

Eisenhower Committee's Memo On French Requests for Aid

Excerpts from memorandum for the record, Jan. 30, 1954, by Brig. Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel 3d on meeting of President's Special Committee on Indochina.

1. The Special Committee met in Mr. Kyes' office at 3:30 p.m. 29 January 1954. . . .
3. Admiral Radford said he had been in touch with General Ely, French Chief of Staff, through General Valluy. Ten B-26 aircraft are on the way to Indochina this week. These would contribute to filling the French request for aircraft to bring two B-26 squadrons up to a strength of 25 operational aircraft each. However, an additional 12 are needed to fill the full requirement because a total of 22 are needed (12 to fill the annual attrition plus 10 to fill the additional French request). There was some discussion on the seeming differences in requests reaching Washington via Paris and those coming through the MAAG. Subsequently in the meeting it was agreed that the French should be informed that the U.S. would act only on requests which had been approved by General O'Daniel after General O'Daniel was set up in Indochina.
4. Admiral Radford indicated that to fill the entire requirement for 22 B-26's on an urgent basis would mean taking some of them from U. S. operational squadrons in the Far East, but this could be done. The aircraft would not all have "zero" maintenance time on them.
5. As to the additional French request for 25 B-26's to equip a third squadron, it was decided that final decision to furnish them should await the return of General O'Daniel. However, the Air Force has been alerted that they may have to be furnished on short notice.
6. As to the provision of a small "dirigible," it was decided to inform the French that this could not be furnished.
7. Regarding the French request for 400 mechanics trained in maintenance of B-26 and C-47 aircraft, there was considerable discussion. Admiral Radford said he had informed General Ely, through General Valluy, that the U.S. does not believe the French have exhausted all efforts to get French civilian maintenance crews. He suggested the French try to find them through "Air France" Mr. Kyes mentioned the possibility of obtaining French personnel from their eight aircraft factories or from the big Chateauroux maintenance base where the U.S. employed French mechanics. General Smith inquired about the possibility of lowering French NATO commitments to enable transfer of French military mechanics. Admiral Radford said General Valluy had informed him the French Staff have carefully considered the idea, but the French Air Force does not have enough military mechanics trained in B-26 or C-47 maintenance to fill the requirement. Therefore, there would be such a delay while their military mechanics were being trained on these aircraft that the urgent requirement could not be met. He had also said that the employment of French civilian mechanics presented a difficult problem in security clearance.
8. General Smith recommended that the U.S. send 200 U.S. Air Force mechanics to MAAG, Indochina, and tell the French to provide the rest. Admiral Radford said this could be done and that the Air Force is, somewhat reluctantly, making plans to this end. He had let the French know that if American mechanics were sent they must be used only on air bases which were entirely secure from capture. General Smith wondered, in light of additional French requests, if the Committee should not consider sending the full 400 mechanics.
9. Mr. Kyes questioned if sending 200 military mechanics would not so commit the U.S. to support the French that we must be prepared eventually for complete intervention, including use of U.S. combat forces. General Smith said he did not think this would result—we were sending maintenance forces not combat forces. He felt, however,

that the importance of winning in Indochina was so great that if worst came to the worst he personally would favor intervention with U.S. air and naval forces—not ground forces. Admiral Radford agreed. Mr. Kyes felt this consideration was so important that it should be put to the highest level. The President himself should decide. General Smith agreed. Mr. Allen Dulles wondered if our preoccupation with helping to win the battle at Dien Bien Phu was so great that we were not going to bargain with the French as we supplied their most urgent needs. Mr. Kyes said this was an aspect of the question he was resisting, Admiral Radford read from a cable just received from General O'Daniel, which indicated General Navarre had been most cordial to General O'Daniel at their meeting and had indicated he was pleased with the concept of U.S. liaison officers being assigned to his general headquarters and to the training command. General Navarre and General O'Daniel agreed to try to work out a maximum of collaboration at the military level.

10. Later in the meeting, Mr. Allen Dulles raised the question as to sending the CAP pilots the French had once requested. It was agreed that the French apparently wanted them now, that they should be sent, and CIA should arrange for the necessary negotiations with the French in Indochina to take care of it.

11. Mr. Kyes said that if we meet the French urgent demands they should be tied to two things: first, the achievement of maximum collaboration with the French in training and strategy, and secondly, the strengthening of General O'Daniel's hand in every way possible. General Smith agreed and felt we should reinforce General O'Daniel's position not only with the French in Indochina but also at the highest level in Paris. . . .

12. Summary of Action Agreed Regarding Urgent French Requests

It was agreed:

a. To provide 200 uniformed U.S. Air Force mechanics who would be assigned as an augmentation to MAAG, Indochina, these mechanics to be provided only on the understanding that they would be used at bases where they would be secure from capture and would not be exposed to combat.

c. To send the CAP pilots, with CIA arranging necessary negotiations.

d. Not to provide a "dirigible."

e. To await General O'Daniel's return to Washington before making a decision

on the other French requests. Efforts should continue to get the French to contribute a maximum number of mechanics.

It was further agreed that General Smith would clear these recommended actions with the President.

13. The next item discussed was the status of General O'Daniel. Mr. Kyes said General Trapnell, the present Chief of MAAG, is being replaced at the normal expiration of his tour. General Dabney had been chosen to replace General Trapnell and is about to leave for Indochina. Admiral Radford pointed out that General O'Daniel could be made Chief of MAAG without any further clearance with the French Government. General Smith said this would be all right but should not preclude further action to increase the position of General O'Daniel. General Erskine pointed out that the MAAG in Indochina is not a "military mission" but only an administrative group concerned with the provision of MDAP equipment. He thought the MAAG status should be raised to that of a mission which could help in training. It was agreed that General O'Daniel should probably be first assigned as Chief of MAAG and that, for this reason, General Dabney's departure for Indochina should be temporarily held up. General Dabney should, however, go to Indochina to assist General O'Daniel by heading up the present MAAG functions. Admiral Davis was requested to assure that General Dabney did not depart until further instructions were given.

20. Mr. Allen Dulles inquired if an unconventional warfare officer, specifically Colonel Lansdale, could not be added to the group of five liaison officers to which General Navarre had agreed. Admiral Radford thought this might be done and at any rate Colonel Lansdale could immediately be attached to the MAAG, but he wondered if it would not be best for Colonel Lansdale to await General O'Daniel's return before going to Indochina. In this way, Colonel Lansdale could help the working group in its revision of General Erskine's paper. This was agreeable to Mr. Allen Dulles.

21. Present at the meeting were:

Department of Defense—Mr. Kyes, Admiral Radford, Admiral Davis, General Erskine, Mr. Godel, B/G Bonesteel, Colonel Alden.

Department of State—General Smith, Mr. Robertson.

CIA—Mr. Allen Dulles, General Cabell, Mr. Aurell, Colonel Lansdale.