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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Summary of President's Meeting with
British Opposition Leader Neil Kinnock

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Secretary Shultz
Robert C. McFarlane
Tyrus W. Cobb, NSC
Deputy Assistant Secretary James Dobbins

British Opposition Leader Neil Kinnock
Patricia Hewitt, Kinnock Staff
Richard Clements, Kinnock Staff

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: February 14, 1984, The Oval Office
4:00-4:25 p.m.

The President welcomed Mr. Kinnock to Washington and indicated that he was delighted to exchange views on international affairs with the new Labor Party Leader. The President said that he had been informed that Kinnock had very useful discussions with several Administration policymakers while in Washington. (C)

Mr. Kinnock thanked the President for his hospitality and observed that he was very pleased with the substantive and fruitful discussions on a number of issues that he has had with U.S. officials. The President reiterated to Kinnock the security themes that he has stressed recently, particularly in his Tokyo Diet speech and his major address on American-Soviet relations in January. The President stressed the urgent necessity of securing global stability and a genuine peace. Should a conflict break out today between the superpowers there would be no real victor. There exists an urgent necessity to rid the earth of nuclear weaponry. However, he stressed he did not agree with the Labor Party's statements on unilateral nuclear disarmament. He noted that the U.S. had offered, when it was the sole nuclear power on earth, to turn its nuclear weapons over to an international authority. We were disappointed that the other side failed to respond. (S)

Mr. Kinnock said that he understood fully the President's position and wanted to make clear that he did not place the U.S. and the Soviets in the same category. Kinnock indicated he was very pleased with the President's State of the Union address which, in his mind, implicitly came close to endorsing a concept

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of no first use of nuclear weapons. He wondered if the Soviet leadership would be as forthcoming. Kinnock continued that he fully recognized the necessity of maintaining Western military strength in order to provide an effective deterrent. This was particularly true in the case of conventional force improvements for the defense of Western Europe. However, from a British perspective, there is no role for nuclear weapons to play in this deterrent strategy. To be fair, Kinnock said, Britain should not ask to be placed under the U.S. nuclear umbrella if it were to rid itself of nuclear weapons. (S)

The President stated that we have had thirty-eight years of peace and, perhaps, the existence of nuclear weaponry has been a contributing factor. He said that when he discusses this issue with students he always asks them to consider whether or not the world has been a safer place because of the U.S. development of nuclear forces. We are prepared, and the Soviets understand this, to defend our Western sovereignty at any level. I wonder, the President said, that if the world had listened to Winston Churchill in the 1930s would we have been able to have prevented Hitler's maniacal schemes? Kinnock agreed that Churchill's words were prophetic and we had failed to heed them. (C)

The President said that following World War II, he often asked Japanese he came in contact with, "Why Pearl Harbor?", "Why did you launch that attack?" Their response invariably pointed out that they observed the U.S. Army training using cardboard tanks and mock-up machine guns, indicating that the U.S. was not serious in its determination to counter Japanese imperialism. (C)

Mr. Kinnock stated that he agreed absolutely with the President, particularly in his characterization of the pre-World War II period. The Spanish Civil War, in which many Americans participated, was a good example of an effort to halt the trend toward fascism in Europe. However, the analogy does not apply directly today. An exchange of weaponry at this time could mean the obliteration of mankind. He added that the President seemed to be saying this in his recent pronouncements. (S)

The President nodded agreement, but stressed that fear of the consequences of nuclear war should not be construed to mean that unilateral nuclear disarmament is the proper path to pursue. He agreed that it is true that we cannot think of victory or defeat as we had previously. Turning to Soviet views of deterrence, the President indicated that he was aware that the USSR may base much of its preparations on a fear of attack. After all, Russia had experienced invasions for centuries and has traditionally been surrounded by hostile foreign powers. However, the President added that he and Kinnock know that no one in the West is going to attack the Soviet Union. Thus, as in 1946, when the Soviets spurned our offer to share knowledge on atomic weaponry and pursued their own atomic arms programs, it appears that the Kremlin has other aims in mind besides a defensive mentality rising from this fear of invasion. (S)

Mr. Kinnock strongly agreed and pointed out that it was to the Soviets' discredit that they missed this opportunity. However, this should not mean that we should seriously adopt concepts such as a "war fighting" capability. This is a primary concern of European youth and has alienated many of them from our policies. Mr. Kinnock indicated he understood the President's position on nuclear weaponry and suggested that if he were in the President's chair, he might feel the same way regarding the role of these weapons. Nuclear deterrence makes sense for the United States, but not for the United Kingdom, said Kinnock. The British people can see no gain from a nuclear conflict or even a discussion of how such a conflict would take place. The arms race must be stopped immediately. An excellent initial step on this, said Kinnock, is the U.S. "build-down" policy enunciated in recent strategic arms proposals. (S)

The President responded that the existence of nuclear weapons has been a key factor in maintaining global stability and preventing war. He wondered if the U.S. would have seriously considered dropping the bombs on Japan if we knew that San Francisco or Chicago would be vulnerable to retaliation from Tokyo. (S)

Mr. Kinnock replied that he understood the President's logic, but that does not lead to the corollary assertion that every state should then have a nuclear weapon. For example, Qadhafi's Libya. We certainly don't want that. The spread of nuclear weaponry could make conflict more probable and lead to such consequences as the "nuclear winter" that has been widely discussed. (S)

The President responded that he was adamantly opposed to any further nuclear proliferation and endorsed all efforts to halt the spread of these arms. He indicated that he, too, had serious discussions on what the consequences would be on a nuclear conflict and agreed with Kinnock that a "nuclear winter" was theoretically possible. The President added, however, that he wished the Soviet leadership would study this question as carefully as he has and would understand better the horrible consequences of a superpower conflict. (S)

Mr. Kinnock, in shifting the discussion to the Middle East, told the President he was a strong supporter of the 1982 U.S. proposal. He recommended that once the affairs in Lebanon had settled, we should return to the essence of our 1982 policy package. Kinnock stated that a solution to the Middle East would likely involve Russian, and certainly Syrian, participation. He indicated that, although he was not a fan of Assad, Syrian security concerns needed to be taken into consideration. Further, he said, we must not overlook the critical questions regarding the Western Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the status of the Palestinians. (S)

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The President replied that this, indeed, was the subject of intense discussions in the White House over the last two days with President Mubarak and King Hussein. He indicated that a demonstrable willingness to negotiate by all sides was necessary, including a readiness to trade territory for secure borders. The President agreed with Kinnock that all of these other concerns should be given equal weight in our negotiations and pledged that the U.S. would do its best to achieve genuine peace and stability in the Middle East. Mr. Kinnock thanked the President warmly for his hospitality and for the leadership he has demonstrated in the Western Alliance. Kinnock noted that all of our lives depend on the President's decisions and he wanted him to know that he (Kinnock) had a great respect for the office and for the President himself. (S)

The meeting concluded at 4:25 p.m.

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Summary of President Ronald Reagan's 4:00-4:25 p.m. Oval Office meeting with British opposition leader Neil Kinnock. Discussion centered on whether or not the existence of U.S. nuclear power has played a role in peacekeeping efforts throughout the last 20 years. White House, 14 Feb. 1984. U.S. Declassified Documents Online, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TNUAUU216001127/USDD?u=wash74137&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=58a7dfda&pg=3. Accessed 9 May 2022.