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THE WHITE HOUSE
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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: President Boris Yeltsin of Russia (C)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Samuel Berger, Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs
Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State
Peter Afanassenko, Interpreter

President Boris Yeltsin
Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Deputy Chief of
Presidential Administration
Georgy Mamedov, Deputy Foreign Minister
Interpreter

DATE, TIME May 17, 1998 -- 11:47 a.m. - 12:33 p.m.
AND PLACE: Birmingham, England

The President: I told Tony Blair we had to find some way to compromise on this matter of Japan or Russia as G-8 host in 2000. I've asked Jacques if he'd be willing to do something around the millennium, and he said yes. I'm working on it and will keep working on it. Maybe there's some way we could do something in Russia in the year 2000, for the reasons that you said [in the wrap-up session of the G-8], but also something in Japan. [The President gives Yeltsin his G-8 lapel pin.] (C)

President Yeltsin: That's a good idea. We'll have two meetings instead of one, and that won't disrupt the sequence for Canada and so on and so forth. (C)

The President: Depending on what happens, we might think about devoting one meeting to international economics and one to international security issues, or perhaps we can do it in some other way. (C)

President Yeltsin: Okay. We'll go forward gradually to prepare for that format. (C)

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The President: Good -- let's see what makes sense. (C)

President Yeltsin: You know, Bill, people are starting to criticize us for the weakening of our relationship. I've been under fire for this, and so have you. I don't think you agree with this characterization, and I assure you I don't either. I hope that you, like I, will push back against the idea that there are deep and irreconcilable tensions in our relations. You know, one reason people have come to this conclusion is that it's been a long time since we met. Sure, we met in Helsinki, in Paris, in Denver last year. But that's not the same thing as a real official visit. We're looking forward to your making a proper visit in July. And I'm counting on your bringing Hillary with you. That's my condition for the Summit! (C)

The President: I'm aware of that. She certainly wants to come. (C)

First, congratulations on your new government. It's a strong team -- young, impressive, capable. The Vice President is off to a good start with Kiriyenko. It's good to see you in such excellent health, but it's also good to see you putting together a government made up of fine young people. (C)

President Yeltsin: I've been glad to see how the mass media, both at home and abroad, as well as a lot of world leaders have paid attention to this point. He [Kiriyenko] is a young but skillful politician. I told him to take the baton from Al Gore in the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission and hold on to it firmly. The Commission has worked well; it's done a good job. (C)

I'll tell you, I've treated Chernomyrdin very well. I've let him keep his salary, his dacha, his car, his bodyguard. All the perks that he had as Prime Minister he has today as a pensioner. In this respect, I've put in place a radical change from the way we used to do things. It used to be when a top-level person resigned, he became a non-person overnight and everyone was kicking him in the shins and so forth. I know your own procedure for dealing with former political leaders is more civilized, but in the case of Chernomyrdin, I think we've gone you one better. (C)

The President: He was loyal to you. (C)

President Yeltsin: Yes. He was always good about seeking my advice, and he's a decent person. But it sometimes happens in the history of a society that the people get tired of this or

that official, and you've got to change things -- start from scratch -- in order to restore momentum. (C)

On START II, the Duma is now fully engaged. It's full-speed ahead. It's not gathering dust. We're hard at work in various committees of the Duma as well as within the government. You and I have to make sure that that we don't let any harm come to this project. As I understand it you'll come to visit us in July only if we ratify START II in June -- that this is a condition of your coming. (C)

The President: Well, I think we've got yet another reason to want to get on with START III. The Indian nuclear test may give you an additional argument with which to push START II over the line. We don't know what the Pakistanis will do, but the whole situation puts more pressure on us to lead the world back from the brink. The whole situation just shows that other countries can hire scientists. If there's anything I can do to help [on Duma ratification], I'll do it, although I understand it's a Russian decision. (C)

President Yeltsin: Here's a paper setting forth our ideas for START III. [Hands over paper.] (C)

The President: Please move forward quickly on this so that we can get on with START III. That will help create a climate for India to sign the CTBT, and it will give you additional leverage with the Indian government when you go there. (C)

President Yeltsin: I'm going in December. (C)

The President: I think India has made a terrible mistake. But I also think India should get credit for 50 years of democracy. We need to help them see that they should not define greatness in a way that gives everyone else headaches. The ruling party there seems particularly to feel that earning the full respect of the world depends on India's being a nuclear power. Before I go [to South Asia], and before you go, we need to prepare and coordinate our approaches. (C)

President Yeltsin: Right! (C)

The President: We're making progress on nonproliferation, weapons of mass destruction and Iran, but I'm worried about a vote coming up in our Senate. I think we've got some good channels going -- the Vice President and Kiriyenko, Madeleine

and Primakov, Sandy and Kokoshin, Gallucci and Koptev. I've got high confidence in these folks, and they're doing a good job. But they've got to know, and we've got to keep reminding them, that you and I are personally committed to this and making it work and not letting it slip backward. There have been some problems with implementation, as you know, so you've got to send a clear signal that implementation has got your total support. (C)

President Yeltsin: Absolutely. I'll do that. (C)

The President: Otherwise we'll get a bad vote in the Senate that will infuriate your Duma. (C)

President Yeltsin: As a friend and as someone who has worked closely with you, I assure you that I'm absolutely intent on doing everything in my power for full implementation of all the agreements we've made and not to depart from them or slip backward from them. You're right that we've got a lot of problems to grapple with in this area, but we've also made a lot of headway in a short period of time. (C)

The President: We have, but we've got to keep it up. The coming week is going to be especially important. So let's have as much positive activity as possible. Senator Lott has got 82 co-sponsors for his bill. Anything good we can do this week will be especially helpful. (C)

President Yeltsin: Okay. (C)

The President: On Kosovo, Primakov and Ivanov have done a good job working with Madeleine and our people. There's no way to resolve this whole problem unless we continue to work together. It's like in Bosnia: we've finally gotten the sides talking to each other on the basis of the idea that Kosovo is part of Yugoslavia [YELTSIN whispers to his team, 'Albanian part of Yugoslavia?'], and we've got to stay on top of it together. That's the only way to keep them from killing each other -- for us to work together, directly with each other and in the Contact Group, which is very effective and important. What's happened with them starting these talks is a big deal; it could mean finally finding a way out of a very dangerous situation. (C)

President Yeltsin: Yes, and we're working constantly with Milosevic. He's a stubborn guy, not easy to work with. But you can make deals with him. We've been exchanging messages, making

phone calls, doing everything to push him to engage with the Albanian community in Kosovo. (C)

The President: Dick Holbrooke had a good set of meetings down there. He's got his own unusual chemistry with Milosevic. But all this works because of what Milosevic has heard from you and Primakov and your team. Our goal is to keep a fence around them [the parties] so that they talk to each other and don't fight. (C)

One other thing: we're working together through the UN to keep a force in Macedonia. That arrangement has been satisfactory to you and satisfactory to us. Some people, though, want to terminate that force. I don't want to see that happen. I want to stay together in keeping a UN force in there. The situation is too fragile to leave completely. (C)

President Yeltsin: On this, our positions are identical. I support what you've said. We'll work together along this line. There's no disagreement. It would be bad if NATO were to engage in there as a presence. NATO would be an elephant in the china shop. (C)

The President: The key thing is that the UN force not evaporate, since that would force us to come up with some other force. Let's have Mr. Mamedov and Strobe work on this and other things of that kind. They have been conducting our Strategic Stability Dialogue under Madeleine and Primakov. They have a common language -- or maybe two. (C)

President Yeltsin: Yes, they understand each other. We know Mr. Talbott. Not everything that he does thrills us, but overall he's solid and works hard. (C)

The President: That's about as much as I can say for him too, and I've known him for 30 years. (C)

President Yeltsin: I've got a lot of other things that my people have prepared me to talk about. What don't I just give you these [he hands over his cards]. (C)

The President: Okay, and here are ours [Mamedov comments with mock astonishment, "And they're classified *confidential!*."] (C)

You know, Boris, we really are working with the stuff of history here. I'm convinced that 20 years from now, when the Russian economy is booming, people will look back and say we

were right; we did the right things. I just hope you get all the credit you deserve while you're still around, because you've done a terrific job of leading your country during one of the two or three most important moments in Russian history. (C)

President Yeltsin: You and I have an excellent relationship, Bill -- more than just a friendship. It's what I would call co-leadership. We've had the fundamental convictions, the courage and the stamina to abandon old stereotypes as well as moving forward with agreements on deep reductions in global strategic nuclear arms and conventional arms too. (C)

For my part, I'm going to keep reducing our armed forces. I plan to cut them from 2.6 million to 1.2 million. That's actually quite fantastic when you think about it -- a reduction of nearly 2 million from where it used to be. And not only that: I'm also trying to find apartments and jobs for the military people who are leaving the armed forces. Dealing with this problem is not easy. It means not just cutting our forces but also providing means of livelihood for the people affected. (C)

The President: That's very impressive. (C)

President Yeltsin: A word on China, which we touched on only briefly earlier [in the G-8]. We're working effectively with China. The forces along both sides of our border -- which is 7,500 kilometers, even longer than yours with Mexico -- have been cut by half. (C)

The President: I'd like to develop this whole issue of what we can do together with China. Let's have Mr. Berger pursue this with Mr. Kokoshin and Strobe with Yuri before I go to China. Russia, China and the United States might consider a joint approach toward the problem of India and Pakistan. We need to give this careful thought, but it could conceivably include getting them into the CTBT and even reinvigorating the peace process for Kashmir. Both countries have a lot of poverty -- they can't afford this constant tension and conflict. If we could help them reconcile some of their differences, it would be a huge thing for your security; it would spur economic growth in Russia and China. (C)

President Yeltsin: A troika! We could bring our influence to bear on India and Pakistan. (C)

The President: All the more reason for us to do so given the historic problems between Russia and China, and also given the way the Cold War affected our relations with India, and Pakistan was something of a special case too. Now we have a chance to come up with a common strategy to solve one of the biggest problems in the world. (C)

President Yeltsin: Maybe we could meet, the three of us, somewhere on the Russian-Chinese border. I could raise this with Zhang Zemin when I see him. (C)

The President: Well, there's a lot more thinking we should do together, the two of us, through Mr. Berger and Mr. Kokoshin and Strobe and Mamedov, before I go to China. We'll have our people come up with a strategy that we can agree to before I go to China. (C)

President Yeltsin: Good. [To Mamedov] Got it? [Mamedov: "yes."] (C)

The President: This is a big deal, Boris. (C)

President Yeltsin: It sure is -- drawing China into our bilateral orbit. It's truly a task for the next millennium. We'll be in retirement when this come to fruition. Maybe we'll set up a club or a foundation of former heads of state. I don't think either of us wants to spend his retirement planting potatoes in the garden. (C)

The President: I'd thought about setting up an institute of some kind. (C)

President Yeltsin: So you're already making plans along the lines of what I suggested? (C)

The President: I haven't had much time for thinking about that. But whatever I do, there will be a place for you. (C)

President Yeltsin: [Laughs.]

Final banter about hunting bear, boar and geese and how a retired president wouldn't have to worry quite so much about animal-rights activists. (C)

The President: Boar and bear are serious -- they can fight back, so you've got a fair fight. (C)

President Yeltsin: I've gone one-on-one with a bear. It was exciting. He was only 20 meters from me. You've got to be a pretty good shot -- right for the heart. [Does an imitation of the bear.] I like goose hunting, but not when they're just sitting there on the water -- only when they're in the air and it's a real test of skill. Getting START II ratified is nothing compared to that! (X)

You know, Bill, people keep saying that we're losing confidence in each other, that our partnership is running aground. Let's make sure they know we're doing fine. With the policy you've pursued toward Russia these past five years, you really can't lose, and in the time remaining to you in office you can score more points. (X)

As for me, I'm criticized for tilting too much toward you. They keep calling me a westernizer. [He uses the word from the 19th century debate between the westernizers and the slavophiles.] (X)

The President: Time will bear you out. (X)

President Yeltsin: Yes. The two of us have set out together to build an alliance [soyuz] based on full confidence in each other. I don't doubt your good faith and you don't doubt mine. (X)

The President: That kind of mutual trust and confidence makes all the difference. We've seen that in Northern Ireland. The whole problem there has been lack of trust. Personal chemistry really matters. Another example is the Middle East. Rabin gets killed, and Arafat and Netanyahu just don't trust each other. If there's no trust, nothing good can happen. (X)

[They conclude, with YELTSIN giving an embrace.]

-- End of Conversation --