

~~SECRET~~

2901

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON



MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with Russian
President Yeltsin (S)

PARTICIPANTS: President Clinton
President Boris Yeltsin

Notetakers: Robert Ford, Michael T.
Manning, Roger Merletti, Matt Sibley,
Jim Smith, Andrew Weiss
Interpreter: Nikolai Sorokin

DATE, TIME April 19, 1999, 9:30 - 10:13 a.m. EDT,
AND PLACE: Oval Office

THE PRESIDENT: Hello Boris. (U)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: Good morning, Bill. (U)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you for taking the call. I wanted to talk to you about Kosovo today. Kosovo is clearly one of the greatest tests we have faced for the Europe you and I have worked to achieve, one which is free from communist dictatorships and is democratic and undivided. I appreciate your heartfelt messages and am glad to see you involved in this problem. (S)

We have solved some of the toughest problems by working together. The best diplomatic outcome is one Russia helps bring about. Russia is central in implementing a solution. The meeting that Albright and Foreign Minister Ivanov had in Oslo went a long way in managing the differences between us and maximizing common ground. I value the way they are working together, and they must keep it up. At the same time, I am glad you are involving yourself in the search for a political settlement, and I think it's important that you appointed Viktor Chernomyrdin to be your personal envoy. Obviously, all of us here know Viktor well. We respect him and think he is a problem-solver, and he has never had a bigger problem than this one. I want to do whatever I can to support you in these

~~SECRET~~

Classified by: Glyn T. Davies
Reason: 1.5(d)
Declassify On: 4/20/09

DECLASSIFIED UNDER AUTHORITY OF THE
INTERAGENCY SECURITY CLASSIFICATION APPEALS PANEL,
E.O. 13526, SECTION 5.3(b)(3)
ISCAP APPEAL NO. 2016-156, document no. 15
DECLASSIFICATION DATE: March 05, 2018

CLINTON LIBRARY PHOTOCOPY

efforts. I want to appoint Strobe Talbott to work quietly and confidentially with Viktor. He already had a good meeting with Ambassador Jim Collins, and if you are agreeable, Jim will be back in touch with him to coordinate diplomatic efforts. Strobe will report to me and Madeleine, and I will see what I can do to help. I know, Boris, how high the stakes are. We're trying to achieve a lasting peace in the Balkans, but also an outcome that would ensure Russia a role in that peace and that would protect the legacy you and I have built by getting Russian and U.S. relations back on track, which we have worked on for the last six and a half years. ~~(S)~~

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: Well, Bill, at this difficult time in international affairs and in U.S.-Russian relations, we need to maintain constant contact. I have never met such a difficult, complicated issue as the ongoing NATO military action against Yugoslavia. Let me reiterate that the developments of the past few weeks confirm that the U.S. and NATO have made a big mistake. You have miscalculated the consequences of the situation itself. Milosevic will never capitulate. Instead of resolving the humanitarian problem, what has been achieved is a giant humanitarian catastrophe, and significant damage has occurred to U.S.-Russian relations. ~~(S)~~

I'll tell you quite frankly that the anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment in Russia keeps growing like an avalanche. Great pressure is exerted on me and the Russian leadership as a whole in favor of taking measures to help Yugoslavia, all the more so since NATO has helped the Albanian fighters. We continue to oppose Russian involvement in the conflict, but our ability to counteract those demands are limited. ~~(S)~~

We have to take emergency measures to try and switch to development of a peaceful, political settlement. I am satisfied that you accepted my proposal to have our foreign ministers meet. That was the first meeting since the beginning of the Yugoslav conflict. They succeeded in outlining the overall principles, as Minister Ivanov told me in Moscow, the overall application of which would enable us to achieve a breakthrough and turn around this situation. But to be able to achieve that, all violence and repression should be stopped in Kosovo, and the safe return of refugees should be ensured, regardless of their ethnicity. International humanitarian organizations should be given access throughout Yugoslavia and primarily Kosovo. ~~(S)~~

We also share positions regarding the need for the resumption of work on a political framework agreement that would maintain

broad-based autonomy for Kosovo and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia in full accordance with international law. At most, the greatest differences between us have to do with the question of an international presence in Kosovo. We understand that without international support, no safe return of refugees can be possible, but the question of international presence should be dealt with and resolved, taking into account the political leadership of Yugoslavia. (S)

Please, believe me that it took us a great amount of effort to gain consent on the part of Milosevic for an international civilian presence, and I think we should be farsighted enough to build on these achievements. I appointed Mr. Chernomyrdin as my special envoy for Yugoslavia because he is a neutral person and has no other concerns. His primary concern will be Yugoslavia. We discussed the situation specifically in great detail. (S)

Bill, what I think is needed now with Kosovo is a strong Albanian leader, so we can get them both to the negotiating table -- Milosevic and the strong Albanian leader. Of course, we also need signals from NATO if we are to cut our losses in finding a way out of this situation. It is clear as day that Yugoslavia will not accept a military mission, particularly if it is a NATO-led mission, because for a long time they will be allergic to NATO. I think other avenues should be explored, and we should come up with a compromise that Milosevic will grudgingly have to accept. (S)

We think, obviously, such an option would be for UN blue helmets, based on Security Council resolutions. We think it would be necessary to have among the blue helmets a contingent of Russian forces. Should we accept this position and common understanding, I think we can instruct our foreign ministers to collaborate on this in detail. (S)

Now, there is one thing standing in the way of negotiations. That is, the bombardment, and the bombardment should be stopped. Of course, it is easily understood that it is hard to think of a settlement when bombs and missiles are exploding all around you. I think a proper pretext should be found for making a pause in the bombardment. It is completely up to you, of course. Such a step on your side would be the testimony of a statesman, wisdom, and an act of humanity. (S)

For our part, we will be prepared to fully cooperate with you and continue our pressure on Milosevic. As for Chernomyrdin, I gave him a special airplane to fly around to Muslim countries to

gain support for the Albanians. Then it will be a realistic thing to bring the Albanians and Serbs to the negotiating table. After that, we could address the whole settlement issue by joint effort -- the U.S., Russia, Yugoslavia and NATO. These are my proposals, Bill. What is your view? (S)

THE PRESIDENT: First, I think it is good we agreed on the common principles: the ending of attacks, withdrawal of forces, the safe return of refugees, access for humanitarian organizations. These create a foundation for a political solution that will allow the Serbs to preserve the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, provided we can ensure that Milosevic will implement it. (S)

Now, I think in order to implement these principles, there needs to be an international presence in Kosovo that has both a military and nonmilitary element. If there is no military element, the Kosovars will never return. The Serbs forces have burned all their villages, burned them alive, raped children, and there is no way they will come back without military protection. Here is the dilemma about a military force. I don't care what it is called, but if there is no NATO involvement, we won't be able to get the Albanians to disarm. We can get the KLA to disarm. We can get the KLA to disarm, and contrary to what you said, we are not arming them. There is a proposal in Congress to arm them. But I oppose having the U.S. or Russia getting arms in there and stirring up the water, so I have been resisting arming the Albanians. (S)

On the other hand, let me emphasize that I think it would be a grave mistake for there to be a military-diplomatic mission where Russians are not present. We need Russians to make this work. After all, there is a Serb minority in Kosovo, and they have to be protected, too, and know they are protected. It is imperative that Albanian refugees feel protected, that the Serb minority feels protected, and that we have a basis on which we can disarm the Kosovar Albanians. (S)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: The problem that needs to be addressed is that there are many Serbs among the refugees. (S)

THE PRESIDENT: I think we can find a formula. I have said in every public statement that I have made that I want the force to have Russian participation and leadership and that I would personally not approve going into Kosovo unless our mandate includes protecting the Serbs as well as the Albanians in Kosovo. In terms of a pause in the bombing, NATO could and

would stop tomorrow if Milosevic started withdrawing his forces. The problem with stopping the bombing with no withdrawal at all is that we have been there before. Last October, we were promised that, and Milosevic broke his word before. Before we started bombing, he had 40,000 soldiers and 300 tanks and started to implement the plan he had drawn up last year and changed the military hierarchy so there'd be no opposition and went about flushing out the country. He has to do something to show this is more than just words. (S)

I would like to agree that we are getting much closer to an agreement. Let's instruct our teams to find a formula with a military component that is also sensitive to our concerns about NATO. Strobe can work with Viktor. It won't work unless Russia plays a leading role. There is no way in the world this will work, Boris, unless Russia plays a military and political role, and the Albanians and Serbs believe they will be protected in a formula where autonomy is genuine and the territory of Serbia is maintained. It cannot happen unless we find a way to do this together. (S)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: But then, we were at a stage where Russia was not involved. Russia can, of course, put pressure on Milosevic. Bill, as I said before, Chernomyrdin will now go to several Muslim countries to try to help the Albanians. After that, he wants to go to Belgrade for a meeting with Milosevic, and after that to see you. I think it is a good option. What is a great concern to me is this anti-American sentiment we have in Russia, and that is what I am worried about. We have spent too many efforts in all areas to let them all collapse overnight. (S)

THE PRESIDENT: What about having Strobe come to Europe to meet with Chernomyrdin even sooner? (S)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: That would be all right. That can be done. (S)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think we ought to do that. I can see that we are close enough to get an agreement. I will have Ambassador Collins get in touch with Chernomyrdin to work it out. I feel quite good about this conversation, Boris. We just have to work hard and stay in close touch. (S)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: I feel that way too. I agree with you and think we can find our way out. We must find a way out. (S)

THE PRESIDENT: All right. We will do it. This is a good conversation. I'm glad to hear you, and I appreciate your involvement in this. (U)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: I agree although I find it increasingly difficult to resist sentiments here. I am subjected to violent attacks and assailed by the Communists. They insist that I send armaments and equipment and that I send our troops there. They are calling for an unleashing of a European and world-wide war, and I am absolutely opposed to that. Today I gave orders to repeal previous instructions to send seven ships to the conflict area, so we will have just one ship, a reconnaissance ship, to provide us with information. (S)

We will not provide them with our military equipment, though we are sending them humanitarian aid and doing it publicly in front of TV cameras. What we are sending are foodstuffs and consumer goods. We have already sent 100 cars and trucks with aid. Bill, just like you, I think we have had a good conversation and think we, too, have avenues to explore where we can reach a common ground. (S)

THE PRESIDENT: I agree, Boris. Let's just keep working on it. Thank you very much. (U)

PRESIDENT YELTSIN: All right. Goodbye, Bill. (U)

-- End of Conversation --