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ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION

MEETING NO. 1062

2:15 p.m., Wednesday, February 23, 1955

Present

Lewis L. Strauss
Thomas E. Murray
W. F. Libby

K. D. Nichols
Edward Diamond

W. B. McCool
John H. Stumpf

Also Present

A. Tammaro
J. L. Kelehan
T. H. Johnson
Paul W. McDaniel
William J. Knox
George A. Kolstad
Col. Vincent G. Huston
Dr. John C. Bugher
John A. Derry
Lyll E. Johnson
E. J. Bloch
W. Kenneth Davis
Charles H. Reichardt
Don S. Burrows

Francis J. McCarthy
G. Norman Rogers
William H. Berman
J. A. Waters
Charles D. Luke
Morse Salisbury
Shelby Thompson
Edward R. Gardner
C. D. W. Thorton
William C. Wampler
McKay Donkin
John Mackenzie, Jr.
Comdr. John W. Crawford
William L. Oakley

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Colonel Huston then reviewed the report of the Joint Storage Board on requirements through Fiscal Year 1957. After discussion, the Commission:

Approved the recommendation of AEC 25/47.

22. Executive Session*

Selection of a Director of Reactor Development

23. Letter from the Chairman of the Joint Committee; Future Use of Nevada Proving Grounds (See AEC 141/28, subsequently circulated)

(In approving these minutes, the Commission requested that the transcript of the meeting be used in lieu of this section of the minutes as originally written. The pertinent part of the transcript of Meeting 1062 (pp. 101-110), which has been reviewed by the Commission, is set forth below.)

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: This has just arrived at this minute, and I think I ought to read it. It is from Senator Anderson. It is dated the 21st., that is Monday.

"Dear Mr. Chairman:

"As you know the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy has staunchly supported the Commission in its desire for a continental test site. We have also insisted that every necessary step must be taken to assure that operations at the Nevada Test Site are conducted safely and that no significant hazard to off-site public health should result from test operations. Experience so far in the present series, however, prompts me to raise the question of whether the Nevada Test Site can be utilized effectively and economically under the present criteria for anything other than very small yield devices.

*Separate minutes for this part of the meeting have been circulated.

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"The test site was established primarily so that the weapon development laboratories could field test experimental devices easily and quickly. It was argued that the use of a continental test site, rather than one in far Pacific, would provide savings in money and, more importantly, in time of key scientists and would interfere as little as possible with normal laboratory operations. Already we have seen in the present series a delay of one week, and unless I am mistaken in my interpretation of the criteria under which the test organization presently operates and the commitments given the public, we shall see much more costly delay. One weather scientist informed us that the probability of finding weather conditions that meet all the present criteria is about one day in twenty-five.

"I would appreciate receiving from the Commission an evaluation of the Nevada Test Site under the present criteria for test operations. Your report should consider whether only very small yield devices should be tested there, leaving all substantial shots for the Pacific where they can be precisely scheduled.

"Please do not misunderstand me, I do not advocate taking any real risk with public health and safety; rather, assuming that the present criteria are necessary for public safety, I am raising the question of whether we can use the Nevada Test Site efficiently for anything other than the test of very small yield devices."

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Do you think he is referring to the present test?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Presumably.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Is he taking some action now?

MR. NICHOLS: He was out there.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: He was out there. He didn't see anything because he left before it was shot.

MR. NICHOLS: That is quite a change in his attitude.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Yes, it is a big change.

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MR. NICHOLS: What I heard before was the criticism why do you worry about all these things, nobody has ever been hurt. Maybe I have not quoted him correctly.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Al Graves said I think you should go ahead.

MR. NICHOLS: This is a complete reversal,

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: This was one day towards the middle of the week.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: I am pretty disturbed by this. I noted, Lewis, that you had cooled off about the Nevada site.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: I had been cool long before. My coolness started in the spring of 1953, but I have never discussed this with Anderson. This is spontaneous.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: I think this will set the weapons program back a lot to go to the Pacific.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: I have gone along with the majority of the Commission that this is the thing to do.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: You would not consider pulling back anything in the present series of tests?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: If I were asked whether the two large shots should be made, and it were left to my sole decision, I would say load them on a ship and go out to Eniwetok and put them on a raft and set them off.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: How long do you think that would take?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: It could take you 60 or 90 days and it may take you 60 or 90 days before you get them off at this rate.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: It is a serious decision.

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MR. NICHOLS: My immediate reaction is that we went over very thoroughly the criteria that were set up for conducting the tests. It is my understanding that it has been rather unusual weather out there. I don't see yet that we are ready to assume that you can't run a series of tests reasonably on schedule. It was recognized that you would not have these big ones on schedule, but you would hope to complete the whole series in a reasonable time.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: Maybe the furor will die down as we go through the series, after we have had the bomb on Monday or Tuesday.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Yes, and it was a little one yesterday. But they made as much fuss about it as if it had been a big one.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: How big was it?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Four KT.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: I think somehow, Lewis, we ought to be very slow. I was disappointed to learn from the General Manager's report this morning that Los Alamos and Livermore are talking about cancelling Dixie. That sets it back.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: I don't think that is on account of any pressures of this sort. It is on account of other reasons.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: Maybe they have the same reason.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: No, I think when Graves reads this letter he will be very surprised.

MR. NICHOLS: I certainly am considering the previous reports I got from people in conversation with Anderson.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: There is a Nevada legislator who has introduced a bill in the Nevada legislature, according to one of the Las Vegas papers, asking us to move out of the state. Both of the Las Vegas papers, which seldom agree on anything, published editorials agreeing that this was nonsense, that we brought a lot of

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prosperity to the state. This was a fine thing for national defense, and they rather laughed this fellow out of court.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: That is a sensible view. People have got to learn to live with the facts of life, and part of the facts of life are fallout.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: It is certainly all right they say if you don't live next door to it.

MR. NICHOLS: Or live under it.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: I bet you would find Governor Peterson would be a little cool to moving the test to the Pacific.

MR. NICHOLS: Particularly the open shot.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: How is he going to get any information?

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We must not let anything interfere with this series of tests -- nothing.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: I think this should be answered promptly. He should be told as far as the scheduling is concerned, he speaks of the week's delay, we delayed the second shot in the Pacific, although much larger, for either two or three weeks.

MR. NICHOLS: Our whole program contemplated delay. That was the way it was set up.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: It really worked them very much to get out there on a scheduled day -- you know how these things are, there is a weather conference and another one three hours later, and nobody knows whether to go to bed or not.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: That is right.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: It is very irksome.

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MR. NICHOLS: He wanted to schedule three shots where you could run it like a circus.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: We could not stage it for them. They just turned around and left,

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: I think we ought to talk about this. I don't want radioactivity falling on people's necks, but it is an awfully serious thing.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Another thing about it is that since the fallout patterns have been established pretty well, they now in addition to the photograph apply a fallout pattern to the map, and there are just about two optimum areas. One is more or less west of north of a line that would run perpendicular north, which would run over this Lincoln, Minnesota. There was group of people there. They had arranged in that event the men would stay in the mines, and the women and children would move out in busses. That was the best route north. Ten degrees east of that they got into more settled areas. There is another apparently optimum direction almost due south.

MR. NICHOLS: Isn't it east?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: No, East they got over Pioche and over St. George, which they apparently always plaster.

MR. NICHOLS: I thought it was just south of those two places.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: South of those two places is a very narrow corridor where if the wind shifts ten degrees in either direction, then they are in trouble again. Of course, they really never paid much attention to that before.

MR. NICHOLS: Those charts are the same as when they explained them to the Commission at the time we went over the criteria.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: At that time they did not have on them what they describe now as hot spots. What are they, Bill?

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COMMISSIONER LIBBY: A fluke of the weather or winds causing local precipitation. I was asked on television yesterday afternoon what would happen if an H bomb was set off in a hurricane. I said I didn't know, and I didn't think anybody else knew.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: What is the largest spot we have exploded in Nevada? Was it 75 kilotons?

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: In the preceding test, I have a feeling you are right.

MR. NICHOLS: Either 70 or 80.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: And the largest this time is 40.

MR. NICHOLS: And we have twice as high a tower.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Not quite.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I think we ought to answer this letter, but we should say we will investigate new sites. We will think of Alaska, and all those other places.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Do you think we ought to raise the question you raised whether he means this series?

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I would not mention it. Just say we are glad to get his letter. We are taking more precautions and more than we have in the past. It may take a longer time to run the series. We will look into it. We recognize the difficulties, and we will look into another site.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Al and Herb York and Ken were talking, no decision made, about conducting future tests of anything except little ones in the Pacific. It is so easy to do things out there because you can do them one a day, practically.

(Discussion off the record.)

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: Let us take this up with the MLC tomorrow. Is that a good subject?

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MR. NICHOLS: It is a good subject. 58 kilotons was the largest one previously.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: I have always been frightened that something would happen which would set us back with the public for a long period of time.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I am interested in the public all right, but if we are not going to have a test for another year, and we don't go out to Nevada again, and we have another year to think of another test place, this Pacific idea you can talk all you want, Lewis, put them on a ship and get them out in 30 or 60 days, it will not be done.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: Fly them out.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: You cannot put troops on the plane and so forth.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: He has not said that in his letter. He may mean it.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: No.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I would tell him, sure, we agree with him, we will look for a new site, and I would talk about Alaska and the northern sections. As a matter of fact, who was it that was in here a while back, was it Vigner, somebody had an idea to go up north, instead of the Pacific.

COMMISSIONER LIBBY: Point Barrow.

COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Put the name of the place.

MR. NICHOLS: Let me have the letter. I will get people to work on it.

CHAIRMAN STRAUSS: This is just a photostat. The original has gone to Military Application. I don't think we ought to lose any time answering.