

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION,  
BIPARTISAN LEADERS BREAKFAST  
WITH THE PRESIDENT, HELD IN THE  
STATE DINING ROOM, THE WHITE  
HOUSE, THURSDAY, MAY 26, 1960,  
AT 8:45 A. M.

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The President started the discussion by telling his guests that he had invited them in for a round table discussion of the events in Paris of the preceding week. He said that he thought they might want to ask questions of him or Secretary Herter or Secretary Gates who were also present. The President also added that he heartily approved of the inquiry which was being started in the Senate and that the Administration people, of course, would fully cooperate.



The President said that he specifically wanted to bring up two questions at the start.

The first was what happened to the U-2 plane. He said that the Soviets had claimed they had shot it down by rocket, but that he did not believe this. The Soviets had known about these flights for some time and were not able to interfere with any of the other flights because of the high altitudes at which the planes were flying. He pointed out that a picture of the plane released by the Soviets showed bullet holes in the wings. No Soviet fighter could get up to 70,000 feet so it is obvious that those holes must have been put in the wing at a lower altitude. He said it is the present theory that the plane's engine had flamed out, and that the pilot had to come down to below 70,000 feet to get the plane working again. It is possible that at that level Soviet planes could have attacked the U-2 and that their bullets could have damaged the plane's control and made it possible for the pilot to destroy the plane.

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The second point the President said he wanted to raise was that of intelligence and espionage. He said that intelligence and espionage were distasteful for many Americans, but that he as President from the very beginning of his Administration had to make decisions based on what was right for the United States concerning the fundamental intelligence knowledge that we had to have. In this field, of course, one had to weigh the risks and the serious consequences that would result if one were caught. The decision of such espionage is something that the President, and the President alone, has to decide. The President fully knows that if anything goes wrong, there will be criticism

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not only abroad but here at home. Nevertheless the President has to accept responsibility for these decisions and also keep the knowledge of such activities in the fewest possible hands. Only a few people in State, Defense and CIA knew of this, and there had been no spreading or leaks of the information. The President said that he was responsible for the directive for the U-2, that the wisdom of the decision lay with the President. "There is no glory in this business," he said, "If it is successful, it can't be told."

The President said that he did his best to put everything he could on the record in his speech last night, but that he was worried that the members of Congress in conducting the inquiry would try to dig into the interior of the CIA and its covert operation. Such attempt would be harmful to the United States and he was sure that the leaders of the Congress would realize this. He repeated that the Administration people would cooperate with the inquiry -- he called it "investigation" several times.

Senator Dirksen said that he was in G-2 during World War I and had some idea about intelligence and that he agreed with the President that intelligence operations by the Government should be held very tightly.

The President continued that it was also his decision to suspend flights. He said that he was sure that the leaders of Congress would be able to see some photographs of the Soviet installations taken by the U-2 and that they would see how tremendous they were. He pointed out that these flights had to be done from friendly bases and that when the U-2 incident occurred, there was a question of embarrassing our allies, and that was one of the reasons he made the decision to suspend the flights.

Senator Bridges interrupted to ask why some of our allies protested about use of bases on their soil. The President responded that the leaders should remember that some of these nations are fairly weak militarily and are close to the borders of the Soviet Union. He said that the Scandinavian countries particularly were afraid of the Bear, that they were perfectly willing to participate if the projects and missions could be concealed but that when they were uncovered, the Scandinavian countries felt that they must disown them.



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Secretary Herter said that the Pakistan reaction was very good -- that they had registered a protest with us for their own protection but that they were not going to publish such a protest and were merely going through the motions. Norway also made a protest, but again Secretary Herter said those nations had to go through the motions for home consumption.

The President said that Ayub of Pakistan was a fine and staunch ally and dwelt for a few minutes on Ayub's plan of basic democracies where first the localities, then the provinces and finally the nation will be given the right to vote.



Senator Mansfield said he was glad to hear that the President would support the "investigation" but that he and his colleagues preferred the word "inquiry", that it would not be an investigation in the ugly sense of the word.

He then said that he wanted to ask one question. What would the President think if there were to be established in the Congress a joint Congressional Committee which would oversee the activities of the CIA.

The President responded that his own feeling was that the operation of the CIA was so delicate and so secret in many cases that it must be kept under cover, and that the Executive must be held responsible for it. He said that he would agree to some bipartisan group going down occasionally and receiving reports from the CIA on their activities, but that he would hate to see it formalized -- indeed would be against the proposal made by Senator Mansfield.

Senator Russell supported the President in this viewpoint and said that they do have a Congressional group that periodically went over reports. He said that they knew the U-2 planes were under construction a long time ago. The Senator added that he was not afraid of the Senators on security matters but that he was afraid of staffs and that he would not want to be responsible for staff leaks. He put it quite bluntly when he said that any leaks of this nature from staffs would endanger the lives of men going into Russia and that he did not want it on his conscience.

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Congressman Vinson said that he was in complete disagreement with Senator Mansfield, that he supported Senator Russell, and that indeed in the House they had the same system as in the Senate.

Senator Hayden also agreed with Senator Russell and Congressman Vinson -- and Senator Mansfield's suggestion therefore was rapidly knocked down.

Senator Fulbright then said that he looked upon the work his Committee would do as a study or inquiry and that he hoped the word "investigation" would not be used in connection with it. He said he was glad to hear that the President approved of the inquiry and that he would do his best to keep it on the track and not let it stray. He also said that he would like to raise this question -- that there was a tendency to revive political dialogue between the parties on who was soft on Communism. He said that if this continues, it would be disastrous, that it would get into the political campaign and that in the end, both parties might find themselves in the position where it would be impossible to renew contacts or continue them with the Soviets.

The President agreed with Senator Fulbright on this point and said that such a situation was easy to develop unless both political parties were careful of their language and their charges. He said that this was one of the things that Khrushchev was trying to do, to inject this matter into the American campaign, that he as President had refused to even recognize it and that he was sure the United States had leaders who had the sense to remain bipartisan in the international field. As for himself, the President said he would have no part of any such political activities.

Senator Fulbright said that his Committee would follow the same pattern as the Russell Committee had in the past, and that a transcript would be issued after the private meeting. The transcript, however, would be subject to censorship as far as security matters were concerned.

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Senator Fulbright said that he would like to raise another point, and that was whether it was wise for the President to take responsibility for the U-2 flights. He said that he himself thought that disavowal would probably have been better.

In response the President said that when the plane was first missing, no one knew what had happened. It had been thought that if the plane got into trouble it would be destroyed, all material on board would be destroyed, and that the pilot would be free of any such material. On this assumption the story of a weather plane would have been able to stick. But, he added, the assumptions were incorrect. Within a few days the balloon was up. Senator Fulbright said that he still didn't think it was wise to take full responsibility. President Eisenhower responded that he thought it was, that if he didn't take responsibility someone else would have had to. He said he agreed that Khrushchev had tried to give him an out on this, but that he looked upon it as his responsibility, and he assumed it.

"Incidentally," he said with a smile, "if anyone were punished they should punish me first." He said that anyone sitting in his chair wouldn't want to put the CIA on the spot, and would not want to disown the CIA or its Director. He said that in addition to being President, he was also Commander-in-Chief, and he didn't see how he could duck this responsibility. He said he would be interested to see what the majority opinion of Fulbright's Committee would be on this point.

At this point Congressman Vinson leaned over and whispered to me that the President was dead right, that Fulbright was all wrong on his thesis, and that he, Vinson, thought the President had acted quite right in assuming responsibility. He said - "That's the kind of a man he is anyway.")

Senator Johnson then asked whether our intelligence would suffer by the discontinuance of the U-2 flights.



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The President responded that when our friends were on the spot he had no alternative but to cancel out the flights. But he added that it was quite clear that with the advance of techniques these flights are not going to be as useful as they were in the past.

Senator Johnson then asked why they weren't stopped before the Summit Meeting.

The President said again that this was a decision that had to be made. The previous flights had been successful. The ill-fated flight had to take advantage of the weather to get the needed information that would not be available later on, and the decision was to go ahead. It was just bad luck that the flight had failed.

Speaker Rayburn interjected that as far as he was concerned, he had kept quiet about the whole thing.

The President responded that the people closely associated with the flight were sure that their cover story would hold and that that was the only reason he told them to put it out. He said that on reflection it would have been a good idea to count to ten, but that that was crying over spilt milk and that nothing could be done about it. It was then that the President said that he would study any recommendations that Senator Fulbright's Committee might make.

Secretary Herter said that the whole matter was a question of alternatives -- that the flights in the past had been successful, that the information they had collected was remarkable but that when the flight failed it was decided to make a frank and full story of the incident.

The President jocularly said that as far as punishment was concerned, the only way he could be punished would be by impeachment. Speaker Rayburn also replied jocularly that "you haven't got long enough to go for that." But then on a serious vein the Speaker told the President that whether mistakes had been made or not, "we are all in this together."



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The meeting then broke up with the President thanking all the participants for coming to the White House.

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The President then came to his office at the White House, and Bryce Harlow and myself worked up the following statement which the President approved:

At the breakfast meeting with Congressional leaders of both parties, President Eisenhower discussed various aspects of the Paris meeting and the U-2 incident. The President told the leaders that he personally welcomed the bipartisan inquiry which will start tomorrow.



In turn, the entire group agreed that the inquiry should be conducted on a completely non-partisan and truly bipartisan basis. The President said that Administration officials concerned would cooperate fully and added that, of course, he would consider any recommendations such an inquiry might make. There was a frank and general discussion lasting over an hour.

*Bryce Harlow*