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Monday, October 9, 1967, 1:45 P.M.

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Herter Record of Eisenhower-Kennedy Discussion of
Laos on January 19, 1961

Pres file

Secretary Rusk has been sent a copy of the attached Secret Record of the January 19, 1961, Eisenhower-Kennedy discussion of Laos and Southeast Asia. It was written by Christian Herter, then Secretary of State, on the day of the meeting.

On page 3 of the Record there is an important additional point which was not in the Clark Clifford memorandum which you have seen.

Secretary Rusk plans to use this record as well as the Clifford memorandum when he briefs the Cabinet tomorrow at dinner.

The Herter paper is a privileged document which we obtained from the Eisenhower Library in Abilene with the permission of Herter, Jr., for use within the Government.

W. W. Rostow

Attachment

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E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.4(b)

White House Communications, Feb. 24, 1983

By *reg/ll*, NARA, Date 10-11-91

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January 19, 1961

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Senator Kennedy asked the President if the problem of Laos could be developed and the President asked me if I would outline the situation. I began by pointing out that there were two separate problems in Laos which were quite closely interlocked: the first was the military situation; the second was the political situation and the possibilities of achieving a political settlement of the problems besetting that country.

With respect to the military situation, I merely stated that it was one of very real uncertainty as of now, with the factor disturbing us most being the unwillingness of the armed forces of the recognized Government to fight despite the logistical support which we had been able to give them in the supplying of materiel of war. I also said that a political settlement might well be affected in large measure by the military situation as of any given time.

On the political front, I pointed out that a number of different suggestions had been made by various governments. I then outlined the provisions of the Geneva Accord which had three objectives in mind, the first being the cessation of fighting, the second the integration of Pathet Lao elements in the Government and Pathet Lao troops into the regular military forces, and, third, the cessation of outside interference in the internal affairs of Laos. I pointed out that in 1957 all parties, including the Pathet Lao, in Laos had agreed that the International Control Commission, which had been set up by the Geneva Accord in order to achieve these objectives, had successfully completed its mission, after which it had adjourned sine die and left the country. I also explained the terms of the SEATO Alliance in which the signatories had taken the solemn obligation to come to the aid of the Government of Laos in the event that it requested assistance as a result of aggression from the outside.

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I then pointed out that in December the Indian Government had requested the two co-chairmen set up under the Geneva Accord, namely, the Foreign Minister of Great Britain, and the Foreign Minister of Soviet Russia, to give consideration to the reactivation of the ICC through a formal request to the three nations represented on that Commission, namely, the Indian chairman, the Pole and the Canadian. No formal reply had yet been sent to the Indians by the co-chairmen since the latter had not yet discussed what joint action they might take. I pointed out that in the last few days we have had a number of discussions with the British and Canadian Ambassadors here over the type of draft reply to the Indians which the British wished to submit to Gromyko for possible joint action. The sticking point in our opinion with respect to our approval of the drafts submitted by the British was that the British refused to refer to the existing Government of Laos, which we consider the legal government, because they were convinced that any such reference would lead to the rejection of any joint effort because the Soviets recognize only the Souvanna Phouma Government, which is non-existent except for himself living in Cambodia. I said, however, that we had come to a tentative agreement which might lead the British to go ahead anyway, and that we reserved our rights depending on further developments with respect to supporting this action with the Government of Laos in the event of agreement between Gromyko and Lord Home.

At this point, I laid particular stress on the fact that I felt it would be futile to send the ICC back into Laos unless its terms of reference were clear and unless it presented itself in the first instance to what is clearly the Constitutional Government of Laos. I then explained that this matter was still in a fluid state, although the Soviets had indicated quite clearly that they wished to have a meeting of all the nations who were signatories to the Geneva Accord in order to work out new terms of reference for the ICC, but that there had not been any great enthusiasm shown by any nation for such a move.

Another alternative

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Another alternative, from the point of view of an international settlement, was that offered by Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, who wished to call a conference in Cambodia of all the signatories to the Geneva Accord, plus the neutral nations of Southeast Asia and the United States. To Prince Sihanouk's message with respect to this subject, we had replied saying that we were giving his suggestion serious consideration in conjunction with other suggested moves, and without encouraging any other steps in this direction, did not close the door completely on such a conference.

Senator Kennedy then asked me a direct question: "What did the outgoing Administration recommend should be the next step that should be taken?" As this question was addressed to me, I pointed out that if a political settlement were possible without setting up a new Government in Laos which would include the Communists, I felt this was undoubtedly the most desirable solution. On the other hand, I indicated that the historic experience of the last fifteen years indicated clearly that governments which included Communist representatives had never succeeded and had always led either to the elimination of the Communists or to complete take-over by the Communists. I indicated that I thought the chances of working out a political solution depended in large measure on the status of the military situation. I then pointed out that the legal government of Laos had the right at any time to formally request the assistance of SEATO should external aggression in Laos be established. In our view, the Soviet airlift constituted such aggression, even though the Soviets denied its existence. In the event of such a request by Laos being made to SEATO, there was a solemn obligation of the signatories to go to the assistance of Laos and I felt that we had no choice but to honor that obligation even though we knew that the British and French hoped such a request would never be made and that, certainly in the case of the French, there was doubt whether they would feel they had to honor that obligation. I explained the anxiety already expressed to us by the Thais, Philippines and Pakistanis as to whether or not this alliance, on which they counted so heavily for their own self-defense against Communist aggression, was in fact only a paper tiger or was one in which the big nations would honor their pledge of assistance. I then added that I could see no

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alternative for us but to honor our obligation, to which the President added that he was confident the Thais, Pakistanis and Philippines would take the same position ;but that he had doubts with regard to the other SEATO members.

Senator Kennedy then inquired with regard to the military situation and Secretary Gates gave an outline of what the most recent deployment of ships and airlift consisted of and, in answer to a specific question from the Senator, gave the length of time which it would take to deploy in Laos itself the equivalent of 12,000 men and 12,000 tons of equipment.

Christian A. Herter

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