August 8, 1963

Memorandum from Under Secretary of State George W. Ball to President Kennedy, 'A Further Nuclear Offer to General De Gaulle'

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Summary:

Undersecretary Ball outlines for President Kennedy the reasons why assisting the French nuclear program is not in America's interests. It suggests that De Gaulle would only accept assistance if there were no political conditions attached, and to do so would jeopardize US interests in Europe and NATO.

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SECRET

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

Subject: A Further Nuclear Offer to General De Gaulle?

Particularly since last January, whenever the hand of friendship has been stretched across the sea, General De Gaulle has put a dead fish in it. In serious affairs, however, past disappointments cannot by themselves be an excuse for inaction, and I think it prudent that we study the available ways and means of inducing the General to sign the Test Ban Treaty -- or at least of improving the record in case he refuses.

Yet, at the risk of being condemned to the stocks as a common scold, I must venture some cautionary views on the project for a new approach at this moment. It seems to me there is little to be gained by it -- and the risks it entails are considerable.

I.

THE OBJECTIVES OF A FURTHER APPROACH

The principal purposes that might seem to justify a renewed effort with the General at this time are, I would suppose, three in number:

a. To induce the French Government to sign the Test Ban Treaty;

b. To remove a serious impediment to conversation and cooperation between the United States and French Governments -- and hopefully to restore France as an effective member of the Western Alliance;

c. Failing

c. Failing success in either (a) or (b), to put the responsibility for France's rejection of the Test Ban Treaty solely on President De Gaulle and the French Government.

II.

THE SCOPE OF AN AMERICAN OFFER

If, as I assume to be the case, we intend to concentrate primarily on the objective of inducing the French Government to sign the Test Ban Treaty, our offer should bear a demonstrable relation to that objective. At first blush, we might seem able to achieve our purpose by undertaking to provide the French authorities with whatever help France needs in order that, by underground testing, it may obtain the information it would otherwise obtain through atmospheric testing.

Logical as this might appear, however, an offer so limited would be illusory. As is made plain in Alexis Johnson's paper of August 6 entitled "Underground Testing Assistance to France, the French problem could not be met merely by providing France with technology and physical assistance in underground testing. If the French are to obtain the information they need in developing warheads for MIRAGE IV aircraft and missile-submarine delivery without serious delay and greatly increased cost, we must do much more for them than that.

We should be under no illusions as to the meaning of a much broader offer, if accepted. It would embark us on a major effort of nuclear assistance. Once begun, I am satisfied that the scope of our nuclear cooperation would tend to expand. Cooperative efforts of this kind have the habit of acquiring a life of their own -- a momentum that is hard to stop. And the General is a past master at raising the bidding by periodically saying "non".

If

If we make an offer of the scale required by the present French program, this will be tantamount to offering France at least a limited nuclear partnership -- and we should face up to all the implications of that decision.

It may be contended at this point that I have overstated the problem and that -- although going beyond help with underground testing -- we could still limit ourselves to a finite effort of assistance to France for the narrow objective of inducing France to sign the Test Ban Treaty. Yet even a carefully circumscribed effort, as Mr. Johnson's paper points out, would of necessity be substantial. It could not be confined merely to providing technology and physical equipment to enable the French to conduct underground tests in the Sahara -- or alternatively the tendering of our own Nevada test site for a cooperative program of tests by the AEC and France. It would also mean the supplying of substantial weapons effects and design data. This would be a major step, and it would be so regarded in the United States. It would have to be fully discussed with the appropriate Congressional Committees.

Even more important, it would be regarded in France and the other countries of Europe as bringing the French into that exclusive nuclear partnership with the United States of which Britain has so far been the only member.

In my view, it is this point that is of prime importance in considering the consequences of such an offer. As I shall point out in this memorandum, the manner in which we handle our nuclear relations with France can have profound effects on the Western Alliance and can seriously influence the future direction of West Germany.

III.

DE GAULLE WILL ACCEPT NUCLEAR ASSISTANCE ONLY IF WE ATTACH NO POLITICAL CONDITIONS

There can be no further doubt on this question. In the General's letter to you of August 5, he states "...I cannot see how France could receive in this field

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the assistance of another state without conditions which would limit the right to the use of these weapons. This, France would regard as incompatible with its sovereignty.

In his letter to Prime Minister Macmillan of the same date the General states his position in somewhat different words when he says: "But neither can I see how France could obtain the assistance of other states in the field of nuclear armaments unless it accepted conditions limiting its right to have them at its disposal. And you know what our position is on that point.

The General's position on that point seems to me indeed crystal clear. It is that he would regard even the most flexible and tenuous conditions as unacceptable if they operated to limit in any way France's right to command, use and dispose of its nuclear forces, at will and for purely national purposes. It is significant, for example, that when Ambassador Bohlen saw Couve de Murville the Foreign Minister interpreted De Gaulle's letter to you as implicitly rejecting even such pale conditions as those involved in the Nassau offer.

It has, of course, been repeatedly stated that De Gaulle regards the force de frappe primarily as an expression of French sovereignty and as securing France's claim to a great power role. The General spelled out his philosophy of the relation of armaments to the state most explicitly in his now famous address before the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires on November 3, 1959.

"It is necessary, he said, that France's defense be French ...if a country like France has to make war, it must be its war.

"After all, he continued, it is indispensable that it be our own, that France defend itself in its own way.

There was

There was, the General said, a good reason for this. "If it had to be otherwise, if one admitted for long that the defense of France ceased to be in the national framework and that it merged or blended itself with something else, it wouldn't be possible for us to maintain a state. The Government has as its raison d'etre, at all times, the defense of the independence and of the integrity of its territory. It is from that that it proceeds. In France, in particular, all our regimes have been based on this.

"...that is why the concept of a war or even that of a battle in which France would no longer be itself and no longer act on its own behalf with its own role and doing what it wished, this concept cannot be accepted."

The meaning of all this is clear enough. Its implications may, in fact, extend even to the point where the General would reject a nuclear offer devoid of all explicit political conditions. Suspicious as the General is of the inherent threat posed by la masse d'outre - Atlantique to his ambitions to restore France to first-power status, he would no doubt strongly prefer that his nuclear arsenal be made in France with no help whatever from the Anglo-Saxons.

IV.

AN OFFER OF NUCLEAR ASSISTANCE TO FRANCE WITHOUT POLITICAL CONDITIONS WOULD JEOPARDIZE OUR INTERESTS IN EUROPE AND THE ALLIANCE

I have argued the view in an earlier memorandum that an offer of substantial nuclear assistance to France, subject only to the condition that France sign the Test Ban Treaty, would be disastrous for our long-range interests in Europe. I do not wish to be a bore, and I do not regard my preoccupation with this question as a

King Charles' Head. I share it with other serious observers of the European scene, of whom Ambassador Bruce is perhaps the most authoritative and articulate. But the point seems to me central and I must urge it as strongly as possible.

First, such an offer would have serious consequences in France. It would confirm De Gaulle's view (frequently reported) that sooner or later the over-eager Americans would come around if he only held fast. This has been De Gaulle's consistent view over the years and, as the attached historical note (Tab A) makes clear, it has frequently paid off.

While confirming De Gaulle in the rightness of his own obduracy, it would, at the same time, further discourage and demoralize the French non-Communist opposition - particularly the younger leaders - who alone can exercise a moderating influence on the General. Not only would this work against our immediate interests, but it could prove harmful in the future, since it is essential for a safe succession that the non-Communist anti-gaullist forces be kept as intact as possible.

Second, it would create concern and bitterness in the other nations of the Alliance. It would boost De Gaulle's stock while deflating our own. It would undercut the "good Europeans" who over the years have been our best friends.

Third, and most important, it would add to the estrangement and isolation of Germany.

The political shambles in Bonn that Secretary McNamara described to you so vividly last Monday (August 5) will not be cured by the passing of Adenauer. In my view, political in-fighting is likely to grow more rather than less intense after the Chancellor has been retired -- particularly if, as seems likely, he continues to try to manipulate power from the wings. Even

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under the best of conditions, Germany will remain a potentially explosive element for a long time to come and recently there have been accumulating danger signals.

I call your attention, for example, to a recent Intelligence Report (Tab B) indicating the developing sentiment within the ranks of the Free Democratic Party for a West German effort, with French help, to acquire a national nuclear capability. I call attention also to a slightly earlier report (Tab C) describing the growing nationalist spirit among the leaders of the CDU.

In the last hundred years Germany has been an unstable force in Europe, and we have no basis for regarding the future stability of the present truncated Germany as in any way assured. Increasing economic prosperity and well-being will not prevent the return of a restless German nationalism. On the contrary, as the Germans feel stronger and more assertive, they will resent with increasing bitterness the pretensions of a smaller and economically weaker France -- particularly if France has been helped to achieve a position of superiority by nuclear partnership with us - no matter how carefully limited that partnership may be.

Nor, in the atmosphere of ferment that the next years can bring forth, are the Germans likely to make subtle distinctions. They would be unlikely to recognize, for example, that in providing nuclear help to the French we were only assisting De Gaulle to do what he might otherwise accomplish by atmospheric testing. Instead they would see the relationship as a nuclear club from which they were excluded.

And nothing can be more dangerous for the peace of the world than Germany with a grievance and a sense of isolation. The result in the past has been military adventure and two world wars. In the future the more probable danger is political adventure -- the heady temptation of a game of maneuver between East and West that would play havoc with the delicate power balance.

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V.

HELPING FRANCE TO BECOME A PARTY TO THE TEST BAN TREATY IS NOT WORTH THE COST

Even German isolation, discontent, and adventurism might be worth the risk if the success of the Test Ban Treaty depended upon French accession.

However, it does not. In fact, I think it easy to exaggerate the importance of French membership to the integrity of the Treaty.

Clearly the Soviets have no fear whatever of a French bomb. They will continue to be concerned with isolating Red China and preventing the development of a German nuclear capability whether the French test or not. If the French should test, the Kremlin would no doubt make muttering noises. But there is no reason to think that the Soviets would treat a French atmospheric test as the occasion for exercising their right of withdrawal.

What then will happen in case France continues to spurn the Treaty? Probably nothing for some time to come.

Our embassy in Paris does not believe that France will resume atmospheric testing in Africa -- and the intelligence community confirms this. A reliable but unverified intelligence source states that the French will conduct their last three or four underground tests in the Sahara this fall.

The French Test Site in the Pacific cannot be fully operational before late 1965 or early 1966, and a high yield thermonuclear device is not likely to be ready for testing before late 1967. To be sure a rudimentary testing capability could be available at the Pacific Test Site by late 1963 for development tests, and the

French

French could also airdrop a fission device in the area if MIRAGE IV systems tests were desired during the next few months. But tests under these latter conditions would have only a marginal value, and it is unlikely that the General would undertake them within the near future. I see no reason why he would feel it useful to demonstrate that he does not regard France as bound by the test ban, when he has already made the point clearly in words.

Meanwhile, all but a handful of nations will have joined the Treaty and sentiment against testing in the forbidden environments will have been mobilized on a world scale. Quite likely a Labor Government will have come into power in the United Kingdom; this will introduce a new element since Harold Wilson will certainly have to make some gesture toward keeping his commitments to phase out the independent UK national deterrent.

Under these circumstances the most likely consequence of a French atmospheric test would be a severe world censure of France which even the redoubtable General would find it difficult to ignore.

VI.

WE WOULD BE WELL ADVISED TO DELAY ANY INITIATIVE TOWARDS PRESIDENT DE GAULLE

Over the next two years we should gain a much better appreciation of the direction in which we can prudently proceed. After the 1965 elections post-Adenauer Germany should be more of a known quantity. If, for example, the grand coalition of the SPD and CDU emerges, German stability should be more assured -- assuming that we take no measures in the meantime, such as a nuclear partnership with France, that might disturb German equilibrium. On the other hand, we cannot be complacent about the German ability and will to stay on a steady democratic course.

By 1965

By 1965 Italy also should be over the growing pains of the Opening to the Left. And finally, we should have a better comprehension of the meaning of the Sino-Soviet split and the scope of possible limited arrangements with Moscow.

Meanwhile, there seems little to be gained by a further approach to the General which he would almost certainly interpret as typical American impatience and over-anxiety. The record is, it seems to me, in good shape as it now stands. The General has not been persuaded that we can help him avoid testing. His belief that a state cannot "be sure of the effective functioning of the weapons essential to its defense without being able to verify their operation itself" suggests the normal reflex of a military commander. I doubt that it is based on the technical advice he is receiving or that it is susceptible of being changed by any technical assurance from us. Since he has arrived at the view on his own, I see no advantage in attempting to dissuade him.

Everyone who has dealt with the General over the years has reached the same conclusion: that he cannot be bribed or persuaded by offers or concessions from pursuing the narrow nationalistic course to which his life has been committed. After all what can you do with a man who begins his Memoires by writing:

> "All my life I have thought of France in a certain way. This is inspired by sentiment as much as by reason. The emotional side of me tends to imagine France, like the princess in the fairy stories or the Madonna in the frescoes, as dedicated to an exalted and exceptional destiny. ...the positive side of my mind also assures me that France is not really herself unless in the front rank; that only vast enterprises are capable of counterbalancing the ferments of dispersal which are inherent in her people; that our country, as it is, surrounded by the others, as they are, must aim high and hold itself straight, on pain of mortal danger. In short, to my mind, France cannot be France without greatness."

Ambassador Bohlen has suggested that serious exploration of the problem be postponed until the General comes here next year. In the absence of some major development, I would suggest that we put it to bed for at least another year or two.

It seems to me that we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by waiting.

George W. Ball

Attachments:

TAB A - Historical note, "Difficulties in Dealing with De Gaulle."

TAB B - Intelligence Report.

TAB C - Intelligence Report.

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Difficulties in Dealing with De Gaulle

One day towards the end of World War II, Anthony Eden observed to General de Gaulle that the Free French had caused more difficulty for the British government than any of the other European governments-in-exile. To this de Gaulle replied: "Of course. France is a great power."

This exchange sums up the perenially difficult relations between de Gaulle and his allies, during the war, his postwar tenure in office (through January 1946) and his second period of power (since June 1958). While de Gaulle of course adapts his action to current realities, he has been wholly consistent throughout his public career on his basic aim: the restoration of France to its traditional rank as a great power, which he defines to mean that France is entitled to be a member of the "inner group" of world powers that makes the decisions on international problems.

The problem of France's role in the world, which preoccupies de Gaulle, already faced Frenchmen in the 1930's. Some decided then that the victory of Hitler's Germany was inevitable and that France should accommodate itself to it. Even those who wanted to resist Germany tended to rely on the British for leadership. De Gaulle was one of a small number who rejected both of these courses and wanted France to play its old role as a fully independent power. He has continued to pursue this goal ever since, refusing to accept the German victory but refusing also to accept what he considered dependence on France's allies, both during the war and after it.

After the military debacle in 1940, France was in effect eliminated from the supreme councils of the alliance. Basic wartime policy, as well as postwar planning, was carried on by the Big Three: the US, UK and USSR. De Gaulle's wartime effort was directed to restoring France to this circle. His Memoirs read, indeed, as if it were the Allies rather than the Germans who were his main antagonists, and in a sense this was true. For de Gaulle sought not just the defeat of Germany and the liberation of France, which the military power of the Allies would bring about in any case, but France's restoration as a great power, which depended on the consent of the Allies.

In lieu of the power which he did not have, de Gaulle developed the technique of standing rigidly on the fine points of French sovereignty and rights, speaking and acting as though his claims were self-evident realities. The gap between, on the one hand, the real status of the Free French--dependent on the Allies for practically everything and

controlling only some of the remoter outposts of the French Empire--and, on the other hand, de Gaulle's pretensions, was so glaring as to make the latter seem ludicruously unreal to many Allied leaders. De Gaulle's stubborness on specific problems was also highly exasperating to them. When, for example, the United States, shortly after entering the war in December 1941, asked routinely for landing rights in New Caledonia, which the Free French controlled, de Gaulle answered that he would be glad to consider this question in the framework of overall joint planning, including himself, of Allied strategy in the Pacific. Such an answer seemed perfectly logical to de Gaulle, who considered himself the custodian of the permanent rights of a temporarily eclipsed France. To the Allies, aware of the actual weight in the war of the Free French, such an answer could only be absurd and irritating. The wartime relations between the Allies and the Free French are replete with such incidents, of which de Gaulle's refusal to meet President Roosevelt in Algiers after the Yalta conference is only the most notorious.

Because de Gaulle's goals seemed to the Allies so incommensurate with his actual position, they tended to be perplexed when every concession they made to him only strengthened his determination to achieve more.

1. The Americans and British attempted to work through Darlan and Giraud in North Africa and to build some counterforce to de Gaulle's Free French. But de Gaulle, by allying himself with the underground resistance in France, including its Communist element, cut the ground from under Giraud, whom he considered and described as a creature of the Allies. In the end the Allies accepted de Gaulle as the head of all the French resistance.

2. But the limited recognition the Allies gave de Gaulle's administration of course did not satisfy him, and he pressed for full recognition of his regime as the provisional government of France. This was not granted until the liberation of France was virtually completed, when it became clear that the Gaullist authority was accepted by the French people and no other had to be or, indeed, could be, dealt with. The Allies thus gave de facto recognition in August 1944 and de jure recognition in October.

3. No sooner had de Gaulle achieved recognition than he pressed for inclusion on an equal basis in the Allied councils that were planning the conduct of the war and the postwar period. This was in effect denied him, though France was given a seat on the European Advisory Commission and the Dumbarton Oaks conference, from which France was excluded, provided that France would be given a permanent seat on the Security Council "in due course." De Gaulle then undertook to emphasize his independence of the US and the UK, whose armies physically controlled France, by travelling to Moscow in December 1944 and signing a treaty of alliance with the Soviet

Union. De Gaulle clearly hoped that the Soviet Union would support his admission to Allied inner councils, and that the British might do the same for fear that a Franco-Russian entente would develop in Europe.

4. These hopes were disappointed. France was excluded from the Yalta conference in February 1945 and later in the year from the three-power Potsdam and Moscow conferences. But France was nevertheless given occupation zones in Germany and Austria and seats on their control commissions.

5. Once France was admitted to these councils, however, the other three Allies found, as they might have expected, that mere presence did not satisfy de Gaulle, and that he had definite policies to implement. Having been excluded from the planning done for Germany at Yalta and Potsdam, yet armed with a veto for its implementation, he proceeded in November 1945 to veto the plan, agreed to by the Big Three, to establish all-German administrations over the four zones. The effect of this on the long-term development of the German situation and the cold war is debateable. What is clear is that de Gaulle, in this case as in others, used each step upward in France's struggle to recover its prewar status to promote its further quest of that goal or its specific policy ideas.

6. De Gaulle also made other efforts during 1945 to establish France's status. He took some hesitant steps towards leading the smaller powers at the San Francisco conference to resist the domination of the proceedings by the Big Four, but finally desisted and accepted a place beside the Four. More significantly, he spoke later in the year of some kind of Western European grouping for which France would speak in world councils with a stronger voice than its own power position permitted.

De Gaulle had not achieved full success in restoring France's rank by the time he left office in January 1946, but it is nevertheless striking how near he had come to success. Considering the status of France in June 1940, and its physical strength and weight on the world scene in 1944-45, it is remarkable that by the end of the war it was assigned a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council--symbol of great power status--and occupation zones in Germany and Austria, with veto-wielding positions on their control commissions. To de Gaulle, this record surely demonstrates that a political result can be achieved which seems to most political observers entirely unachieveable in terms of the real distribution of power. His return to power in 1958--12 years after leaving office--may well seem to him a

second political "miracle" of the same kind, against all odds. In light of this record it would be imprudent to judge that de Gaulle cannot believe that the ambitious foreign policy goals he has set himself since 1958 are beyond achievement and are therefore not seriously meant. His present goals perhaps seem less unattainable to him than those he has nurtured--and achieved--in the past.

De Gaulle has of course been able to deal from a position of greater strength since 1958 than he was able to do during or immediately after the war. His basic goal remains the same, however, and some of his means are similar to those he tried in 1944-45. The force de frappe is clearly a military means to a political end; that is, the possession of nuclear arms is intended to buttress France's claim to the still elusive full prerogatives of a great power. A corollary to this would be that assistance to the French weapons program, while it might yield a specific compensation, would not satisfy or extinguish de Gaulle's claims to status as set forth in his letters to the American and British governments of September 1958. Similarly, limited consultation on given subjects might produce some measure of understanding on those subjects but could not of itself settle the broader Franco-American problem. Even full acceptance of de Gaulle's ideas of a "directorate" would not guarantee harmony, for within such a framework, as formerly in the German Control Commission, France would promote its own policy ideas. These, of course, are divergent in important respects from those now pursued by the United States. (See Research Memorandum REU-4, "De Gaulle's Foreign Policy," and RM REU-31, "Possibilities and Limitations in Dealing with de Gaulle," copies of which are attached.)