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Brent Scowcroft Interview Transcription
29 June 2007

Timothy Naftali

Hi, I'm Timothy Naftali, director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. I'm here today with General Brent Scowcroft. It's June 29, 2007. We're in Washington, D.C., and I'm delighted that the general has agreed to participate in the Richard Nixon Presidential Oral History Program. General Scowcroft, thank you for joining us today.

Brent Scowcroft

Good afternoon, nice to be with you.

Timothy Naftali

I'd like to start with your work for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You worked for the chairman?

Brent Scowcroft

I worked for the director of the Joint Staff.

Timothy Naftali

For the Joint Staff.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, and he's the one who ran the Joint Staff for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Timothy Naftali

And you joined that in 1970, was it?

Brent Scowcroft

I believe 1970, yes.

Timothy Naftali

I assume that your focus was the Vietnam War?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it was everything that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did. I was primarily in charge of organizing the topics for discussion, getting the people who were going to discuss them, getting the papers out, coordinating with the various services.

Timothy Naftali

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By that time, the Nixon administration, the Secretary of Defense, Mel Laird, had made it clear that we were going to draw down the number of troops. That was clear by 1969. What was the discussion like in -- that you can recall, in the Staff about how to manage the draw down of troops and yet achieve our objectives in Vietnam?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, the discussion was how do we make the transfer, how do you prepare the Vietnamese to take over, what are the kinds of things you have to do, how do you ensure the equivalent and so on. So it was a lively time and done with a certain amount of optimism, I must say.

Timothy Naftali

There was discussion about the consequences of LBJ's choosing of targets and the effect that that had on the military leadership. Did you find that the staff felt that Johnson had been too interventionist in shaping strategy and that that was not changing?

Brent Scowcroft

That wasn't a big issue with us, anyway. We were focused on different kinds of issues, and what the president -- what President Johnson's role was was not really a focus of what we were doing.

Timothy Naftali

How did the strategic environment look in 1970? Did we feel we were ahead of the Soviets, equal to the Soviets in strategic terms, or behind them?

Brent Scowcroft

It was a time of some concern because the Soviets were building up their strategic forces, especially, very rapidly. We were having difficulty with the Congress; appropriations were difficult to come by, and so there was a sense that the Soviets were gaining on us. And so it was a time of some anxiety.

Timothy Naftali

Did we feel we had good -- as I mean, you lived through the missile gap of the '50s. Did we feel confident that we knew what the Soviets were up to in terms of --

Brent Scowcroft

Well, we had a fairly good idea what the Soviets were up to and that was what concerned us because they were turning out new missiles very rapidly. We were still ahead of them. We were developing MIRVs at that time, and so we were confident that the numbers were staying ahead, but they were building very big missiles, and bigger than we had, and we were very concerned about them overtaking us.

Timothy Naftali

What was the thinking -- again I'm asking this before you go to the White House. What was the thinking in the Staff about arms control as a way of dealing with the strategic problem?

Brent Scowcroft

That was just getting started. There was a discussion of it and how one would go about it and how you would strike a balance between our greater numbers, the Soviets' greater throw weight, the greater size of missiles, and what would a proper balance be and how would you arrive at it. So, arms control was just getting started then.

Timothy Naftali

And one last question that would have come to you at that point. When looking at the Vietnam War, what were you thinking about Cambodia in this period? What was the Staff just thinking through the role of Cambodia in the Vietnam War, and it resulted in some difficult choices for the president. What were the issues?

Brent Scowcroft

It was -- the issues significantly were the use of Cambodia as a major supply depot, if you will, or supply line, for the Vietnamese. And how could you shut down the supplies coming through Cambodia in a reasonable way?

Timothy Naftali

Did we feel that the bombing was effective in doing that?

Brent Scowcroft

No, not particularly, and we thought about trying to close the port in Cambodia. That, you know, wasn't really feasible, and so it was a lot of anxiety about it and a lot of debate about it, whether the CIA was really accurate, how much was coming through there and so on.

Timothy Naftali

Did they sense that maybe not as much was coming through or more?

Brent Scowcroft

No, more than the CIA was suggesting.

Timothy Naftali

Is this what led the decision to encourage the South Vietnamese to go into Cambodia? Is it because the bombing was not working?

Brent Scowcroft

No, that was a little different. I'm talking about the strategic role of Cambodia. The tactical role Cambodia was playing was that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese would have bases in Cambodia, then they would go over to Vietnam and attack, and then they would withdraw into Cambodia. And it was frustrating for us because we couldn't chase them or destroy them. And so that gradually led to the notion of cross-border penetrations and especially bombing campaigns.

Timothy Naftali

And those -- you mentioned the bombing campaigns were not particularly effective. Would you say the same about the cross-border penetrations?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, we didn't do that as much. Most of it was bombing, and it would -- it's hard to bomb the jungles effectively.

Timothy Naftali

How is that you become military assistant to the president?

Brent Scowcroft

When I was in the Joint Staff, I was promoted to brigadier general. So I had to move on to a different job, and being a brigadier general is sort of like being a second lieutenant again. Most of the jobs are somebody's deputy, not great jobs, ordinarily. So while they were looking for a job for me, the director of personnel called one day and said, "How would you like to come to the White House?" And I said, "Well, you know, what does that mean?" Well, they said there was a job called military assistant to the president, and it's basically a management job. Your job would be to manage all of the resources the Defense Department provides to the White House: Air Force One, the helicopters, the motor pool, the White House mess, Camp David, the Sequoia, things like that. So faced with the other opportunities I had, that sounded like not a bad job, so I accepted it. Now it turned out the Air Force told me later that what they really wanted was to get somebody in as Henry Kissinger's deputy at the NSC, and they thought that I had the background in international politics that he would find attractive. So they wanted me over there so I would be available.

Timothy Naftali

Is this one of the consequences of the Yeoman Radford Affair? The sort of the -- there was a --

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know that there was any connection. I was in the Joint Staff when Yeoman Radford -- when that affair broke. I don't know that there was a connection.

Timothy Naftali

We've asked a few people about that affair. Could you tell us what you saw?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know very much about it, but Yeoman Radford was a -- I think he was kind of a runner between Joint Staff and the NSC. And he used to have access to papers, and apparently he got some papers he wasn't supposed to have and brought them back to the Joint Staff and so on. So he was kind of a spy for the --

Timothy Naftali

For the Joint Staff --

Brent Scowcroft

For the Joint Staff.

Timothy Naftali

-- spying on the --

Brent Scowcroft

-- spying on Kissinger, yes.

Timothy Naftali

So you meet Kissinger -- had you met Kissinger before you came over to the White House?

Brent Scowcroft

I met him briefly for the very first time when I was teaching at West Point, and he came down from Harvard and gave a lecture. So I met him very briefly, but I really didn't know him, no.

Timothy Naftali

So you do meet him when you arrive at the White House in November '71, I guess.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

You get there about the time of the Indo-Pak War. Do you remember that?

Brent Scowcroft

A little after.

Timothy Naftali

A little after.

Brent Scowcroft

A little after.

Timothy Naftali

So you were just after --

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, that was in the fall. I got there really in December.

Timothy Naftali

Okay, do you remember -- so you were at the Joint Staff when the Indo-Pak War came. So you come in afterwards. You help with the advance trip to China, do you not?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, I had been there maybe three days when I left for China. And I was -- since, you know, I'd -- the job I had also provided communications for the president and the party and all those kinds of things. So I was a significant part of the backstopping and the preparations for the --

Timothy Naftali

Could you tell us a little bit about how we made it possible for television images to get back to the United States a little bit more successful.

Brent Scowcroft

We built a -- or the Chinese built for us a terminal and transmission station in China. I remember they -- we sketched it out, what we wanted and so on and so forth, and they built it in about two months, including all the scribbles on the side of sketches. They were even then awesome in the way they operate. We had 600 press, and they had to be able to communicate, and so that's why they did it.

Timothy Naftali

Did you also set out to do the advance or some advance for the Moscow trip?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I did.

Timothy Naftali

Could you tell us --

Brent Scowcroft

I ran the advance trip, the Moscow trip.

Timothy Naftali

Could you compare and contrast please what it was like to advance in Beijing versus --

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I didn't actually run the advance to China. China was like a different world. It was the most -- strangest, most alien-like environment I had ever been in. Everything was different, and Russia was much more -- well, Russia was much more European looking and so on and so forth. The Chinese were more difficult in the sense that they didn't understand. I mean, as I say, we had 600 press; they didn't know how to handle press at all. They were not used to it. But they tried harder. The Russians were easier to understand what our requirements were, but they were not so friendly.

Timothy Naftali

Again, we're being -- well, this will be for people who don't have a lot of background in -- when you became military assistant, how was the concept of Détente understood?

Brent Scowcroft

That's a very difficult question to answer. Détente, I think, was looked at with a sense of relief that the high tension of the late '60s and the growing Soviet strength and so on was now being sort of dealt with by a general agreement in arms control to freeze where we were at that time. And in a sense that, instead of this inexorable build-up and heightened competition, we were going to talk to each other, we were going to relax, we were going to be friendlier. So there was this -- in 1972, there was a great sense of relief, if you will. It got -- as Détente wore on, people started to suspect it, that it was really a way for the Soviet Union to lull us into a sense of complacency while they went on building.

Timothy Naftali

Their building, was it a matter of, well, they went on and did what they did in the Third World, or was it also a sense that they were building strategic weaponry?

Brent Scowcroft

Both, both, and in the Third World, as time went on, as we got acquainted with the Chinese and the whole -- the sinews of our relationship with the Chinese were very few, and they were directed all at Russia. And the rapprochement was really to oppose Russian hegemony. So in places like Africa, for example, we encouraged the Chinese to build railroads in Dar es Salaam into what is now Zimbabwe

and so on. So we were cooperating that way with the Chinese to stop what we saw as great Russian expansion in the Third World.

Timothy Naftali

To what extent were the Chinese useful or helpful with Vietnam?

Brent Scowcroft

Not so helpful as we hoped, but I think part of that was that our -- the real -- the most substantive contact we had with the Chinese was between Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai. Shortly after the Nixon's trip and the Shanghai Communiqué, within a year, Zhou Enlai got sick -- and then earlier steps of cooperation in Cambodia, in Laos, for example, with the Chinese sort of didn't come to fruition.

Timothy Naftali

So you would attribute that to the disappearance of Zhou?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know that that's the case, but I think he was our real liaison, and when he sort of was not any longer active, it was more difficult to get things done.

Timothy Naftali

I'm sure it was hard, but in your assessment, what role was Mao playing in that government, that leadership when you arrived?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, Mao was this sort of -- my impression was he was almost a demi-god there, and I mean, he manipulated Zhou Enlai. He had him thoroughly cowed. He had purged most of his entourage and so on. So he was the dominant figure by any measure.

Timothy Naftali

What was your assessment of the role that Brezhnev was playing in the leadership you dealt with? At this point, I know he's going to get sick as you stay on.

Brent Scowcroft

Clearly, the dominant figure and a fascinating individual, very unusual. He used to -- I remember one time, he had on the table when we were having discussions, he had a little toy cannon. And I guess it had caps in it or something, and he'd keep pulling the lanyard and setting off the caps. There was another meeting, he was trying to quit smoking, so he had a cigarette holder on it with a lock on it and a timer. It would open once an hour, and he didn't want to wait an hour for his cigarette, so when he tried to pry open, it wouldn't pry open, so he turned to Gromyko and he grabbed a cigarette from Gromyko. He was a very interesting guy.

Timothy Naftali

There was some concern in the White House in late '71 that the attack on Haiphong might do something to the summit, might delay the summit. It turns out the Soviets wanted a summit. What do you remember of the debate over whether to press Vietnam now at the risk of losing the summit?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, there was a big debate about whether or not the bombing of Haiphong would call off the summit. And I argued -- I wasn't in that debate, I was just the logistics guy off here.

Timothy Naftali

You were the observer.

Brent Scowcroft

But you know, I moved -- I did know something about Russia, and I'd taught Russian history at West Point and so on and so forth, and I said, "There's not a chance that the Russians will call them off because the bombing of Haiphong is an irritant; they have strategic purposes for going ahead." And it turned out that was the case.

Timothy Naftali

What effect do you think our relations with China had on the Soviet perception of us?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I think it had a lot. I think one of the incentives for the Russians for Détente was both to lull us because Johnson had started a ballistic missile defense program, we were starting MIRVs, and I'm sure that was of great concern to the Russians, although we were thinking we were falling behind. So I believe this: that for the Russians, Détente was in part a way to counter our newfound friend relationship with the Chinese.

Timothy Naftali

When did you meet Richard Nixon?

Brent Scowcroft

I actually met Richard Nixon when they had -- I had had an interview with Bob Haldeman, who was chief of staff, about coming over there, and then he said, "Well, I want you to meet the president." And so I was thought I was being interviewed by the president. Went in to see him, and he said, "Well I understand you're my new military assistant." And we chatted for a minute. That was my first encounter with him.

Timothy Naftali

When did you have your first substantive discussion with the president?

Brent Scowcroft

It's hard to say. My first contact -- I had two kinds of contact with him at first. One was at ceremonies when he was presenting people, especially military, putting medals and so on, I would assist in that. And the other was part of my job was being a liaison to the prisoners of war families. And that was of great concern to him, the care of the families, because there was a lot of opposition to the war growing among the families of the prisoners of war. I used to, when he would meet with the families, I would be there, and then I would report to him periodically on how things were going in that regard.

Timothy Naftali

Did you have any interaction with Ross Perot then, in this period?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I did, at that time I met Ross Perot, and we became fairly good friends.

Timothy Naftali

I believe he played a large role in helping the --

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, he did. He was very helpful, but only to a point. He wanted to be more helpful and play a bigger role, and the White House didn't want him to.

Timothy Naftali

This White House. I know the Reagan White House later would also do the -- make the same decision.

Brent Scowcroft

It's sort of started there. He wanted to run things. He was a control guy; he wanted to do everything. So there was a little of that, but mostly it was very positive because he really did some very fine things to help them. And I went to some of his rallies and so on and so forth and sometimes spoke a little bit about work he was doing. So yeah, I got to know him quite well.

Timothy Naftali

When did the Air Force's plan for you to get close to Kissinger start to be realized? When did you start to have real conversations with Henry Kissinger about --

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I used to have some just casually in -- mostly on presidential trips, on the trip to China and on the trip to Russia because I was on Air Force One with those kinds of things, but not very sub -- but Kissinger's deputy at that time was Al Haig, General Al Haig, and he and I were West Point classmates. So I knew him, of course, very well, and I used to organize through Al Haig for Kissinger's secret trips to Paris to meet with Le Duc Tho. I would provide the airplane and make sure it was taken care of in Paris, and so on and so forth. So that's how he really got to know who I was and so on.

Timothy Naftali

Let's talk about the debate over the Christmas bombing. You're not yet Henry Kissinger's assistant, but you are still an observer. What do you remember of that debate?

Brent Scowcroft

Cloudy, I don't remember anything very sharp in the White House. I thought it was an excellent idea.

Timothy Naftali

But was objective to get the North Vietnamese back to the table or to send a message to South Vietnam? Or both?

Brent Scowcroft

No, I think it was primarily to get the North back to the table. And in the fall there had been this kind of agreement about a ceasefire and so on, and then the North sort of kicked it over, and the Christmas bombing was to demonstrate to them that we did have options and that we could take the gloves off.

Timothy Naftali

What was the sticking point with them?

Brent Scowcroft

I can't remember.

Timothy Naftali

But they'd already agreed to the --

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah, in November, there was a kind of general agreement. And then -- I just can't remember who it was, but they kicked it over.

Timothy Naftali

Could you tell us your observation of the relationship between Mel Laird and the White House?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I think so. Mel Laird is a marvelous personality. He is a quintessential politician, and he had his own games to play, if you will. He's the Secretary of Defense. And he and Kissinger did not always see eye to eye, and he was a big proponent of the Vietnamization program because he wanted to get his troops out of there. So he and Kissinger had a little friction, and I think Mel Laird hoped that I would be his mole in the White House when I went over there. Hey, I mean, you know, this was not sinister or anything. It was just kind of a friendly competition in different approaches, and Mel Laird was not always easy to manage.

Timothy Naftali

Please tell us the circumstances that led to your becoming Henry Kissinger's deputy.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I don't know if I can tell accurately because Henry tells different stories about it. The story he really likes to tell is that at one time, we were on Air Force One, and

I don't know what the debate was, but as Henry describes it, Haldeman and I were having an altercation in the aisle in Air Force One. And here was Bob Haldeman at the height of his power, and I was standing up to him and giving him as good as

I take, and Henry said, "That's the guy I want." I don't know if that's true. He's also told other stories that he was talking to Howard Hughes about personnel and Howard Hughes says, "If you can, hire a Mormon because the Mormons are loyal, they're dedicated, they're hard working." So I have no idea. But I did get to know him over this year in not really substantive ways. And the Army tried hard to keep that post as theirs, but finally, he asked me if I wanted to come over.

Timothy Naftali

Wasn't he having a little bit of trouble with Al Haig, too?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, that was -- yes. And I didn't see that trouble, but my -- later, it seems that Henry thought that Al was not playing straight with him. When Henry was off negotiating somewhere, Al was undercutting him with President Nixon. I have no idea whether there's any substance to that or not. But that was -- those were the kinds of things that motivated him.

Timothy Naftali

People around describe, and Al Haig does to a certain extent, too, that he was a little bit harder line than Henry Kissinger on certain issues.

Brent Scowcroft

That's -- I think that's true. But I don't know what the facts are because I was not in those inner discussions, and I think Al thought so, and I think the president maybe thought so, that Al was harder

line than Kissinger, and Kissinger was prepared to compromise a little more. But I think Kissinger thought he was harder line than Nixon was.

Timothy Naftali

You arrived on the job; it's January 1973. We have just about or will announce the peace accord with the North Vietnamese. What are we most concerned about? When you come on the job as deputy national security advisor, we've just ended the Vietnam War. What are we worried about?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, what we're really worrying about was would it stick, and what would happen in Vietnam. Would they abide by the peace accords? Would the South Vietnamese be able to stand up, themselves? How would things go because we had a document, but we had no faith in North Vietnam and not much confidence in the ability of the South to pull themselves together, you know, by themselves. So that was the principle. And by then, by January '73, Watergate was beginning to eat, and it really heated up through the spring, and Haldeman had to leave. And so that was a very tense period.

Timothy Naftali

Do you recall -- because I want to set up the Middle East story. Do you recall at all the killing of the American ambassador and his assistant in Khartoum?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't recall any details of it.

Timothy Naftali

That's the PLO, Black September.

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah, I do remember it happened, but I don't remember the details.

Timothy Naftali

1973, the CIA has -- it's been declassified. The CIA writes a SNIE saying, "What are they up to?", about the Soviets. The Soviets start to test more missile systems than we anticipated, and more of them are MIRV'd. This is September '73, this is -- we were discussing the strategic concerns in the Joint Staff in 1970. Are we getting more and more concerned as the years go by about Soviet strategic force?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yeah, we were. See, what happened, the old strategy for arms control was that we didn't know how to balance off these forces. Each one had different ideas. The Soviets were more concentrated on ICBMs; we were more concentrated at sea, the submarines and so on and so forth. So how do you balance all these things? The Russian major weapon that we were concerned about was the SS-9. It was

a huge, 10-megaton weapon, but it was a single warhead, and in, I think, the end of '72, beginning of '73, they started to replace it with the SS-18, which had 10 warheads. And that was legal because we counted -- we didn't count weapons, we counted silos. So what they put in the silo was perfectly legal, but it upset all of our strategic calculations, so yeah, that was very --

Timothy Naftali

Why, in the -- this is controversial, I know, in the SALT negotiations '72, why didn't we anticipate MIRVing?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know that because I was not involved in '72 in the discussions. I think we thought were way ahead in MIRVing. I think we probably did anticipate that it would happen, but we didn't know how to count the missiles, though. You couldn't move silos, so you could see by satellites if they were building new silos and so on. But you couldn't count missiles, and that's why we didn't count missiles, we counted silos --

Timothy Naftali

Oh, you mean you couldn't count warheads.

Brent Scowcroft

No, couldn't count warheads. Well, you couldn't count the missile itself. So that's why we counted submarines, and you can count the number of places on a submarine for a missile, and we counted silos --

Timothy Naftali

And we were confident enough about our technology that those things we couldn't count, we thought we were ahead of them anyway.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, pretty much, and then, then the Russians started going mobile with some of their ground-based missiles, and that gave us a real problem.

Timothy Naftali

So we are beginning to get concerned about our strategic position besides everything else that we have to worry about.

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

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Let's talk about the Middle East. When the Yom Kippur War starts, Henry Kissinger's in New York, I think, and you're in Washington. You find yourself --

Brent Scowcroft

I think so.

Timothy Naftali

You find yourself in a key position. I think you are -- you serve as a back channel to Dobrynin and Dinitz, I guess, the Israeli ambassador. How much -- to what extent, I mean, was the Yom Kippur War a surprise to the United States government?

Brent Scowcroft

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Yes, well, I can tell you exactly how much of a surprise. But what happened? Every fall, in September, the Egyptians and the Syrians used to have maneuvers, and in the fall of '73, they had maneuvers again.

 So that was the nature of the surprise. It was a surprise, and it was a surprise also because the Israelis were super cautious because in the '67 war, they had preempted the Egyptians, and that had caused a lot of problems. So we told the Israelis, you know, "We don't want any more of that." So the Israelis held back, and whether they anticipated that it was a conflict or not, but they were caught by surprise as well.

Timothy Naftali

But weren't the Soviets also sending word through us to the Israeli -- I mean, weren't we also telling the Soviets the Israelis will hold back in those early --

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I think we were probably reassuring the Soviets that the Israelis would not do again what they did in 1967, yes.

Timothy Naftali

So the Arab attack happens.

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah, the Arab attack happens.

Timothy Naftali

What do you recall of our response where you're standing?

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Brent Scowcroft

Well, our response at first was that the Israelis could handle it. But it happened to be a two-front war; the Syrians attacked in the Golan Heights, and the Egyptians through the Sinai. And so the Israelis said right away, "We need ammunition." And the question was, how to get them, how to get the ammunition to them. And at first, they said, "We will send Israeli airplanes to get them." Well, that didn't work very well. Then, the notion was that well, maybe we could mobilize the -- our civilian airlines, something called the CRAFT, Civil Reserve Air Fleet, and use them. Well this -- they were going on, and they said we're running out of 155 millimeter shells or something like that. And so this went on for about two to three days, trying to figure this out. Then after about the third day, Nixon, President Nixon, just said, "Enough of this. Use Air Force airplanes." So then we started a massive airlift to support the Israelis.

Timothy Naftali

Do you recall Secretary Schlesinger's role early on in trying to --

Brent Scowcroft

I sure do; I mentioned that. But Schlesinger of course was the Secretary of Defense, and I was, I can't remember why, in charge of finding airplanes. And he was my chief foot-dragger, if you will, in the task of finding airplanes, because he didn't want American fingerprints on all of this. In other words, he wanted any shipments to be cash and carry and so on and so forth. So in the search over these days to figure out how we could get military supplies to the Israelis, I did not consider him to be helpful.

Timothy Naftali

Did the sort of climax of decision-making occur in a meeting, or did President Nixon just send a memo?

Brent Scowcroft

No, it was not a meeting. At the very beginning, there was a meeting, and the first meeting, as you say, Kissinger was in New York, so I chaired the -- well, it was an NSC meeting without the president.

Timothy Naftali

Okay.

Brent Scowcroft

That's when Schlesinger made clear, you know, he thought we ought to be neutral in this war. So that's when this kind of started. But it was not -- it was separate discussions. It was not done at a meeting.

Timothy Naftali

Do you recall him -- did you have a meeting with President Nixon during this period?

Brent Scowcroft

Did I see him during this period? I honestly don't remember; I honestly don't remember.

Timothy Naftali

What role did -- he seems to have been distracted. He had the Saturday Night Massacre going on. Could you describe the climate in the White House in this period, in this moment when you have this war going on in the Middle East --

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

-- please.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I can. It was chaotic. We had -- when the Yom Kippur War was underway, we were searching for a ceasefire because half -- in the first few days, the Egyptians had made big progress in the Sinai Peninsula, and what we really were seeking is a ceasefire which would give them some sense of some success because we thought that that would put them in a mood to negotiate, that they were in despair after the '67 war and wouldn't negotiate. We thought that if we could stop while the lines had moved some, but not too much, that that was the thing to do. So we agreed, and we sent -- Henry went to Moscow to negotiate, figure out how we could get a ceasefire. I dealt quite frequently with Nixon during this period. At the time of the Saturday Night Massacre, the ceasefire broke down, and the Israelis started -- they were surrounding the Egyptian third army and well, anticipating a little the ceasefire. It was in trouble, and we couldn't -- we were having trouble communicating with Kissinger. And he was working with Brezhnev, and President Nixon had had me, when Kissinger left, had me draft a letter to Brezhnev, a friendly letter saying that Kissinger's coming, [unintelligible]. He has plenary authority to negotiate. So I sent that letter -- well, until Kissinger got in a hole in Moscow, and he said, "No, I can't agree to that. I have to communicate with President Nixon." And Brezhnev waved the letter and says, "No, you don't. No, you don't," and so Kissinger was just livid because he didn't know about the letter. And so he called me, and I was -- said "Go in, you talk to Al Haig, and we've got to get this thing straightened out." So I go down the hall, this is early evening on Saturday, and I go into Al Haig, and I say, "I've got to talk to you about Kissinger in Moscow." And he said, "Do you know what is going on now?" And it was right in the middle of the Saturday Night Massacre.

Timothy Naftali

Why didn't Kissinger want plenary authority?

Brent Scowcroft

Because he wanted to be able to stall and negotiate. He didn't want to be on the firing line as making the agreement himself.

Timothy Naftali

So it was unusual for him, to get plenary authority?

Brent Scowcroft

It was the only time. It was the only time that President Nixon made it clear he did have plenary authority.

Timothy Naftali

Had this something to do with the fact that Nixon was --

Brent Scowcroft

No, no, that would just -- he's out to negotiate, but the president's a decision maker.

Timothy Naftali

Why would he give him the plenary authority if this is that --

Brent Scowcroft

It was a gesture President Nixon made to show he wanted this thing to happen and --

Timothy Naftali

And it wasn't --

Brent Scowcroft

It was a Nixonian gesture.

Timothy Naftali

It wasn't because he was distracted and really --

Brent Scowcroft

Oh no, oh no, no, no, it was very deliberate. And you know I'm still getting to know President Nixon at that time, so I didn't anticipate the inter workings between him and Kissinger.

Timothy Naftali

Could you describe them a little bit for us, if you could?

Brent Scowcroft

Describe?

Timothy Naftali

The inner workings between them?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it was -- each one of those men is a very complicated personality. And the two of them interacting with each other was something to behold. I mean, they, admired each other, respected each other, but each one was jealous of the other. And Nixon wanted to be the strategic thinker of the administration, and Kissinger wanted to be the strategic thinker of the administration. And actually, it was a great team because the fundamental architect of the foreign policy was President Nixon, but he was not that kind of a manager. Kissinger took the ideas and implemented them. So they were a great team together, but there was always this underlying competition and friction, and I frequently found myself right in the middle of it.

Timothy Naftali

Weren't you the one that received the news that Kissinger had won the Nobel Prize?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't remember that; I may have.

Timothy Naftali

That was not --

Brent Scowcroft

That was not -- President Nixon was, "Oh that's wonderful," but he thought he should have won it.

Timothy Naftali

Please tell us about the nuclear alert during the Yom Kippur War.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, as I say, when the truce broke down and the Israelis started to move, we were alarmed, and so were the Russians. And so the Russians -- Brezhnev sent a letter to Nixon saying, you know, "We've got to restore this ceasefire. I suggest that we send joint military force in to restore the ceasefire, and if you're unwilling, we may have to do something by ourselves," something like that. Well, as a result of the ceasefire, the Russian airlift to Egypt had stopped. And so we're debating this message from Brezhnev, and again, NSC meeting without the president. We didn't have a name for it then. We do now, but we didn't have a name for it then. And then President Nixon was not in the meeting, so we're discussing how do we respond, what do we do? We were certain the last thing we wanted was Russian

troops introduced into the Middle East, even as a part of a joint thing. So that we didn't want to do, so how should we react? As we were debating, we got some intelligence that there was activity in the Russian airlift fleet. And indeed, some planes had left on the route they used to fly down into Egypt, so we thought, "troops?" Maybe, so we were really worried. "What do we do?" And the debate, and as I say, Nixon was not present there. He was over in the residence, and Al Haig, who was then chief of staff, would leave the room and, as he said, to communicate with Nixon. I have no idea what he did when he left the room, but that was how -- that was the story.

So what we thought about was how can we get the Russians' attention. And I don't know who thought up the idea, but the idea was that we will increase the state of alert of U.S. forces from two to three. And to do that, the Pentagon would send out wires all around the world, alerting the forces. The Russians would see that communication traffic and know we were serious. That was the whole alert. I know people have said that Kissinger declared war or something. It was a device to let the Russians know how serious we were. So we declared the alert, and that was sometime around midnight or something. Then we framed a response for the Russians, and then the meeting broke up. And I sat around for about two hours until we were sure that the Russians had seen the cable traffic. And then I called Dobrynin over and gave him the message.

Timothy Naftali

And how did you know that the Russians had seen the cable traffic?

Brent Scowcroft

I mean, we just assumed, I mean the intelligence community said, you know, "They will get it." And within a couple of hours, they will have communicated it to their political leaders.

Timothy Naftali

When did their planes stop flying? How long did it take for you to see a physical --

Brent Scowcroft

They -- actually, the planes -- as I recall, those planes did not go on to Egypt. They did resume an airlift in the following days after.

Timothy Naftali

But not with troops.

Brent Scowcroft

But not with troops. There were no troops on the airplane, and Dobrynin said, "What are you thinking? We weren't going to do anything unilaterally;" you know, "it was all a big mistake."

Timothy Naftali

But it -- did it turn out the planes that we were watching and were concerned about, were they actually carrying troops, or do we know --

Brent Scowcroft

No, they were not. As far as we know, they were not carrying troops. Anyway, no troops --

Timothy Naftali

So wasn't -- it was bad intelligence?

Brent Scowcroft

No, we didn't know. Nobody had said they had troops in them. We just saw the planes flying. We didn't know what was in them.

Timothy Naftali

So --

Brent Scowcroft

But they could have been troops.

Timothy Naftali

And President Nixon's role in this decision -- the role he played, he played indirectly through Al Haig?

Brent Scowcroft

Indirectly through Al Haig, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

And did Al Haig -- do you recall Al Haig at some point saying, "The president would like you to do this?"

Brent Scowcroft

I don't recall; I don't recall. It was not that kind of an issue because this was, in a sense, this was an administrative decision to raise a green light to an orange light or something like that. This was not substantive and had nothing to do with strategic air command, which was already on an elevated alert.

Timothy Naftali

Tell us a little bit please about the rapprochement with Sadat that follows.

Brent Scowcroft

That was -- that was very interesting. Sadat was -- Sadat really turned out to behave the way we had hoped he would behave. It gave him the self-confidence and maybe the sense of backing from his people to reach out and start negotiating. And he proved really to be a very shrewd and a very thoughtful person. We didn't really know him before, and as we got to know him, our respect, and I think I can say that for everybody, deepened. And then in '74, when President Nixon went over there after we had done withdrawals and sort of secured borders and withdrew from the borders, it was really very good. As a matter of fact, at one point, we were in a helicopter, our helicopter, we had flown helicopters over there, and he was flying Sadat around in Egypt, and Sadat said something, "Oh my, this is a wonderful helicopter," and so on. And Nixon said, "It's yours." So he gave him the helicopter, right on the spot. Well, it's not that simple, but that's what he did, so I spent six months trying to figure out (a) how to get the helicopter through, how do you get pilots trained to fly it, Egyptian pilots and so on. How do you maintain it? And who's going to pay for it?

Timothy Naftali

So they actually -- Marine One that he was flying in?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

He gave him that one?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, gave him the Marine One. And it actually ended up being Sadat's helicopter.

Timothy Naftali

Sadat had thrown the Russians out of Egypt before the Yom Kippur War, hadn't he? The Russian advisors.

Brent Scowcroft

He'd thrown them out of the advisory thing. They were building the Aswan Dam and so on, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

But we weren't sure what that meant.

Brent Scowcroft

We weren't sure what that meant, no. But I think it was Sadat, he was tired of the high-handedness of the Russians and so on and so forth, and --

Timothy Naftali

Please tell me about the Syrians after the Yom Kippur War, because we actually have a relationship of sorts with them for a while.

Brent Scowcroft

We did have a relationship of sorts with them, and that's a very tortured thing. You know, we -- in fact, we flew -- I went in a couple of times to Damascus and when Henry was on his shuttle diplomacy, he went in there once a week to try to get withdrawal and a stable frontier between the various parties. And Assad was a very strange duck, but he was an independent player, and he cooperated. [in audio]

Timothy Naftali

You said Sadat was a strange duck.

Brent Scowcroft

No --

Timothy Naftali

I mean Assad. Assad was a strange duck.

Brent Scowcroft

Well, you know, at one point, Kissinger was negotiating, he was trying to get a peace conference organized, and he was talking with Sadat -- with Assad, with Assad, yeah --

Timothy Naftali

Sorry.

Brent Scowcroft

-- about it, and Assad was very helpful. "Well, you ought to do this, you ought to do that and the other," and so it got all arranged to Assad's satisfaction, and Assad said, "Of course I won't be coming." One of Assad's tricks was he had apparently a very large or strong bladder, and he used to keep discussions going until people -- until his interlocutors couldn't stand it any longer, just as a test of endurance.

Timothy Naftali

Please tell us about the Air Force One flight into Damascus.

Brent Scowcroft

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Brent Scowcroft Interview Transcription

29 June 2007

We were flying into Syria, and the Syrians decided that as a gesture of respect for the president of the United States, they wanted to provide a fighter escort. So that's what they did, but they neglected to tell us. Our pilot, Ralph Albertazzie, fancied himself as a fighter pilot anyway, so he saw these planes suddenly appear on his wing, and he decided he wanted to take evasive action, you know, great big Air Force One trying evasive action against fighter. So he winged over and went like this down, and just scared everybody to death on Air Force One. And I told him that was not exactly the right thing to do.

Timothy Naftali

I guess, but you didn't -- did he establish communications with these?

Brent Scowcroft

We couldn't talk to them.

Timothy Naftali

Couldn't talk to them.

Brent Scowcroft

We couldn't talk to them. But it was clear what they were doing. We were never in any danger; we were not going to escape --

Timothy Naftali

That's true.

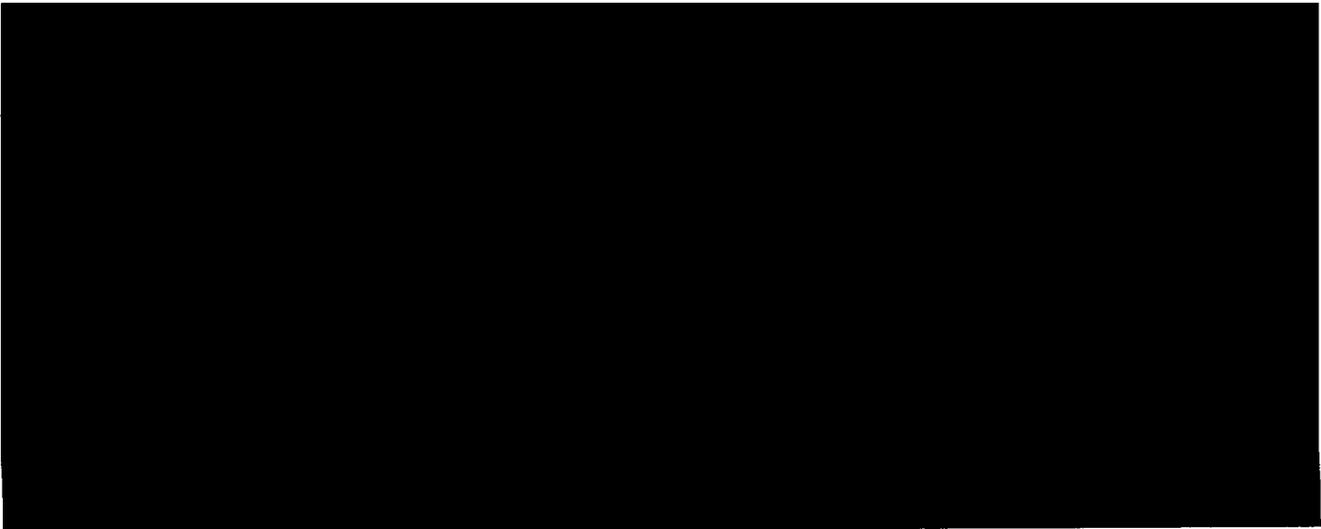
Brent Scowcroft

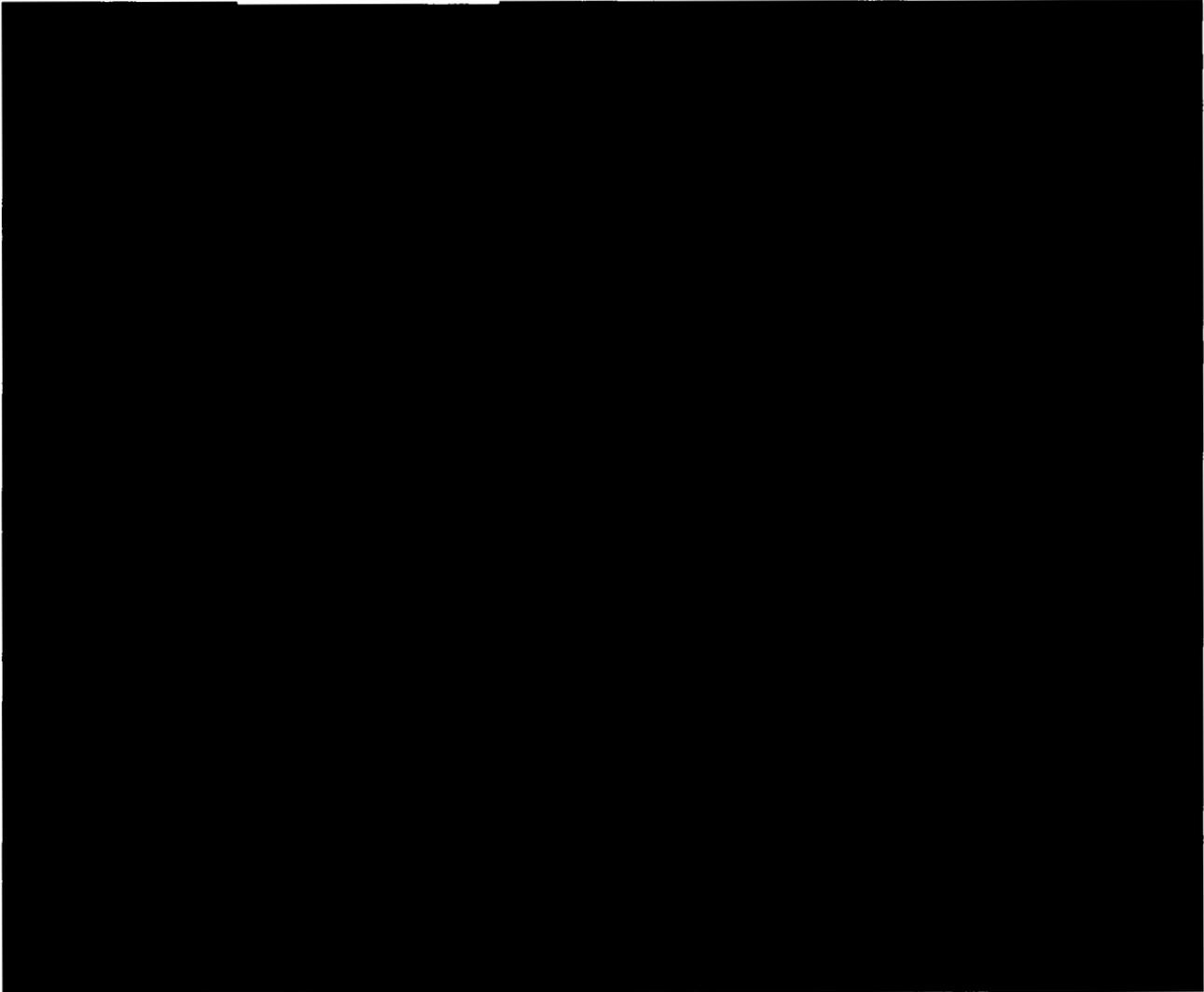
-- by doing what he did. It was an act of flamboyance, but it scared everybody.

Timothy Naftali

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Timothy Naftali

But I -- what is the effect of Watergate on U.S. foreign policy by the end of '73, after the Yom Kippur War?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, if you look back, the effect of Watergate, the first time I noticed it, was in about March, maybe it was March of '73, and we got reports that the North Vietnamese were starting to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail again to re-supply, and that was a violation of the accords. And I remember Henry Kissinger was down in Mexico on vacation, and that was my first really encounter with the president in a substantive way. I guess his reaction -- if it had not been for then the growing constraints of Watergate and what it was beginning to mean, if it had not been for that, I think he would have restarted a bombing campaign right then.

Timothy Naftali

That was your sense from talking to him?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, so it had an enormous point. You know, he maintained an atmosphere of normalcy right up to the last week. I remember going to a meeting with him and a few other -- I can't remember the subject of the meeting, but it was something about do we build a tennis court on the White House grounds. It was at some inane meeting, but it was scheduled, and it was a normal meeting and so on, and he kept up that façade, but it was obviously extraordinarily difficult.

Timothy Naftali

From interviews, it appears that the domestic team collapsed after Haldeman and Ehrlichman left, it was under severe strain.

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, it was.

Timothy Naftali

The foreign policy team remained intact?

Brent Scowcroft

Intact, intact, yes. And we tried to keep the foreign policy running as if there were no Watergate. And it was not so hard because nobody, none of our friends, nor the Russians, for example, could believe that this was serious, that a president would actually be brought down by some stupid

-in. So they treated Nixon as if he had all the authority in the world, right up to the very end.

Timothy Naftali

Right up to the end?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, the last trip to Moscow, Brezhnev and Nixon went off by themselves to negotiate, and I think Nixon was hoping for an arms control treaty, a follow-on agreement in principle or something that would have given him a psychological boost with the American people and maybe prevent something happening. It didn't; it wasn't possible to conclude anything, but that's what I think he had in mind.

Timothy Naftali

But it was your sense that the Soviets were withholding this agreement?

Brent Scowcroft

No, I just -- maybe by this point. This was June of '74 -- well, an agreement would have been premature in that it had not -- negotiations had not gotten to the point that it was ready to be concluded.

Timothy Naftali

Did you see any strain on Henry Kissinger from Watergate?

Brent Scowcroft

Not in particular, but, you know, Watergate was affecting things by the time I started working for Henry Kissinger, so I didn't see any change.

Timothy Naftali

How did it affect the way you interacted with the president, though?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't think it did. I didn't -- I mean, you know, when I would go into to see the president or something, I wouldn't think Watergate, but just try to keep things going. Things, obviously it was going to affect, like, for example, being able to restart a bombing campaign, that would have been a disaster at that particular time, politically a disaster. So there were certain things one had to take account of the mood, but by and large, it did not affect foreign policy.

Timothy Naftali

So he was as present and as available as he had been before --

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yes, yes.

Timothy Naftali

Did you get to know Gerald Ford at all as vice president?

Brent Scowcroft

Yes, I did; I got to know him quite well because when he became vice president -- I'd known him a little bit when he was minority leader, but when he got to be vice president, he wanted to be briefed once a week on what was going on in foreign policy. Well, Kissinger did that a couple of times, and then he said, "You do that," so I would sit down with him for an hour or two once a week and go over with him what we were doing, why were doing it, what our objectives were and so on, so that when or if anything happened, he would be able to step right in and not be surprised.

Timothy Naftali

Could you for us compare the way he viewed the world to the way that Nixon viewed the world?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, you know, in terms of their operational methods, they were polar opposites. President Nixon really didn't much like meetings. He liked to get his information, get a bunch of papers and go into his study and pore over them and write himself notes and so on and so forth and make his decisions that way. And Ford liked meetings, he liked to sit down with his advisors around him and listen to them argue the various points and different approaches to policy. So in that sense, they were very different kinds of people. President Nixon did not shy from making tough decisions, but they physically exhausted him, and when he would make a particularly difficult decision, he would frequently then get in a helicopter and fly up to Camp David and just hole up for two to three days. Wouldn't talk to anybody, wouldn't see anybody and so on. Gerald Ford, once he made a decision, he never worried about it. It was a decision; it was made; it was gone; it was past. Nixon would pore over it. "Is that the right decision? Should I have done this instead?" and so on. So they were very different personalities.

Timothy Naftali

Can you remember a decision that Nixon made that produced that?

Brent Scowcroft

I'm trying to think. And offhand, it doesn't come to mind. But almost any major decision, whether it was signing arms control, agreeing to do this, and so on.

Timothy Naftali

What about the climate of the White House? How did that change?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, it became increasingly tense, and as I look back on it, I call it a very searing period, especially the last six months -- the first nine months of '74. It was a distressing environment.

Timothy Naftali

You cut your teeth analyzing other governments and other peoples. At what point did you, as an analyst, think that the Nixon administration was going to collapse? Or that the president would have to resign?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know that I ever came to that conclusion until it happened. I was increasingly despairing because it seemed to me to be unfolding like a Greek tragedy, that the president would react to a new assault and do some things, but never quite enough to lance the boil. So he was always playing catch up, and it would -- and you could just see the tragedy unfolding. It didn't affect me, didn't affect my work at all, because as I say, foreign policy was pretty much isolated from what was going on. But I read the newspapers, I saw things, and it was clear Nixon

was losing support. I don't know about the American people. He was losing support in the Congress, losing support from his own party, and that -- I don't know if I ever really contemplated a resignation, because that's unique in American history, but I can't say I ever thought, "he's gone," until he left.

Timothy Naftali

Were there any major foreign policy decisions that were on the docket when he left that Gerald Ford had to make in his first few weeks?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh yeah, well, there were a lot of things. And a matter of fact, on inauguration day, we had a crisis. We had an operation going to lift a Soviet submarine in the Pacific, "Glomar Explorer," and it turned out that on inauguration day, a Russian trawler had picked up the "Glomar Explorer" and was trailing it. And that was one thing that President Ford didn't know about.

Timothy Naftali

And you were not allowed to brief him on it?

Brent Scowcroft

I don't know. It was just one of the things that we didn't brief him about. It wasn't that it wasn't allowed to, but he didn't know about it. So I had to explain what the whole program was, what it was about and then, "Okay, and now you take me to the middle of the Pacific, and here's what's going on, and what do we do about the Russian trawler?"

Timothy Naftali

What did we do about the Russian --

Brent Scowcroft

The Russian trawler turned around and left after a while, fortunately.

Timothy Naftali

As I remember the story, we only got half of the --

Brent Scowcroft

Well, what happened is it was very -- the trawler had these big clamshell things, and we were going down, grab the submarine and lift it up. And we got the submarine and got it up, and then it broke in half, and we only got the one part of it.

Timothy Naftali

That happened a few weeks, a few months later?

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah, yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Any other major decisions?

Brent Scowcroft

One of the things we really wanted to have happen was to demonstrate to our friends that the U.S. government was still operating and to our enemies, "Don't fool with us; we can still react." So we had President Ford meet with all of the ambassadors of the NATO countries in Washington. We got the Soviet -- we did all of those things to make sure that nobody made any mistakes as a result of our crisis.

Timothy Naftali

So you were --

Brent Scowcroft

That was an extremely busy time.

Timothy Naftali

So you were at your desk as the president lifted off?

Brent Scowcroft

As the president lifted off, I was in the East Room, listening to the new president, who said, you know, our national nightmare is over.

Timothy Naftali

Two more questions for you: post-presidency, what role did you play in President Bush's decision to send Richard Nixon to China after Tiananmen? Or was it just Richard Nixon's decision to go to China after the Tiananmen Square?

Brent Scowcroft

It was Richard Nixon's decision. It was not President Bush's -- President Ford's. It was Richard Nixon's.

Timothy Naftali

President Bush. I'm talking about in 1989, I believe.

Brent Scowcroft

1989, that was President Nixon's. We didn't discourage him; but it was his decision.

Timothy Naftali

His decision?

Brent Scowcroft

Yeah, but I stayed close to Nixon after he left office and indeed, he used to call me frequently during the Ford administration to find out how well it's going on and so on. And then after the Ford administration, I went out to San Clemente for two to three weeks to read the drafts of his memoir.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Brent Scowcroft

On the foreign policy, so I got to know him very well.

Timothy Naftali

What -- which sections -- you helped him on the foreign policy sections, but any in particular that you remember?

Brent Scowcroft

No, I didn't help him. He had writers out there. I just reviewed them.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Brent Scowcroft

For accuracy.

Timothy Naftali

1992, Nixon's famous memo. What effect did it have on President Bush's policy towards Russia?

Brent Scowcroft

'92?

Timothy Naftali

When Richard Nixon from the sidelines criticizes Bush's policy toward Russia.

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, oh, yes. Yes, yes. Well, the effect it had was to make him mad because President Nixon wanted to reach out more to the Russians than President Ford was prepared to.

Timothy Naftali

Bush, President Bush.

Brent Scowcroft

-- President Bush was prepared to or even able to. He frankly thought it was meddling.

Timothy Naftali

Did you have a chance -- he was your old boss, talking about President Nixon, did you have a chance to talk to him about it?

Brent Scowcroft

No, no, no, I never talked to him about that.

Timothy Naftali

Did -- when you were on the Tower Commission, did you consult at all with President Nixon when you were thinking about how to --

Brent Scowcroft

I may have; I don't know. I used to talk him, well, not frequently, but periodically during the last years of his life. Every time he came into town, we'd have a meeting and so on. So I maintained a fairly constant relationship. I used to go up to New York to see him.

Timothy Naftali

After Saigon fell in 1975, did you talk to him at all about what might have been?

Brent Scowcroft

Not that I recall, no.

Timothy Naftali

In '73, after the agreement, did you -- was there a sense that it was inevitable that Saigon would fall some day?

Brent Scowcroft

No, I don't think it was. I think -- I don't know what would have happened. I think in the long run, probably the South could not have held up, but they were doing, actually for a year or so after, the South was on the offensive. They were doing really quite well. And then the Congress cut the funding for them, and in response to the cut in the funding, I think President Thieu figured he could not -- he didn't have the wherewithal to defend all of South Vietnam, so he started to withdraw his forces to the populated areas, out in the mountains. Well, it turned out he couldn't withdraw forces, they disintegrated as he was withdrawing them because they were up in the mountains; they had their families with them. And they weren't going to withdraw and leave their families, so it turned into a disaster at that point. Whether it would have otherwise, I don't know. And if it hadn't been for Watergate, if we had had, for example, another threatening bombing campaign or some -- I don't know what the outcome would have been.

Timothy Naftali

Did you, lastly, did you ever talk to him about how Détente went from being a tactic to being a strategy and the consequences of --

Brent Scowcroft

I'm sure I did, but I don't remember any details of what happened to Détente.

Timothy Naftali

To what extent would you say that what happened to Détente shaped the way you handled Gorbachev and the Soviet Union.

Brent Scowcroft

It had a big impact on me because I felt that Reagan went from the "evil empire" to saying the Cold War is over without any visible changes in the strategic deployments around the world and so on and so forth. So when President Bush came in, I said, "Look, the Cold War is not over; the Cold War started over Eastern Europe. There is still as many troops in Eastern Europe as there were before. We can't afford another Détente, premature Détente, because you can't turn the battleship of the United States, you can't turn public opinion back and forth this way. Let's not raise expectations; let's do the kinds of things that will ensure that the Cold War gets ended." So it -- I would say, at least for me, it determined what I thought our strategy ought to be.

Timothy Naftali

Is there any anecdote or story you'd like to put on the record that we haven't touched on tonight?

Brent Scowcroft

Oh, gee, I'm terrible at that. I can't think of one right now.

Timothy Naftali

You're a great student of history, I know. What -- Nixon's strategy -- how do you think his foreign policy is -- you say he is the architect of American foreign policy. How has that been tested by history? How well has it come through?

Brent Scowcroft

Well, I know one of the things that has been tested brilliantly is China. I mean, against all indications, he decided it was important to end the isolation of China and the United States. And he did that single-handedly. There was no pressure to do it; there wasn't even much support for doing it. I think that has led to a U.S.-China relationship that could have been far different had we continued in a hostile confrontation. So that alone, I think, was -- you know, Détente, which is the other major

through he made, I don't know. History hasn't revealed what effect that had. It was good, and it was bad, because I think it did end a dangerous tension in the relationship, but I think it gave the Soviets the notion that the correlation of forces in the world was changing and that they were winning. And it sort of lulled us into a sense of complacency, and I'll never forget Jimmy Carter's comment when the Russians went into Afghanistan. And he said, "I've learned more about Russia in the last two months than I knew about them my whole life." And I thought, "Oh my God," because they were behaving just like Russians to me.

Timothy Naftali

General Scowcroft, thank you very much.

Brent Scowcroft

I enjoyed it.