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SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE SECRETARY
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May 8, 1958

MEMORANDUM

TO: G - Mr. Murphy

FROM: S/AE - Richard C. Breithut 

SUBJECT: British Prime Minister's Letter of April 24, 1958 to the President, Proposing Discussions to Ensure Agreement on Procedure for Decision to Launch Nuclear Retaliation.

1. The British have in the past sought to obtain a commitment from us that we would not take a decision to use atomic weapons anywhere without prior consultation with them. We have declined to give such a commitment.

At his press conference of November 30, 1950, following the retreat of United Nations Forces in North Korea, President Truman said that United Nations authorization was not necessary for the use of the atomic bomb and that the United Nations Commander in the field would have charge of the tactical use of the weapon. A White House statement issued later the same day said that the President alone could authorize the use of the atomic bomb and no such authorization had been given. The President's remarks were protested by a number of members of the British Parliament; Prime Minister Attlee took the position that a decision to use the atomic bomb could not be taken until all the countries participating in the Korean campaign had been consulted, and he announced his intention to go to the United States for a conference with President Truman. He did so, and the communique of December 8, 1950, issued after the conference, said: "The President stated that it was his hope that world conditions would never call for the use of the atomic bomb. The President told the Prime Minister that it was also his desire to keep the Prime Minister at all times informed of developments which might bring about a change in the situation." Churchill commented for the Opposition in Parliament that the communique contained no guarantee of consultation and that the American bases in the United Kingdom made a clear definition of the British position all the more necessary.

TOP SECRET

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- 2 -

In 1951 a number of high level military talks were held with the British, at the latter's request in order to learn about American war plans in connection with the use of the airfields in the United Kingdom. Foreign Minister Bevin sent a message to Secretary of State Acheson in January of that year asking that he be informed of American strategic air plans involving the use of the atomic weapon; he felt that it had been implied in his talks with Ambassador Douglas concerning the bases that the British would be consulted about any plans for the use of American planes based in the United Kingdom. It was agreed between the State and Defense Departments that no formal commitments for consultation could be given to the British. In his reply to Mr. Bevin, Mr. Acheson referred to the military talks and said, "I think there is no reason why you or the Prime Minister should not now be in a position to make to Parliament the kind of statement you wish to make, which I understand is a reassurance that your chiefs are in close touch with ours with regard to air plans."

Mr. Acheson discussed with Foreign Minister Herbert Morrison the question of Anglo-American consultation before the use of the atomic bomb in September 1951. He said that the United States would discuss with the British situations which might result in general war, and he distinguished between the use of the bases in Britain for delivery of the bomb and action elsewhere. He thought it inconceivable that the United States would get into a war without knowing whether or not it had allies. While he saw no difficulty regarding consultation with the British before using the bases, he supposed that retaliation could take place at once if Chicago were bombed. He emphasized, however, that the President had to be in a position to deny that any agreement prohibited the use of the atomic weapon under any circumstances.

When Prime Minister Churchill came to Washington in January 1952, the question was again raised in his talks with President Truman. The President stated that he was prepared to authorize the use of atomic weapons if and when the necessity arose. It had always been his personal feeling that allies should be consulted on this matter. (Minutes of meeting, January 7, 1952, by R. Gordon Arneson.) The communique of January 9, 1952, issued after these talks, did not refer to this phase of the discussions but reaffirmed the understanding that use by the United States of bases in the United Kingdom in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision (see paragraph 2. below).

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TOP SECRET

- 3 -

Mr. Eden, as Foreign Minister, visited Washington in March 1953 and had discussions with both President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles. The joint communique of March 7th relating to his talks with the Secretary substantially repeated the statement in the Truman-Churchill communique regarding the use of the bases. Mr. Eden also asked the President on March 9th whether he would be willing to give Prime Minister Churchill a personal assurance of consultation prior to any use of atomic weapons. The President, while expressing his sympathy with the British viewpoint and his understanding of the exposed position of Britain in the event of general war, declined to give a commitment. He said that the United States would, of course, in the event of increased tension or the threat of war take every possible step to consult with Britain and our other allies. (Memorandum by Under Secretary of State Smith, March 12, 1953.)

2. United States Air Force bases have been established and Strategic Air Commands units stationed in the United Kingdom, on the basis of informal understandings and military service agreements, dating from the Berlin airlift in 1948. We have given the British Government assurance that the use of these bases in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision. As noted above, this assurance was reaffirmed publicly in the joint communique of January 9, 1952, issued after the Truman-Churchill talks, which said: "Under arrangements made for the common defense, the United States has the use of certain bases in the United Kingdom. We reaffirm the understanding that the use of these bases in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision by His Majesty's Government and the United States Government in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time." This statement of understanding has been utilized by British Government spokesmen in Parliament on a number of occasions, the latest being Mr. Butler on February 4, 1958, replying to questions about current flights of United States and British bombers carrying nuclear weapons.

3. Macmillan's present letter may reflect continued British concern with these questions in light of the increasing gravity of the military threat (as the Soviet nuclear capability increases and the time needed for attack shortens). There is undoubtedly apprehension over possible consequences to Britain of independent action by the United States--either because we might not come to its defense in time or because

TOP SECRET

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TOP SECRET

- 4 -

we might involve it in action initiated by ourselves. The British may also be concerned that, while they have chosen to place main military reliance on retaliatory power, there may be lack of coordination between their strategic war plans and our own. Doubtless also, they would like to learn more about our command arrangements for the execution of war plans.

4. The significance of the reference to "the American and British forces under operational command of SACEUR stationed in the United Kingdom" is not clear. It is our understanding that the only forces stationed in the U.K. which are "assigned" or "earmarked" for possible use by or support to SACEUR are a British regimental combat team (to be replaced later this fiscal year by two "fly-in" brigades) and certain American and British fighter, light and medium bomber, and reconnaissance aircraft. These are not "strategic nuclear forces", and Macmillan's present proposal does not appear to relate to any strategic or retaliatory capability which may be provided to SACEUR. Perhaps consideration of the latter, however, should not be deferred so casually as seems to be suggested. There is also the Canadian aspect of which we must take account.

5. It seems clear that we can accept no limitation upon United States freedom of action. Yet it might also be of vital importance that our action and that of our allies be concerted to the fullest extent possible. Since we must plan for possibly almost instantaneous decision, it would seem to be in our interest to try to establish "a fully agreed and understood procedure" leading up to the decision. Such understanding probably would have present value to the alliance, also.

If the Defense Department concurs, it might be useful to accept the suggestion that the British Embassy inform us concerning the lines on which the British have been thinking.

cc: EUR - Mr. Kohler
RA - Mr. Fearey
INR - Mr. Arneson

S/AE:RFCourtney:akd
PR

TOP SECRET