

THE WHITE HOUSE
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MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with Russian
President Yeltsin (S)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Yeltsin

Interpreter: Yuri Shkeyrov
Notetakers: Jenny McGee, Miles Murphy,
Joel Schrader, James Smith, Andrew Weiss

DATE, TIME March 24, 1998, 9:20 - 9:56 a.m.
AND PLACE: Oval Office

The President: Hello, Boris. (U)

President Yeltsin: Yes, hello Bill. (U)

The President: Thank you for taking my call. I want to talk to you today about the situation in Serbia and Kosovo. I know you are aware already that Jacques Chirac, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and the rest of the Europeans have decided we have to launch airstrikes against military targets in Serbia soon. My people have kept in very close touch with yours for many days now and have tried to talk openly about how the situation is developing and what we would be required to do. But as you know, Milosevic has stonewalled your negotiator and Dick Holbrooke, and he has continued to move his forces into Kosovo and to evacuate villages. He has left us no choice. I know that you oppose what we are doing, but I want you to know that I am determined to do whatever I can to keep our disagreement on this from ruining everything else we have done and can do together in the coming years. (S)

President Yeltsin: I'm afraid we shall not succeed in that. If you do that [unintelligible] our side very much. Because what was needed to have begun were political discussions again and again and again, instead of bombing and destroying people. Primakov is only the first step ... [unintelligible]. We have

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many steps to aim against your decision, maybe inadmissible steps. (S)

The President: Let me just say this, Boris. I did everything I could do along with you to try to negotiate with Milosevic. He made an agreement last Fall and ended the trouble for awhile, and then he unilaterally violated the agreement. In violation of the agreement he made with us, he has massed 40,000 troops in Kosovo around the border and nearly 300 tanks, and he is running people out of their villages again. He won't even stop the violence, and this means he is going to recreate Bosnia all over again, and we're supposed to sit around and say that this is terribly unfortunate. Basically, it will be your decision if you decide to let this bully destroy the relationship we worked hard for six and a half years to build up. (S)

I have always been there for you, working hard with my people to support Russia economically. I came there last Fall. I was there in 1996 when a lot of people said I shouldn't go. You may decide to let this get in the way of our relationship, but I'm not going to because I do not think he is that important. I won't sit still while Europe is pleading with me to help them avoid another Bosnia. (S)

He made 2.5 million refugees there, and there are another 250,000 from Kosovo, and I'm not going to let him make another 2 million and impose those kind of burdens. I'm sorry he is a Serb. I wish he were Irish or something else, but he is not. He has constantly refused every plea to stop his aggression. He is not important enough for us to allow him to wreck the relationship between the U.S. and Russia and all the European support. It is not worth it. (S)

He has displaced 30,000 more people just since last Friday. He is killing innocent people. We have reports of summary executions. He has basically told Russian, EU, and American negotiators that he doesn't care what any of us think. If we don't do something, we are going to have another Bosnia all over again. We had a peace agreement at Rambouillet. No one wanted to take his land, his property away, but he wants to crush them militarily. I think we have to do something about it, but I do not believe it should get in the way of bigger issues of trying to make Russia stronger economically, politically, securing its role in the world in a positive way, and both of us reducing our nuclear arsenals. That's a lot more important than Milosevic. But if we let him destabilize the Balkans, that is all we will do for the next two years. (S)

President Yeltsin: Yes, Bill, it is a great pity for me. We have been for so long working in each other's direction. We have done a great deal. I have reached agreement with the State Duma with regards to START II, and on the sixth of April, they were supposed to ratify that Treaty. This time around that will not happen, of course, under the circumstances. (S)

It is easy to throw bombs about. However, the long-term political search for a constructive solution to the situation, that's a different thing. But this is the only correct approach, the only correct way. If we pool our strengths together, we could turn Milosevic around. Their parliament made some appropriate decisions yesterday. (S)

The President: Well, let me just say this, I believe we should not give up on diplomacy. After what -- [Yeltsin interrupts] (S)

President Yeltsin: Of course, we are going to talk to each other, you and me. But there will not be such a great drive and such friendship that we had before. That will not be there again. (S)

The President: But the problem is, Boris, if you remember going back to Bosnia, remember what happened in Bosnia. After threatening a few airstrikes and him losing a few battles on the ground to the Croatian forces, and a few other things happened, then he was willing to talk about diplomacy. But right now, he is only too happy to have people come in and talk to him because he continues his invasion in violation of his own constitution and his own agreement.

How can you negotiate with someone while he's evacuating villages and has no intention of stopping, but he is happy to have you in for a talk and give you a cup of tea while he does it? That is why the Europeans feel even more strongly than the U.S. does. My God, they have nightmares they'll repeat Bosnia and all the instability and all the problems, and it will spread from Kosovo to Macedonia to Albania and engulf all of their southern flank. They are very, very worried about it. They are right to be worried about it. I think we should take this first round of action and then engage in diplomacy again. Then maybe Milosevic will listen. (S)

President Yeltsin: But this is an intolerable situation when something is done because of the position of one person. It is intolerable because of the hundreds of thousands of people who will suffer and die. We cannot be guided only because of his words, we should not proceed only from his position and actions. He should be surrounded by the people who will encourage the situation in the correct direction so that it would become intolerable for Milosevic to behave the way that he has until now. Foreign intelligence [services] should also play a part in that process. (S)

The President: If I thought that were true, that would be wonderful, but the truth is he has dislocated 25,000-30,000 people since last week. (S)

President Yeltsin: In the name of our future, in the name of you and me, in the name of the future of our countries, in the name of security in Europe, I ask you to renounce that strike, and I suggest that we should meet somewhere and develop a tactical line of fighting against Milosevic, against him personally. And we are wiser, we are more experienced, we can come up with a solution. That should be done for the sake of our relationship. That should be done for the sake of peace in Europe. It is not known who will come after us and it is not known what will be the road of future developments in strategic nuclear weapons. It is known, however, what will be when we are in power because we have taken the decision to decrease them, decrease them, decrease them. (S)

The President: Well, Boris, I want to work with you to try to bring an end to this, but I don't believe there is any way to call off the first round of strikes because Milosevic continues to displace thousands of people every day. I think we can get some of our people together in the next couple of days to try to dissuade him. I don't want this to be a great source of a split between Russia and Europe and Russia and the U.S. We have worked too hard. There are too many economic and political things for us to do together, and I regret this more than I can say. (S)

I could not believe after we got this agreement from the Kosovar Albanians that he not only refused to sign the agreement, but moved into their territory, but that is what has happened. What has to be done in the next day or so is clear. I hope we can stay in touch and find a diplomatic solution. I think you know what has to be done to find a diplomatic solution. Maybe after a first round of airstrikes, he will be ready to give diplomacy

a chance. Madeleine is ready to go back to work with Ivanov, back to the Contact Group. We should think several moves ahead, almost as if we are playing a chess game. (S)

This would be the time to come together to resolve this, but I can't go against the unified opinion of the Europeans, as well as my own view, that this man is not going to stop his military advance unless someone does something. Milosevic is still a communist dictator and he would like to destroy the alliance that Russia has built up with the U.S. and Europe and essentially destroy the whole movement of your region toward democracy and go back to ethnic alliances. We cannot allow him to dictate our future. (S)

I know this is a political problem for you at home, and I will do everything I can to put it right and restart the diplomacy at any point in this. I'd give anything not to have to make this telephone call today, but we have no choice. I hope between the two of us we will not let it destroy all the bigger issues before us and the world. (S)

President Yeltsin: I think that now we should try and seek at least some ways in order to retain, to save, some of what we have managed to develop during these years. But our people will certainly from now have a bad attitude with regard to America and with NATO. I remember how difficult it was for me to try and turn the heads of our people, the heads of the politicians towards the West, towards the United States, but I succeeded in doing that, and now to lose all that. Well, since I failed to convince the President, that means there is in store for us a very difficult, difficult road of contacts, if they prove to be possible. Goodbye. (S)

-- End of Conversation --