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OF THE
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OFFICIAL - INFORMAL

SECRET

Office of the Political Adviser
Headquarters, U. S. European Command
c/o American Embassy, Paris

February 19, 1958

Dear Lane:

On a trip with General Palmer last month to Morocco, I had the opportunity of visiting Sidi Slimane and of witnessing one of their alerts. It was most impressive. Noting the "cocked aircraft" lined up wing to wing and also the close order in which they proceeded down the runway, I asked the Executive Officer about their fire control measures. I was not the only Cassandra as I learned consequently that General Palmer had made a similar inquiry of General Compton. We were both given a description of how neighboring planes would be removed and were told that it was estimated that the firefighters would have approximately ten minutes to put out the fire before it reached the HE.

The reports from Embassy Rabat and in the press referring to "evacuation" of the base rather surprised us as no mention had been made of any such procedure. We have had no reports from military sources on the incident, and there is an understandable reluctance here to question the 16th AF or any other part of SAC. Considering how shrill our stolid British allies have been on the subject of nuclear accidents - albeit with political motivations - I was very impressed with Ambassador Cannon's successful handling of the situation with the Moroccans, who are neither stolid nor allied to us.

At the same time, however, I am concerned about the inconsistency between our assurances concerning the relative safety of nuclear weapons and the instant case involving what was apparently an ordered evacuation.

I am

B. E. L. Timmons, Esquire
Director, Office of European
Regional Affairs
Bureau of European Affairs
Department of State
Washington 25, D. C.

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I am afraid that this inconsistency vitiates our assurances and can and will be thrown back in our faces. Would it not be well to ascertain whether and under what circumstances evacuation is the standard drill at our bases? I realize that in many cases evacuation of a base may be demanded by ordinary prudence and that for most of us it makes little difference whether we are killed by HE or nuclear explosions. At the same time, some of our bases are probably sufficiently large so that it should be possible to have personnel moved to a remote and protected corner of the base where they would be safe from fire and flying debris.

This problem of the popular fear of accidental nuclear explosions is going to be a factor to contend with for some time, and it seems to me that, in addition to examining evacuation procedures, much can and should be done to educate the public. It is not surprising that the man in the street, who has grown accustomed to the idea of the fantastic power of nuclear weapons, should have the idea that nuclear weapons present a terrific accident hazard. Technical explanations cannot accomplish a great deal with the general public. What seems indicated is a series of popular articles, pictures and newsreels showing nuclear bombs being hacked up with axes.

I am getting somewhat too far afield, but I do think we should know where we stand on this evacuation question.

All of the best to you and Ruth,

George L. West, Jr.
George L. West, Jr.

Copies to:

Mr. Thurston
Mr. Joseph Wolf

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February 28, 1958

Dear George:

Thank you for your letter of February 19 which contained very pertinent comments on the public posture of the U.S. on the subject of security aspects of the handling of nuclear weapons.

I am advised by S/AE, the office with direct responsibility in such matters, that the Department of Defense will, in the near future, issue a "Technical Letter" concerning action that should be taken in the event of an accident involving a nuclear weapon. It will be pointed out in the letter that in the event of such an accident the general public should be kept 1500 feet or more from the scene of the accident. Should the plane become engulfed in flames, the fire fighters should then withdraw beyond 1500 feet.

The Commanding General at any base has the prime responsibility for the welfare of his men. The measures to protect them are left to his discretion. In the case of the Sidi Slimane incident, the Commanding General chose to use the opportunity to practice his evacuation plan. It is unfortunate that this practice evacuation became tied up with a plane carrying a nuclear weapon and that this fact became known.

I am enclosing for your information a copy of the DOD-AEC release of February 14 concerning the hazards involved in the movement of nuclear weapons which, by the way, received little notice in the United States.

Sincerely yours,


B.E.L. Timmons
Director

Office of European Regional Affairs

Enclosure.

George L. West, Esquire,
Political Adviser, USEUCOM,
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Paris.

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