

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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PER E.O. 13526

2015-0782-M-2 (1.14)

3/13/2013 KBH

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Private Dinner with Russian President
Yeltsin: Middle East, China, Iran, Nuclear
Control (X)

PARTICIPANTS: U.S.

The President
Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State

Russia

President Yeltsin
Dmitriy Ryurikov, Foreign Policy Assistant

DATE, TIME March 21, 1997, 8:15-9:30 p.m.

AND PLACE: Finnish Official Guest Residence, Helsinki

President Yeltsin: It has been a good day. It has been a good finish (using the word meaning the finish of a race). (X)

The President: Yes, I agree, although the press will try to see if it can't catch us up on something. (X)

President Yeltsin: Well, given everything that we agreed, they won't be able to make any trouble or difficulty. (X)

The President: Are you tired? (X)

President Yeltsin: A little bit, but I am also feeling satisfied. (X)

The President: That is pretty much the way I feel, too. (X)

President Yeltsin: This was the first flight -- the first business trip -- I have taken since my operation. (X)

The President: What are your views of the Middle East? Will it be possible for Arafat to stop the violence in the Palestinian areas? (X)

President Yeltsin: When I met with Arafat recently, it was my impression that he had plenty of good-will and that he wants to

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Reason: 1.5 (d)

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put an end to the cycle of violence and certainly not to encourage terrorism. (C)

You and I together did a very big job today. The skeptics wondered whether either of us were up to it. They speculated about how I was ill and about how you were ill, and yet despite all that, we still managed to have a good day. Let me offer a toast to your success, your leadership and to our accomplishments together here in Helsinki. (C)

I have a couple of gifts for you. And I hope that presenting these gifts in this particular setting would be allowed. (President Yeltsin presents the President with some silver tableware). This was only the third time that this very rare kind of folk art and silverwork have been presented to a foreign visitor. Once was in the reign of Alexander II, the other was in the reign of Nicholas II and the third time was a similar set that had been given to Charles DeGaulle. (C)

(President Yeltsin then presents the President with an elaborate wooden cane which breaks down into three pieces like a billiard cue and has a screw-off top revealing a telescope inside.) (C)

(The President gives President Yeltsin a gift -- a small Frederick Remington statue or a copy of a Frederick Remington statue of an Indian chief on horseback riding down a steep grade.) (C)

The President: You'll see that the horse is on very tricky footing here, but the rider is strong and a good horseman and knows how to stay in the saddle and not be thrown off stride or off the horse. And I think that's a pretty good metaphor for you, Boris, in the way you've been able to deal with difficult terrain. (C)

Let me offer a toast: I toast you for never giving up, never giving in to your opponents and always coming back. You're an inspiration to me and to many others around the world. (C)

(The President asks about China, and Yeltsin talks a little bit about Zhang Zemin coming in April, about a conversation that he had had with Zhang after the death of Deng, who he mistakenly referred to as Mao Zedong. And how Zhang had assured him that there is no unrest and no difficulties after Deng's death.) (C)

President Yeltsin: The Chinese are now on a new course of reform and democratization, and they're ready to cooperate more with the United States. I've talked to Zhang about this and will encourage them in that direction. In general, we need to have better cooperation among the three of us. (C)

The President: I agree with that. (X)

President Yeltsin: Russia and China have a common border, 5,500 kilometers long. We are beginning to draw down military forces along the border. That is, Russia is. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are preparing to de-escalate any tensions that might still exist along the border with China. (X)

The President: I note that the Indian Prime Minister is coming to Moscow soon. (X)

President Yeltsin: Yes, he is coming on Tuesday. The Indians are trying to get Russia to sell them missiles and rocket engines, which Russia will not do. But, at the same time, Russia is prepared to go ahead with the sale of an atomic power plant and two 877 class submarines. These are permissible, but we are not going to do anything that will allow India to build up its nuclear weapons potential. (X)

The President: India is a very important country, and they'll become more important over time. We need to unlock the tension between India and China and India and Pakistan, using as an example the way in which we've been able to reduce the tension between Russia and the United States. Tell the Indian Prime Minister that he and his neighbors can do that if Russia and the United States were able to defuse those kinds of tensions. (X)

President Yeltsin: Okay, I will tell him that. (X)

The President: Soon India will have the biggest middle class in the world, but that will only happen if India can develop its full potential by reducing the tension that exists between it and its neighbors. (X)

(The President then asks about Iran, clearly intending to raise the question of Russian arm sales to Iran.) (X)

President Yeltsin: The relations between Russian and Iran are essentially those as between a country and a close neighbor. I am opposed to the criticism that Russia sells missiles to Iran. We will never do that. We will sell them submarines, two of these 877 class submarines, and we will go ahead with the nuclear power station. (X)

But, we have not yet signed an agreement on an Iranian mine, and also there is apparently a contract in consideration for an enrichment plant. I have not decided yet, since there was some concern that enriched uranium could push Iran closer to having weapons-grade uranium. I want to avoid coming under fire from

those who would charge Russia with having helped Iran acquire nuclear technology or missile technology. (C)

The President: Some intelligence is troublesome, because it suggests that, in fact, some very dangerous technologies and particularly missile technologies have reached Iran from Russia, although it wasn't necessarily clear that this was coming from the Russian Government. It may have been from certain other organizations ... (C)

President Yeltsin: (interrupts) Categorically no. That technology could be coming from North Korea or China but not from Russia. I know, Bill, you have recently received such intelligence. The Israeli Prime Minister was here, too, and said something about all of this, but I have looked into it, and there is absolutely nothing of the kind. We're aware that Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to us as well. (C)

My impression is that on your side there have been some efforts to build bridges to Iran. (C)

The President: I've always been willing to talk to them as long as when we talk to them terrorism is one of the issues on the agenda, but they always refuse. I can't be in the position of talking to the Iranians in ways that might make it seem that we're acquiescent in Iranian behavior that threatens our people, our friends and our allies -- that could make all of us more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. (C)

But you're in a different position, Boris. First of all, Iran is your neighbor, and I have some sense of Iran and its people. Long ago when I was living in Arkansas, our state university had many Iranian students. Even after the fall of the Shah, there were lots of Iranians in the United States. What divides us and Iran is this idea that it is part of the legitimate function of political power to fund terrorism around the world. (C)

President Yeltsin: Well, we have discussed this issue. But what I want to tell you is that we will never accept sending missile technology to Iran. (C)

The President: Tell me about your political situation, especially in the Duma. (C)

President Yeltsin: The Duma is now more prepared to cooperate with the Executive Branch, especially since I agreed this year that this would be the year of accord and reconciliation. I am prepared to cooperate with all parties and factions, and the Duma has begun to tone down their reaction to my policies. My hope is this will increase in the period ahead. Now it is easier to deal

with the Duma. I have more support in the Federation Council.
(X)

(President Yeltsin then talks about his new presidential aircraft, an Ilyushin-96.) (X)

President Yeltsin: It is a Boeing-class aircraft, very well made. It is a first edition for the President's personal use.
(X)

(The Presidents talk about how many times each has been to Helsinki, and the answer was three for each President. The President recalls his first visit to Helsinki nearly 30 years ago, around Christmas time, and remembers on Christmas Eve the beautiful patriotic local custom of people going out to the graves of war-fallen and digging little holes in the snow and putting paper bags with candles in them. And he remembers how beautiful the hill looked from the harbor where people were skating. He says it was a beautiful and peaceful way of remembering the sacrifices of the country's soldiers who had died in the war. It had stayed with him for 30 years.) (X)

(There is a fairly long period when President Yeltsin is called out of the room to take what looked like a telephone call, although that is not entirely clear. During that period, the President has a very relaxed conversation with Dmitriy Ryurikov and the two interpreters.) (X)

(When President Yeltsin returns, the Presidents compare notes on their experiences with their operations. The President talks about the procedures in the United States for passing power temporarily to the Vice President. President Yeltsin describes doing the same thing at the time of his heart operation, passing power over to Chernomyrdin and taking the power back. He makes fun of Chernomyrdin for not being used to having what he calls the "button" or the "nuclear football.") (X)

President Yeltsin: Chernomyrdin did not have very long to play with these toys. (X)

The President: Well let's hope none of us ever have to play too much with those toys. (X)

President Yeltsin: I have actually taken part in an exercise with the Russian "football" at one point that involved launching a warhead onto the Kamchatka Peninsula. (X)

(The President then describes the plot of the movie "Crimson Tide" and how it has demonstrated some of the dangers of being on

a nuclear-hair trigger, although he says his people have told him that the plot of "Crimson Tide" could not actually happen.) (C)

President Yeltsin: What if we were to give up having to have our finger next to the button all the time? We have plenty of other ways of keeping in touch with each other. They always know where to find us, so perhaps we could agree that it is not necessary for us to carry the chemodanchik (Russian term for their equivalent of the "football"). (C)

The President: Well, I'll have to think about this. All we carry, of course, are the codes and the secure phone. (C)

President Yeltsin: Yes, you and I are the only leaders who have to do this. (C)

(The President calls on Mr. Talbott to comment.) (C)

Mr. Talbott: Mr. President, given the responsibilities of your office and President Yeltsin's, it makes more sense for the two of you to have these devices with you at all times rather than to have the function assigned to a computer somewhere or to anyone else. (C)

The President: Well, if we do the right thing in the next four years, maybe we won't have to think as much about this problem. This issue of nuclear reduction is very important. If we were able to get to the place where our successors could go even lower than 2,000 nuclear weapons on all sides, then we would have to come to some understanding with the Chinese and the Indians and others, because it's absolutely crazy for countries as poor as those to have to waste so much money on nuclear weapons. (C)

(It was on that subject that the dinner ended.) (C)

(As the dinner breaks up, Mr. Talbott tells Mr. Ryurikov that President Yeltsin had spoken in error at the press conference when he said that there had been an agreement with the President that NATO would not use Soviet-built infrastructure on the territory of new member states of NATO. Ryurikov acknowledges that there had not been such an agreement.) (C)

-- End of Conversation --