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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with President Francois Mitterrand of
France (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Francois Mitterrand
Adrian Basora, NSC Staff (Notetaker)
Alec Toumayan, Interpreter

DATE, TIME: January 20, 1991, 1:17 p.m. - 1:34 p.m.
PLACE: Camp David

The President: Francois, how are you? (U)

President Mitterrand: Good evening, dear George. I want to speak to you tonight to get your assessment of the situation as it stands today. (S)

The President: Absolutely. Let me make a few comments. In the first place, the actual targeting of the air campaign is going very well. I am pleased it has been accurate enough so that civilian casualties are lower than could be expected. Our planes, those of the coalition forces, the UK, the French, the Saudis and the Kuwaitis, now basically control the skies. The danger is not so much from SAMs but from stray anti-aircraft rounds. (S)

The weather is bad and thus we do not have the bomb damage assessment that I would like to see. We have not gotten the real, hard analytical results of the damage so far. But, as soon as the weather clears -- and we expect it to clear in 24-48 hours -- we should have a better assessment of whether we have disabled a lot of these key targets. It is my view that Saddam Hussein himself does not know how much damage has been done. (S)

President Mitterrand: Undoubtedly! How seriously has his communications network been affected? (S)

The President: We are not sure, but we think a lot of damage has been done to his communications networks, particularly his ability to communicate with his troops. But we believe he still has a good deal of contact. The damage to the Republican Guard, we believe, is significant -- but that job has not been finished. There was a tremendous explosion on one of the attacks, so big that it was actually recorded by our machinery that picks up major detonations for testing. But we still don't have the total

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assessment. My main concern at this point is out in the west of Iraq because of the attacks on Israel. (S)

President Mitterrand: These attacks are more symbolic than real. (S)

The President: Yes, and fortunately the loss of life has been minimal. The problem is we are trying to convince Shamir not to overreact and I am hopeful we will be able to keep him from doing so. I am convinced we can do the job of wiping out the SCUDs better than they can with their aircraft. But they keep talking about what kind of retaliation they will take. I don't think we need that risk and I am trying to keep him from doing anything, but that problem is not solved. I talked him into not attacking the other night and, fortunately, no attacks occurred last night. We have also sent Patriots. But you know how they are; they may feel they may have to attack. This worries me some. I have checked with the coalition partners and I think they will stay firm, but it is better if Israel lets us take care of this problem. (S)

President Mitterrand: Surely; that is very important. (U)

The President: I wish I could tell you I have talked him out of doing anything, but I cannot guarantee that I have. There have been no real surprises; our reaction is that things are going as well as or better than expected. (S)

President Mitterrand: I believe the media have overstated the successes at the very beginning. (S)

The President: Exactly, and there is euphoria and optimism. It is not good. (S)

President Mitterrand: This is the first time we have had to wage a war while being harassed by the media, which are talking incessantly. (S)

The President: That is true. I think CNN has been a great asset for Saddam Hussein. (S)

President Mitterrand: More the pity for us. (S)

The President: Francois, how is public opinion holding up in France? (S)

President Mitterrand: It is holding up well. I am looking at a poll that was conducted today. I have a 75 percent approval rating, and you have 74 percent approval. (S)

The President: That is amazing. (U)

President Mitterrand: I apologize for being one point ahead of you. (S)

The President: You deserve it, Francois. (S)

President Mitterrand: I didn't say I deserved it, but that proves that French opinion continues to remain very sound, and this percentage has been in effect for the last four days. I see that we have 67-68 percent of opinion consistently very favorable to the US, so I have no complaints on that score. (S)

The President: What do you think Saddam's next move will be? (S)

President Mitterrand: Do you think he has something up his sleeve for us? I am worried he has some clever tricks. If he could launch SCUDs and manage to strike Israel in spite of the Patriots, this would be a major success for him. Of course all of this is fiction, but it would register and have an impact. Another problem is whether he is going to be able to bring out his aircraft. And the last problem is the air campaign, which must last long enough so that the land campaign is not too deadly. (S)

The President: I agree completely. Our people tell us our Air Force totally dominates the skies. The count is 11-0 when we have engaged them in the air. (S)

President Mitterrand: The French pilots are doing a very good job every day. We have a total of 52 aircraft in the area. We have sustained no losses yet, but of course there will be some. (S)

The President: That is very good, wonderful. (S)

President Mitterrand: We feel very close to you every time you sustain a loss because we know there will be losses spread out among all us over time. Our only real problem is the way the countries of the Maghreb are beginning to react. There are crowds in the streets engaging in some violent acts against our consulates. (S)

There you are. I just wanted to tell you where we stand. But I believe a major diplomatic effort is called for in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. (S)

The President: I have been remiss on that, but we will try. Bendjedid himself seems fairly supportive. (S)

President Mitterrand: Yes, he is very friendly towards France, but the fundamentalist and Islamic movements are very strong. So, for the time being, that is my number one concern. I wanted to talk to you tonight so we could share views and exchange impressions, and I will be in touch again very soon. (S)

The President: I totally agree that the air campaign must go on long enough to protect our ground forces. We must give our ground forces full protection by finishing phases 1,2 and 3 of the air campaign. There will be voices calling for a halt. (S)

President Mitterrand: It is up to Saddam alone to stop. (S)

The President: Exactly. (U)

President Mitterrand: He can't tell us to stop. Saddam alone can say stop -- that is the landmark really. He is the one who bears the responsibility, he alone. The others are not responsible. (S)

The President: I appreciate the fact we can talk like this, and I appreciate the role that France is playing. I will call if anything comes up, and I would welcome a call from you at any time. (S)

President Mitterrand: This is quite understood. I want very much for us to go on working as we have, in the same spirit. It is not easy, but it has to be done. (S)

The President: I agree; so far so good. (S)

President Mitterrand: Good night, my dear friend, and good luck for your soldiers. (S)

The President: Thank you, and the same for your heroic airmen and soldiers. (S)

-- End of Conversation --