

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Prime Minister Ratu Mara
of Fiji (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President
and National Security Affairs
Robert M. Gates, Assistant to the President
and Deputy for National Security Affairs
Desaix Anderson, Acting Assistant Secretary
of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs
Peter Watson, Director of Asian Affairs, NSC,
Notetaker

Ratu Mara, Prime Minister
Abdul Yusuf, Charge d'Affaires, Embassy
of Fiji

DATE, TIME November 6, 1989, 11:00 - 11:25am EST
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: Welcome. It's wonderful to see you again. It takes me back to when we opened the Embassy here. I was pleased to see you then. That event was important to the relationship.
(P)

The President: We have no formal agenda this morning. We heard you were going to be back in town, and just wanted to take this opportunity to renew a wonderful relationship between friends. I would like to leave it open to you to tell me how things stand. We are grateful for the positive approach you take to the U.S., and your concept of expanding relations with us, which is an example to other countries in the region. Although events in Eastern Europe seem to take our time these days, I want you to know that we are not losing any interest in your region or pulling back from our participation in it in the long term. Some may feel that the developments we have made with the Soviets relieve tensions in the Pacific, and therefore believe that we do not need to keep a strong presence in the region. We disagree. It is important to work with you to maintain regional security.
(P)

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Prime Minister Mara: We appreciate our relationship over the years with the U.S., starting in the early days when U.S. forces assisted in the region during World War II. And we've had no reason to doubt that relationship with the U.S. since. We see the U.S. as a friend and a protector. (S)

Prime Minister Mara: A problem could have arisen when New Zealand broke away from its strategic relationships. They probably expected other regional countries to do the same. They thought that because we play a role in the area, that we would follow suit. But we did not do so, and they have not been supportive of us until recently. We have received interest expressed from Russia to establish an embassy in Fiji, as well as other overtures from them. And we have resisted all of these. The Soviets have, however, made a foothold in PNG. Actually, I am a long-time friend of the former Prime Minister of PNG, Michael Somare, the current Foreign Minister. And I can't understand why he is supporting these initiatives, and that he has encouraged the Soviets since he was Prime Minister. Unfortunately, I haven't had the opportunity of discussing this matter with him. (S)

The President: What's your view on why he and the PNG Government are doing this? (S)

Prime Minister Mara: It's very complicated, frankly. But I believe it's largely a reaction to Australian dominance, and a desire to express their international independence. There is also the question of Libyan influence in PNG, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Many nationals from those countries are graduates from our own university in Fiji. They pick up propaganda from disgruntled lecturers who were on the loose, and gained a foothold at our university. These people are lecturing with leftist viewpoints, and are anti-establishment. Therefore we "grew a crop of politicians on the left such as Barak Sope." Sope was Foreign Minister of Vanuatu. He has developed connections with Libya, and has helped them gain an influence in the region. (S)

The President: It's fascinating what influence one person can have. I am actually surprised that Libya is accepted down there, as they are largely discredited around the world. But I suppose that with money they are able to promote themselves. (S)

Prime Minister Mara: This has been particularly true in New Caledonia, where Libya has provided arms and training to Kanak extremists. (S)

The President: I wonder what Qadhafi really seeks to achieve by supporting these groups, but when he has to reach halfway around the world? (S)

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Prime Minister Mara: It's amazing, but some people in Vanuatu and New Caledonia continue to turn to him to provide training, weapons, etc. (Ø)

The President: That is also true for the Philippines, and other countries. (Ø)

The President: On New Zealand, do you have any advice for me on that situation? We had great person-to-person relations with New Zealand, and then came a breach. Since then, the exchanges have grown more shrill than I like, or feel comfortable with. It's helpful that Lange is out as he personalized the situation so much. What's your thinking on this? Will time heal this problem? (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: The climate with New Zealand seems to be changing. The Foreign Minister, Russell Marshall, portrays a less strident attitude with us, and seems to be coming around. The first signal of his new attitude came from his response to lobbying efforts for a statement against Fiji, at the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, in Kuala Lumpur. He and Palmer resisted this lobbying, and stated that any action against Fiji must be taken in conformity with the views of the neighboring island countries. They stated that, unless you get the approval of all of the islands, no action against Fiji is going to fly. This is the first time that the New Zealand Government has enunciated this internationally. This is a difference from Lange. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: If this is an indication of their overall thinking, this might be helpful to the U.S. A number of countries in the region -- Tonga, Fiji, and Western Samoa -- are friends of the U.S., and their collective views can be influential. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: (Addressing the President): Do you think that in the near future the U.S. will change its attitude toward New Zealand? (Ø)

The President: I don't want to miss an opportunity with them. But, as the world takes a look at the rapid changes arising in the Soviet Union, there is a danger that people in the region will feel that the U.S. does not need a naval presence, that warships are not necessary, and that soldiers are not necessary. There is this lulling effect that takes place around the world when these rapid changes with the Soviets are taking place. However, there will be no slashing of our defense budget. The situation is not all roses. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: It is significant that after a long debate, New Zealand recently approved the purchase of two warships. (Ø)

The President: What type of vessels were they? Small vessels, or frigates? (Ø)

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Prime Minister Mara: Two frigates. (Ø)

The President: That seems to be a realistic view by them. We are having Cabinet meetings in Australia presently, and are having good talks with the Australians about New Zealand. We wish to take a realistic view and work together to improve the situation. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: I do not expect that the Labor Government will, however, be changing their position before the next election -- but they possibly might try to do so if they win. (Ø)

The President: When is the next election? (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: In the last quarter of next year. (Ø)

The President: What other countries are attracted to the "Soviet's siren song," i.e., suggestions of bases and fleet facilities, etc.? (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: Kiribati entered into a fishing agreement with them, as did Vanuatu. Both of these countries are influenced by Sope who, unfortunately, is very persuasive, and may well be the next Prime Minister of Vanuatu. He has a long and deep resentment of the French and British political condominium that ruled Vanuatu at one time. He has a deep need to show independence. (Ø)

The President: Maybe we should work with them to demonstrate we are not hostile, or have any interest of subjugation. (Ø)

The President: (Addressing Desaix Anderson) We are not doing very much over there presently, are we (referring to Vanuatu)? (Ø)

Mr. Anderson: We have some fishing interests out there, I recall. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: The real issues in the region currently are driftnetting and French atomic testing. Of these issues, driftnetting is really more serious, because France offered facilities to test the effects of atomic blasts, but this offer was not taken up. However, anti-testing protests continue. In this respect, our relations have been strained with some island countries because we allow nuclear vessels to come to Fiji. (Ø)

The President: Did you speak to the UN during this visit? (U)

Prime Minister Mara: No. Not this time. (U)

The President: Whatever happened to Samesa Sikivou (former permanent representative for Fiji to the UN)? Are you on the same side these days? (Laughter) (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: (Smiling) Yes he is a good friend, and I will say "hello" for you. (Ø)

The President: I have a great deal of respect for the man. And his daughter, Vasiti, I think, and Dorothy were good friends. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: Sikivou is now a journalist, and keeps up with current events. He has learned a lot, and has taught me a lot. (Ø)

The President: As you know, I have sent Evelyn Teegen to Fiji as our Ambassador. She is a close friend, and is very serious about Fiji. She studied very hard, and I am advised by some senators that she did very well during her confirmation hearings, answering her questions in detail. (Ø)

The President: The message I want to convey is about our strong friendship and with this our understanding of your concerns. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: (Nodding assent) (Ø)

All Participants: {A personal conversation ensued at this point concerning golf.} (U)

The President: We so appreciate your taking the time to come and visit. You're a friend, my door is always open to you and to Fiji. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mara: Thank you very much. (U)