegram to President Rhee, telling him that if he did not behave himself we might have to move out.

Secretary Humphrey inquired how it would be possible to withdraw our forces from Korea without inviting a military disaster in the course of the move.

The President, however, said that if it proved necessary we could probably withdraw without serious loss to our own forces.

In response to a question from Mr. Stassen, the President made clear his conviction that Rhee's move was in no way related to the recent heavy Chinese Communist attacks, but it obviously had been planned weeks in advance. He then pointed out that the Council must not misunderstand his proposed message to Rhee. He was not going to say that we would actually pull out of Korea, because, for one thing, we do not want the enemy to imagine such a possibility, but in certain circumstances we might have no option but to do so.

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The President smiled and said "yes", if such a move actually commanded respect, but he pointed out that despite everything that has been said, President Rhee obviously had a great popular following in South Korea.

Mr. Cutler observed to the President that what he was really saying to the Council was that the whole Korean venture was over and that we were getting out. If that was indeed the President's view, Mr. Cutler stressed the necessity of a clear and forceful statement by the President that the ROK Government had broken faith with the United States. Otherwise, any U. S. withdrawal would have terrible repercussions both among our allies and among our own people.

Secretary Dulles asked to be heard, and stated his belief that the disaster was not irreparable if from now on it were correctly handled. It seemed plain to the Secretary of State that President Rhee was engaged in a last desperate effort to torpedo the armistice and to force the hand of the United States. If he realizes that his attempt won't work, Rhee may well feel compelled to give up. It will then be our task to find out whether the Communists really want an armistice so badly that they will be willing to overlook the release of the 25,000 prisoners. Certainly they had reacted violently to our own earlier proposal to effect the release of the North Korean prisoners, and of course it was a question how they would react to what was now an accomplished fact. It was Secretary Dulles' guess, however, that they were so anxious for an armistice that they would overlook what had happened. Nevertheless, we must take the strongest possible line with Rhee so that he will not imagine that he can actually run the show.

The President commented that the simple fact was that President Rhee and his supporters wanted to keep on fighting. That was the long and short of it.

Mr. Jackson said that it was important to tie in what had happened in South Korea with the uprisings in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Together, all these events provided a real chance to assay Communist strength and weakness. While we should certainly be stern with Rhee, it would be wrong not to push ahead for the armistice rather than to make any suggestion of withdrawal. The Communists themselves must be very agitated by the grave difficulties that they were confronting in East Germany and among the European satellites. We ought not ease this pressure, therefore, by any withdrawal from Korea which would provide a victory.

The President replied, facetiously, that if we were to play the game that Mr. Jackson suggested, it might be better to send a message of congratulation to President Rhee.

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Mr. Stassen, agreeing with Mr. Jackson, said that it seemed to him vital to keep on stepping up pressure on the Communists. This pressure, which had begun to be applied by the President and Secretary Dulles five months ago, was really beginning to hurt, and cracks in the Soviet edifice were beginning to be visible. Of course, added Mr. Stassen, we will have problems to contend with as regards our allies, but we must not relax this pressure.

While agreeing with this point of view, the President nevertheless pointed out that the United States must either assume responsibility for President Rhee's action in releasing these prisoners, or else it must strongly repudiate that action. If we accept what has happened without protest, our allies would regard it as tantamount to abandoning the coalition. The Communists, too, would be quick to exploit our weaknesses, for what had happened in Korea was certainly no victory. It could be interpreted to mean that we could not even control the ROK. Communist propaganda would shout that either the United States had no influence on the Republic of Korea, or else that the United States was really responsible for what President Rhee had done.

Secretary Dulles pointed out that the actual release had occurred simultaneously in four separate POW camps, and he anticipated that it would be followed up in two more such camps. Obviously, therefore, the whole thing had been planned in advance.

The President emphasized the terrible situation which this posed for General Taylor and General Clark. They could not conduct the defense of South Korea while ignorant of what the ROK forces in their rear would do next. How could we continue to provide ammunition for the ROK forces when we had no idea what their next move would be?

The Vice President interposed to state with great emphasis that the United States must find some way to remain in Korea. If we got out, he insisted, it would constitute a great Communist victory, no matter what we said in explanation of our withdrawal.

Both the President and Mr. Stassen expressed agreement with this sentiment, but the President reverted to his offer of June 6 and again emphasized the violation of the promise by Syngman Rhee not to take unilateral action without consultation. Rhee had broken his word, and the President pointed out that our national self-respect was involved in what had happened.

Mr. Stassen said that it was barely possible that Rhee's action was really evidence that his Government was going to accept the armistice and that the freeing of the prisoners was simply a move to save face in the course of capitulating.

To learn more about The President said this might be true if there were an armistice.

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Secretary Dulles warned that if Rhee managed to get away with this move, and unless he wholly accepts the authority of the UN Command, we could not go on, and we would certainly get no armistice. Either Rhee accepts our authority or we shall be obliged to go our separate ways. However, added Secretary Dulles, if we hit him hard now in this message, Rhee will probably elect to save face and accept an armistice.

The President then expressed his concern again as to the repercussions on our allies, and suggested to Secretary Dulles the advisability of calling in two or three of their Ambassadors in Washington in order to inform them of the contents of the private message he was sending to President Rhee. Over and beyond this message, of course, we must make a public announcement that we are repudiating Rhee's action.

Mr. Stassen questioned again, as he had earlier in the discussion, whether we could properly accuse Rhee of breaking his word, in view of the fact that he had never actually agreed to the proposed processing of the North Korean prisoners of war as anticipated in the forthcoming armistice.

Secretary Dulles and the President explained again to Mr. Stassen the commitments which President Rhee had made and broken with respect to the unilateral action, and the President warned that unless we repudiated what Rhee had done we would go down as the biggest frauds in history. After all, we had been negotiating on this prisoner-of-war issue for a good many months, and we could not jeopardize our good faith in these negotiations.

Mr. Stassen replied that all this was doubtless true, but the fact remained that we could not now get out of Korea, and that if Rhee would not cease and desist

The President again stated that he was not, in his message to Rhee, telling him that we were going to get out if he did not capitulate, nor even that he must return the released prisoners; but we were telling him bluntly that he had broken his word and that if he would not agree to behave himself in the future we had no alternative but to make other arrangements in Korea.

Mr. Cutler queried the wisdom of putting any faith in Rhee's future promises, especially since to do so involved risking the lives of American soldiers.

The President replied that there seemed no clear alternative to trusting Rhee, and besides, he felt reasonably sure that if it came to a showdown, a very large part of the armed forces of the Republic

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of Korea would elect to stay in the lines with our own forces or to stay with us in sufficient numbers so that we could at least withdraw and create a defensible perimeter around Pusan.

Secretary Wilson observed that it seemed that the ROK prisoner guards who had permitted the release were not actually responsible to the Chief of Staff of the ROK Army, but were responsible to the Provost Marshal, who was in effect the head of the internal police and directly under President Rhee.

This statement was questioned by Mr. Allen Dulles, but Admiral Fechteler pointed out that the ignorant guards had probably in fact carried out orders from Rhee's man whether they should have done so or not.

There then ensued a discussion of the probable allied reaction, and especially the British reaction, to what had happened. The President said facetiously that it would probably be similar to the behavior of some of his opposition in Congress. They would curse us, but they would offer no constructive suggestions for how to meet the problem.

Mr. Stassen suggested that we tell the British that our Rhee is like their Mossadegh--they would certainly understand that.

The President then summed up the discussion by stating that if no one had any better suggestion, he proposed to go ahead with the present plan for issuing a public repudiation of Rhee's action and sending a very tough private message to President Rhee. By and large, he added, he was doubtful if it would be actually necessary to contemplate a withdrawal of our forces to Pusan, because Rhee wanted to advance, not to retreat.

Mr. Cutler again expressed his great anxiety over the possibility that the ROK forces could endanger our own men by further unilateral action, either by pulling out of the line or else by involving us in all-out war in Korea.

The President said that he too was concerned, and that in certain contingencies perhaps the only quick way to end the danger was the coup d'etat. Certainly, he added, this course of action deserved consideration.


the President continued on to say that of course we ourselves "don't actually do it; we merely assure immediate recognition to those in Korea who would bring the thing off."

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Admiral Fechteler thought it would be desirable to remind the Council that messages from General Clark, dated May 14 and May 25, 1953, indicated that Clark knew that Rhee was at least contemplating taking the action which he had now taken. Accordingly, said Admiral Fechteler, Clark could scarcely have been surprised at what had happened.

Secretary Wilson commented that at one time the Defense Department had actually contemplated detailing British troops to guard these prisoners of war, but that General Collins had made strenuous objections. Furthermore, continued Secretary Wilson, aside from the loss of face, he rather doubted whether our people in Korea felt too badly about what had happened or even felt that it had rendered the rear areas insecure. Secretary Wilson was inclined to think they judged it a little coup of no great importance.

The National Security Council:

Agreed that the United States should repudiate President Rhee's unilateral action in releasing North Korean prisoners of war as a violation of his agreement with the UN Command, and should state that, unless he gives unequivocal assurance that he will abide by the actions of the United Nations Command in accordance with such agreement, the United States will have to effect other arrangements.

NOTE: A message from the President to this effect subsequently transmitted to President Rhee.

3. THE RIOTS IN EAST GERMANY AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The Director of Central Intelligence stated that he wished in his briefing to relate the recent events in East Berlin and Czechoslovakia to the series of developments which had resulted in what was called Molotov's "soft" policy. He then listed the specific actions of the Soviet Government with regard to Germany, and noted that the objective of all these actions was to support the Soviet policy for the unification of Germany in the interest of the Soviet Union. He then went on to describe the similar softening processes with regard to Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Iran, and Israel, culminating with a comment on the over-all Soviet objective of encouraging trade with the free world to the point of hinting their willingness to provide the free world with strategic materials in return for consumers goods. Mr. Dulles then noted the not less significant evidences of a relaxation of harshness within the Soviet Union itself. All these taken together, continued Mr. Dulles, obviously had not escaped the notice of the satellite peoples, who evidently were interpreting the soft policy as offering real possibilities of action against the Soviet Union without the terrible risks which would have been incurred under Stalin.