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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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May 7, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR

THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Action on Nuclear Assistance to France

In March and April 1962, the question of nuclear assistance to de Gaulle became active. The principal sources of concern and advocacy were three.

First, there was Ambassador Gavin in Paris. He had become deeply bothered by the gradual deterioration of Franco-American relations, and he was persuaded that the principal cause of this difficulty lay in the failure of the United States to meet the hopes of the French in the nuclear field. He foresaw that with the ending of the struggle in Algeria de Gaulle would become not less but more difficult, and he believed, as Ambassadors in Paris have characteristically believed, that a major improvement could be accomplished if only the United States would respond to the interests and desires of General de Gaulle.

The second main source of interest was in the Pentagon; it derived initially from a concern for practical relations with the French in such fields as the build-up of NATO conventional forces, cooperation with NATO in a variety of other fields (e.g., tropospheric scatter), and the balance of military payments. Observing the persistent obstructionism of de Gaulle with respect to NATO, concerned by the persistent refusal to permit nuclear NATO forces to use French territory, uncertain over how much of a conventional build-up France could afford unless relieved of the nuclear burden, and tempted by the prospect of extensive French purchases in the nuclear field -- purchases which it was hoped might balance the military expenditures of the United States in France -- the senior civilians in the Pentagon (initially Paul Nitze and later Ros Gilpatric and Bob

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E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.5(b)

White House Guidelines

By NARA, Date 4/30/97

POF/116a / France - Security 1962

McNamara in descending order of enthusiasm) joined in recommending that a serious approach be made to the French Government.

The third substantial voice raised on this side of the argument was that of General Taylor. In a visit to Europe in the latter part of March, he was deeply impressed by the unanimity of the Frenchmen with whom he talked, in passionate commitment to development of a nuclear capability, and in passionate resentment of the refusal of the Americans to provide assistance. Concluding that the French would soon have a nuclear capability of their own in any event, and fearing the consequences for the Western alliance of French bitterness extending well beyond de Gaulle, General Taylor joined in urging a re-examination of American policy.

Many others, at other times, have shared these same concerns about our relations with de Gaulle and had asked whether some new relation in the nuclear field might not be worth seeking. At the President's direction members of the staff had encouraged Paul Nitze's inquiries earlier in the winter, and the President himself had written a most tentative letter of explanation to General de Gaulle at the turn of the year. General de Gaulle's cool response had discouraged the White House, but there was general recognition that the matter should in fact be reviewed once more.

Among those who believed that the subject should be reopened, there was some difference on ways and means. There was little support for an immediate decision to provide technical nuclear information to the French on the basis of a finding of "substantial progress" under the terms of the Atomic Energy Act. It was believed, rather, that a beginning should be made in areas related to nuclear weapons delivery systems -- notably assistance for the French program to produce MRBM's, for use as a means of delivering French warheads against the USSR.

Handwritten notes:
Mr. Galt
Mr. [unclear]
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Most of those urging a new departure believed that we should initially seek an agreement in which MRBM technology would be traded for balance-of-payments help and cooperation in NATO. Assistance for the production of warheads would be dependent upon still further

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French concessions. But one of those in favor of a change in policy, Secretary Dillon, argued powerfully that it would not be possible to make a step-by-step set of bargains with General de Gaulle. He believed that the whole question should be opened with de Gaulle by the President himself on the broadest possible basis, with the US laying out both MRBM and warhead assistance as part of a comprehensive package.

Those who held to the earlier policy were located in the State Department, the AEC, and the White House (except General Taylor). Their central argument was that the provision of nuclear assistance to France would not substantially improve our relations with General de Gaulle, would disrupt our basic European policy, and would be certain to weaken our position with respect to nuclear weapons in general -- with consequent grave implications for our effort to stabilize relations with the USSR.

As to General de Gaulle, it was argued that he had never proved amenable to bargaining in the past, that he would in no way bend his major purpose in response to offers of assistance from us, that this purpose was precisely to establish France as one of the three great independent Western powers -- leading a continent from whose most intimate affairs the UK and the US were excluded; and that the consequence of nuclear assistance to de Gaulle could only be to confirm him in this purpose and assist him in working for it. As a consequence, he might become more intransigent than ever in demanding all-out nuclear aid and US recognition of French continental leadership, on the theory that the Americans had shown -- in granting aid -- both an acceptance of his position and a vulnerability to his pressure. If the US resisted such further demands, the net effect of the episode would have been to worsen, not improve, Franco-American relations. We would have lost the respect which the General -- characteristically -- may now have for the firmness and consistency with which we hold to a course that, we have concluded, best serves our long-term interests. (He is reported on one occasion to have said that he understood our reasons for not extending aid to France and would do the same if he were in our shoes.)

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De Gaulle's vision of a three power-directory was strongly opposed by this group of advisers -- and indeed by those on the other side as well, on the grounds that it simply would not work. The other nations of the Western European continent were entirely unwilling to accept the notion of French primacy, and neither the size nor the power of France put General de Gaulle in a position to enforce his view -- particularly vis-a-vis Germany. Even if France should become a nuclear power, it was not likely that she would achieve any such leadership. The existence of a more substantial nuclear capability in Great Britain had not produced any parallel British supremacy with respect to the other European members of NATO. Thus the idea of the directory was unreal, and US attempts to move -- or to help France move -- in the direction of this unreality could only lead to misunderstanding and frustration within the alliance.

These dangers were illustrated plainly -- the argument ran -- by the consequences of nuclear assistance to France for our relations to other NATO powers. Belgium and the Netherlands, strong supporters of NATO and of a Western Europe integrated within NATO, would feel let down by the inconstant Americans. The Italians, seeing themselves as a growing force equal in principle to the French, would be embittered. Most of all, the West Germans, restrained by their pledges, made modest by their past crimes, held to their present course mainly by trust in America, but stirring with new strength and increasingly insistent on equal treatment, would feel overwhelming pressure toward one or another of two dangerous courses: to insist on nuclear help from the U. S., or to bargain for a partnership with France. We could not count on de Gaulle to refuse such a partnership, whether or not we gave him nuclear help, since his whole foreign policy rests on the premise of Franco-German collaboration in building an independent Europe.

Equally dangerous was the signal such assistance would give about American policy in the nuclear age: a signal of American acceptance of nuclear diffusion to many nations. (To General de Gaulle, France was obviously unique; to many others she would be merely another middle-class power which had proved that the Americans respond to pressure.) Such diffusion was strategic nonsense; the Western

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nuclear deterrent was fundamentally indivisible -- as Secretary McNamara was to explain at Athens in a notable speech to NATO on May 4th. There could be only one serious nuclear war against the Soviet Union -- and the prevention of that war, by credible deterrence, could in no way be assisted by the addition of small, ill-controlled, vulnerable, and wholly independent national nuclear forces. Measured in terms of defense against Soviet Russia, the French force in prospect could only be a danger to all -- including the French themselves. French policy, vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, was pointless -- and General de Gaulle may have known it. There was gossip that he had frankly admitted, in talks with French colleagues, that his nuclear weapons would be more useful within the Atlantic Community than for defense against the Soviet Union. Could it be in the interest of the United States to give nuclear help to such a man, with such a purpose -- thus strengthening his hand, in his own country and in Europe? Could it be in the US interest to suggest to other countries that the road to US favor lay through such unilateral and dangerous ventures, rather than through the multilateral arrangements that our policy ostensibly espoused?

Finally, the opponents of help to France asked what would be thought in the Soviet Government if now there should be a new U. S. policy of nuclear help to those friends who happened to want it a lot. Would the chances of some understanding on arms control be increased? Would a general accommodation become easier or harder? Would a moderate Soviet policy in Central Europe and Berlin be easier, or harder, to come by? Would the West be less or more able to defend itself in a nonprovocative, controlled, and single-minded way?

These were the main arguments on both sides. Within both camps there were lesser assertions. Thus the opponents of help denied that any major French contribution to the balance-of-payments problem was likely, even in return for nuclear help; they held that the French wanted knowledge more than hardware and that at best they would give only one-shot, temporary orders for purchase. There were also differences on the likelihood -- and the timing -- of French nuclear progress in the absence of help. At one

extreme the advocates of assistance argued that the French were sure to have a nuclear force (meaning fission-bomb aircraft) of their own within three years and would be deterred by nothing, with or without de Gaulle. At the other extreme it was suggested that Europe-based aircraft had been publicly branded as vulnerable and obsolete by General Norstad, and that really adequate weapons (meaning thermonuclear missiles) were not likely before 1970, and that by then a post de-Gaulle government might possibly be moved to submerge this costly and unfruitful effort into a broader multi-lateral scheme -- if US help had not bailed out the French program in the meantime.

The President read and heard the arguments. He talked individually with Gavin and Taylor; he also heard Jean Monnet as that determined European argued emphatically -- and privately -- against nuclear help to France, his own country. Monnet's themes were four: the deterrent is indivisible; nuclear diffusion is immoral -- and cannot be halted on the continent, once it is begun; we must build a Europe of equals, if we are not to have a Europe of rivals; de Gaulle will eventually accept what he cannot change.

Mr. Kennedy made his decision firmly -- in a sense he simply never unmade it. His personal responsibility for the nuclear posture of the West was never far from his mind, and he had an almost instinctive doubt that he could ease this burden by sharing it. The path of nuclear diffusion seemed to lead away from that limitation of the atomic arms race on which he never gave up hope. He respected de Gaulle, but on many great issues de Gaulle and he were in clear disagreement, and de Gaulle would not change his policy in return for nuclear weapons. On April 16th, the day of his final decision, in a meeting with the Secretaries of State and Defense, the President said, "You could probably get money from him, but that's all you'd get." It was not enough.

There were other elements in the decision. The President did not want to have the Germans clamoring for help in their turn; he would have found it a nuisance to face Congressional criticism from the assertive Joint Committee on Atomic Energy; he would have been troubled by the reproaches of the leading men of NATO --

Norstad in particular; he would have had to overrule the Secretary of State -- which he did not often do. These considerations could well have been overbalanced if there had been a great end in view; each of them after all had a minor counterbalance of its own. Against Rusk was McNamara; against Norstad were Taylor, Gavin and the JCS; against the Joint Committee were the angry journalists like Sulzberger who had taken up the French line; and against the German claim in the future was the French claim in the present.

But no one could offer him a solid and substantive return for this major change in policy, with all its evident disadvantages. No one could tell him that de Gaulle would join the team and throw his support to our basic policy of cohesive European and Atlantic communities. No one could deny the dangers of diffusion, which this basic policy sought to limit.

* * *

Among those who greeted this decision with approval, and with a renewed awareness of the practical clarity of the President's mind, there was little delight. The French problem remained, and the French nuclear effort would almost surely continue in some form -- with or without de Gaulle. It was no answer to give nuclear help, but what could be done?

Clear answers to this question had not emerged in early May. But a few preliminary points were plain:

First, there must be no complaints about French nuclear efforts -- and no public sneering at their limitations. The effort may be wrong, but it is also natural, determined, and in its way gallant.

Second, as we would not expect French cooperation in other matters in return for our help to France on nuclear systems, so we should not cease to seek effective relations with the French in other matters merely because de Gaulle wants (and will never ask for) nuclear help.

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Finally, we must increasingly press upon all our European friends a deeper understanding of nuclear weapons as they look in the 1960's: numerous, deadly, and indivisible in their impact; costly, complex, and rapidly obsolescent in their technology; dangerous in their diffusion, and increasingly useless except in the single great goal of deterrence. We must recognize that for those who do not have them, nuclear weapons are the most potent status symbol since African colonies went out of fashion. But we must not give up the effort to demonstrate that -- always excepting strategic deterrence -- these weapons are about as much use, in the long run, as Ruanda-Urundi -- and much more costly and dangerous.

Above and beyond these immediate actions, we must persevere on the broader course of assisting and encouraging the movement toward European integration and Atlantic partnership. If that movement goes forward, the disadvantages of an unaided French nuclear effort can be contained and limited; we can still make progress toward our basic goals, despite that effort. And in the degree that the forces making for European integration and Atlantic partnership prevail, France may -- either during de Gaulle's term or after -- come to recognize that she can play a larger role by assisting than by hindering the prosecution of this basic policy. At least this course seemed -- in May of 1962 -- to offer a better chance of promoting US objectives than any other at hand.

McGeorge Bundy

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