

## DOCUMENT No. 109: Minutes of the U.S. National Security Council Meeting on the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, August 20, 1968

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Source: National Security Council Box No. 3, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, August 20, 1968, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

*This document records an emergency meeting on August 20, 1968, of the U.S. National Security Council, called by President Lyndon Johnson. The discussion reflects the surprise, dismay, and caution of U.S. officials in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.*

*None of the officials appears to have anticipated a Soviet invasion. Most of the president's senior advisers voice opposition to any forceful response for fear of damaging relations with the Soviet Union or of provoking a Soviet retaliatory blockade against West Berlin. Vice President Hubert Humphrey represents the majority opinion when he declares that in this "delicate" situation "we need to show caution" and should do little more for the time being than "snort and talk." That view appears to be shared by President Johnson himself. The only time the possibility of a U.S. military response is addressed is when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, flatly rules out any such options: "There is no military action we can take."*

The NSC meeting notes were taken by White House Aide Tom Johnson.

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SECRET

NOTES ON EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE  
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

AUGUST 20, 1968

THOSE ATTENDING THE MEETING WERE:<sup>3</sup>

The President  
Secretary Rusk  
General Wheeler  
CIA Director Helms  
The Vice President  
Ambassador Ball  
Walt Rostow  
Leonard Marks  
George Christian  
Tom Johnson

*Secretary Rusk:* This surprises me.

*Secretary Clifford:* It does me too.

*General Wheeler:* Ambassador Bohlen was uneasy about this.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In order, these were: President Lyndon Johnson; the Secretary of State Dean Rusk; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle Wheeler; the CIA Director Richard Helms; Vice President Hubert Humphrey; the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations (and former Under Secretary of State) George Ball; the Assistant to the President for National Security Walt Rostow; the Director of the U.S. Information Agency Leonard Marks; the Presidential Press Secretary George Christian; and a Top Personal Aide to the President Tom Johnson. Another participant in the meeting, who for some reason was not listed here, was the Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bohlen, the deputy under secretary of state for political affairs, had previously served as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union.

*CIA Director Helms:* This was what their big meeting was about today.

*Walt Rostow:* The evidence is: (1) Withdrew Soviet's planes to Poland. (2) Brought them back. [One line excised.] (4) Maneuvers.

*CIA Director Helms:* On 14 August exercise started.<sup>5</sup>

*General Wheeler:* Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and USSR Troops have moved in:

23 aircraft into Poland  
50 aircraft into border area  
50 aircraft entered Czechoslovakia

*Walt Rostow:* Aircraft: 50 in Czechoslovakia

18 in S. W. Poland  
44 in central Poland

Prague domestic radio tells people not to resist.

*The President:* I asked you to come here because of the alarm of the last few hours. Ambassador Dobrynin called me late today with a very "urgent" message. He read from a long-hand note.<sup>6</sup> (INSERT A)

I told him we would give it our attention. He said they were invading Czechoslovakia because the Czechs had asked them to come in.

I notified the secretary of state and called this NSC meeting to analyze these actions and try to determine what our national interest is.

It is one country invading another communist country. It is aggression. There is danger in aggression anywhere.

We need to give immediate thought to the timing of the meeting with Soviets. The agenda is more full now than before. We must discuss all problems before us. Is October agreeable or should we meet earlier.

There are serious questions: (1) Can we talk now after this. (2) Does our presence look as though we condone this movement.

It demonstrates the difficulty the platform committee has in working out strategy at the Hilton Hotel. What do we do?

*Secretary Rusk:* First, I am surprised by the timing of this action. I am disappointed, particularly in light of their favorable messages on (1) nuclear explosion, (2) strategic missile talks (3) your meeting. This shows they hold the USA in contempt.

*Walt Rostow:* Read FBIS 07 Bulletin (INSERT B)

*Secretary Rusk:* We do not know yet if the Czechs will raise a voice. There is not a great deal we can do if they don't. We could support the Czechs in the United Nations and through USIA. If we do they can put pressure on the West, particularly Berlin. Khrushchev called Berlin the testicles of the West and when he wanted to create pressure he squeezed there.

*Secretary Rusk:* Draft reply to Dobrynin read.

We have a public problem as well. We must decide what moral force and political force we should bring to bear. The big question is what the Czech reaction will be. I would not move ahead in next day or so.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably, this refers to the "Horizon" exercises, which actually began on 11 August.

<sup>6</sup> The Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatolii Dobrynin, contacted President Johnson with a "very urgent" message a few hours before the president convened the NSC. The message turned out to be a cable from Moscow explaining that Soviet troops were entering Czechoslovakia "at the invitation of the Czechoslovak government" to remedy a "gravely deteriorating situation." The cable claimed that this action would "in no way affect U.S. state interests" and expressed hope that the move would not cause "a worsening of Soviet-American relations."

*The President:* We should talk to Dobrynin tonight.

*Secretary Rusk:* In order to let the press know I'll call him in to give him our views, it will be good to position ourselves publicly.

*Walt Rostow:* There are two points in Rusk's statement.

*The President:* I am amazed that Dobrynin told me it was at the request of the Czech government and the Czech government was never told.

We must talk to him about the other announcement.

*The President:* We reviewed information given by Ambassador Dobrynin.

*The President* instructed Rusk to ask Dobrynin in to discuss this matter. The Secretary could say:

(a) Astonished at this news.

(b) Not opportune time to make announcement tomorrow.

Tell allies we are dismayed and outline what should be anticipated.

*Secretary Clifford:* They had the first meeting. It seemed to go well. They had a meeting of the Warsaw Pact countries.<sup>7</sup>

I am not clear as to the reason why the Soviets took this action.

*The President:* We have been fearful that they have lost so much face that they had to return. They could not stand to move in until all the other ducks were lined in a row.

*CIA Director Helms:* It is not what has happened but what has not happened. They wanted to see if the Czechs would clamp down on the press. They did not.

*The President:* Wasn't this hard to swallow?

*CIA Director Helms:* Yes. Military exercises were designed to see how the troops could move in.

*The President:* Should the Secretary talk to Dobrynin tonight?

*CIA Director Helms:* Yes.

*Secretary Clifford:* Czechoslovakia is just one piece on the chessboard. This march will have an effect on Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary. We must visualize what effect this will have on other countries.

*Secretary Clifford:* I agree we have to speak to Dobrynin. We have to delay this announcement.

*The President:* This seems strange in light of (a) peaceful uses of atomic energy and (b) the scheduled Geneva meeting. (c) The scheduled Geneva announcement. Then this bombshell.

*Secretary Clifford:* It may be that Supreme Soviet rumblings caused this.<sup>8</sup>

*Ambassador Ball:* They have been concerned about the internal structure of the Warsaw Pact and about not destroying the relationship with the United States.

This occurred just before the Democratic convention, just as the Hungarian invasion occurred before election.

<sup>7</sup> These appear to be references to the Āierna and Bratislava meetings.

<sup>8</sup> Clifford is likely confusing the Supreme Soviet with the CPSU Politburo or the CPSU Central Committee. The Supreme Soviet was a figurehead parliament that met only one or two days a year.

We can't be idle in the United Nations about this.

*General Wheeler:* There is no military action we can take. We do not have the forces to do it. This approach is cynical to the Nth degree. They have had CPX exercise and troops on the border. I think this message is an insult to the United States.

They say keep your hands off.

Dean (Secretary Rusk) should say the future course of US-USSR relations depends on how this is handled.

*The President:* A. Do we send for him? B. Do we say no announcement? C. Do we say we are utterly dismayed by it. D. Cannot reconcile his statement with other statements we've received.

*Secretary Rusk:* Czechoslovakia is the 3rd arms supplier to Vietnam.

*General Wheeler:* That is because they were told to.

*Secretary Clifford:* Let's get to the heart of this matter. They may be sincerely conciliatory. Suppose there is no combat. Suppose there is a pullout. They had a lot of troops in there two weeks ago.

*The President:* I sympathize with General Wheeler's views. We do not have to say what we feel. 1. Call in Dobrynin. 2. Tell him we won't make announcement. 3. Tell him we asked Council to meet.

*The Vice President:* We need to show caution. The Czechs have touched the heart of the communist revolution. All you can do is snort and talk.

Your plan is right. We are in a more delicate situation than at the time of Hungary because of the developing relations with the USSR.

*Ambassador Ball:* What do we do effectively. What do we do publicly. We have a bad family problem. We may look like a paper tiger.

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11:10 A.M.  
President's Office

THOSE PRESENT:

The President  
Secretary Rusk  
Walt Rostow  
George Christian  
Tom Johnson

Draft statement read.

*Secretary Rusk:* I told the Soviet ambassador last night we could not reconcile statements.

*George Christian:* I prefer the tougher statement.

*Secretary Rusk:* The Czech mission at the UN.

*The President:* Ambassador Ball has been instructed to join with other nations in the United Nations and vigorously express our protest of this unwarranted action. And to insist upon the Charter rights.