

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Pierre Joxe, Minister of Defense of France

PARTICIPANTS: The President
The Vice President
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
Adrian A. Basora, Director for European Economic Affairs, NSC Staff (Notetaker)
Eliza Burnham (Interpreter)

Pierre Joxe, Minister of Defense
Jacques Andreani, Ambassador to the U.S.
Jean-Claude Mallet, Counselor for International Affairs, Ministry of Defense

DATE, TIME February 12, 1991, 1:10 - 1:40 p.m.
PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: I am very pleased with U.S./French cooperation on the military side -- and on every side. I have great respect for President Mitterrand, and we will continue to stay in close personal contact. You come in to your new job as Defense Minister with French forces deployed in a war. Our military are very respectful of the French forces, of your pilots. There is good cooperation on the ground. My view is that the war is on schedule. That reporter asked a good question when he asked about pressures building on us regarding civilian casualties in Iraq. (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: I saw Iraqi TV images of wounded civilians. No one believes that our forces are targeting civilians. Whatever our purposes, however, images of civilian casualties, especially of children, are very moving to the public. (S)

The problem is that there is an imbalance in media coverage. There are very few images of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. When we start the ground war, there will be another phase in terms of

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media attention. In France, we know gas warfare by experience. My parents told me about it, and as a child in 1940 I fled from the German advance with a gas mask. But most of the French have forgotten. They will react strongly to the shock of civilian casualties, military casualties and casualties to gas warfare. This will be a difficult period, but French opinion does understand the situation. Public support is strong in all age and social groups. Nevertheless, the bombing should not last any longer than absolutely necessary. (S)

The President: Perez de Cuellar is getting nervous because Iraq is circulating a paper alleging that more civilian lives have been lost than actually has been the case. I am also concerned with civilian casualties in Kuwait, with casualties among our troops, and with environmental damage. As we hear about Iraqi civilian casualties, we should feel no great pressure. We must keep our eye on our purpose, which is the full implementation of the UN resolutions. U.S. opinion is like French opinion on these issues. A cease fire at this time is out of the question. It would make Saddam Hussein a victor. (S)

Our pilots and yours are doing good work. When television footage shows a bridge being bombed with civilians crossing it, people must understand that the bridge is a military target, under the current circumstances, and that civilians should not be walking on it. (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: Another problem that we face is opinion in the Arab world. Saddam can become a hero. And, if Jordan becomes a second front, then we have a very different situation. (S)

The President: How would that happen? Perhaps if Israel were to retaliate, or if Saddam Hussein tries to draw Jordan in? (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: If the Palestinian issue does not progress after the present crisis then we will have problems. Saddam Hussein has promised a solution to the Palestinian issue, although no one believes him as yet. I am sensitive to this issue because we have 4 million Arabs living in France, of whom 2 million are Algerians. Although they wouldn't want to live in a country like Iraq and prefer France even to their own country, they are nevertheless torn. Among their young, Saddam Hussein is a hero. (S)

The President: In this country, Arab-Americans support our troops, but at the same time they too are torn because of their family ties to the region. (S)

After the war, I want to work closely with France. You know the Middle East well, perhaps better than we do, and we must cooperate in working out the problems of the region. We were making some progress on the Palestinian issue before the war. Please tell President Mitterrand that I look forward to working

with him in dealing with the Palestinian issue and in solving other problems, working with the rest of the world. (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: As Interior Minister, I saw reports of great tension in our schools, particularly among the young Arabs in France. They were proud when the first Scud missile fell in Israel -- and yet they are at the same time hard put to defend the idea that Saddam Hussein should send missiles against Israel. (S)

The President: Francois has told me that he is concerned about the Maghreb. This was even before the demonstrations there. I have not yet thought of a way for the U.S. to be helpful. Felipe Gonzalez has also told me that he is very concerned, even though King Hassan is standing firm. (S)

France knows the area well, and if Francois has ideas as to what we could do, I would be interested in hearing them although I don't see as yet what the U.S. can usefully do. (S)

I like Bendjedid. He has cast his lot with Saddam Hussein, but he is an intelligent man, and we do need to keep lines of communication open to Saddam Hussein. He might have a useful role to play. (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: Yes. (U)

Ambassador Andreani: Bendjedid has not entirely cast his lot in with Saddam Hussein. (S)

The President: Right, but he is seen as being aligned with Saddam Hussein, even though reluctantly and less so than King Hussein. When we prevail -- and we will prevail fairly soon -- France, the U.S. and the UK will be in a position to be helpful. Let us hope that we can use the outcome in order to be a force for peace -- although I am aware of the big problems that we will have to face. (S)

I feel good about the military situation, especially our air power. Before January 17 our estimates of likely losses were much higher than the losses have been in fact. We are well on our way to destroying much of his armor with systematic, laser-like bombing. (S)

That is the overall situation as I see it. We have good cooperation among the military. What is the rest of your schedule here in Washington like? (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: From here I go back to the French Embassy and meet with the press. Then I fly to Paris, and the day after tomorrow back to Riyadh. (S)

The President: You'll be a basket case with all the jet lag!
(U)

Defense Minister Joxe: There are times when you have to do this sort of thing. (U)

The President: Marlin, we wouldn't presume to give the Minister any advice, but since he will be having to deal with the press, do you have any thoughts as to the questions he is likely to be getting? (S)

Mr. Fitzwater: I think right now most of their questions will be on the question of initiating the ground war. (S)

Defense Minister Joxe: My answer will be that the decision to move to a ground war will be made when the decision needs to be made, and that it will be made by the people in charge of making such decisions. (general laughter) (S)

The President: I wish you well. Please convey my respects to President Mitterrand. I offer both of you the full cooperation of the United States. (S)

-- End of Conversation --