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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with Francois Mitterrand, President of France on February 19, 1991

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Francois Mitterrand
Adrian Basora, NSC Staff (Notetaker)
Eliza Burnham (Interpreter)

DATE, TIME February 19, 1991, 3:24 - 3:47 p.m.
PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: Francois, can you hear me OK? (U)

President Mitterrand: Yes, I hear you well. (U)

The President: I just wanted to touch base and compare notes on the Soviet initiative. (S)

President Mitterrand: I understand. I feel a great need to know your views on this. (S)

The President: I have already written to Gorbachev emphasizing the importance that there be a prompt and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. I said that I have problems with an unspecified length of time, and that 96 hours should suffice -- it only took the Iraqis 48 hours to go into Kuwait. After this, we have to keep the pressure on. (S)

President Mitterrand: Yes. (U)

The President: I stressed that Saddam Hussein would have to comply with all of the UN conditions. I am planning to send a second letter pinning down more details such as the need for an immediate exchange of POWs and the principle that there can be no cease fire until a credible withdrawal has begun. This will not be a problem for Gorbachev, but I question whether it will be acceptable to the Iraqis. (S)

We will not attack the departing forces. The POW exchange must occur within the first 24 hours. We have a lot of their prisoners, approximately 1,200. They have very few of ours, but they are very important to us. (S)

The Soviet initiative, in its totality, is not acceptable. But this does not mean that we have entirely closed it off. However,

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we cannot be drawn into negotiating the terms of the Iraqi withdrawal. The UN has established those terms. There can be no pause. It is military pressure that has brought us this far with Saddam Hussein, and this military pressure has to continue. (S)

I would very much like to know your views. (S)

President Mitterrand: My views are the following. First, we must have a very quick response from Saddam Hussein, that is, by tomorrow. Second, the reply must be very clear and unconditional. Third, any postponement makes for difficulties for our armed forces, vis-a-vis public opinion, or even within the coalition. You have seen the Italian and German reactions. (S)

The President: No, what are they? (U)

President Mitterrand: They have shown indiscriminate enthusiasm for the Soviet proposal. We have demanded that Saddam Hussein's response be rapid, clear, unconditional and fully in compliance with the UN resolutions. As long as he has not replied, we can continue the war, perhaps almost with increased force. (S)

The first hypothesis is that he imposes conditions for his withdrawal. In that case, the war would simply continue. The second hypothesis is that he agrees to depart without conditions. If so, that clearly changes the situation. We then must pose questions as to the modalities, such as the speed of withdrawal, the POW question, and the timeframe for his final pullout. You said four days. I would have said one week. (S)

The combatants will have to agree to these conditions. It is not up to the USSR to determine them. (S)

The President: Exactly. (U)

President Mitterrand: You are right that we must continue what we started, although we should not bomb withdrawing troops. But until they withdraw, the threat must continue to be felt by Saddam Hussein. This creates a special problem for Israel, however. (S)

Perhaps for the next few days we should pursue our discussions by means other than the telephone. I have no specific ideas, but let's think about the possible means of doing so. (S)

In conclusion, if Saddam Hussein accepts all these conditions, then we can't continue the war as we have until now. By this I mean our conditions, as we have outlined them, not just Soviet conditions. (S)

The President: What would be your prediction as to Saddam Hussein's reaction? You know him. (S)

President Mitterrand: I don't know him, but if I look at the precedents, I think he will refuse. However, if Saddam Hussein is looking at Iraq's disastrous situation, he will find a way to withdraw. He will use some gimmick so as not to appear to be conceding. He will try to enhance his prestige by all available means. We must not allow him to do so. (S)

The President: I agree. (U)

President Mitterrand: This is the state of our thinking. I have worked on this with only a very small group of my advisers and we have not made the Gorbachev proposal public. We should consult fully, and we must act in concert. (S)

The President: I agree. We are not commenting on any of the specifics of the Soviet proposal as Gorbachev has requested. It is important to respect his request, although we must not let public opinion get out ahead of us, believing that peace is at hand and then having their hopes dashed. (S)

I have not yet talked to John Major although I have had a written message from him. You are the first person I have called. Have you spoken to John Major? I agree that we must stay in close touch. (S)

President Mitterrand: I spoke to John Major just 30 minutes ago. A rough summary of his thinking would be to say that he shares the same opinions that I do. (S)

The President: Do you think there are differences with the British? (S)

President Mitterrand: No, I said just the contrary. His position is the same as ours. (S)

The President: Good, that is very important. I have not talked to anyone yet. This is the first call I have made. (S)

President Mitterrand: Yes, yes. We need a response within 24 hours, otherwise we will be overwhelmed by public opinion getting out ahead of us and political statements will begin to be made by others, and the UN Security Council may be getting into the act. (S)

The President: Yes, that is true and it would not be productive at this stage. The Soviets have made a statement at the UN although I don't know the details of it. However, they have not revealed the details of their plan. (S)

The Soviets would clearly like a piece of the action. I see no problem in that, but they should not make the decisions. I don't think that they should carry the ball. They want to play a role, but they must not have too big a role and they cannot be the sole broker. The UN has a position, and the coalition has a position. I don't think we need the Soviets to negotiate for us. (S)

President Mitterrand: The issue is very clear. As soon as Saddam Hussein's position is known, the role of the Soviets as a broker is over. We then take over. Those who are prosecuting the war should establish the conditions for his pullout, and that is we. But, of course, we should be very diplomatic with the Soviets. (S)

We will need to talk again very soon, since events are moving so swiftly. (S)

The President: Yes, but if Saddam Hussein comes back with new conditions, we must strive ahead with the war. (S)

President Mitterrand: I am absolutely in agreement. (S)

The President: I am asking Brent to see if we have anything further from Bessmertnyhk with whom Baker was talking if you can hold on just for a minute. No, the call is just starting and it will take a while before we have any readout. Perhaps Brent can call Admiral Lanxade. (S)

President Mitterrand: Or Dumas can call Baker. (S)

The President: Yes. Thank you for the call and we will remain in close touch. (S)

President Mitterrand: Yes, indeed. Have a good day -- and this is the moment to say so. (S)

The President: Goodbye, Francois. (U)