

THE WHITE HOUSE
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MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Chancellor Helmut Kohl

Interpreter: Gisela Marcuse
Notetakers: Katherine O'Loughlin, Peter
Huggins, Lyle Harrison, Larry
Wright, Marianna Papadimitriou,
John Schmidt, Steve Pifer and
Dan Fried

DATE, TIME January 6, 1997, 1110 - 1133 a.m. EST
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: Hello? (U)

Chancellor Kohl: Bill, hello. How are you? (U)

The President: I'm fine. It's good to hear your voice. How are you? (U)

Chancellor Kohl: I'm doing well. I have started work. I was at home for a few days over Christmas. I was thinking about a few things and wrote a few of them down. I spent lots of time in the woods. For the first time in many years, we have had a hard winter on the Rhine, lots of snow, with low temperatures of about -5 or -6 degrees centigrade. I hope soon that you will have completed setting up your new government. I hope all works out well. I have been looking at a few things for the new year, and I believe this will be a very important year for all of us, with the developments in the former Yugoslavia, for example, the question of NATO enlargement, and a number of developments in Asia that are of interest to all of us. It is a wise idea that you will embark on direct, high-level talks with the Chinese leadership. (Ø)

The purpose of my call is to give you a first-hand report on my conversation with Boris Yeltsin. Per my request, we met at a place outside of Moscow, to avoid the protocol paraphernalia in

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the Kremlin. We were quite alone. It was basically a one-on-one meeting with just two notetakers and interpreters present. I wanted to give you my impressions right away. I believe Yeltsin has come through the operation well, but basically his general shape is certainly not good at all. I would like to word this very carefully. The Boris Yeltsin that was around last year from January to May, for example, was a quite different person from the Yeltsin we see today. There is virtually nothing left of his vitality, and also his tendency to show his physical strength, to overpower people with his physical presence, is diminished. As far as his mental state is concerned, he has all his faculties. He still has a very good memory. He still reacts logically and his remarks are to the point, but he is much stiffer in his performance. He is more static and he seems to have slowed down significantly. We all saw him and I believe you saw him on TV. He seems to be very rigid, his face is very mask-like. But there are no signs that he has resigned himself to his fate or become despondent. He is very determined to do his job, but won't be able to do it at the same speed as before. This may change, since he is still in a period of convalescence. He may improve over time. He also had a bad cold which may have slowed him down, but it may also be that this is the Boris Yeltsin we will continue to see. Though this may seem blunt or brutal, but we are well advised to use this new year, 1997, to the best of our ability, and he himself wants to make the best use of his time.

(C)

Of all the issues we discussed, there are three of particular interest to you. They quite evidently are going to continue to improve their relations with the People's Republic of China, and he expects a visit from the President of China soon and Prime Minister Li Peng was already there. Another thing is the relationship with Iran. I asked personal questions quite specifically and he answered that they are not selling the Iranians any sort of nuclear or modern, he underlined modern, weapons technology. But for them the overriding argument is that in the neighboring republics, fundamentalism is on the rise. They are quite worried about it and want to play the Iranian card against it. On economics, it is quite evident they have made great strides against inflation, but on jobs there is still stagnation. He claims, and I don't know, I am not a judge, that he will be able in the next few weeks to pay pensions to the elderly and soldiers' pay to members of the armed forces. (C)

Regarding NATO enlargement, I put it to him quite clearly and unequivocally that he has no veto powers, but that this is something we all want to bring about together. His position was quite clear; he is against it. He thinks it is unnecessary and fraught with enormous psychological problems. He is afraid that a new cold war is imminent and that people won't understand it.

My impression is that we would be able to bring this about if we try to come to an agreement with him personally. I do not believe we will be successful if we do this through normal, official channels. This is obviously something we have to try to do anyway. (Ø)

What I believe, however, is that it would be desirable for us -- for you, me, Jacques Chirac and John Major -- to have direct, bilateral talks with him and formulate one line of argument that will convince him. This would be, as I see it, an agreed position and a concerted effort by all of us. We should try to put this forward as soon as possible, and if possible, engage in this kind of dialogue before we enter negotiations leading to the accession of new members. So, if we want to stick to the agreement that has been set -- namely, the date of the NATO meeting this summer (because delaying would cause great irritation in prospective members, in Poland, Hungary and others) -- we need to come up with fresh ideas of what we can do as soon as possible. Now as I understand it, you will receive him as your guest in March or April? (Ø)

The President: Yes, that's right. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: That is why I believe we should make the best possible use of our time before then. My greatest fear is that if it is handled only in official channels, we will fail. I would like to ask you who's in charge of this - Strobe Talbott? Because if he is, I ask that he come here as soon as possible before his planned visit to Moscow. I would really love to talk to him directly before that, if he is indeed the man responsible. (Ø)

The President: First, let me say, that I am basically encouraged by what you have said. Strobe Talbott will represent us on this issue. I understand we cannot work through the normal NATO bureaucracy. I will have Strobe talk with Bitterlich today to work this on a personal basis. I will send Strobe to Bonn before Moscow and he can represent me and Madeleine Albright. You are right, we need to have a coordinated, diplomatic effort. So I believe that if you, me, John and Jacques can come up with a united approach to present to Boris and a creative position -- one that is based on no Russian veto, no slowdown of the process, no explicit exclusion of anyone, and no compromise of NATO decision-making -- I think we will be all right. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: What I am most interested in, Bill, so as not to be misunderstood, is that Strobe Talbott come here as soon as possible, and not just when he is en route to Moscow. Because I think it would be important to have him here to have a good,

lengthy conversation about these issues, and then go back and talk to you, before going to Moscow. (Ø)

The President: I agree with that. He can go this week or next week. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: He can talk to Bitterlich and work out the details and then we can talk again. I believe you understood me that we need to make the best possible use of our time right now. I am not a member of the medical community or a prophet, but I think time is running out. (Ø)

The President: Let me say two things. I agree we have to make the most of our time and I will have Strobe come over there. The second thing is, I have had a lot of friends who have had the same operation Boris had. My father-in-law had it as well. The typical experience is that after the operation, there is a period of psychological slowness or even depression for a few months, but usually within six months people are performing at a higher level of efficiency and in a better frame of mind than a couple of years before the operation. It is too soon to draw conclusions. Boris may rebound not just physically but psychologically as well, and be better than before the operation. It is too soon to tell. We have to see how it goes. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: That may well be, but unfortunately, we do not know for sure. (Ø)

The President: You're right, we have to make the most of every day. I'm not like you, I can only stay in office for eight years. I can't stay for 18 or 20 years. I can't keep up with Bismarck or Adenauer like you can, so I have to work hard every day and make the most of it. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: Very well, thank you. We will welcome Strobe Talbott soon. (Ø)

The President: Thank you. He will be there soon. Give my best to Hannelore. Bye-bye. (Ø)

Chancellor Kohl: Bye-bye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --