

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

1816

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

PARTICIPANTS: The President  
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs  
Andrew Card, Deputy Chief of Staff  
Robert M. Gates, Assistant to the President and Deputy for National Security Affairs  
Elizabeth Dole, President, American Red Cross  
John R. Bolton, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations  
Barbara G. Kilberg, Deputy Assistant to the President for Public Liaison  
Nancy Bearg Dyke, Director for International Programs and Public Diplomacy, NSC Staff (Notetaker)

Cornelio Sommaruga, President, International Committee of the Red Cross  
Jean de Courten, Director of Operations  
Jean-Paul Fallet, Head of ICRC Delegation, New York  
Alfred B. Isler, Deputy Head of ICRC Delegation, New York

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: Friday, March 8, 1991, 11:35 am-12:05 pm EST  
The Oval Office

The President: Welcome back to the Oval Office. It is a pleasure to see you again. I'm glad Mrs. Dole, the new President of the American Red Cross, could be here. We want to work with the American Red Cross. I appreciate ICRC's role. The Red Cross has always been committed to helping other people.

Mr. Sommaruga: We are trying to accomplish our mandate in full. This is very important for your statement in Congress when you spoke about the New World Order. We shall be involved as a basis of behavior.

The President: That is a very important point.

(Cameras and reporters entered Oval Office).

The President: I might take this opportunity just to salute the International Red Cross. And from the very beginning, it seemed to the Americans that you tried very hard to do what was compassionate and right, and you ran into some obstacles, but you stayed with it. And I think we owe you a vote of gratitude. And I want to assure you of our continuing interest and support, and of course, we are proud of the new President of the American Red Cross because Elizabeth Dole being there, I think, is more than a symbol -- it shows a part of the commitment that we all feel to the work of the Red Cross. So it gives me a chance anyway to welcome you back and to say thank you.

Mr. Sommaruga: Thank you very much, Mr. President. I am extremely glad to be here today; also to express appreciation for the excellent cooperation we were able to have in the field with the military -- with the commands of the coalition forces in order to carry out our mandate, which is a mandate given us by the Geneva Convention. And we will continue to carry out this mandate. And I think that what happened in the Gulf will also be for us all a sort of lesson on how one has to proceed in the implementation of internationally maintained law and possibly also in the enlargement of it.

Question from the Press: Mr. President, is there any indication that the POWs were mistreated?

The President: I will not take any questions here. I am concerned about reports that some of them were clapped on the ears, and it affected their hearing. But I don't know the details yet on all of that.

**(Turning to Sommaruga)**: You are most welcome to talk to our press after this meeting. Do you have good cooperation with the Iraqi Red Crescent?

Mr. Sommaruga: All the societies are legally with us. Some of the Red Crescent societies cooperate with us better than others. The Red Crescent of Iraq is continuing to cooperate very much with us. This was not so at the start of the war.

The President: Interesting. Did you have total access to the POWs in Saudi Arabia?

Mr. Sommaruga: Yes. After the ground hostilities began, though, there were so many that we just did it in preparation for repatriation. We had a meeting in Riyadh yesterday. Procedures were set including registration and repatriation of prisoners, and return of civilians on both sides. The cooperation is working well in this respect. Where we have a problem is Basra.

The President: We're very worried about that. There is not much we can do -- no military applications but we are very concerned

about the humanitarian situation, and we want to do something on the humanitarian side of the equation. Are journalists being released?

Mr. Sommaruga: I don't have an update on that yet. We tried yesterday to enter Basrah with our delegation. But we were stopped. We tried again today. I am waiting for news. Then we should be able to get news of the journalists.

The President: What did the Baghdad group say about seeing coalition prisoners? Did they call them prisoners of war? (U)

Mr. Sommaruga: They neither said yes or no. They didn't enter legal arguments. They didn't recognize Iraq-Kuwait to be an international conflict.

The President: Because they called Kuwait "Province 19?" (U)

Mr. Sommaruga: Yes.

Mr. Sommaruga: This war shows that international humanitarian law has to establish a better future. When I refer to international law, I refer to additional protocols. I hope your Administration can make a new examination of these in light of the Gulf war. The US behaved in accordance with Protocol I. It would have been helpful for the US to have been a party to it, to refer to it when the other side wasn't observing it. Protocol I includes environment, human shields.

The President: We can review it. Our position is the same as that of the Reagan Administration. (We cannot ratify it.) For example, terrorists are defined as military forces covered under international law. We have hang ups that we have been frank about. Some of the provisions are good. We can take a look. We think international law on these matters is pretty clear.

Mrs. Dole: The American Red Cross supports Protocol I. So do Canada and Germany, and soon Australia. One hundred countries have ratified it. Twenty-five have made a provision reserving with regard to the phrase about wars of national liberation.

The President: Let's talk about it (the Protocol) because it has many positive aspects.

Mrs. Sommaruga: Observers especially. And it asks all parties to proceed against terrorists.

The President: Let's look at what Mrs. Dole mentions.

Mr. Bolton: We treat Protocol I as emblematic under international law.

Mr. Sommaruga: In general terms, it is important to see to it that there is constant watching of international humanitarian law by all countries. Conventions should be applied everywhere. There is not enough pressure, e.g. Iran/Iraq -- neither applied provisions fully. With the engagement of the USA and others, we could plead for universal observance.

The President: I'm interested and I want to do what's right. I don't want the US to stand out as the only one not signing, if 100 have signed.

Mr. Sommaruga: I know you as a great supporter of the ICRC. I know you are inspiring your administration to support us internationally. In the Gulf, yes. In the rest of the world too. The Occupied Territories are important.

The President: Do the Israelis cooperate?

Mr. Sommaruga: Settlements are a real problem as they are against Geneva Convention Four. Expulsions are a problem too.

The President: Expulsions are contrary to our policy. I hope out of the Iraq war there will be a real chance to work with other countries regarding Palestine. We will try. We will break china in the process. There is a new credibility there. We want lasting peace. It is not easy. We are determined to give it a full try. That is what Secretary Baker's mission is about. We want to be a catalyst, but we cannot dictate.

Mr. Sommaruga: The moment is a good one. I am interested in what you told Congress about control of arms. What if the President of Iraq had used all the weapons at his disposal? We could use the ICRC gathering of 165 states in December in Budapest to discuss this. I will report on implementation of international humanitarian law. I would be glad to see the concern from the US about armament. I hope there will be a resulting (?).

The President: I will take a look at the conference. There is less Iraqi armor now; a major reduction in the threat. Maybe your goals can be fulfilled. You can have peacekeeping forces in the area to most countries "this reduces the need to have your own forces." Maybe there is a new role for the UN there.

Mutual thanks for the meeting and goodbyes.

-- End of Conversation --