

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh of the USSR

PARTICIPANTS: The President
James A. Baker, III, Secretary of State
John H. Sununu, Chief of Staff
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
Robert M. Gates, Assistant to the President and Deputy for National Security Affairs
Condoleezza Rice, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, NSC Staff (Notetaker)
Raymond Seitz, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs
Dennis Ross, Director of Policy Planning, Dept of State

Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, Foreign Minister of the USSR
Sergey Chetverikov, Deputy Chief of Mission to the U.S.
Aleksandr Obukhov,
Pavel Palazhenko, Interpreter

DATE, TIME January 28, 1991, 1:30 - 2:15pm
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: First let me say that we are proud of your new assignment. You have important insights into the United States and I look forward to working with you. I want to hear from you and follow up on your conversations with Jim Baker. If there is anything you wish to convey, I am ready to listen. President Gorbachev and I have talked about the importance of the relationship. It is good to keep that in mind even when things are going wrong. Our cooperation in the Gulf, changes in Eastern Europe, German unification -- these were all beneficial for the whole world. (C)

I was quite frank in my letter to President Gorbachev about our difficulties with what is happening in the Baltics. I have no intention of intervening in the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union but President Gorbachev must understand that the Baltics are in a different category for us. (S)

Well, I am ready to listen to anything that is on your mind. (C)

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Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: First of all, our discussion is a reflection of our relationship. We want to keep the foreign policy track on course and persist in what we were doing before. All the basic lines are the same. The policy of perestroika and new thinking have brought us here and will continue. There is a good feeling between us now. (S)

The changes are dramatic but the quality of our relationship must stay intact. For the first time in decades, the convergence of our views has brought great progress and our willingness to work together is clear. We found ourselves on the same side of the barricades in the Gulf. At the same time, we understand that things can happen. Changes in the relationship, even reversal, comes not by the wishes of the leadership but because of circumstances. (S)

I am eager to discuss the Baltics because I know it concerns you. The Baltic situation is unfortunate. It was not created intentionally by the President. It just occurred. The leaders of the Baltic states want shortcuts to independence. We say they must go through the constitution. Actions of the central government may have added to the problem. We were not perfect either. Here, I refer first of all to Vilnius and Riga. I was mortified and disgusted by that use of force. I was flying back from London and I saw the pictures -- I couldn't believe it. (S)

But now the question is what should we do? Some are under pressure to react. I understand you are too -- from the Congress. Gorbachev read your letter carefully. He has given me a response. I will highlight a few passages. Gorbachev believes that the unprecedented trust that has developed between you is a major fact in world politics. He appreciates the fact that there is the possibility of great trials. He notes that we passed with great dignity through the trials of German unity and Eastern Europe and he refers to the Gulf. (S)

Now turning to the Baltics. In an atmosphere of crisis and polarization, there are some irresponsible Baltic leaders. The national minorities there have been put in a very difficult position. There is organized harassment of them. The West, without considering any of this, accused Moscow of doing everything. It says that Gorbachev is moving toward dictatorship and calls up Prague and Afghanistan. Gorbachev says, "I made a statement only after I had heard the facts. But the West made statements within hours." After five years, the processes were bound to have some unpredictable set backs. We are moving toward a mixed economy. (S)

Continuing from the letter, "There is a struggle with terrible pressures from both sides." He then goes on to describe the dialogue with the Baltics, saying, "I want a political solution and will try to make sure nothing of the last few nights will be repeated. Over all we will be able to settle things." (S)

I talked to Moscow about practical things that are being done. We need to solve this through peaceful means. I have brought a list of things that we are doing. I want to note that on February 1, the Federation Council will meet to discuss the Baltics and that the one additional army regiment that was deployed from Pskov and most of the MVD units will be removed. (~~S~~/Sensitive)

There will not be a single additional unit there. We are doing our best not to let this thing go out of control. We are worried about statements and actions that may be taken. Gorbachev makes reference to the EC scaling down of their relationship with us. He says, "We will not beg anyone to reconsider, but things will undoubtedly get harder." (~~S~~)

The domestic situation is very tough. People in Russia are following the economic area. When you announced those Presidential initiatives, it was very well received. If actions are taken now, then it will be perceived as a blow to Gorbachev. The right wing will say, you are supporting the U.S. in the Gulf. You are supporting their military actions. Now they are going to undercut you. People will question the wisdom of perestroika and some will exploit it. Washington may find itself, inadvertently, on the side of reactionary forces without wanting it. (~~S~~)

We understand that public opinion is excited by what happened in Vilnius and Riga. But the whole relationship, which promises so much, could be set back. No one wants Cold War again. (~~S~~)

The President: Is that true of all factions. We hear of some who want to see things go back. We are told that factions are pulling Gorbachev in several different directions. Are there those who want to see Soviet power reasserted? (~~S~~)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: Definitely. Many don't hide that. Colonel Alksnis has said that Shevardnadze defended U.S. interests. These people don't like the whole course of Soviet foreign policy. We are coming to the season of treaty ratification; the German treaty, etc. Another reason to be careful is so those important things will not fail. This is the situation we are facing. The decision to postpone the Summit is mutual but it may have other effects. (~~S~~)

The President: Will it be considered a slap to Gorbachev? (~~C~~)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: Some people will present it as such but the joint statement will help. Gorbachev understands. (~~S~~)

The President: We talked to him last year about negotiations. It took a step forward, the economic blockade was lifted and then it all slipped back. Is it true that more progress is being made with Latvia and Estonia? (~~S~~)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: They have agreed on major things. That there will be no claim that the governments there are illegal, for instance. Even in Lithuania, there may be some progress but Landsbergis is trying to hinder the situation. He wants what is impossible (S)

The President: I appreciate your explanation. The critical stumbling block though is your use of force in the Baltics. Drawing down the military presence sounds like a good signal. (S)

On the postponement of the Summit, I will stay with the spirit you discussed. Some may interpret it as primitive -- I don't want that. Some will say Bush must do something and maybe the delay in the Summit will calm the troubled waters. I want these strategic arms talks done too. (S)

Well, I don't have much more. Do you have anything, Jim? (U)

Secretary Baker: No, nothing much to add. In our conversation, we talked about the importance of getting a dialogue going. We talked, as well, about the potential for referendums which might express the will of the people and allow some amendment of the secession law. (S)

The President: I thought the Lithuanians weren't willing to have a referendum? (S)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: If there is a referendum, it would be a good start. There needs to be a constitutional way to do it. (S)

The President: Any flexibility that Gorbachev can show on self-determination? Maybe we need to get over some bumpy times. But the repudiation of future uses of forces would be important. (S)

I sent the letter saying that barring a solution, we will have to take some steps. We are doing our best to stay on track but I am becoming a minority on this point. I am sure Gorbachev knows how strongly we feel on the use of force. I know you were shocked. I believed him when he said he didn't know but we feel strongly. We should go forward with this announcement. Let's try to move forward. (S)

We don't have much time. The sooner you find visible ways to show that things are changing the better. I am not making this up. I don't want you to underestimate the feeling. Its too bad we can't go forward but you must find a way to be flexible -- on the constitution. I do not want to see this relationship fall apart. (S)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: Even I did not realize the scale and complexity of Gorbachev's problems. I realize the pressures are just tremendous on him. He is trying to push ahead. But the overwhelming majority demanded he establish Presidential rule. I saw the letters. (S)

The President: We hear that he is being attacked from his own left -- the Republics; Yeltsin. That gets a certain following here. I had a letter from Paul Weyrich -- a well-known conservative. He says he has never seen the conservative movement more united than in the case of the Baltic states. Most of these people didn't believe in dialogue with the USSR to begin with. But this is broader and deeper than I thought. He was telling me the truth. He has some real life experiences. On the left, some in the human rights community, who wouldn't join with the right except on this are also excited. Please convey to Gorbachev that we're not trying to get out in front here. But I also feel it in my own heart when I see what is happening in the Baltic states. (S)

Secretary Baker: I don't know how much time we will have before we have to do something. One thing that would help most is the establishment of some mechanism for dialogue. (S)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: Gorbachev is for that dialogue. He will convene the Federation Council. (S)

I want to say one other thing -- about START. 98% of the job is done. We are discussing some details and our intention is to go ahead and finalize that. (S)

The President: We don't think of a START treaty as a favor to anyone. We also need to clear up the ambiguities on CFE. (S)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: We want to go on to other discussions as soon as possible. We need to address the prospect for settlements in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Like 1943 when the Germans were at Stalingrad, we met at Teheran. (S)

Secretary Baker: I do hope that the withdrawal of troops in the Baltics will minimize any further accidents. (S)

Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh: We are trying to do our best. Informal groups are shooting at each other. We will do our best. (S)

The President: Thank you for coming. (U)