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[p.741]

196. Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)¹

Washington, May 5, 1972.

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

22:58

Nixon: I was going to ask you to do something today that I think is very important. I want you to be rather than cool, particularly outgoing with Dobrynin.

Kissinger: Yeah. [Unclear]—

Nixon: I want you to play them like they play us, and be very, very excited. 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 we—the die is cast, we are going to play this in the most vicious way that we can with those bastards.

23:36

[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.]

30:33

Kissinger: Now, I feel I must put before you this consideration, Mr. President. We must do something drastic. There's no question about it.

Nixon: Hmm.

Kissinger: The advantage of a blockade is that it commits us irrevocably, that after that

Comment: "Omitted here" annotation at the beginning and end of transcripts was not included in later FRUS volumes because it can be potentially misleading. For example, this annotation fails to note that Nixon's secretary, Rosemary Woods, was present for the first part of the meeting. The annotation does not address the earlier part of the conversation as denoted in the tapes as Conversation No.720-4. FRUS guidelines were revised to say that only "a portion of the conversation was transcribed specifically for this volume. It is part of a larger conversation [time period]"

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Comment: Kissinger did not "urge" the President "to be wary of leaks." Rather, he said at 24:09: "somebody in the White House is talking too much". Moreover, Kissinger hardly had to tell Nixon to be "wary" about leaks.

Comment: Conversation with Haldeman also included discussion of leaks and news coverage—not just about blockade in Vietnam.

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¹ 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.

we've struck—

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Nixon: Um-hmm.

Kissinger: —and there's no turning back. That's a great advantage. And the other side must then do something. The disadvantage is that it confronts the Soviets most directly.

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Nixon: That's the thing I said the other day.

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Kissinger: They can hardly step back from that. They may, but my Soviet expert² thinks that it's more likely that they'll step back from a blockade than from a bombing, but—

Nixon: The disadvantage of the bombing is, as you put it so effectively yesterday, is [that] they expect it—

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Kissinger: But—

Nixon: And in their thought it's already been discounted.

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

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Nixon: So will a blockade.

Kissinger: And—

[End p.741; Start p.742]

Nixon: Either does that you mean? It's the line—a major escalation—that they're all talking about—

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Kissinger: Yeab—

Nixon: And either the blockade or a bombing will—they're going to trigger the peace groups. So have no doubts about that.

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

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Nixon: [Unclear: That's it]. 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: And so then it would be ineffective.

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Kissinger: The bombing?

Nixon: We cannot have a stop—a stop—and start thing again.

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² Likely a reference to Hal Sonnenfeldt.

Kissinger: That's right—

Nixon: We've been around it and around, I understand the problems of a blockade.

Kissinger: No, I just wanted to put it—

Nixon: Not only—Not only there's that problem. It confronts a lot other than the Soviet Union—[such as] 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 always been 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. He's [Nixon's] 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 the riots.

Kissinger: You can, well, of course, say 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—

Kissinger: And you—

Nixon: —public relations impact.

Kissinger: And you—

Nixon: I can 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 say I hope to Christ they'll then negotiate about something. And it isn't going to happen. Hmm?

Kissinger: That's right.

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[End p.742; Start p.743]

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Comment: Per the *Foreign Relations Style Guide*, ellipses are allowed in Nixon tapes transcripts when a speaker's voice trails off. Em-dashes are used for interruptions.

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Comment: Incorrect chronological sequencing, likely due to reliance on noise reduction software that lacks precise control over time when reviewing (although it can be used as a plug-in with most audio software, PA/HO used the feature as a standalone program)

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

37:43

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—

Kissinger: —about the bombing—

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Nixon: —I've already presented that to the American people on April 26th.³

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.

Kissinger: — factor.

Nixon: The bomb—The blockade has the advantage that it's—First, it's a total commitment; it's decisive. I mean, in the end, let's face it, in the end, we've got to figure, Henry, that probably that we may lose the election, and so forth, and so on. But in the end, the blockade will end the war.

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Kissinger: Yeah,

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Nixon: And, by golly, that's—

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

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Nixon: Yeah. If you win it soon enough. And, you 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 to you earlier, of the—which 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. And after bombing, the Russians bitch, but they do not break off the summit. Then we continue to bomb. Then, I suppose,

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³ See Document 171.

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 convincing reason, because we can't bomb unless we bomb enough. 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 that you 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.

[End p.743; Start p.744]

40:33

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

43:41

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.

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: So, 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, say, "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 with the Chinese summit. And you remember, I said that it's a possibility. I told them it could happen.

Kissinger: Of course. We shouldn't look back to the Chinese summit. I suppose we

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Comment: Omitted here is discussion unrelated to the Soviet Union. There is significantly more omitted than just discussion about Laird's opposition to the blockade, including talking about General Creighton Abrams, Ellsworth Bunker and much more.

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were'n't bombing the North then, Mr. President—

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

Kissinger: Every single [unclear]—

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Nixon: The Russians still might say, "We will—During this period of time we'll cool it."

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And that'd be the condition of our going. Then, we go and we come back, and we start

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bombing again. The problem is: Is bombing Hanoi and Haiphong do the trick, Henry?

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

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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: That's right.

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Kissinger: That what they're trying to do to you, instead, is obvious. They're trying to kill you now. And I'm not sure—I said this to this group last night. I—They said, "What are the Russians intentions?" I said, "Look, 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—"

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Nixon: You know, that's quite true.

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

Nixon: You said it well. That's why they [were jeering off what was said, probably, rather than disagree]—

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[End p.744; Start p.745]

Kissinger: So, [unclear] 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—or, and whoever starts nagging at him—is responsible. But what I think the—

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Nixon: Those people are sensible enough, for Christ's sake, to think—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: Ok,

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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've got—he said, "You can count on the support of the country now." He said, "Now's the time to do something."

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

Nixon: Who escalated this?

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 ally itself with 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 the shame and indignity not wreck our whole domestic structure?" Those are the only two—

Nixon: And, also, I think the issue [is] 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, I mean,

Kissinger: See, I think what the Russ[ians]—what the North Vietnamese are saying to themselves is, "All right," They know we're going to bomb. I mean—

Nixon: There's the point.

Kissinger:—they know. And they say to themselves, "All right, we're going to take this." And, uh...

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

Kissinger: Yeah.

Nixon: They've had it before, you see. I—I—Look, Henry, there's nobody that's more aware, because I, like you, [unclear] 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 in the meeting—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—

[End p.745; Start p.746]

Kissinger: No, that is certainly note,—

Nixon: That's good advice on the part of Connally, because he had seen something I had not seen. I led you into that.

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Kissinger: No.

Nixon: Yes, I did. Because I remember what Eisenhower did. But I had really forgotten that, well, it didn't hurt Eisenhower when the Russians canceled the summit. It didn't hurt him. Goddamnit, the American people don't like to be kicked—It didn't hurt Eisenhower when the goddamn Japanese canceled his trip.⁴ Remember?

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Kissinger: Absolutely.

Nixon: All right, now, it didn't hurt me, as Vice President. I'll never forget when I got stoned in Caracas.⁵ It helped me.

Kissinger: It helped you.

Nixon: People thought it was great.

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Kissinger: Yeah.

Nixon: 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 but they might not 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 through—

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Kissinger: You're much more subtle.

Nixon: through many years I've put much more layers of subtlety on it. But anyhow, Connally comes quickly to the point. He says, "Look, the summit is great; I hope you don't knock it off. I think you could 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 the bombing, you understand? What I'm really saying here is that, I

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⁴ 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.

⁵ Reference is to Nixon's 1958 trip to South America; see *ibid.*, vol. V, pp. 477–483.

think that's what was convincing to me—

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Kissinger: The blockade—

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Nixon: Like I say, "Win the war."

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

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Nixon: Well, everybody knows then, that I've thrown down the goddamn gauntlet, and there it is. And [do] they want to pick it up? And, you see, that I'm going to live with the blockade, as I've said. Well, it's an ultimatum.

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Kissinger: Yeah.

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Nixon: Bombing is not an ultimatum,

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[End p.746; Start p.747]

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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 right.

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Kissinger: It will start the Chinese screaming.

Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: And you'll be accused of having blown up everything on your foreign policy—

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Nixon: I know.

Kissinger: —which is, on the other hand, a disadvantage—

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Nixon: It brings sadness to me. It brings sadness to me. We've had a damn good foreign policy.

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Kissinger: You haven't been wrong, Mr. President—

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

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Kissinger: Mr. President, you—It would—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 won't—

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Nixon: Henry, if you come back to the fundamental point, I mean, as I took you up on that map yesterday and, I showed you that little place, and we looked at it, and we think

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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 now, flush it, and get out of it in any way possible and conduct a sensible foreign policy with the Russians and with the Chinese...

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Kissinger: We'd do it.

Nixon: ...we ought to do it. We ought to do it because—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? Who else could do it?

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All right, so that's at stake. I mean, 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 if they'd have him, the only other possibility is Teddy,⁶ who might be the worst of the three.

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Kissinger: Certainly the worst.

Nixon: But in any—

Kissinger: Well, McGovern's—

Nixon: But in any event, because I saw that—No, McGovern would be the worst of the three for sure if he gets in, but Teddy would be so stop-and-start that he [End p.747; Start p.748] 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 in 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 the, you know, the Presidency? And that meant, frankly, the present occupant, and that meant saving the summit. All right, I have considered it all, 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—

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Kissinger: [Unclear]—

Nixon: —in the situation where Vietnam is here and I assured Rogers and Laird,

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⁶ Reference is to Senator George McGovern (D–South Dakota), former Vice President and Senator Hubert Humphrey (D–Minnesota), and Senator Edward Kennedy (D–Massachusetts).

[unclear] 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.

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

Nixon: [Bring it]

Kissinger: I was prepared to take it.

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Nixon: Well, I told you before you left—

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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—

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Nixon: [Laughs] I'll say. Thank God that I know. I still wish they had [accepted the May 31st proposal], nevertheless.

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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, [unclear: and if we can make it] and then Vietnam goes down the tube, it really doesn't make any difference.

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

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

Kissinger: Well, I think—

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Nixon: [Unclear: 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—

Kissinger: No, I think that—

Nixon: —and might last the election.

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Kissinger: 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.

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Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: They're going to have you as the bomber. The guy—when I looked at the

DRV statement, they wanted you to break off the peace talks yesterday—

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

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

[End p.748; Start p.749]

Nixon: Well, I hope they know—it got across that they helped to break them off. Did Porter make [unclear: that at the meeting]?

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

Nixon: Yeah. 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: Well, Henry, let me put it this way. I know that you've been thinking about this during the night as I have, but I've never—I come back to the fundamental point, leaving the President out and so forth, and who knows, something could happen—the Democrats could get smart and draft Connally and I could be defeated.

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Kissinger: That's impossible; inconceivable.

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

Kissinger: But Mr. President—

Nixon: [unclear]

Nixon: —they're more likely to draft you. They will not draft Connally.

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Nixon: But anyway, my point is, we have to face this fact: leaving me out and leaving 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?

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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 sword. So the blockade is on. And I must say that I'm—And incidentally, but I want one thing understood, you said bombing [unclear] 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 sword out, we're going to bomb those bastards all over the place.

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Kissinger: No question.

Nixon: And let it fly. Let it fly [unclear]

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Kissinger: The only point I disagree is we can do all of this without killing too many civilians. I just know we can—

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Nixon: I don't want to kill civilians; you know that I [don't], I don't try to kill any, but Goddamnit, don't be so careful that you don't knock out the oil for their tanks.

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Deleted: See my point?

Kissinger: Oh, God no.

Nixon: See my point?

Kissinger: God no. Those have to go.

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