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In Reply
Refer to: T-443

September 9, 1952 409418

Commissioner Gordon Dean
U. S. Atomic Energy Commission
1901 Constitution Avenue
Washington 25, D. C.

CLASSIFICATION CANCELLED
BY AUTHORITY OF DQE/OC
REVIEWED BY H.L. Hoppe 11/22/85 DATE
REVIEWED BY C. Wilson 2/12/86 DATE

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By: P.M. Sweetman 6/11/86

Dear Commissioner Dean:

Ever since I came here last February, I have been concerned about the choice of the date for the thermonuclear test, November 1. My concern has been revived recently, both by the approach of the critical date and by reports of Dr. de Hoffmann about discussions which he had on this matter at the Commission about two weeks ago.

The first danger is, of course, that this test might in some manner be injected into the election campaign. I do not believe that the Presidential candidates themselves would do so but there are many others that might, for instance members of Congress or newspaper columnists. If the test is carried out on November 1, if it is successful, and if this fact becomes known, the danger is very great that it will be used as campaign material.

Now I don't believe that it will be an effective argument in the campaign; in fact, I think it is unpredictable which party would benefit from it, regardless of how or by whom the topic is raised. But I am worried that some politicians of either party might believe that it would help their side. We all know that emotions run high in a campaign, especially towards its close. Demagogic statements may be made at such a time which the speaker himself will later regret.

The least of the troubles which would arise from such speeches is that they might make atomic energy and atomic weapons a partisan issue. Much more serious is the possibility that the public would be led to believe that the accomplishment of a thermonuclear reaction had made us invincible, that we could now take chances in

foreign policy and perhaps even risk a major war. It would take a long time to correct this impression, and in trying to do so, we would be unable to use some of the most potent arguments because they are classified. A few words said in the heat of battle can thus do permanent damage to the public attitude on this matter.

The most important reaction, however, will be that abroad. If our test becomes publicly known, and I think the chances for this are enhanced if it is held during the election campaign, it will undoubtedly give food to the Communist propaganda machine. This propaganda is apt to be quite effective because I believe that the knowledge of a successful thermonuclear test will create fear in the countries of Western Europe rather than confidence. A few belligerent or merely incautious remarks by some people in this country will play into the hands of Communist propaganda by convincing many otherwise friendly people abroad that this is an important step towards our starting a war. "Neutrality" will be strengthened, to an extent that it may influence the policy of European governments and become very hard to deal with. There is of course no guarantee that inappropriate remarks will not be made outside of a campaign, but the danger is much greater during it.

The chances are very considerable that a successful test on November 1 would become publicly known before the election. It has happened on a previous occasion that Congressmen returning from the observation of an Eniwetok test have given press interviews while still on the way back to the U. S. The incentive to do this will be greater near the end of an election campaign so that even the likelihood of disclosure itself is increased, quite apart from its unfortunate timing. If there is no disclosure, the test may still become public knowledge because of large fall-outs, visual observations from Kwajalein, or possibly observations of shock or seismic phenomena. Whichever may be the method of revelation, the evidence of a test with enormous yield combined with a lot of previous discussion in the columns of newspapers will almost undoubtedly lead the public to the right conclusion.

It therefore seems to me vital that the test be postponed at least until the day after the election. A somewhat longer postponement would be highly desirable for more general reasons.

Dr. de Hoffmann has told me that a statement has been prepared for release after the test. From his report on its contents, it seems to be most admirably formulated. However, in spite of the restrained statement, public discussion of the real implication of the test (if successful) may easily get started, and in this case there may be rapid and unpredictable political repercussions, especially in Europe, among both our friends and our enemies. Our own Government must be in a position to react to such possible events quickly, effectively and authoritatively. The last requirement

implies that the incoming Administration must be behind any moves and statements that we may make. This will be necessary, whichever candidate is to become President. Therefore it seems to me important that both candidates be fully informed about the prospective test and that the test be held late enough after the election to give the smoke of battle time to dissipate, let us say November 15.

It is our great good fortune that both Presidential candidates are men of the highest caliber. Therefore it should be easy to give them both the information they need, and to trust their discretion. Certainly General Eisenhower has been supreme commander long enough to appreciate the need for secrecy, and he has already received substantial information on atomic energy. It is true that the General refused to listen to the foreign policy briefing which President Truman offered to him, but I do not think that the present problem is at all in the same category. The invitation to discuss matters of atomic energy could be made privately, not publicly, so that General Eisenhower would not be embarrassed politically. Best of all perhaps, some person could visit the General and present the situation to him. It would be best if you felt in a position to do this yourself, but if you did not, it could be done by a person like Dr. Oppenheimer, who has previously given atomic energy briefings to General Eisenhower. I presume there are no difficulties at all in informing Governor Stevenson.

If the two Presidential candidates are fully informed, it would seem that a date like November 15 would meet the requirements of finding the U. S. Government in a position to deal with possible political consequences of the test. Such a date would involve little hardship for the thermonuclear program and for the Los Alamos Laboratory. In May, I discussed this question with Dr. Bradbury who in turn discussed it with Dr. Graves and others primarily concerned. Dr. Bradbury wrote a letter on this subject to Dr. Oppenheimer of which he sent a copy to Gen. Fields. He said in the letter that a delay to November 15 was slightly undesirable because the weather in Eniwetok is deteriorating during November. However, if the shot were to be fired on the first day with favorable weather conditions after November 15, it is confidently expected that such conditions would occur within two weeks at the latest. A later target date than November 15 would be less acceptable, and after December 1 favorable weather could no longer be expected reliably.

The effect of a postponement by two weeks or a month on the general thermonuclear program of the Laboratory would be almost unnoticeable. Such a postponement would not cause any delay in the important Upshot test or in theoretical or engineering design of thermonuclear weapons.

[REDACTED]

It seems to me therefore that the arguments for postponement are overwhelming; and those against, practically non-existent. I think it would be most desirable that you order such a postponement. However, I can see that you may be reluctant to make such a decision on your own responsibility because the arguments are essentially political. For this reason, it would be quite appropriate to refer the decision to the President. If this is done, however, it seems to me that it should be so referred with a strong recommendation for postponement, giving the admittedly political reasons for this, and giving the proper evaluation of the technical effects of postponement: the rather slight inconvenience to the men involved in the test itself, and the negligible delay of the thermonuclear weapons development. A lukewarm or an adverse recommendation to the President would seem to me highly detrimental and potentially very dangerous for the country.

Please feel free to use this letter as you see fit.

Yours sincerely,

/s/ H. A. Bethe

H. A. Bethe