

Conversation No. 735-1¹

Date: June 15, 1972

Time: 10:31 am-12:10 pm

Location: Oval Office

Participants: Nixon, Luis Echeverría Alvarez, Alexander M. Haig, Jr. and Donald F. Barnes.

[Ronald L. Ziegler, members of the press and the White House photographer were present at the beginning of the meeting.]

~~07:57, 735-1~~ **DECLASS**

[Paragraph breaks denote pauses for translation.]

Nixon: Well I want to say that we—I'm very—I think it's very appropriate that the first meeting that we have after I returned from Moscow is with the President of Mexico.

I think it's very important that we establish the proposition that our two countries consult very closely, and this demonstrates it to the world.

Now, Dr. Kissinger, as you know, Mr. President, is going to China. He's leaving tonight—leaving about this afternoon.

I—If you, if you like, I would—After he returns some time later in the summer, I would like to have him come to Mexico City and give you a first-hand report on his trip, as he did earlier when he visited Acapulco.

We can't—We don't do this with very many heads of government because there are too many governments, but with Mexico and, like, Japan and the Euro—European countries and Canada, we try to have that kind of communication.

¹ Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Conversation No. 735-1, Oval Office. No classification marking. The editors transcribed the portion of the conversation published here, which was part of a larger conversation, specifically for this volume. The portions transcribed are part of a larger conversation, which ran from 10:31 a.m. to 12:10 p.m. Alexander Haig and Donald F. Barnes, who acted as an interpreter, were also present at the meeting. In an August 9 telephone conversation, which is not published, Kissinger asked Herbert Brownell to lead a commission to undertake a thorough study on Colorado River salinity and propose a long-term solution to the issue. (Ibid., Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, Box 15)

We will, we will—It'll suit your convenience.

In the meantime, I know that we have a number of subjects that you would like to discuss, and it seemed to me, Mr. President, that the—on the bilateral—in the bilateral area the most, the most pressing, urgent problem from the discussions that I've had with our staff who have talked to your staff is the salinity problem—probably.

And I want to, because we are good friends, even though we've only met once before—I thought that if you would like that we might tackle that problem right away. Let's say—I'd like to hear your views, and then I will try to see what, what I can do on the problem. And then go to other subjects in which, of course, we're mutually interested in. But, if you would prefer another procedure or agenda, you, you can tell me, because I [unclear]—

Echeverría: I'll deal with, with this problem, Mr. President, in two parts and very briefly.

Nixon: Good.

Echeverría: Now, first to the summary of the problem, Mr. President, and second is a note drafted by the Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico after his conversation with Dr. Kissinger last night.

Nixon: Oh, good. I have a note from Kissinger, too.

Echeverría: In the past, the President of Mexico has never gone to the Mexicali Valley, which is the affected area and always studied this problem from a distance and usually reviewing the reports of engineers who were the ones responsible for distributing the water.

Within the course of the last month, Mr. President, I have visited this valley twice, and I've gone to many far and remote corners of the valley and talked to a great many of the agricultural people in the valley.

The fact of the matter is, specifically, Mr. President, is that people in California and Arizona use water that is considerably better than what is used by their counterparts in Mexico, just a little bit down the river.

And, referring back, now, to the 1944 treaty, Mr. President, one of the auth—authors of that treaty, one of the ones that worked on it on the American side is now Governor Rockefeller, and he told some of my assistants recently that they never dreamed that this matter—that the water would not be other than pure.

And he was the coordinator of Inter-American Affairs at that time, and he participated in the, in the work on the treaty.

So, it came about—it has come about that ten percent of the water of the river has come from wells. It's water from a very, very ancient, fossilized wells and was discarded. This water is centuries old and has been discarded into the river.

Another 17 percent is not as bad as this first category: it's Colorado River water that is used for, for irrigation and then drains back into the river itself.

And so, accordingly, as a result of the conversations held last night between our Foreign Secretary and Dr. Kissinger, I believe that out of this meeting could come—without creating any immediate problem for you, Mr. President, either in California or in Arizona—but out of our meeting could come a statement that would be a very strong testimony and witness for Mexico and for Latin America that is, that is following these events very closely. And so, for example, Mr. President, I think if we said something in a general way that Mexican farmers should enjoy water of a quality equal to that employed by American farmers, without reducing the amount of water given to Mexico, I think this is something that would be a positive step. We would be willing to have a discarding of the bad water that's going into this area, even if it's counted towards that—the amount that we are entitled to according to the treaty. The moral point of it is that we can discard that, even if we have to have that charged to our, our yearly account on that. But, if we have a general statement of this kind, and it would not be used in any way—it wouldn't create any problems. I realize what year this is, and what you're facing. I would not want to create any problems for you in Arizona or California. We, on our part, would be willing to temporarily sacrifice the total amount of water that we would receive. As I said, even if the, the amount that is discarded—is taken away from our account, because we believe that a better quality of water, even in a reduced amount, would be better than the larger amount that we have now that is not as good.

This is what the Foreign Minister drafted after speaking with Dr. Kissinger. It should have been given to the President this morning.

18:19

[Omitted here is discussion as the translator reads the draft note on salinity.]

21:16

Echeverría: We, of course, understand, Mr. President, that without—on a technical matter such as this, that you cannot commit yourself without a prior—very careful study.

And I know that there are interested farmers in Arizona and in California that are watching this very closely.

But, on the other hand, there is a great deal of interest in this in Mexico; there is a great deal of tension all over Latin America, and we are faced with a very real and a serious problem.

And then I think that we might come out with a, perhaps, a balanced statement, more or less along the lines of what Dr. Kissinger and our Foreign Secretary agreed upon. Well, even if this is in general terms, I could then go back to Mexico and take steps, so that without impairing or hurting the farmers that use the water in Arizona and California, that we not use this very—conspicuously bad water that has been coming to us, and then we could have a very detailed and serious technical study of the problem.

This is a synthesis—a summary of what I think, Mr. President.

Nixon: Well, Mr. President, there is the problem that you have alluded to: of our Congress—the congressmen from Arizona and California, who represent the interests of the farmers there.

I realize it's a very, very sensitive issue for your people, but as you know, farmers, whether—either side of the border always want something for themselves.

And, of course, if I were to take some action at the Executive level that Congress would not approve, this would be a very unfortunate development.

So what I would like to suggest is that we have a—you and I—Come on in.

[A unidentified individual entered the room.]

24:24

[Omitted here is discussion regarding Echeverría's schedule.]

26:17

Nixon: The second point is, Mr. President, is that—Let me talk very pragmatically to you. As you know, I just returned from a discussion with Mr. Brezhnev.

Now, here we were dealing with, basically—not on a basis of personal friendship with Brezhnev, but—and not personal, personal belligerence—but, basically, the United States and the Soviet Union have very great differences.

But the reason that our conversation succeeded was that he and I talked directly, as you and I are talking now. And when I could do something, I said so, or when he—and he, he took exactly the same line. Or, if I couldn't do it, I said so.

Now, I do not want to make a, make a statement on the water that the Congress would reject, because that would mean that—that would be misleading you and misleading your people, your farmers—*campesinos* .

Nixon: He understands?

Translator: Understands everything.

Nixon: Right. Now, what the—Let me say, Mr. President, now there—What I will—what I would like to do with you is to make a personal commitment to do something before the end of the day, to work this out before the end of the year.

The President can count on me to keep my word.

Echeverría: Well, Mr. President, but on the other hand, I think that a—even an expression of a general nature would be useful, because all of Mexico is waiting for something like this, and I'm sure that this is in the thoughts of, of all the Mexican-American citizens that live in the United States. And I think that if we could see—express something in the sense of—that a deep technical study must be made in order to find a solution to this problem; that it is a technical problem; we will have to take a technical approach to the solution, so that the Mexican *campesinos* can in the future count on having the same quality of water as American farmers do, because this is something that is felt very, very deeply and vividly in Mexico.

Nixon: No, I didn't—No, I—I'm not—didn't mean to rule out a statement after—in our commun—in our communiqué at the end of our meetings. There should be, I mean, there should be a general statement. But, what I wanted to talk to—tell the President directly is what I think we can accomplish before the end of the year.

Echeverría: Sí. [Yes.]

Nixon: For example, when I met with your, your predecessor [Gustavo] Díaz Ordaz [unclear] we discussed salinity down at the Amistad Dam; we discussed salinity again when I was in Puerto Vallarta; we discussed it again when he came to San Diego. And each time we left it to the State Department to work out the matter. And I thought it was, was being

settled. And now I have decided that it has to be taken to the Presidential level, and that I, with you, must work this thing out.

Echeverría: Mr. President, I understand very, very clearly what your problems are, and that I have no intention of making any proposal that might be awkward for you.

Yes, Mr. President, but we have to multiply the ties in the spirit of understanding that, that surrounds our two peoples and our two governments, and, for example, tomorrow, after we would have held our second meeting, perhaps we could say that you expressed an interest in the lot of Mexican farmers; that they should receive water as good as that received by their American counterparts—counterparts. But, at the same time, to allay the fears on the part of the American side to speak of a technical study in depth that will have to be made in the course of the year on this problem. I think that this will be a very positive contribution. And I think that we will—if you will read this note over a little bit more carefully perhaps and think about it today, we can see by tomorrow what you might be able to do.

Nixon: What I would suggest if—if it agrees with the President's view, is that Dr. Kissinger, this afternoon, and General Haig talk again with the Foreign Secretary and work out some language to be, to be put out publicly. And his Foreign Secretary will submit it to you, and Kissinger will give it to me.

Now, now, Mr. President, there is a little sensitive bureaucratic problem here: The State Department has been handling this matter.

And so, when you're discussing the matter with other people—for example, Secretary Rogers and others—you should, you should, of course, raise the subject; express your concern; but simply say in general terms that you hope that a satisfactory statement can be made in the communiqué. But, just have in mind the fact that we will work on the statement here at the White House, rather than at the State Department, with your Secretary of State.

And let me say that, in that connection, that it seems to me that the problem has been, has—using our vernacular—been kicked around for 26 years—no, 20—28 years, since 1944. And, I will make you my personal commitment that I will work out a solution in cooperation with you before the end of this year.

Echeverría: Yes, Mr. President, the problem, I think, has been also that this is—for many years, this issue has been left in the hands of technicians and of engineers, when it is essentially a political problem.

Nixon: Hmm.

Echeverría: But I would like to leave one thought with you in your consideration of this: that the border of Baja California with the United States is more than a border with Mexico; it's the American border with all of Latin America. And so, I think this is very important—

Nixon: Good point.

Echeverría: —for you to remember this; that this is, perhaps, the most important problem coming from south of the border, as far as the United States is concerned. And that, as I say, that the border there is a border between the United States and all of Latin America.

36:49

[Omitted here is discussion of Latin American regional issues]

1:21:56

Nixon: I could also like to say one other thing to the President, that I—without trotting on any of Mexico's traditional attitude toward maintaining an independent policy. I think it's very helpful that Mexico take a greater leadership role in the OAS, in matters like this. I am not speaking, now, that Mexico should take this role as any agent of the United States. But, I think that Mexico is in an ideal position to do so. And—Otherwise the leadership role may be taken by other leaders in the continent who cannot speak as, as effectively as can the President of Mexico.

Echeverría: I agree with that approach.

Nixon: In other words, let the voice of Echeverría, rather than the voice of Castro, be the voice of Latin America.

Echeverría: This is not for personal reasons, but I do feel this to be the case very much in Latin America at the present time.

I don't want what the members of the Senate and the House are going to feel when they hear my speech in a few minutes. But, frankly, I talked to them toughly.

This is not a diplomatic speech, it's a—I speak some very flat truths, and I make an appeal for a greater understanding of these two half-worlds that we have in the hemisphere.

If you have no objections, Mr. President, when I refer to the bilateral relations between our two countries, I would like to say that, without making any commitment whatsoever, that in the problem of salinity, that we have begun to talk about it, and that I found deep understanding on your part—

Nixon: Good.

Echeverría: —of our problems, and that this is a first step forward.

Nixon: Yes.

[Kissinger enters the room]

Kissinger: Hello, Mr. President.

Echeverría: ¿Cómo le va doctor? [Laughter] Mucho gusto. [How is it going, doctor? It's a pleasure.]

Kissinger: [Unclear].

Nixon: He's been briefing some members of Congress—and he just got rid of them so they could come down to hear you.

Echeverría: Sí. [Yes.] [Laughs]

Nixon: He had to brief them before he went to China.

[Unclear exchange]

Echeverría: [Laughs] Sí. [Yes]

Nixon: We, we had one thing we agreed upon, Henry—Sit down, Al—that the President and I agreed that, that if you and the Foreign Minister, if you have the time this afternoon, could work out a statement on the salinity problem. We discussed it at some length, but if you could work out a statement that we can make publicly, as—And then, of course, you can—I would say, at the same time, if you would indicate a, a private commitment to the President that I will make with regard to settling it by the end of the year; appointing somebody that—a top Presidential emissary or expert to give me advice.

Kissinger: Right.

Nixon: Et cetera.

Kissinger: Right.

Nixon: But we need something for the communiqué. You see—

Kissinger: Right.

Nixon: —we, we cannot, we cannot sit here and just say we discussed it. And I agreed with the President that you and his Foreign Minister would work a communiqué this afternoon.

Echeverría: This, so you can think of, or be thinking about during the course of the day, today; what actually we're be going to say—

Nixon: Sure.

Echeverría: —on this subject.

Kissinger: I had a pre—preliminary one with him last night—

Nixon: Oh, yes. We—He, the Foreign Minister, made a memorandum of the conversation which he submitted to us—just as you did to me.

Kissinger: Right.

Nixon: And, so I think now if could get together again to see what we say publicly, and what we say privately.

Yeah.

Echeverría: Yes, I think without making any clear commitment on your part, Mr. President, that we can speak of progress having been made, and this will enable me to go back home and take certain measures which I—will instill some hope in the hearts of the farm workers of that area. And, without creating any problems for the farmers of Arizona and California, but also offering some hope to the farmers of Baja California.

And I can also add that in my words to the Congress in a few minutes that, as a result of our conversations, we can speak in general—we have spoken in general terms about the problem of the wetbacks. That is: Mexican illegal immigrants to the United States.

Nixon: Yes, yes, yes. Because we will get—I just [unclear] Henry, for little more time tomorrow with the President, because—

Kissinger: [Unclear]—

Nixon: —we started a little late. And you can—If you should indicate that we—we're—we—we have discussed that problem; we'll go into it more tomorrow [unclear] tonight, at dinner.

I think it might be very well for the President, if he pre—if he desires to indicate that we discussed the problems of the hemisphere.

Echeverría: Sí. [Yes.]

Nixon: Whatever you think [unclear]—

Echeverría: Sí. [Yes.] Without going into the specifics, but saying that there is an atmosphere of reciprocal understanding.

Nixon: Um-hmm.

Echeverría: And as far as the wetbacks—the illegal Mexican immigrants—Mr. President, this, of course, is a very complex problem that we might touch upon tomorrow, but I think that we might think about the possibility of establishing a commission to study the working conditions that these people are working in at the present time. We can't speak, of course, in terms of an agreement, because we know what the pressure would be from the American organized labor in that event.

But, the fact is, that we are being told that, that there may be as many as seven—800,000 illegal Mexican workers in the United States.

And American farmers are accomplices in this situation because they get cheaper labor.

Nixon: Right.

Echeverría: And so we have a very long border, Mr. President, and these people cross over and find work under conditions that sometimes are exceedingly harsh.

Nixon: And then, many of them move to the cities, which makes it even worse for them.

Echeverría: They've gotten—They've moved quite a ways north, now; they're no longer concentrated exclusively in California and Texas; they've gone in to the Midwest and Chicago.

They have relatives and friends already settled in these areas, and they give them some cover.

Nixon: Yeah.

Echeverría: And the attitude of the radical Chicano groups in California and Texas has been changing as far as these new illegal immigrants are concerned, are concerned. They're starting to help them, now.

If, at first, these Chicano groups did not like to see these illegals coming in because they meant competition for jobs, but now, they are changing their attitude, all with a very definite political direction.

So, you have your problem of a minority that is growing in the United States. So, the best thing would be to face the problem and then study it.

Without ruffling the feathers of the unions, of course, but to study what their conditions are because this is something that, I think, affects all of us.

Nixon: I agree. [Unclear]. We agreed, incidentally, Henry, that after your return from Peking, some time later this summer, or maybe after we get the treaties through the Congress, which will be around, well, September 1st, that—that you would go to Mexico. I want you to take off a few days in Acapulco and then, and then call the—

Kissinger: Call on Echeverría—

Nixon: —and then call on the, call on the President and brief him. I told him that we were only—that we could only do this with about—with some of the European countries, with Japan, and with Mexico and Canada—that we would like to do this.

Echeverría: We are kept up to date in Mexico, Mr. President, of the progress made in U.S. relations with China and the USSR.

But, there's another fact, Mr. President: We feel very deeply that whatever China and the Soviet Union can do in Chile, in Argentina, in Mexico, or anywhere else, one way or another is going to be going against the United States.

Nixon: Right.

Echeverría: And, as you know, Mr. President, any problems that they can create in Latin America vis-à-vis the United States, and that may affect American relations with Latin America, would be considered a success on their part.

If they could set up another Cuba somewhere else in Latin America, they'd be very happy.

And wherever they see a—military dictatorships in Latin America, they're very happy also.

Because they're able to foster a great many problems underground.

And wherever there are no dictatorships, they subsidize youth groups, for example, and magazines that are clearly pro-Soviet in their line.

So, it's easier, easier to counteract whatever they are trying to do when you have a political system that provides the social and economic solutions to economic-social problems.

We are told in certain avenues, by certain Latin American leaders, "Well, we used to have a lot of problems with our members of Congress and our Senate, so we got rid of 'em."

[Laughter]

"And now, we're working better."

But, underground, they can do a lot, still.

Nixon: Well, the President must—

[Unclear exchange]

Nixon: —leave for his date with our Congress.

We will—we will meet again tonight, at dinner.

And we will go to—we'll continue our talks tomorrow.

[Omitted here is discussion of regional issues]