

**April 5, 1963 Conversation between Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, Ambassador at Large, Llewellyn E Thompson, Attorney General, Robert Kennedy and President John F. Kennedy**

Tape 79.2 JFKPOF-MTG-79-020201 (starts at 8:36) and 79.3 and -030101-----RR

79.2

Attorney General, Robert Kennedy (RFK) began by saying that, when Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin made the appointment with him, he tried to call Llewellyn (Tommy) Thompson (LET) but couldn't get ahold of him, so he saw Dobrynin alone. He said that Dobrynin was very pleasant and that he arrived with his documents wrapped up in a newspaper. The first part of the conversation was about Norman Cousins, who was seeking to see Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (NSK) while on his trip to the USS. Dobrynin said Khrushchev was going to see him and the Kennedys speculate that Khrushchev was agreeing to see Cousins because he thought Cousins was close to the Kennedys. Rusk said that Cousins had seen him about meeting Khrushchev and he told Cousins he should strictly as a private citizen. RFK described the meeting with Dobrynin. It followed the usual procedure, which was that Dobrynin would show RFK the notes.

RFK: He handed me the document and he said, "Now I want you do understand this is a *talking* document. This is what I'm saying to you, I have no way to expedite it. Maybe you'd like to read it." Now that's the usual procedure that he follows. And so, it was much thicker, it was about twice as big as any that he'd given to me... and it went through all of these things. And, again, that's the summary. And I read the document once. ... Studied it... summary of the points that remained. Uh, the *theme* that I thought was a man that had gotten into some difficulty or problems and was having a struggle of some kind and wanted to prove how tough he was. He'd just gotten knocked down and he wanted to get up and he ... yelled and scream to prove that he's as tough as the next fellow and had some kind of inferiority complex and thought that [by] going round and yelling and standing up that everything would be equal again.... What struck me and ... struck me and quite forcefully was this complete lack of understanding about our whole system, the United States and the President. I meant his idea that he's really so backwards that the country is run by capitalists and monopolists that want to make war profits and that they're the ones that are making policy and the Rockefellers the kind of stuff I heard from the communist students in Japan. And that was the Idea through all of this with a very a uh, uh, tough, unpleasant kind of a message.

LET asks what was mentioned first, nuclear testing or Cuba? RFK says it was testing first and LET asks if he emphasized Cuba but RFK says they were about equal. About the testing, RFK says that Dobrynin brought up testing first because it was the last thing he and RFK talked about. RFK says Khrushchev couldn't understand why we couldn't accept 2 or three inspections. We couldn't understand why they couldn't go up to 7. The purpose of the letter was to answer that, and then he gets into the Cuba thing. Bundy(?) asks if Dobrynin says that the letter is personally from Khrushchev and RFK says Dob told him "this is from me" but it comes from "them." "It was written as if he was talking to me."

Then quoting the letter, "I have seen in the newspapers here statements that have been made and I want you to know Mr. Khrushchev gets concerned about them." Then RFK commented the letter was full of "those funny phrases that Khrushchev uses."

Ambassador to Moscow, Foy Kohler, was given a message to deliver to Khrushchev, to reassure the Soviets on?... Garbled section where Berlin and Macmillan are also mentioned. Rusk (?) "I should not see Dobrynin with a basically negative position on UN troops tomorrow, while this is pending." More garbled. Rusk says LET should call Dobrynin and tell him that Rusk cannot see him the next day but that JFK would be writing him [Khrushchev] a letter in the next few days to "put a good many of these thing into perspective." Rusk was going to see the French and British foreign ministers in Paris that Monday, about the non-transfer of nuclear weapons. RFK says Khrushchev talked about this in his letter too. Rusk says that there were a number of things to talk about on Cuba to give perspective to overflights, to explain to Khrushchev that the Cuba overflights were "an instrument," Bundy (?) adds, "not to build up tensions but to keep things under control." Rusk goes on, "You have to have some basis on which to assure the American people that there are not great threats building up on Cuba."

In discussing who should go to Moscow to fix this and other misunderstandings, Rusk says he could go to Moscow after a meeting in India at the end of the month. Kennedy mentions sending Bobby to Moscow under the cover of looking at their legal system or possibly their universities. [He keeps insisting on sending Bobby throughout the conversation]. JFK says that one of the things he gets from Bobby is that Khrushchev thinks that "we are treating him with contempt, indifference or not important." Rusk points out no Secretary of State has been to Moscow since 1947, "but Gromyko had been to DC at least a dozen times... there are always problems with going to Moscow. ... Part of this depends on how we decide to respond to Macmillan's proposal... for the summit. " "The other proposal to open up a way for a special emissary to open up the nuclear test business." JFK asks, "What are we doing about the Macmillan letter?" Someone replies that it is being "vetted."

They go back to discussing a cover story for the trip. They Speculate that visiting universities and bar associations in India first and then Moscow on the way back might be better, but someone says "I wonder if that cover would mean anything as far as the Soviet Union is concerned." Thompson points out that Khrushchev will not be in Moscow for some time yet. Rusk says that, because of the Norman Cousins trip, Khrushchev may come back earlier than he was expected.

JFK: We seem to be so far apart as far their understanding of our problems. Fact of the matter is, they should be appreciative of why we have taken three months because of the struggle in the US which he seems to be wholly unaware of, which we haven't managed but we are on top of...we had a bad situation in the US about Cuba...a month ago we couldn't be talking about arresting refugees making raids on Cuba ... Now we can, so we have substantially improved our control ...

JFK asks Thompson if he sees any merit in sending someone over either Rusk or RFK to look at universities or look at the legal system ...

LET: Well I think the main thing would be they [the Soviets] are undoubtedly dead center over the Chinese thing and I could see advantage to showing him the

door was open in this way. This last letter to the Chinese [presumably from Khrushchev, published the day before] is pretty ominous as far as we are concerned. There – it's got a lot of stuff in here. He puts one item on the agenda as they struggle against the imperialism by the United States; he mentions his confidence of victory in South Vietnam, that sort of thing... it's pretty bad now...

Discussion between JFK and LET about the letter and an invitation to Mao come to Moscow. Will he accept the invitation. LET says, not and that Khrushchev doesn't expect him to either. (23:17)

LET: "The only question for these issues is, where are the lower level [Chinese] groups going to meet? They're trying to maneuver it to be in Moscow..."

JFK: "Do you think there will be a reconciliation?"

LET: "Not really and I think this is indicated there. They felt that ...makes one reference to State relations rather than Party and I think it's pretty clear they're not going to solve it, but it may get – push it under the rug."

JFK bemoans time lost and says, "I don't know where we could have gone, but we can try."

LET: "I think the main thing here is, uh, I had the feeling that, and said to the Secretary, you might want to just, the day before this thing happened, that I felt their military were going to do something."

TAPE EXCISED 1:24 Starts up again at 24:41

Kennedy asks Thompson directly what his feeling is...if there is any use if Rusk or Bobby go. Thompson says a lot depends on timing.

LET: "In either case no matter what your intentions are, you are bound to get into a full discussion on the Cuba thing. This is what is mainly on his mind. Being pressed as he is on every side, he is concerned we are going to knock Castro off one way or another at a time he cannot afford it. If he loses Cuba at this time on top of everything else, he is going to have to be the goat [scapegoat], or there's a good chance of it. I think his position is not shaky now but if this happens ....he is concerned particularly about [us] twice firing on soviet ships with the military feeling the way they do, he had to do something about it. That's really what kicked this move off."

Background discussion of which ship...

LET: "But this, this undoubtedly this message was written or steamed up in his mind...written before he *knew* we were going to ....."

JFK interrupts with garbled discussion. Not clear. Ends with "he may have made reference to our previous statements."

LET: I would think so. At least he really didn't know that we were really following through on....." [We interpret this to be in regard to Khrushchev's reference to

Cuban émigré groups' private attacks on Soviet ships around Cuba and more recent US efforts to curtail them.]

Bundy: "I gather from the letter they knew there were strong steps being taken [to curtail Cuban exile attacks]....

Rusk: "But let me ask this, because this could be fairly important...what impression do you get from what you read that what he was trying to do was to reopen this channel?"

JFK: "Well, there was on the last page seems to be saying...why I sent the memorandum is because you people have been making such provocative statements but if you want to do it I think it is helpful and I would be glad to do it, something like that..."

Rusk: "I think it is important to have something go back fairly quickly as a result of Dobrynin's talk with you...One way would be to tell him today that you were interested in opening this channel, and that you will be writing."

RFK: "You don't want to give the impression -- as it was a pretty strong letter -- that suddenly we have thought a good deal about it."

LET suggests pinning it on postponing Rusk's talk [with Dobrynin]. RFK suggests LET talking to him informally.

JFK: suggests LET call up and say, "talks have been cancelled...why don't you [Dobrynin] and I[LET] get together and talk about this...and then talk about this incident try to get across some of these ideas of what we want to do...we want to reopen this but we've got to do it with mutual respect. They shouldn't have the idea we are kicking them around, but also there has to be an understanding of what the problems are here and to try to do it by name calling is not going to do it."

RUSK: "The memorandum seems to slide by the Jupiter thing." [referring to the NATO missiles in Turkey]

RFK: "Yeah, the last conversation I had I indicated we would start getting them out."

TAPE EXCISED [We suggest a FOIA request because this is no longer secret.]

They discuss how to respond to Dobrynin. They say that they will tell him that Kennedy was preparing a letter to NSK. Thompson speculated that, once NSK knew a pen pal letter was coming it "will hold things off." Otherwise NSK might take down a plane. And RFK says the important thing is to resolve problems. Then Thompson says they should try to "find out what he [Dobrynin] thinks is behind all of this."

Tape 79.3

They decide to take NSK's offer to open up the pen pal letter channel again because he "might be desperate" and to keep him from "doing something rash".

LET: "We need to make clear, but in very careful language, that if they shoot down a plane this will be quite an issue. He might need this.... Make one reference to this. It is difficult for him to get messages with reference to these overflights...I do try to do this in a general way so it doesn't rub it in that he is agreeing to these, you see."

They go back to the difficulty of communication, and bemoan that they "didn't get across to Kohler exactly what we had in mind so he didn't get across to the Russians exactly what we had in mind."

JFK: "Khrushchev is not getting any contact with us. With this administration...a lack of understanding knowledge what the President thinks, about what the country is like and we are trying to do...this plays a role what they understand. There was a misunderstanding...and perhaps you could get on a plane and at least he won't do something wild."

Thompson agrees that Khrushchev can "work themselves up when he only hears one side of it."

RFK suggests they should talk to Dobrynin because he didn't think that letter sounded like Dobrynin, nor did he think that Dobrynin believed what was in it. Then RFK describes conversations with his Soviet backchannel, Georgi Bolshakov. RFK says Bolshakov claims there were some instances when he saved the situation...because of false reporting that was coming back to Moscow, but then RFK expresses doubt because "Dobrynin is always sticking it to Bolshakov. So you don't ever know."

RFK: "But the way that letter was written ...that was like a fellow who just came off Mars and just came down and filled with poison. And I think back about how easy it is if you only hear one side of it... and someone keeps talking...spread this stuff in your ear ... It is pretty tough to get back and get acclimated to think there is anything good about the other fellow...other than the fact that he is trying to give you the shaft right up to your gullet."

Either Rusk or Bundy says, "That's why I wondered how much of this was Khrushchev, and how much was cranked in from foreign office." Thompson judges it was personal from Khrushchev.

They decide a response letter will be written and it seems it was decided Rusk would go. JFK wonders if that should be mentioned in the letter. Then he opines that RFK ought to go, maybe a month later or at the same time. Discussion again about who should go. Kennedy wants to say in his letter that one or the other will go in early May...which "will purchase us some time." Rusk is worried about domestic political reaction if RFK goes. It would require "the right cover." Bundy thinks the "cover would be ripped right off," in which case it would be a "very serious visit." JFK disagrees, still presses for RFK, says "Some people will grumble but to hell with them. Domestic policy doesn't bother me."

Then he says it is up to the Secretary. If the Secretary decides to go..."no sense in both of them going."

Rusk says he'd like to make his own judgment about it, after he speaks to Dobrynin and Mr. [French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de] Murville about non transfer point because he thinks "that is worth doing something about."

JFK: "What is your opinion Tommy? ...About the Secretary or Bobby going."

LET: "Well I see an advantage in having contact with him to show there is an alternative to this turning towards a hard line. Hard to read on this Chinese thing how far he really needs to go. Everything points, it seems to me, the fact that they are considering switching to a considerably harder line. Of course this raises problems. On the other hand, as I say, I don't think you can -either the Secretary or Bobby could go without getting involved pretty deeply into what really amounts to negotiations. I mean, he will bring up the Cuban thing. He will say as long as you are putting pressure on Castro this way, this is intolerable and so on. This is the thing that worries him."

Rusk expresses concern that they might get hit with an ultimatum...like what happened in Vienna.

LET: "There is a terrific disadvantage from the point of view of our allies ... the domestic thing. The Germans are so suspicious with the Berlin talks started. No matter what you say or the arrangement is, they will be..."

JFK doesn't see it. It wouldn't bother him if some German went to Moscow. If RFK went to look at the Universities or legal system....

They discuss the timing and Rusk offers that if they picked early May, then Bundy says they could send Averell Harriman. But no one pursued that suggestion. They decide to "war game this out a little bit."

JFK goes back to pushing for RFK. They discuss what kind of invitation? What would be Bobby's mission? The university or the law? There would have to be a cover that sticks. But Thompson points out that with the present Soviet crackdown on the cultural world, the legal system would not be a good idea. University would be better since they were still in session.

JFK says *somebody* ought to go. They don't see what harm it does... it could do some good... in May... LET suggests that the letter say JFK is sending a representative before too long and based on the fact there are big misunderstandings between us. Bundy says to be effective, there would have to be an invitation.

Rusk says he already received an invitation and indicates he would like to go. [Gromyko had invited Rusk apparently some time back.]

Kennedy ignores this and goes back to RFK, asks that in the event Bobby went, did they think the education system and the university cover would hold.

LET: "Not with the public in general... not with the allies. The Germans I think really and French would be concerned we were going to do something on Berlin.... It undoubtedly would be valuable but the question if the price is high."

JFK: "I don't think the price is that high."

Bundy thinks that it would be alright if only the people in the room knew that RFK was going on a serious mission and if all background papers for the Attorney General's vacation trip were organized that way and everyone "really stuck to that."

They speculated that perhaps it could be camouflaged by having RFK going see universities in Sweden, Finland, then include the university of Leningrad, and go to Moscow as a courtesy call and then perhaps on to Poland, since there are US students in each of these universities. "So it would look like a highly developed, organized, special trip for a single purpose."

They discuss possible fallout with the allies. LET says we should tell the allies the seriousness of this business that Khrushchev was threatening to shoot down a plane, to give them a bit of a warning in case it happens, that there are "elements of danger" over Cuba. What would the US reaction be if there were a serious threat? JFK says he has asked Defense Secretary Robert McNamara for a contingency plan.

TAPE EXCISED

JFK: "And we don't want to send another one up there 'cause it would be inviting it to be shot down. We should have a drone."

Garbled section

They conclude that Thompson should have "as informal a meeting as possible" with Dobrynin, "to give Dobrynin atmosphere and background..." and to mention that JFK would send Khrushchev a letter.

JFK: "We're going to send somebody over there, either you [Rusk] or Bobby."

Rusk: It would be hard for me to go without something specific.

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Thompson met with Dobrynin to float the idea of someone seeing Khrushchev to sort out these misunderstandings, and asks if that would be well received and was told yes. Then he asked who the Soviets would prefer, Rusk or RFK, and Dobrynin got back to him later that Khrushchev preferred Rusk, who ultimately went, but not until August. Rusk and Thompson both went to visit Khrushchev at the Black Sea after signing the Limited Test Ban in Moscow as the cover. Averell Harriman did go over as well, but to talk about a Test Ban Treaty which was encouraged by Macmillan. As Thompson put it in a letter to Foy Kohler on May 1, the "mountain was coming to Mohammed."

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