

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Arnold Ruutel, President of Estonia

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Robert Kimmitt, Acting 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
Edward A. Hewett, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, NSC Staff
James Dobbins, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs
Interpreter

Arnold Ruutel, President of Estonia
Lennart Meri, Foreign Minister
Juri Luik, Notetaker
Arvi Jürviste, Interpreter

DATE, TIME March 29, 1991 (10:40a.m. - 11:25a.m.)
PLACE: Oval Office

The President: Mr. President, we are delighted to have you here. You know our position. We are very concerned about what is happening in the Soviet Union. It is in no one's interest to see a resurgence of KGB or Military control of the country. (S)

You're the expert. I'd like to know your views on this situation. This is my fifth meeting with a Baltic leader. I am proud to have you here. (S)

President Ruutel: First of all, I wish to thank you for finding the time to meet with me. Also, please allow me to use this opportunity to extend greetings to you and to the people of the U.S. for how you've been able to combine a coalition in a victory against aggression in the Middle East. (S)

The President: You wrote me a nice letter on that. Thank you very much. (U)

President Ruutel: It is the human rights aspect of the Gulf War which is most important: you provided a good lesson to those who would use force against a free people. (S)

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Now for some brief information on the situation in the Baltic States. I wish first to thank you for the role you played in January when the Soviets resorted to force in the Baltics. (U)

The President: That offended the American people, and we spoke out against it. I don't know if it did any good. (S)

President Ruutel: We are quite sure it was effective. The Soviet Union was stopped when the international community demanded a dialogue. (S)

Now to the present situation. We are still trying to start negotiations. You may know that yesterday was the first meeting of the Soviet and Estonian negotiating teams. Regrettably nothing substantial came out of it. The Soviet side did not have a mandate to negotiate. (S)

The President: What level are the Soviet members of the negotiating team? (S)

President Ruutel: The Soviet side is headed by a Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Foreign Minister Meri: But he was not present at yesterday's meeting. (S)

The President: What are the negotiations about? Do you say, "Let's discuss the mechanics of how we get our independence?" (S)

President Ruutel: Our proposal is that first we need to define our current status. The political situation has changed and in this new situation we would like to define our status. Having done that, we are ready to engage in a constructive, calm dialogue on economic, political and other matters. (S)

It appears, however, that Moscow only wants to talk, without accomplishing anything substantial. It is not clear yet how Moscow will define the Baltic's status. The Moscow delegation appears to be without instructions on how to proceed. (S)

Yesterday the Soviets agreed to a second meeting in mid-April. We hope we can take off there from the negotiations we had last August. (S)

The President: Is it your feeling that the Moscow delegation did not have instructions because Gorbachev is completely absorbed in the battle with Yel'tsin, or that he worries about the military and the KGB? (S)

President Ruutel: I agree that Gorbachev is involved in a struggle with Yel'tsin, the KGB, and the military. (S)

The President: If Yel'tsin were in power, would he grant freedom to the Baltics? (S)

President Ruutel: We have an agreement with Russia, and in that agreement there is a clause supporting full sovereignty for Estonia. When Yel'tsin talked to me, he said that he personally is in favor of freedom for the Baltics, but that it is difficult finding support for that idea. (S)

When I last met with Gorbachev at the end of January, he was almost silent on Baltic independence. And that, despite the fact that I argued with him that after we define our status, we could improve our economy, which would benefit the Soviet Union as a whole, and not only the Baltics. (S)

We truly believe we are in a situation where the Soviet economy is on the decline, and we could improve our economic situation, if only our status was clarified. Of course we assume that one of the requirements for our successful development would be stable relations with the outside world, which would require stability in neighboring countries, including the USSR. (S)

The President: I thought Gorbachev said you could have your independence, but in accord with the secession procedure, which is admittedly very difficult. (S)

President Ruutel: You are quite correct. But these secession procedures were in fact designed to make sure secession is impossible. (S)

The President: I want you to know that I have personally talked to Mikhail Gorbachev more than once about independence for the Baltics. If the Soviets would allow independence, that would help the Soviet Union gain support in the West. (S)

Our whole point is self-determination for the Balts, and especially for the Balts. Georgia, Ukraine -- they are entitled to self-determination, and will have to work that out for themselves. But the Balts are special. We will never recognize the incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR. (S)

But what will happen in the Soviet Union? None of us can predict what will occur. You are in a position to know. What do you think will happen? Will Gorbachev remain in power? Or will Yel'tsin come to power? Are the Army and the KGB moving society to the right? (S)

Answer only if you are comfortable. It is simply very important to get a feel for how things will work out. (S)

President Ruutel: I am very pleased to respond. Broadly Soviet society breaks down into two camps: liberal and reactionary (the partocracy). In my last meeting with Gorbachev at the end of January he again said that he is on the side of democracy. But whatever he says, he is wavering, and gradually moving towards partocracy. This certainly has contributed to the difference between Gorbachev and Yel'tsin, although there are personal differences here as well. (S)

The President: I think you're right. But will Gorbachev survive? If you had to bet \$10, would you bet he'll survive. (C)

President Ruutel: I am convinced that if the international community, with the U.S. at its head, makes clear to the Soviet Union that relations with the West are fully dependent on the commitment to democracy, that will strengthen the democrats and - if Gorbachev will swing towards them -- then that strengthens his power. In fact you are pursuing this line now, and we are grateful for that. (S)

When I met Gorbachev, I said, "Let the Balkans go; it will boost your authority." Democratic forces in the Soviet Union would support him. (S)

Let the Baltic case be the test case for democracy in the USSR. It is important in responding to the forces of stagnation in the USSR that the rest of the world convey a clear view of their activities. Before coming here we had a meeting with the Council of Baltic States. We agreed on an appeal for an international conference on the Baltic states which could undertake a historical and legal assessment of the Baltic states, as well as a strategic assessment. (President Ruutel hands a copy of the declaration to the President, Tab B). It is important for the international community to publicize the historical aspects of the Baltic situation. (S)

The President: Is the multilateral approach because of frustration over the lack of progress in the bilateral negotiations, or a supplement to those negotiations? (S)

Foreign Minister Meri: Mainly to reinforce, not to replace, the bilateral negotiations. (C)

If I might add -- we believe that time is short. Democratic forces in the Soviet Union feel deceived by Gorbachev. They no longer need Gorbachev. The conservative forces likewise feel they no longer need Gorbachev. (S)

The President: So your \$10 says he won't be around long? (C)

Foreign Minister Meri: The time factor is essential. We are in a more dynamic situation than when I last met with you. One way to convince the West to take a more active part is to stress that the military situation in Europe is unclear. Conventional forces are not fully controlled as required. Soviet forces will be deployed through Rostov into the Baltic states. That is a major problem not only for us, but for the U.S. (S)

Gorbachev might have a choice, but the only possibility to make him grasp it is clear language: Let the Balts go and there will be rewards. The Baltic States are a test case. If totalitarian forces succeed in crushing legitimate power, that means a new

totalitarianism not only in the Baltic states, but in the entire USSR. (S)

The President: Those are interesting points, and eloquently put. I agree. The U.S. is committed to Baltic independence, and to freedom, democracy, and a market economy in the Soviet Union.

(S)

But because of our standing as a superpower, we must conduct ourselves so as not to encourage a totalitarian takeover. I'm listening to your words. But the situation is such that we don't want to inadvertently push the military and the KGB to move against the center. We want independence, democracy, and a free market. We don't want to inadvertently push for a military takeover. (S)

I am not saying Mikhail Gorbachev is the only hope. If another person comes in, we'll deal with him. We just don't want to set back the course. That's why I am asking. (S)

President Ruutel: We fully share your views. We too want stability in the Soviet Union. We need assistance in finding constructive ways to convince the Soviet Union that letting the Balts go will help them domestically. I reiterate once again, I told Gorbachev, "Let us go and it will alleviate the Soviet Union of a big burden, while giving a chance to work to improve our situation." (S)

The President: You are absolutely right. But will the military and the KGB allow it to happen? (S)

President Ruutel: On the military, our proposal recognizes that the Soviets cannot withdraw immediately when we achieve independence. We see a gradual process to remove bases. We believe our proposal is very realistic and constructive. The possible stumbling block is Great Russian chauvinism. (S)

Foreign Minister Meri: During the last three-four months, the press has developed a new image of Gorbachev as a hostage of the KGB and the Army. I believe that is not the case. In fact, the KGB always was in full command of the country, and was the main power behind Gorbachev even under Andropov. (S)

What is possible is a conflict between Gorbachev and his 7000 generals, all of whom want to be marshals. There is still a chance, but this could be Gorbachev's last chance. He sided with the extremists, and is relying on the old party structure. Right now you are at a point where you could give him a push, enabling him to take the right side. (S)

The President: I must take my wife to church, and therefore regret that I must end this interesting meeting. I have enjoyed it. I do have a better understanding now of the situation. The last point was very interesting to me. I hope you are seeing others. (U)

Robert Kimmitt: He met with Secretary Baker yesterday. (U)

The President: OK. I have great respect for you. Your independence is something we want. I made the point to Gorbachev that it would be best for him. It is hard even to give food aid while this situation lingers on. (C)

Foreign Minister Meri: I remind you that in 1921 when we fought Russia, we were in a position to give food aid to most of northern Russia. Such are the possibilities of a free country. (C)

President Ruutel: I am embarrassed to say that I forgot to begin by thanking you for the medical aid you gave to us earlier this year. (U)

The President: We are glad to help, and want to do more. (U)

-- End of Conversation --