

Conversation No. 652-013

Date: January 20, 1972

Time: 4:52 - 5:59 p.m.

Location: Oval Office

Participants: Nixon, General William C. Westmoreland and Melvin R. Laird

During a meeting with Defense Secretary Laird and Army Chief of Staff General Westmoreland, Nixon stressed the need for more “aggressive” action with regard to arms sales in Latin America, since “with the sales...goes the training, goes everything else, and goes the stroke.” Had the United States been more effective at “playing our military friends” in places like Chile, Nixon mused, “Allende might not be there.” Most importantly, the U.S. Government needed to abandon its blanket preference for civilian governments and understand that, under certain circumstances, a military government could better serve a nation’s well-being: “You see, the fiction is that if a government is based on any kind of military support, that it’s, by definition, thereby a bad government. And, of course, the truth is that sometimes it’s bad, sometimes it good. But, if a government is solely civilian...[it] can many times be worse, and also one in which we have no influence.” Nixon also wanted to military attachés and advisers to show greater initiative in cultivating relationships with foreign governments, and follow the example of “imaginative” and “ruthless” General Vernon Walters who, besides having “had a helluva lot to do, as you know, with what happened in Brazil,” was extraordinarily well connected in the region.

[...]

[652-013_Clip1](#) (3.9m; 4:06)

Nixon: I want our military to be more aggressive than it has been in terms of military sales around the world, and that includes Latin America. I mean—

Laird: [Unclear]—

Nixon: I want you to push it. I consider to be a—it’s a disgrace for us to allow the French, and the rest, to sell to these Latin American countries. I mean, we ought to be selling it to ’em in the main. And, one of the reasons is to, just is to say that that helps them. But it’s the fact that with the sales goes, goes the training, goes everything else, and goes the stroke. And also—

Westmoreland: The French are just in there baiting us—

Nixon: And the other thing I was going to say is that we ought to ponder it, and I think, too, that, as you know, on the Latin American proposition, I just feel very strongly that toward, you know, toward playing our military friends down there. Now, people can say, “Well, look at Peru.” Well, so you look at Peru. But, if we had—if we had, perhaps, more influence with the Chilean armed forces, Allende might not be there.

Laird: We’ve made some progress there—

Nixon: Make some now.

Laird: Yes, sir.

Nixon: Well, it’s all right. Don’t tell me about it; just do it. But, the point that I make is that, as you know, I feel quite differently from the conventional wisdom on that, and I know you do, too.

Laird: I do.

Nixon: And you—you’re talking to the fellows, with the Chiefs [unclear] Fulbright and Mansfield, and the rest, will raise hell and scream—and Church—but we are going to see to it that in this period, as we—as we are reducing our presence around the world, that we stay in the business of providing arms, support, and so forth, for regimes around the world, for them—for maintaining some military strength. The—You see, the fiction is that if a government is based on any kind of military support, that it’s, by definition, thereby a bad government. And, of course, the truth is that sometimes it’s bad, sometimes it good. But, if a government is solely civilian, without military—if you look at the numbers and the present statistics—can many times be worse, and also one in which we have no influence. Right?

Laird: [Unclear] through this, even the [coughs] in Yugoslavia right now, the military is probably much more important than it was even two years ago. I think [unclear]—

Nixon: Is that right?

Laird: —and his reorganization of the Communist Party [unclear]—

Nixon: Hmm.

Laird: —that I think it’s true not only in some of those satellite countries, it’s certainly true in Latin America—

Westmoreland: We have a military delegation going down to Yugoslavia.

Nixon: Play it all you can. I think that we talked about this once before, Bill, and I want to see that the Army, and the Air Force, and the rest, let's have the greatest possible contact around the world, you know. I know that—I know that we'll have that again when they say, "Well, the military attachés and the rest, what the hell do they do?" You know very well what they do. They go to parties and the rest, but they learn a hell of a lot, and they still see if the people can be our friends.

Westmoreland: And they make friends.

Nixon: They make friends. Now, you know Vernon Walters?

Westmoreland: I know him very well.

Nixon: Well, Walters, who is aggressive, imaginative, ruthless, had a helluva lot to do, as you know, with what happened in Brazil.¹

Westmoreland: Absolutely.

Nixon: He knows every one of those people—

Westmoreland: More than any other—

Nixon: He's an intimate friend of the President's [*today*].

Laird: Isn't that an asset of the United States?

Westmoreland: Absolutely.

Nixon: And I just really felt that let's start playing these things a little bit more that way.

[...]

¹ On March 31, 1964, the Brazilian military overthrew leftist President João Goulart, while Walters was the U.S. military attaché. Declassified U.S. Government documents indicate that there was CIA involvement in the *coup d'état*, but the agency has yet to release any of the relevant documents. Peter Kornbluh (ed.), "Brazil Marks 40th Anniversary of Military Coup," <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB282/index.htm>.