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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia (U)

PARTICIPANTS: U.S.  
The President  
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President  
for National Security Affairs  
Robert L. Hutchings, Director for European  
Political Affairs, NSC Staff  
Lisa Valyiova, Interpreter

Czechoslovakia  
Vaclav Havel, President  
Milan Knazko, Presidential Advisor  
Alexandr Vondra, Presidential Advisor  
Michael Zantovsky, Presidential Press  
Spokesman

DATE, TIME February 21, 1990, 2:45 - 3:30 pm  
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President and President Havel held a follow-up meeting in the Oval Office on February 21. (U)

The President: How did your speech at the Congress go? (U)

President Havel: It was very well received. (U)

The President: I had good reports back on it. (U)

President Havel: May I ask whether you were informed of the contents of the speech? (U)

The President: No, I got a summary and would appreciate your impression of the highlights. (U)

President Havel: I was surprised at the applause at points where I expected boos. In my speech, I elaborated on some of the points we discussed yesterday. I was surprised that some things which were addressed more to our domestic audience were also received well. (U)

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The President: You leave Washington with good feelings for you and your country. I want to follow up on our meetings. We need to stay in close touch on how you view developments and how we do. I meet this weekend with Helmut Kohl. It will be a quiet meeting, where I hope he tells me what's on his mind concerning German unification and his domestic pressures. As you know, there are some real concerns in different countries in Europe about what a unified Germany means for Europe's future. (Ø)

President Havel: With your permission, I will make two remarks and pose one question. As far as Germany is concerned, the problem is that there will be unification at a time when elections are coming in both Germanies. My second remark: I talked today in Congress more specifically than I have with you about this topic and even more specifically with the House Foreign Affairs Committee. I was asked specific questions and had to elaborate more. I do not want to take up much of your time, but I will inform you, if you are interested. (Ø)

Now, my question. In a few days, I will go to Moscow. What interests me extremely and our country is whether you have a message I could pass on to Moscow. This is important, not only for our country but also for the whole of Central Europe. As I said in Congress, the best way the U.S. can help Gorbachev is to help the Soviet Union on its way to democracy. I also said that the withdrawal of troops from our country and others depends on assistance that is easy to provide, but which the Soviet Union could never ask us for. It is a proud superpower and now more proud because it is crumbling. Above all, I am thinking about humanitarian assistance -- food stuffs and grain that you have in reserve and which could be used for Armenia to support Gorbachev. The Soviets do want to vacate Europe but are still reluctant to do so. They are afraid of their own returning armies, which they cannot house and feed. They have had a very good life in Europe, and the Soviet leaders are afraid of a rebellion in the army. It shouldn't be too difficult to help them in this, and in so doing to help us. It will not be easy for me to explain why Soviet troops cannot leave overnight. Still, withdrawal should not be too difficult. There are only 73,000 in Czechoslovakia, which was the last country they came to. And they came to suppress a liberation struggle, so there is also a political aspect. Nobody perceived them as part of the balance of power, but only as occupiers. It would help us a lot to have something to offer, to help speed up the withdrawal by a few months. We shall be there in Moscow on February 26 and, on the same day, sign an agreement on withdrawal. The agreement will specify that the first soldier is to be withdrawn the same day. So far, the agreement says that the last will leave on the 26th of May next year. I would like to shift it so it can be just one year from start to finish, but I cannot only demand things from them without offering something in return. All we can offer is a kind of special mediating role, because of my special role as the only non-communist head of state for now. (Ø)

The President: I agree with your assessment of the problems he faces. We need to allow him to make withdrawals with a certain sense of pride. We don't want to paint adversaries into a corner. Our desire is to see problems resolved without rubbing the Soviets' nose in failure. We will not conduct ourselves in the wrong way by saying "we win, you lose." (S)

President Havel: It only occurred to me that the problem of pride could be overcome by having the aid private. (S)

The President: That's an important point. To the level of several million dollars, we're already doing that. Considerable aid to Armenian earthquake victims, in the form of emergency medical supplies, has already been provided through the American private sector. The question of food aid is very sensitive right now. The Soviets are very proud. They have not made a specific request for this kind of support. They've made such requests of others -- the Germans, for example -- but not of the U.S. If they came to us and said "our people are starving," we would of course find a way to help. The Soviets also have a distribution problem. There was a good crop last year, but they can't get the goods to market. The system is broken down, which makes it harder to help. The problem is not food, but distribution. For that reason, we are interested in providing help -- both private and governmental -- for the restructuring of the Soviet economy. Our Attorney General was recently there discussing their new legal system, as well as their legislative problems. Alan Greenspan was there on monetary issues and Carla Hills, on trade negotiations. I think I mentioned yesterday that they have a long way to go before they understand markets or how a private sector works. (S)

Now, back to the question you raised about a message for Gorbachev. I would suggest the following: tell Gorbachev that you leveled with me about your aspirations for Czechoslovakia and that I asked you to tell Gorbachev that we will not conduct ourselves regarding Czechoslovakia or any other country in a way that would complicate the problems he has so frankly discussed with me. Tell him that I told you that we are not only supporting perestroika, but the President of the United States also wants President Havel to tell Gorbachev that the President supports him by name. That's an important point. We don't want to get caught up in internal problems in the Soviet Union, but we do see in Gorbachev a man who supports peaceful change in Eastern Europe. I'm impressed that he is willing to sit and work out a specific agreement with you on troop withdrawals. Perhaps you can use your dramatic background to convince him that nothing in the U.S. presence in Europe threatens him; rather, this is a stabilizing force. This is a very important point. I expect that some citizens in the USSR ask why the U.S. has to be there any more. I need to convince Gorbachev this summer that a continuing U.S. presence is stabilizing. He worries about

Germany and about the Polish border, and I'm convinced our presence is stabilizing in those regards. That's straight from my heart. Also, if you could, tell him I'm really looking forward to seeing him. We had a long phone talk the other day in the best spirit. On food aid, I would be careful. We are blessed in this country, but why didn't Gorbachev mention this to the Secretary of State? The answer is pride. Yet, in a human compassionate sense, we'd like to help. One example: when the Berlin Wall first was chipped away, there was great joy around the world, not just in Germany. My political opponents here said the President of the United States was laid back, not excited about these events. In my mind, we're the other superpower. I don't want to cause problems for him. My actions cost me domestically. Gorbachev knows that, but you should know as a friend. Who would have thought these changes could have come and at a time of great anxiety in the Soviet Union? (S)

President Havel: I would like to say that this explanation has been very important for me. I now understand things much better. On one thing that you mentioned, it is clear that the presence of American troops in Europe is a stabilizing factor, and the Soviets themselves know it. Again, it is a question of prestige. This is the reason why I talked about the new European security system without mentioning NATO. Because, if it grew out of NATO, it would have to be named something else, if only because of the element of prestige. If NATO takes over Germany, it will look like defeat, one superpower conquering another. But if NATO can transform itself -- perhaps in conjunction with the Helsinki process -- it would look like a peaceful process of change, not defeat. (S)

The President: We should give serious thought to that -- how to manifest it. You raised a good point. Our view is that NATO would continue with a new political role and that we would build on the CSCE process. We will give thought on how we might proceed. (S)

President Havel: It seems on this kind of understanding, it is the best way to end our discussion. I don't want to take up more of your time, so I will end on that note. You're invited already to Prague. I would be glad to welcome you in Czechoslovakia. Our offer to host a U.S.-Soviet summit remains valid. I understand that your next meeting is already scheduled, but perhaps the one after that could be in Prague. (S)

The President: It is an interesting idea and might send a good signal. (S)

President Havel: In the fall? Prague is open. (S)

The President: I had been saying before there was no point in such summits without an agreed agenda, but I've changed my mind.

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We need to meet. The problem is we still have, and the media have, a summit mentality, so that there are always high expectations attached to these meetings. (Ø)

President Havel: I, on the other hand, sometimes regret that some politicians have no sense of symbols. For example, I proposed to meet Gorbachev in Yalta, but he didn't understand the symbolism. (Ø)

-- End of Conversation --

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