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By KW NARA, Date 5-6-08

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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

TOP SECRET-SENSITIVE

October 1, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *K*
SUBJECT: Conversation with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin

Attached is a report of my conversation last Saturday with Ambassador Dobrynin.

Following the prearranged telephone call, I emphasized to Dobrynin that you felt:

- Vietnam was the critical issue;
- There would be no special treatment for the Soviet Union until Vietnam was solved;
- We took seriously Hanoi's attempt to undermine the President's domestic position;
- The train had left the station and was headed down the track.

Significantly, Dobrynin responded, inter alia, that:

- He hoped it was an "airplane" and not a "train" and that there would be some "maneuvering room";
- My private conversations in Paris had impressed Hanoi;
- Moscow had an interest in improving relations with us but hadn't seen real progress on any subject.

I emphasized that we could go further towards improving US-Soviet relations if Russia took an understanding attitude on Vietnam.

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During the conversation Dobrynin also expressed:

- surprise that no meeting with you had been arranged for Gromyko;
- interest in our preference as to 2 or 4-power negotiations on the Berlin issue;
- hope that the White House would intercede to expedite a preliminary agreement on the Middle East between Rogers and Gromyko prior to the latter's departure;
- assurance that a reply on SALT would occur in due course.

I believe the Soviets are concerned and now more clearly understand that we mean business on the Vietnam issue.

Attachment

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Date: Saturday, September 27, 1969

Time: 3:00 p.m.

Place: Dr. Kissinger's Office

SUBJECT: Meeting Between Dr. Kissinger and
Ambassador Dobrynin

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Kissinger
Ambassador Dobrynin

Ambassador Dobrynin came to see me at his request. I let him wait for a week but agreed to a brief appointment on Saturday afternoon.

After an exchange of pleasantries, Dobrynin remarked that his Minister regretted not having had an opportunity for a longer chat with me. Had Gromyko been able to visit Washington, Dobrynin would have given a luncheon for him and me at the Soviet Embassy. The absence of a visit to Washington made Gromyko's trip somewhat unusual. I said I regretted that his Foreign Minister did not come to Washington, as I would have enjoyed talking to him, and was sorry his schedule was so crowded. Dobrynin replied that the difficulty was the absence of a meeting with the President, which had been a standard procedure during previous visits to the General Assembly. I told him that in order to keep ourselves from being swamped we had adopted the rule that no Foreign Minister would see the President in Washington. In any event, there had never been a formal request. Dobrynin said he was not aware that there were such fine questions of protocol.

Dobrynin then remarked that his Minister had asked him to inquire whether in negotiating the Berlin issue we had any preference as to forum. Specifically, did we care whether it was discussed in a four-power or two-power forum? While the Soviet Union was willing to speak in a four-power forum, it was also prepared to have two-power discussions. I told him that four-power discussions seemed to be quite acceptable. If there was any different inclination on the part of the President, I would let him know.

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Dobrynin then turned to the Middle East and said that the meeting in New York had been very constructive. Gromyko hoped that he would be able to come to a preliminary agreement with the Secretary of State before his departure on Wednesday. He asked for intercession of the White House in expediting this agreement. I replied that since matters seemed to be in train on the diplomatic level, there was no need for White House intervention. I added that Dobrynin should understand our elemental position. We had made several communications to the Soviet Union on Vietnam to which they had never replied. While this did not inhibit normal diplomatic relations, it made it very difficult for the White House to go beyond what normally occurred on the diplomatic level.

At this point, the President called. When the conversation was completed, I commented that the President had called me at a providential moment because it enabled me to tell the President directly what was being discussed. To us Vietnam was the critical issue. We were quite prepared to discuss other subjects, but the Soviet Union should not expect any special treatment until Vietnam was solved. They should also have no illusions about the seriousness with which we took Hanoi's attempt to undermine the domestic position of the President. Dobrynin asked me whether there was any hope for a coalition government. I replied that we had covered the subject at great length previously and that I could add nothing. It was a pity that all our efforts to negotiate had failed. The President had told me in his call that the train had just left the station and was now headed down the track. Dobrynin responded that he hoped it was an airplane and not a train and would leave some maneuvering room. I said the President chooses his words very carefully and that I was sure he meant train.

Dobrynin then asked what our problem had been in the past. I said that every negotiation turned into a discussion on our readiness to accept the 10 points. We could not negotiate in a forum of ultimatums. Dobrynin said that my own conversations with the Vietnamese seemed to have gone rather well. I asked him what he meant. He said Hanoi had told Moscow that they had been very impressed by my presentation and thought I understood Vietnamese conditions very well. I replied that if this were true the next move was up to them.

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Dobrynin then engaged in a lengthy exposition to the effect that the Soviet Union, for its own reasons, was interested in peace in Vietnam and had in the past often been helpful. I countered that we had no illusions about Soviet help in the past. It had been considerably in the interest of Hanoi and had been largely tactical. Dobrynin said that he wanted to assure me of Moscow's continued interest in improved relations with the U. S., but it was getting very difficult to convince Moscow of our goodwill. There had been no real progress on any subject. For example, we could have been more generous on trade liberalization. I said the most important issue was Vietnam. As soon as Vietnam was out of the way and especially if the Russians took an understanding attitude, we would go further. Dobrynin smiled and said that I had an unusual ability to link things together. I told him that we had hoped to have a reply on SALT. Dobrynin said there would be a reply in due course but did not give any indication as to when.

Dobrynin returned to the subject of Soviet interest in improving relations with us. I said we reciprocated this feeling, especially after Vietnam was out of the way.

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