

**196. Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)<sup>1</sup>**

Washington, May 5, 1972.

[Omitted here is a discussion of Kissinger's speech to the Asia Society in New York City the previous evening.]

Nixon: I was going to ask you to do something today that is very important. I want you to be rather cool, particularly outgoing with Dobrynin. I want you to play them like they play us, and be very, very nice. Act as if everything was going ahead on schedule. But act very, very nice. Say how gracious we are—how pleased Mrs. Nixon is with the graciousness of Mrs. Dobrynin, and all that. Because now that the die is cast, we are going to play this in the most vicious way that we can with those bastards.

[Omitted here is Kissinger's discussion of going ahead on all planning for military action in Vietnam, especially urging the President to be wary of "some leaks in the White House." H.R. Haldeman entered at 9:21 a.m. to join the discussion regarding the blockade in Vietnam and left at 9:30 a.m.]

Kissinger: Now I feel I must put before you this consideration, Mr. President. We must do something drastic, there's no question about it. The advantage of a blockade is that it commits us irrevocably, that after that we've crossed and there's no turning back. It's a great advantage. And the other side must then do something. The disadvantage is that it confronts the Soviets most directly.

Nixon: They might [unclear].

Kissinger: They can hardly step back from that. They may, but my Soviet expert thinks that it's more likely that they'll step back from a blockade than from a bombing, but—

Nixon: Well, the disadvantage of the bombing is, as you put it so effectively yesterday, is that they expect it, and therefore it's already been discounted.

Kissinger: The disadvantage of the bombing is that it will trigger every goddamn peace group in this country.

Nixon: So will a blockade.

Kissinger: And—

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<sup>1</sup> Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Oval Office, Conversation No. 720–4. No classification marking. According to his Daily Diary, Nixon met with Kissinger in the Oval Office from 9:14 to 10:09 a.m. The editors transcribed the portion of the conversation printed here specifically for this volume.

Nixon: Either does that. It's the line—the major escalation—that they're all talking about. Either the blockade or the bombing—they're going to trigger the peace groups. So have no doubts about that.

Kissinger: But it's hard to turn off a blockade.

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: I mean, for you to turn off—you can always stop bombing for a day or two or a week or—

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: Or 2 weeks, and therefore—

Nixon: So that would be ineffective.

Kissinger: The bombing?

Nixon: We cannot have a stop and start things again. We've been around and around and around. I understand the problems with the blockade.

Kissinger: No, I just wanted to put it—

Nixon: Not only theirs—that problem confronts a lot of them in the Soviet Union, the Indians, and the Chinese.

Kissinger: Those are no problem. But the Chinese are a problem too.

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: But in a way, of course, it's all a question of degree. A prolonged bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong—

Nixon: They have to react.

Kissinger: Will do the same thing. It will send the question—

Nixon: The other thing is that the bombing has been done before. It's the same old routine. We're back to bombing, bombing, bombing, stop the bombing, stop the bombing. So they're going to say lift the blockade, lift the blockade. On that point it isn't as strong a case for it. The blockade is not as good a target as the bombing in terms of riots.

Kissinger: You can, well, of course there's got to be bombing too with a blockade.

Nixon: Oh, I understand. But the people are going to look at the blockade. The blockade is going to be so overwhelming in terms of its public relations impact.

Kissinger: And you—

Nixon: I understand. Look, Henry, the main point is that when you raise these points which you've got to raise, there are no good choices.

Kissinger: No.

Nixon: There are no good choices. Sure, there's a choice of a 2-day pop, and then go back and then hope to Christ they'll want to negotiate about something. And it isn't going to happen.

Kissinger: That's right.

[Omitted here is further discussion of the military situation in Vietnam.]

Kissinger: Another advantage of the blockade is that you can go to the American people where you can't go to the American people—

Nixon: About bombing I've already presented that to the American people on April 26th.<sup>2</sup>

Kissinger: And you can rally the American people for a blockade while you cannot rally them—

Nixon: That's right. That's right.

Kissinger: And that's not an inconsiderable—

Nixon: It's a helluva considerable thing. The blockade has the advantage that it's—first, it's a total commitment; it's decisive. And in the end, let's face it, in the end, we've got to figure, Henry, we may lose the election, and so forth and so on. But in the end, the blockade will end the war.

Kissinger: Yup.

Nixon: And, by God—

Kissinger: Well, if you win the war you won't lose the election.

Nixon: If you win it soon enough. And see that's the problem. The blockade, we know damn well that in 8 months we'll have them at their knees.

Kissinger: Oh, I think that with bombing we'll have them quicker—with bombing, before they can get alternative routes organized.

Nixon: So, my view is that the blockade rallies the people; it puts it to the Russians. I mean, the only advantage, as I told you earlier, as I said earlier, is the line that Connally came up with is to start bombing again. And then, if the Russians still do not break off the summit—you see, the bombing-blockade thing has this possible advantage, which I ran by you yesterday. You bomb. After bombing, the Russians bitch but they do not break off the summit. Then we continue bombing. Then I suppose, we can go to the summit.

Kissinger: Well, if you bomb enough, they'll break off the summit. There's no question about it.

Nixon: Well then, that perhaps is the mess we're in because we can't bomb unless we bomb now. We can't bomb and then have—you can't bomb and then have them kicking us around while we're in Moscow. You see, that's the point Thieu made which is tremendously compelling. I cannot be in Moscow at a time when the North Vietnamese are rampaging through the streets of Hue or for that matter through the streets of Kontum.

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<sup>2</sup> See Document 171.

[Omitted here is discussion of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's opposing position on the blockade.]

Kissinger: We should go on this as if we were going all out on it, and I'm saying this to you—I am not saying it to Haig, or to Moorer, or to Connally, or to anyone else. I mean, we still have a few pieces that have got to come in. We still have got to get the Russian reply. If it doesn't come by the end of the day, it's too late. But I'm sure it will come today.

Nixon: Yes.

Kissinger: See, another problem you face is you bomb Hanoi and Haiphong, and then the Russians do to you what they did to me. They come and we'll talk about it. And then you've got to stop again. Of course, you could say fine, but "I won't stop it now until—"

Nixon: You could—well, putting that case at its best, you bomb Hanoi and Haiphong. And the Russians will say, "Look, you come and will have sort of a pause while we have the summit, as we did at the Chinese summit." And you remember, I said that it's a possibility; that's one thing that could happen.

Kissinger: Of course. We shouldn't look back to the Chinese summit. We weren't bombing the North then, Mr. President.

Nixon: Let's suppose—let's look at this, and leave that out of it.

Kissinger: Everything the—

Nixon: The Russians still might say, "Well, during this period of time we'll cool it." That'd be the condition of our going, and we go and we come back, and we start bombing again. The problem is will bombing Hanoi and Haiphong do the trick, Henry?

Kissinger: Well, Hanoi isn't so important except for these rail lines.

Nixon: I know. But Haiphong or the bombing of Hanoi—will it do the trick?

Kissinger: The great—the conclusive argument to me in favor of the blockade is that you cross the Rubicon.

Nixon: Right.

Kissinger: That what they're trying to do to you, it's obvious, they're trying to kill you now. And I'm not sure—I said this to this group last night, they said what are the Russians [unclear]? And I said, "There's nothing the Russians would rather do than to get rid of the President. He's the only thing that stands between them and dominating the world." I said, "Now—"

Nixon: Now that's quite true.

Kissinger: That is true. But I was amazed by that group because now—

Nixon: You said that's why they're shooting all of a sudden while we were [unclear].

Kissinger: So, I think the only thing now—I don't believe they started out trying to overthrow the President. But if he gets too vulnerable at home, then you people are—and whoever starts nagging at him—is responsible. But what I think the—

Nixon: Those people are sensible enough, for Christ's sake, to know that Humphrey or McGovern or Teddy would be pacifists with the Russians, aren't they?

Kissinger: Oh yeah.

Nixon: Aren't they?

Kissinger: Oh yeah.

Nixon: Okay.

Kissinger: It was—I must tell you, I had—these last two evenings have been amazing in this respect because usually I get nagged at.

Nixon: Oh, Connally's point, of course, he's from Texas, but Connally talks to other people, apart from the polls and everything, he thinks that we got—he says you've got support in the country now and now's the time to do something.

Kissinger: You see, I don't—I never actually—One question was, how do you defend escalation? I said I'm not going to defend escalation. I said—

Nixon: Who escalated it?

Kissinger: I said, that's not the issue. There are only two issues. One is does the United States put a Communist government into power and allow itself and its enemies to defeat its friends? The second issue is do we—can any President permit 60,000 Americans to be made hostages, and will be shame and indignity, not wreck our whole domestic structure. Those are the only two.

Nixon: Also, I think the issue that how can the United States stand by after offering peace in every quarter and do nothing in response to an enormous enemy escalation—we're only responding to an enemy escalation. That's the real point here.

Kissinger: See, I think what the North Vietnamese are saying to themselves is all right, they know we're going to bomb. I mean, they know. And they say to themselves, "All right, they're going to take it." And—

Nixon: I think they are prepared to take the bombing, Henry—

Kissinger: Yeah.

Nixon: You see—look, Henry, there's nobody that's more aware, because I, like you, one of the reasons we're both in here, is that we both take a long view, which goddamn few Americans do. That's why I said that we put out a little game plan if we wanted to cancel the summit first and then going after them, which I think we're absolutely right in not doing that.

Kissinger: Now that is something—

Nixon: That's good advice, because it's something I've seen. I led you into that—I led you out of that, yes I did. Because I remember what Eisenhower did. But I had really forgotten it didn't hurt Eisenhower when the Russians canceled the summit. It didn't hurt him. Goddammit, the American people don't like to be kicked—It didn't hurt Eisenhower when the goddamn Japanese canceled his trip.<sup>3</sup> Remember?

Kissinger: Absolutely.

Nixon: All right, now, it didn't hurt me, as Vice President. I'll never forget when I got stoned in Caracas.<sup>4</sup> It helped me. People thought it was great. Now, it depends on how you react to it. Here's the problem. Looking at the long view, bombing might turn it around. It runs a better chance of keeping the summit alive. The Russians can live with the bombing or might be able to live with a blockade. All right, that's the advantage of that. But we constantly come back to the, basically, Henry, to the fundamental problem. And Connally, with his, you know, with his animal-like decisiveness, and which I also have, except I—

Kissinger: You're much more subtle.

Nixon: Through many years I've put much more layers of subtlety on it. But anyhow, Connally runs quickly to the point. He says, look, the summit is great; I hope you don't knock it off. I think you can do both. And I hope you can do both; I think you will do both. But, he says, even if you don't, if you're going to do the first things first, you've got to remember, you can do without the summit, but you cannot live with a defeat in Vietnam. You must win the war in Vietnam. Or, to put it another way, you must not lose in Vietnam. That's crystal clear. So, everything's got to be measured against what wins or loses in Vietnam. And here is the weakness of the bombing. Bombing might turn the war in Vietnam around. The blockade certainly will turn it around. Now, here, the blockade plus, you understand—what I'm really saying here is, I think, that's what'll convince me to, say, win the war.

Kissinger: The blockade gets you across the Rubicon. There's no way it can't be ended without the blockade.

Nixon: Well, everybody knows then, that I've thrown down the goddamn gauntlet, and there it is. Do you want to pick it up? And, you see, I'm going to lift the blockade as I've said. It's not over yet—the bombing's not over yet.

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<sup>3</sup> Reference is to President Eisenhower's official trip to Japan in 1960 that was canceled due to riots; see *Foreign Relations, 1958–1960*, vol. XVIII, pp. 329–356.

<sup>4</sup> Reference is to Nixon's 1958 trip to South America; see *ibid.*, vol. V, pp. 477–483.

Kissinger: The bombing—they cannot do it. This is the argument for the blockade now. It heightens the chance of a confrontation with the Russians.

Nixon: That's correct.

Kissinger: It will start the Chinese screaming.

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: And you'll be accused of having blown up everything of your foreign policy, which is on the other hand a disadvantage.

Nixon: A great sadness to me. A great sadness to me. We've had a damn good foreign policy.

Kissinger: You have—

Nixon: Even if it all goes down the tubes, we will be remembered as the ones who went to China. And in the future, that'll work out.

Kissinger: Mr. President, actually, if you get re-elected, it will make your foreign policy. It's the same as the Laos operation. Everyone said that you now have broken it with the Chinese, and 3 months later we were there. And a year later, you were there. So, I think it will—

Nixon: Henry, if you come back to the fundamental point, as I took you up on that map yesterday. I showed you that little place, and we looked at it, and we think that this whole big wide world, everything rides on it. If there were a way, believe me, if there were a way that we could flush Vietnam down, flush it, and get out of it in any way possible and conduct a sensible foreign policy with the Russians and with the Chinese—

Kissinger: We'd do it.

Nixon: We ought to do it. We ought to do it. Because there's so much at stake. There's nobody else in this country at the present time with the exception of Connally in the next 4 years that can handle the Russians and the Chinese and the big game in Europe and the big game in Southeast Asia. You know it and I know it. And the big game with the Japanese 5 years from now. Who could help us to do—all right? So that's the stakes. That's why I—the only reason I had any doubts earlier in the week was that I had to face up to the fact 'cause I saw the inevitability of McGovern, or Humphrey, or the only other possibility is Teddy,<sup>5</sup> who might be the worst of the three.

Kissinger: Certainly. No, McGovern's the worst.

Nixon: But anyway, as I saw that—McGovern would be the worst of the three for sure, but Teddy would be so stop-and-start that he

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<sup>5</sup> Reference is to Senator George McGovern (D–South Dakota), former Vice President and Senator Hubert Humphrey (D–Minnesota), and Senator Edward Kennedy (D–Massachusetts).

might get us into worse trouble. Anyway, if you're going to go for peace, you might as well surrender right off the bat rather than cost it all and slaughter. But my point is, Henry, that I had to put that in to the equation. And therefore, I had to go down the line and say how in the hell can we save, how the hell can we save, you know, the Presidency, and frankly, the present occupant, and that meant saving the summit. All right, I'm considering going, and I don't think there's any way you can do it—I don't think there's any way you can do it and at the same time temporize in Vietnam. I've reached the conclusion that we're in the situation where Vietnam is here and I assured Rogers and Laird, [unclear] let's make another offer, and have we agreed to offer this, and well, I don't know if we have, and they're wining and bitching about it. Well, Henry, you know and I know this is not true.

Kissinger: Mr. President, you and I know, perhaps as the only ones, if they had given us a face-saving way out, I was prepared to take it.

Nixon: I told you before you left.

Kissinger: You told me—because you told me that. They want us out in a humiliating way. They want us to put a Communist government into power. Goddamnit, let's face it, if they had accepted our May 31st proposal last year, they would have taken over Vietnam within a year or two.

Nixon: Oh, I'll say. God, I know. I still wish they had, nevertheless.

Kissinger: Of course. But it isn't as if we've been intransigent in our offers. Not at all.

Nixon: See, if we can survive past the election, Henry, and then Vietnam goes down the tubes, it really doesn't make any difference.

Kissinger: I agree with you. That's seems the whole—

Nixon: But we have no way to survive past the election.

Kissinger: Right. I think—

Nixon: There's no other way to go, given their other argument for bombing. Maybe we could bomb but not blockade, and still have the summit, and might last the election.

Kissinger: But, Mr. President, I think they're going to kill you. They're going to put you into the Johnson position. This is the other argument for the blockade.

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: They're going to have you as the bomber. The guy—when I looked at the DRV position, they wanted you to break off the peace talks, Mr. President.

Nixon: That's right. That's right.

Kissinger: So you're the guy who doesn't talk.

Nixon: Oh, I hope they know, the guy across from me helped to break them off—did you get that across?

Kissinger: Oh, yeah, that got across. But all of this is minor because the peace groups are going to keep backing—

Nixon: The headlines are that we broke off the talks.

Kissinger: So that 6 months from now, 3 months from now—

Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: —it's forgotten that there was an invasion, and therefore—

Nixon: Henry, let me put it this way. I know that you've been thinking about this during the night as I have. But I come back to the fundamental point, leaving the president out and so forth. Who knows, something could happen—the Democrats could get smart and draft Connally and I could be defeated.

Kissinger: That's impossible; inconceivable.

Nixon: Well, if they did, it could save the country.

Kissinger: But Mr. President, they're more likely to draft you. They will not draft Connally.

Nixon: But anyway, my point is, we have to face this fact: leave me out and leave McGovern out and all others. The United States of America at this point cannot have a viable foreign policy if we are humiliated in Vietnam. We must not lose in Vietnam. It's as cold as that. Right?

Kissinger: I agree.

Nixon: And they have not given us any way to avoid being humiliated. And since they have not, we must draw the swords. So the blockade is on. And I must say, and incidentally, but I want one thing understood, you said bombing—Moorer is right, the surgical operation theory is all right—but I want that place, whenever the planes are available, bombed to smithereens during the blockade. If we draw the swords out, we're going to bomb those bastards all over the place.

Kissinger: No question.

Nixon: And let it fly. Let it fly.

Kissinger: The only point I disagree is we can do all of this without killing too many civilians. I said, no way.

Nixon: I don't want to kill civilians; you know that I don't want to. I don't try to kill any. But goddammit, don't be so careful that you don't knock out the oil for their tanks. See my point?

Kissinger: Oh, God no. God no. Those have to go.

[Omitted here is further discussion on the impact of intended military actions in Vietnam.]



**Foreign Relations of the  
United States, 1969–1976**

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**Volume XIV**

**Soviet Union  
October 1971–  
May 1972**

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United States Government Printing Office  
Washington  
2006

DEPARTMENT OF STATE PUBLICATION 11355

OFFICE OF THE HISTORIAN

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For sale by the U.S. Government Printing Office  
Superintendent of Documents, Mail Stop SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-9328