

44. Memorandum of Conference With President Kennedy

Washington, September 20, 1961.

OTHERS PRESENT

General Lemnitzer
General Power
General Taylor
General Clifton

General Power approached the President with a proposal on intelligence and in all the discussion several requirements came forth:

The President directed that General Taylor take an active hand from the intelligence viewpoint to see that General Power and General LeMay came up with an explanation of the difference in their opinion on what could be done.

General Taylor then said that, to formalize this, the requirement should be placed on General Lemnitzer to study the problem and present the President the viewpoints of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—not necessarily a Joint Chiefs' agreed position—and if General Power's estimate was different, to have his comments attached. This could give the President the necessary information on which to base a decision for or against General Power's suggestion. The President agreed.

General Power expressed great concern over the lack of information on Soviet ICBM sites, stating that we had only 10% usable photographic coverage of the USSR. Since in the photographed area 20 ICBM pads had been found, there might be many times more in the unphotographed area. Generals Lemnitzer and Taylor contested the accuracy of this estimate of useful coverage and the conclusion drawn from it.

In view of our lack of information, General Power strongly recommended the resumption of U-2 flights.

In response to questions by the President, General Power indicated his belief that the time of our greatest danger of a Soviet surprise attack is now and during the coming year. If a general atomic war is inevitable, the U.S. should strike first—presumably after locating the essential Soviet nuclear targets.

The President also directed that the group come up with an answer to this question: how much information does the Soviet Union need, and how long do they need to launch their missiles?

C.V. Clifton
Major General, USA
Defense Liaison Officer

Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Chester V. Clifton Series, Conferences with the President 3/61–9/61. Top Secret. Drafted by Clifton. According to an earlier draft of this memorandum, the fourth, fifth, and sixth paragraphs are based on notes taken by General Taylor. (Ibid.)