

TELCON

Seymour Hersh/Kissinger

12:22 p.m. - 7/17/73

K: Hello.

H: Hi.

K: How are you?

H: This is in the nature of here we go again, ok?

K: On what basis are we talking?

H: We're talking on the - there's a wonderful story making the rounds about retroactively off-the-record. We're talking off-the-record.

K: OK.

H: Strictly on background. And here's the situation. Late last night in connection with this Cambodian bombing stuff - story, I got a call from someone who was in the government then, a military man, very upset because he said he wanted me to know that the orders for the - I don't think anybody in the - there's no question that there was enough justification to bomb Cambodia given Sihanouk's cooperation and the buildup and also the fact that all the bombing was kept into a very rigorously centered area. The only issue that seems to me in the whole issue of the Cambodian bombing in '69 and '70 is the falsification of records as described by Mr. Knight and General Brown's admission yesterday that the orders to falsify came from higher up. Well, listen this person I talked with last night was in the government over in the JCS then and he said very flatly, this was done not by a general nor by an admiral and the way he described the situation is this - that it was - that the operation was conceived or the falsification of the operations were conceived in the National Security Council. He mentioned specifically Mr. Haig and he says the reasons for it were quite good, he said, and we all accepted them. In fact he said I accepted them. I assumed he had some authority and he said simply because, apparently it had to do again with the spin off from the William Beecher May 1969 story. I'm not sure about that. His recollection was faulty. But the point is there was some means to set up a special reporting procedure just simply to prevent any and all leaks that could be embarrassing internationally. His argument was that there wasn't an attempt to tell the Congress, well Congress publicly wasn't told, I mean the fact is that's a fact. And he also said that he knows for a fact that Goldwater and Stuart Symington and Stennis were briefed on this bombing.

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- K: The senior Senators were briefed.
- H: Yes, so when Senators are talking about not being told, that's not so. It seems to me the _____ is simply this: If the Air Force was ordered to falsify documents as he alleges and he insists it was not done, it was done across the river over in the White House over in the National Security Council, at least the impetus for the program came there and it was worked out
- K: Impetus for what program? Of the bombing or of the falsification?
- H: The falsification he says.
- K: Look, I made the mistake when these FBI wiretaps surfaced of talking on the basis of my recollection, and you know all these things happened four years ago.
- H: Absolutely.
- K: And therefore I don't want to get into the position of now making a flat statement which if I'd checked I may have to lament so let me talk on an off the record basis as to ~~my~~ assessment of the situation is. One, if we're speaking about myself I don't know anything about the god damned reporting system. So I wouldn't even know how to give an order to falsify it if I wanted to.
- H: Yeh.
- K: I never heard a discussion about how the reporting should be handled. I know we put great pressure on them to keep the thing secret for diplomatic reasons, but it seems to me almost out of the question that we told them how to report this thing. Our concern was not to have false reports; our concern was to keep the secrecy and therefore it seems to me that this information you have is almost certainly wrong. Now I will check with Haig when he gets back from Bethesda and I will be able to confirm it.
- H: Now let me tell you exactly what the information is. It's a very emphatic that it was done at the instructions for setting up the procedure were not conceived by any military officer. They were conceived by a civilian officer.
- K: Now Haig wasn't a civilian officer.

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H: That's right, he was a military officer.

K: Yeh, but look that's inconceivable to me.

H: Well

K: You know the reason it's inconceivable is that I do not - if my life depended on it, I couldn't tell you how the reporting is done.

H: Right. Right.

K: And therefore that couldn't just be true.

H: Well

K: I mean again now I'll have to search my records and see whether I can find any phone conversation or anything else which could be construed this way. But he didn't say I did it.

H: No, no, he didn't say. He just said - you have to understand it - I know from my conversations with people did work on the handwork that this is something you wouldn't have the technical knowhow to even begin to - but I understand there was a tremendous reaction to the Beecher story over at the ACS. Basically, also in your shop.

K: That's true, but yeh - well mostly because of the great concern of the diplomatic consequences.

H: Sure. That means there's no question that you had a problem with Sihanouk. So there was a decision made to cut out a vast number of Pentagon people with information.

K: Now that - no, no, wait a minute. As I recall it our pressures were to keep the thing secret but not to specify how that was to be achieved.

H: Well, yeh.

K: That makes a big difference.

H: You're right.

K: I to this day don't know who in the JCS knows what. When we want something like that we tell the Chairman it should be kept on the most restricted basis possible. We don't tell the Chairman who should get what report.

H: Yeh. OK.

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K: I'm just telling you what my present

H: This is totally off the record and I'm going to tell you what I'm going to plan to do. I'm going to put in a call to Mr. Haig.

K: Why don't you call General Haig. He's at Bethesda.

H: I'm going to give a call to his office and tell him I talked to you. Obviously

K: Incidentally, let me say one other thing. There's going to be one office in this building where if Haig did it, I'm responsible. There is no such thing as Haig doing it on his own.

H: Of course not, but that doesn't mean you had to know about it. Look, you know this is all needless to say, at this point

K: I must say that I nor any of my civilian associates know enough about the reporting

H: To conceive of how to set it up.

K: I mean what I read in your story was total news to me.

H: The problem of course is the obvious one that, you know, in talking to military men there are ethical questions raised. You know there is a time for false reporting, obviously it has a role.

K: The first time I heard of false reporting was in a Monday newspaper.

H: OK.

K: Now that I can say flatly.

H: OK, I accept that.

K: How they kept the information secured, that I just didn't look into, but that didn't in my mind presuppose false reporting. In my mind, it presupposes that only a tiny number of people knew about it.

H: Right. Right.

K: That is my conception of how you keep things secret.

H: Do you agree that perhaps whoever thought up the idea of false reporting should at least be talked with or discussed with? You know nobody's suggesting anything wrong but there should be some action taken

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to find out just who did.

K: Yeh, but the first - that's right, I am looking into this. I have not been aware previously of any false reporting.

H: Are you initiating any steps to look into this?

K: No, but I will. I think that's a good point but you have to consider the first time I heard about it was yesterday.

H: I understand that. I'm going to leave a call for Mr. Haig and talk to him about it and tell him I talked to you. Is that all right?

K: I think he'll still be General Haig until August 1st.

H: Oh yes, that's right. \$2,000 a month is that right? I'll tell you something, he's learning about politics and the hardway isn't he? It's a rough game.

K: Well, you know, let me tell you something in an individual capacity. You know there are a lot of people who have tried to do the right thing, even the moral thing and the honorable thing, and it's getting awfully tough when everything - when constantly every action has to be interpreted four years after an event.

H: That's right. And Inouye too.

K: And Inouye. Now just don't think - I just don't believe there was any order to falsification out of the White House. I cannot believe that. The thing we were conscious of is how to keep it secret and to restrict the knowledge of - how to do that wasn't our problem.

H: No, but if not ordered to, at least approval of. I mean nothing was mentioned about you but Haig did come up, but I'm not going to play a game.

K: Well, you have to talk to him.

H: I certainly will and I'll put in a call now to get this straight. And it could be that they're talking about the Secretary of Defense who conceived this except that wasn't the impression they gave me.

K: I suggest you talk to Laird too.

H: I absolutely will. OK, thank you very much.

K: Right.

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