

DRAFT

Conversation No. 33-89

Date: November 18, 1972

Time: 12:02 pm - 12:08 pm

Location: White House Telephone

Participants: Richard M. Nixon, Henry A. Kissinger

National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger informs President Nixon that he received a phone call from US Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker. Kissinger conveyed Bunker's assessment that the "news is not good," with a major concern that the South Vietnamese were trying to change the terms for a negotiation session scheduled in Paris. (Talks collapse in December when Kissinger presents a number of Thieu's demands).

Kissinger tells the president, "It's their old pattern. What they always do is they first read what you give them then they raise a few technical objections and they just keep escalating it."

Kissinger warns that the North Vietnamese would "play it like an accordion" if they knew of a wedge between the US and its South Vietnamese ally and alerts Nixon, "We can't delay the negotiations and we can't tell Hanoi that we're having trouble." Nixon responds with an emphatic, "No, sir."

Nixon and Kissinger agree that going to bilateral negotiations with the North Vietnamese would be "repugnant," but both men were at a loss as to how to proceed. The bilateral option would be repugnant, Nixon states, "because we lose everything we've done. You know what I mean? People said we could have done that years ago." Kissinger responds that there were some new concessions that could not be attained earlier, such as "a ceasefire in Laos and Cambodia" and being able to say that the US put South Vietnam "in a position where they can defend themselves." Despite a few redeeming points, Kissinger worried that the negotiations would be a "miserable exercise."

Nixon and Kissinger wondered aloud what motivated South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to challenge earlier agreed upon negotiating points and chalked it up to an attempt at strengthening the South Vietnamese bargaining position before the Paris meeting and "trying to prove that if they're going to cave they're going to do it afterwards, not before."

[Omitted Conversation; denoted in copied tape log with strikethrough text]

~~Kissinger's location~~

~~—Washington, DC—~~

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~~President's schedule~~

~~—Dictation—~~

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~~David Ben-Gurion~~

~~—Letter to the President—~~

~~—Sense of history—~~

~~—Vietnam—~~

~~—The President's People's Republic of China [PRC] trip~~

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~~Acquaintance with Kissinger~~

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~~John J. McCloy~~

~~Letter to the President~~

~~Comparison with Abraham Lincoln~~

~~Civil War~~

~~Doves~~

Kissinger: What I wanted to mention and check with you since we now—we had a phone call from Bunker. We haven't got the actual message yet saying that now, apparently the South Vietnamese are beginning to kick over the [traces] again.

Nixon: Oh, Christ!

Kissinger: And I believe that we just have to continue now and get the best agreement we can...

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: ...and then face them with it afterwards.

Nixon: How are they kicking it over?

Kissinger: Well, they've apparently memorandum to him. He just said the news is not good. And their ambassador here has also raised some questions with [*William H.*] Sullivan.¹ It's their old pattern. What they always do is they first read what you give them then they raise a few technical objections and they just keep escalating it.

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: But—

Nixon: Well, shall I send them another letter?

Kissinger: No, I think we now have to wait, Mr. President until we get a—until we see at least what's going to happen in Paris.

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: And once we have the text of an agreement in Paris we'll have a new situation

Nixon: So, Bunker says that they're kicking over the [traces] and just being unreasonable as hell. Is that it?

¹ William Healy Sullivan was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 1969-1973, when he was appointed the U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines.

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Kissinger: That seems to be the case. But I don't—We can't delay the negotiations and we can't tell Hanoi that we're having trouble.

Nixon: No, sir.

Kissinger: They're going to play it like an accordion.

Nixon: All right.

Kissinger: The other—

Nixon: When you really come down to it, though, I just can't see how Thieu has got any other choice. Goddamn it, we've told him we're doing everything we can and that's going to be it...

Kissinger: Well—

Nixon: ...but on the other hand the idea of just making a bilateral thing, Henry, is...

Kissinger: It's repugnant.

Nixon: ...It's repugnant because we lose everything we've done. You know what I mean? People said we could have done that years ago.

Kissinger: Well, if we can get a ceasefire in Laos and Cambodia; and we can, of course, say we've put them in a position where they can defend themselves.

Nixon: Uh-huh

Kissinger: But it's going to be a miserable exercise.

Nixon: Well, it may not be. You just can't tell—

Kissinger: If we do it bilaterally I mean—

Nixon: This is maybe—

Kissinger: But I—I—

Nixon: This just may be bargaining on their part knowing, knowing that you're going to Paris.

Kissinger: Basically, I really don't know where they hell they're going to go.

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: And they're still making all the preparations as if there will be a ceasefire.

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Nixon: Right. I noticed that.

Kissinger: But I just wanted to check with you whether it is in accord with your views that we proceed negotiating. We can't wait any longer for coordinating.

Nixon: Hmmm. Well, what would be the choice otherwise? This would mean you—

Kissinger: Well, but we'd have to—

Nixon: —wouldn't go?

Kissinger: That's right. And ask for another delay but I think that's almost impossible.

Nixon: Well, we couldn't do that.

Kissinger: I mean not after—

Nixon: No—

Kissinger: —we announced it.

Nixon: —but I would, uh—I'd simply go. You mean they—Don't you really think they're trying to strengthen the bargaining position before you go to Paris? Isn't that—or...?

Kissinger: Oh, I think that's one possibility. That they're just, uh...

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: ...trying to prove that if they're going to cave they're going to do it afterwards, not before.

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: And probably that they figure they'll get less than what they agreed to they better ask for more.

Nixon: Um-hmmm. Um-hmmm. Well, I think you should tell Bunker to play it damn tough. He is, isn't he?

Kissinger: Oh, yes.

BEGIN WITHDRAWN ITEM NO. 1

[National Security]

[Log states 3 second withdrawal, however there are 10 seconds of 'G' Tone (beep) on the audio]

END WITHDRAWN ITEM NO. 1

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Kissinger: And what Sihanouk says that, uh, his interests were completely sold out by the North Vietnamese. He said this to the Algerian ambassador—

Nixon: Um-hmmm.

Kissinger: —that it was one of the most shocking examples, and it's an example of US-Soviet pressure and that it's the Soviets who pressed the North Vietnamese into yielding—

Nixon: Yeah. Yeah. Well, go right ahead on the same track. Do the very best that you can. Haig has no doubts about going ahead now, does he?

Kissinger: Oh, no. No, no. He's completely with us

Nixon: And he feels that we have to do it, and, uh...?

Kissinger: Haig is against an open break with them before the negotiation, as I am.

Nixon: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. No, no. Go negotiate now. But they can't go over the [traces]. They're—they're making public statements?

Kissinger: No. No, no. This is a private communication—

Nixon: Yeah. Yeah. All right. Just go ahead. Do the best—the very best you can. Get the very best agreement you can.

Kissinger: Right.

Nixon: That's all. Ok?

Kissinger: Ok, Mr. President—

Nixon: Fine, Henry. Fine.