

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada on August 19, 1991

PARTICIPANTS: The President  
Brian Mulroney, Prime Minister  
Notetaker: Barry Lowenkron, NSC Staff

DATE, TIME August 19, 1991, 9:09 - 9:18 a.m.

AND PLACE: Kennebunkport, Maine

The President: Brian? (U)

Prime Minister Mulroney: Yes, George. (U)

The President: Every time I come to Maine, all hell breaks loose. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mulroney: It's going to be a tough one today. (Ø)

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The President: I just wanted to touch base. I'm trying to get in touch with all leaders. Most that I've talked to agree that we must play this reasonably cool and stay with our insistence on democratic reforms. The press here are trying to almost put a military confrontation on this thing. They are asking, have you used the hot line, who is controlling the nuclear weapons? I've been saying, look we don't want to set the clock back to the status quo ante. We give Gorbachev credit for the reforms. Our policy will be determined by whether perestroika and the reforms continue. We've got a democratic movement in Russia itself. Francois, I heard from him earlier, said a lot of coups look good in the beginning and then don't work out. I said, well, there's no finality to this coup. We don't know its development. He asked if we were taken by surprise, too, and I said yes, we were, but so was Gorbachev obviously. We've talked to Moscow. Our people are safe. And, Brian, I'd appreciate this staying confidential, but I'm going to go to Washington only to swear in Strauss and send him over. Then, I'll come back. (Ø)

Prime Minister Mulroney: Today? (U)

The President: I don't know. We have this hurricane to contend with, too. I don't know if I can get there. If it's tomorrow morning, I don't want them to say the wind turned north so we can't go tomorrow. (Ø)

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Prime Minister Mulroney: What is your best assessment of what happened? (S)

The President: We really don't know. Its the hard liners Pugo, Kryuchov, Yazov, Pavlov. We're not sure where Moiseyev was. The rumor is that he flew down to break the news to Gorbachev. I know those four in there. Yanayev was my host when I was in Moscow and he talked quite reasonably. He appreciated our support for the center. What I was saying was let the people decide. He was quite reasonable when we were talking but is now emerging as a hardline puppet, a token of the right wing. The new leaders apparently will be on television at 10. We don't know; our embassy didn't know a damn thing. We were surprised like everyone else. The press is saying it was an intelligence failure. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: George, one point where you may get some criticism on behalf of all of us. They may say, well, if you people had been more generous in London, maybe this wouldn't have happened. You may remember my turning at lunch to Helmut Kohl and saying to Helmut, who is closest to the situation, remember when we had agreed on what we were going to do? Now, if a month from now, Gorbachev is overthrown and people are complaining that we haven't done enough, is what we're proposing the kind of thing we should do? He said absolutely; there was no second guessing the nature of the decision in London. (S)

The President: It's funny. Our press didn't raise that, but it could happen. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: The reason you may remember my exchange with Helmut was because Lubbers interrupted to say that Kohl already answered. And I said, no, he had not. Lubbers said that nobody would be overthrown in a month. And I said how do you know that? Helmut said, no, I spent time with Gorbachev in Kiev. What we're proposing is what he needs and what he wants. (S)

The President: That's an important point, if raised. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: This was raised at luncheon just before we met with Gorbachev. And Helmut reassured us that this is what Gorbachev wanted. I'm grateful to Lubbers for interrupting. (S)

The President: I do remember that. This crowd is pretty hardline. I'll get hit for holding the country too close to Gorbachev. I'll point out that it's a damn good thing because look at the changes that have taken place. And if we had tried to pull the rug out it would have happened sooner. And Brent Scowcroft and others will be arguing that position. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: Any doubt in your mind that he was overthrown because he was too close to us? (S)

The President: I don't think there's any doubt. It will be interesting to see what the new leaders say. At first, they said health problems. Maybe that means that Gorbachev's fingernails

wouldn't come out. Even more important is the economic chaos and disorder that goes with it and the economic drift. And I think on the part of these guys, the downgrading of the communist party. These are hardliners and they see the party that was their life's blood, the KGB, that has been the silent hand forever, undermined and threatened as well. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: George, Do you see any significance in the fact that the Union Treaty was to be signed in the next few days? (S)

The President: I don't know. That's a good point. Yeltsin is out there on top of a tank saying this coup must be reversed. You have to give him credit for enormous guts. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: You may want your people to look into that. It struck me that Gorbachev coming back to sign that treaty would be the kiss of death. Maybe they moved to make sure that the signing never took place. (S)

The President: That's an interesting point and I will put it to our experts. It hasn't been voiced so far but we'll look into it. Give me a holler if you have any more thoughts. I want to reactivate this diplomacy. I was told that EC foreign ministers, -- don't know if that means the whole EC -- will meet, and then maybe to be followed by a meeting of the European heads of state. Major was saying this might take place. I think you and I and Kaifu need to stay in very close touch. Any thoughts you get, give me a holler. And let's not let this interfere with the Mulroney visit. In fact, it's a good reason to put substance into it. (S)

Prime Minister Mulroney: That's right. Goodbye, George. (U)

-- End of Conversation --