

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

REAGAN-GORBACHEV MEETINGS IN GENEVA
November, 1985

Third Private Meeting

DATE: November 20, 1985
TIME: 10:15 - 11:25 A.M.
PLACE: Soviet Mission,
Geneva, Switzerland

PARTICIPANTS:

United States

President Ronald Reagan
Dimitri Zarechnak, Interpreter

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary, Central Committee,
Communist Party of the Soviet Union
Yuri D. Uspensky, Interpreter

* * * * *

After the photo opportunity in an adjoining room, General Secretary Gorbachev invited President Reagan to join him in a small room next to the main meeting room while the rest of the delegation took their seats, after which he and the President could join them.

President Reagan told the General Secretary that he wanted to talk with him privately about a subject which he knew that the Soviet side considered to be interference in its internal affairs. The President stressed that he did not want to interfere in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union, but he did want to speak with Gorbachev about human rights.

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

NLSF96-087 #9 DLB 5/15/00
AS 7/2/02

The President indicated that in the U.S. system of government many of the things that we would hope to accomplish with the Soviet Union would require the support of the Congress, which, in turn, is influenced by the people of the country. He could get such support if some things were done in the area of human rights. In the U.S., as Gorbachev knew, we have people from all over the world. Many of them retain a pride in their heritage, with regard to the countries where their parents and ancestors came from.

The President said that religious groups in the U.S. tend to influence Congress through lobby groups. An example of strong attachment to religious celebration occurred in the U.S. on St. Patrick's Day. This was a special holiday for the Irish, and Reagan's father had come from Ireland. Other groups in the U.S., such as Ukrainian Americans, Lithuanian Americans and Polish Americans have their organizations, customs and holidays.

The President said that he did not wish to raise this issue in the main meeting. He was also not asking to get Gorbachev's agreement to publicly announce actions which were being taken to deal with difficulties in this area, such as emigration. The recent release of several men and women who were allowed to join their spouses had made a big impact on the people in the U.S., but the President wished to be frank and said that the question then arose -- why not the rest? An example of such an issue was the desire of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. There was a large Jewish community in the U.S., which had an influence on Congress.

The President told Gorbachev that if he could resolve some of these issues on his own, the President would never boast that the Soviet side had given in to the U.S. We would express our appreciation for what was done, and there would be no hint that this was done as a result of U.S. efforts. But the fact that something was done would make it easier for the President to do the type of things which the two countries could do together, such as in the area of trade, for which the President needed Congressional support.

The President said that he wished to give an example of this type of approach. In 1981, during his first year in office, the Soviet government was eager to have a new long-term grain agreement with the U.S., after the imposition of the grain embargo by Reagan's predecessor. The President had sat down with the Soviet Ambassador and had spoken with him about human rights concerns, citing the specific example of the Pentecostals who had been living for five years in the basement of the Moscow Embassy. If they had left the Embassy, they would have been taken by the police. They had come to the Embassy because they had gotten into trouble after having asked for permission to emigrate. The

~~SECRET / SENSITIVE~~

22

President told the Ambassador that he would not speak publicly about this, but there would be a better chance to have a grain agreement, since there was opposition in the U.S. to such an agreement, if something were done to free those people. Shortly after that, they left the Embassy and emigrated to the U.S. The President never told anyone that he had done this. Those people were gratefully received in the U.S., and they did not even know that the President had spoken on their behalf. A short time later, the long-term grain agreement was concluded without difficulties in Congress, and this agreement is in place today.

The President indicated that this was the type of thing which he was seeking here and that is why he did not wish to raise these issues in the full meeting, not to make it appear that he was trying to interfere in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. It would make it easier for us to do the type of things that we could do together if he were not constantly reminded about the restrictions imposed on Soviet people, the refusal to permit them to practice their religion, etc. The President would not tell anyone that he had raised this issue with Gorbachev.

Gorbachev replied that he considered that at some stage of U.S.-Soviet relations, the issue of human rights was being used for political purposes, not only by representatives of various political organizations which were anti-Soviet, but, and this came as a surprise, also by officials of the U.S. Administration, including the President. The Soviet side did not understand this. The President had mentioned why and how he had come to be involved in these issues. Gorbachev wished to say in all sincerity that the Soviet Union was in favor of broader contacts, exchange of people -- scientists, cultural representatives, all types of people -- with the U.S. The Soviet side felt that this was necessary, and Gorbachev thought that Reagan had said the same. The two countries depended on each other today and would in the future. We should get to know each other better and create a good atmosphere. The Soviet people have no enmity for the American people. The Soviet people have a positive attitude toward the people of the United States. If we work at this on the basis of non-interference in the internal affairs of the other country, the Soviet side would be ready to broaden its contacts with the U.S. It is truly interested in doing so. But what we need first is an atmosphere of good will between the countries. This was the fundamental question.

Gorbachev then went on to give specific examples. People from the U.S. travel to the Soviet Union and vice versa. People in the U.S. have relatives in the USSR, and they come visit the places of their origin, such as the Ukraine, the Baltic States, and so on. The Soviet Union welcomes this and is open to such visits. There are no difficulties in this regard. Lately, there

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

13

had been an increase in contacts between representatives of religious groups. The Soviet side was in favor of this. There were marriages between U.S. and Soviet citizens. This was a very natural and understandable thing, and there were no objections to this. Since the group of U.S. Senators that had met with him before this meeting in Geneva had mentioned these issues, Gorbachev had looked into them. During the past five years more than 400 marriages had taken place, and out of these, only ten people had not been permitted to emigrate. The only obstacle to emigration is involvement of the person in question with state secrets. In this case, the state has a specific responsibility, but it tries to let time pass, to let the individual do different kind of work so that his knowledge becomes outdated. His case is then returned too, and he is released. Gorbachev repeated that within the past five years restrictions had been placed only on ten of 420 to 450 people. But these were Soviet regulations, and the Soviet side asked that they be respected. This was one example.

Gorbachev continued that the President had mentioned Jews. The fate of Jewish people was of concern to the Soviet government. There are many Jews in the Soviet Union, as there are in the U.S. (which has the greatest number) and in other countries. After what the Fascists had done to the Jews, the Soviet Union had done everything it could to give them special attention, and it had not regretted doing so. Since many Jewish families had been separated, difficulties existed because of this, and the Soviet side tried to examine such cases. But when such issues are mixed in with discussion of the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union in general, this is not right. Then the Soviet side objects and furnishes data to back up what it says. This has been the Soviet Union's approach in all cases, including in its discussions with the U.S. The Soviet Union was willing to look at specific cases, but when these things are used for political aims, they would be rebuffed. Specific cases would be examined quietly, in a humane way.

Gorbachev said that when a U.S. Congressional delegation had visited the USSR at the invitation of the Supreme Soviet, the two bodies had agreed to establish a permanent group to examine such issues, and the Soviet side was in favor of this, but would not permit this issue to be used for political aims.

The President said that with regard to Jews and other religious groups, there were restrictions in the Soviet Union on their ability to practice their religion, e.g., Jews were not permitted to teach Hebrew. In the U.S., in addition to attending the usual schools, Jewish families sent their children to their own schools to study their ancient language. Perhaps some people would not think of emigrating from the Soviet Union if they were allowed to practice their religion.

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

The President continued that with regard to other questions, the two countries had signed the Helsinki Accords which assured certain freedoms, such as family reunification and the right to emigrate. However, our two countries were big ones, with very large bureaucracies. It was not possible for Gorbachev or the President to know everything that went on at the lower levels, where people could make decisions which were contrary to the desires of the leadership.

The President said that Gorbachev had mentioned that only ten people had not been permitted to rejoin their spouses. But he had a much larger list of cases of separate families. He also wished to give Gorbachev one more example of a case in this category. He knew of a piano player, a young man in the Soviet Union, who wished to emigrate to Israel. Not only was he denied such permission, but he was also denied permission to play the piano with major orchestras, and his records could no longer be sold in stores. His career had been destroyed as a result of the fact that he had wished to emigrate. The bureaucracy could do many things of which Gorbachev was not aware. This man had a wife and a small child. Apparently, he and his wife had been told that they could emigrate, but the baby would have to remain. Since the child was only one year old, they certainly could not have left him behind, so they did not emigrate.'

Gorbachev said that he would like to ask the President about the following. For the Soviet leadership and for everyone in Soviet society it was clear whose side the President was on in the area of human rights. The President always spoke of the lack of human rights in socialist countries. In other countries there was democracy and everything was okay. Since people were aware of the rights situation in the Soviet Union and in other countries, and could compare the situations, why was the President taking this point of view. If other people said this, this might be understandable, but the President always said that there is a clear distinction, namely, that there are no rights in socialist countries, but they are in bloom in the democracies. This caused consternation.

Gorbachev continued that at the level of General Secretary and President one should be responsible and call things by their proper names, no matter where they occur. If things are painted only in black and white, this would only inflame the distrust between the countries. He thought that it would be better to take steps to improve the general atmosphere of our relationship, and then specific humanitarian issues could quickly be resolved. The Soviet Union was prepared to resolve them. But if questions of human rights were used for political purposes, the Soviet side would rebuff such attempts. He repeated that the Soviet Union was ready to examine specific cases, especially those mentioned by the President.

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

The President replied that he was trying to clearly indicate that if such changes occurred, he would not indicate that he was the one that had persuaded Gorbachev to do this. He realized that both of them had concerns about their political image, namely, that they did not want to have it seem that they were giving in to outside influences. He wished to assure Gorbachev that he would have no such problems with the President. What happens is that various groups in the United States have relatives and families in other countries, and they get information from these people. Then organizations deliver this to the President and demand that their grievances be resolved with regard to people in the Soviet Union. These things make their way into the press, and he could not do anything about that since the U.S. has a free press. He was trying to say that we could work better together if such issues did not appear on the front pages, but rather if he spoke with Gorbachev about these things confidentially.

Gorbachev replied that he welcomed the President's decision to have such a private meeting. He had heard him out, and the President had heard him out as well, and the two of them would bear in mind what had been said.

The President indicated that he would like to make one last point. With regard to what Gorbachev had said about issues like this in the U.S., the President wished to say that in the U.S. there are laws which prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, national origin, sex and race.

Gorbachev interjected that he was familiar with the state of things in the U.S. The President had said that there was no discrimination on the basis of sex. This was not true. According to U.S. law a woman could make 60 percent of the salary a man made for the same job. The President had spoken of equality. But so much time had passed since the American Revolution, and women still did not have the same rights as men. He knew this to be the case. He was informed. He had a legal education. The President should not think that he saw only the negative aspects of things in a primitive way. He saw things from a broad perspective, and he was responsible. He supported the rights of families. If there was a need, we should have exchanges and see what could be done about specific problems. But if we are referring to changing laws, with other interests in mind, this could not be done. The Soviet people set their laws. Any other approach shows a disrespect for the Soviet people. This must be the basic framework. The U.S. had its own system, and the Soviet Union had its own. The President would defend the United States, and he, Gorbachev, would defend the Soviet Union. Such a discussion could take a very long time.

76

The President replied that there were differences in our economic system and in our societies. Gorbachev had mentioned the question of women's rights. The President noted parenthetically that women own more than 50 percent of all the wealth in the United States. But the difference in the systems was that, yes, there were individuals, perhaps employers in factories, with personal prejudices about hiring women, blacks, and so on. But the law says that there can be no discrimination. So when various groups indicate that there are those who discriminate, the government must abide by the law and punish those individuals. No U.S. law permits discrimination -- quite the contrary.

The President continued that he had spoken about the bureaucracy. He wished to recall that when he was Governor, he learned from one of his assistants that the latter had taken some young black people to the State Labor office to fill out some job applications (the President explained that there was a Department of Labor in California, which helped people to find jobs). When the applicants had subsequently been questioned about whether they had filled out the applications correctly, one said that he had not. Reagan's assistant took the man back and asked to see his application. They could not find it. Then the man to whom they had been talking slowly edged over to the wastebasket and pulled the application out of it. The Governor was not the one responsible for this. It was one prejudiced clerk who had thrown the application into the wastebasket.

Gorbachev said that people in the U.S. should live as they like. If they choose something, the Soviets would not judge them. The U.S. had many achievements, and the USSR would not interfere in its internal affairs. But the U.S. should do the same with regard to the USSR.

The President said that it would be easier for him to fulfill some of the possible agreements between the two countries if he were not beset by people in the U.S. Congress and by organizations that hear of their relatives and friends and complain about the restraints which they consider should not be imposed upon them, such as with respect to the right to live in other places or the right to emigrate. So if Gorbachev would think about these things, the President would have more freedom to work together.

Gorbachev said that he had heard the President's thoughts, but he could not agree that the President was so dependent on the opinion of small groups. He knew what the President could do as a political leader when he wanted to. When he did not want to, he would talk about pressure groups, and so on. The Soviet side saw all of this. If had a realistic view of life, and asked the U.S. side to have a realistic view of the USSR.

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~

27

The President said that he realized that it was difficult for the General Secretary, within his system, to believe the President that he, Gorbachev, was wrong about the President's power. In the U.S. system, including during the time after he had become President, one part of the Congress, i.e., the House of Representatives, was dominated by the opposition party.

Gorbachev interrupted, without listening to the translation, to say that he had understood what the President had said, and that he took all of this into account. He was familiar with the American political process, and the President should not hide behind this. (U.S. Interpreter's Note: Gorbachev's indication that he had understood what the President had said without translation was unexpected, since he had never shown any indication of understanding English in previous or subsequent conversations. After the President's following remarks, Gorbachev specifically asked for interpretation and looked like he had not understood what the President had said. I think that the first time he was simply assuming that he knew what the President was saying, and was anxious to get into the plenary meeting.)

The President indicated that there were things which he was not able to get approved at the present time because of his opposition, which based its position on what was said by lobby groups.

Gorbachev said that the President had talked about certain issues and he, Gorbachev had expressed his views.

The President interjected that with regard to some cases involving individuals Gorbachev could make it easier for him with regard to the relationship between the two countries.

Gorbachev said that he was glad that they had had a private talk and that this had let them get to know each other better, and this was important. When the two of them would communicate, especially about the larger political issues, they would know what the other one looked like, and the image of the other person would be present when decisions would be made.

Prepared by:

Dimitri Zarechnak,
Department of State

~~SECRET/SENSITIVE~~