

Conversation 887-19

Portion of a conversation between
The President and Brent Scowcroft
Ronald Ziegler enters during the conversation

The Oval Office
March 22, 1973
Unknown between 12:53-1:12pm
8 minutes

The National Archives has prepared this transcript and does not guarantee its accuracy.

“_____” refers to unintelligible portion.

[Entire portion declassified national security withdrawal]

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BS: "They have moved, ah, they've moved a lot of their anti-aircraft from the North parts of Vietnam down into the South, ah, now, not, not, too much really over into Laos, but..."

RN: "It's mean..."

BS: "But I think, I think inevitably we will probably, uh, we will probably lose some and, of course, that being the possibility, of a, of more POWs..."

RN: "That's the problem, ah, see..."

BS: "And that, of course, that, ah, that..."

RN: "_____."

BS: "Then you start a whole new iteration."

RN: "See that's the problem that I see with it, is basically, not particularly is, is not the, is not the action, not worth the risk but is, is the risk, ah, going to payoff? Is it worth it? You see and that's the balance. If you say well, we lost four or five planes and _____POWs and so

forth. That's, my own view is that we are probably better advised, I mean, if we have to face the fact, which I think we have to face, ah, we, ah, have to continue to bomb in Cambodia and you end up massive violations that, ah, you would have to consider, you know, that something _____."

BS: "Again."

RN: "Again. Ah, rather than to do--is to take the heat then. Ah, the problem though, the problem concerns me here is that, ah, I don't know whether Henry is _____ whether he is properly presenting the way, I mean the idea of, ah of giving them a warning, in effect, that may make them, as he says, concerned about what we'll do later. Well, that's fine. To make a warning. But here we do have a problem of American POWs _____."

BS: "We do, we..."

RN: "We do have that problem. And I think, I think really it comes down to-- that's what I'm so worried about. Don't you think so?"

BS: "I think that's, I think that's part of it, and I think that..."

RN: "Well, they're..."

BS: "And I think partly they are also looking at the military ineffectiveness of it, ah, and ah, is it, is it really, is it really worth it in those terms. Especially at this time. Ah, now the only magic thing that I see about this particular interval is that the message is stronger if they still have some of our POWs. Because it seems to me that's an added element of determination, ah..."

RN: "Yeah, I know. That's what Henry _____ but we're still on the outer edges of, ah, it seems to me, of ah, we're not, uh, we're on the outer edges of conjecture in either instance which, which there is no conjecture, ah, so _____ Henry _____ on either the 8th or December 18th."

BS: "Oh no, that's right."

RN: "_____ have objection at all..."

BS: "That's right."

RN: "...to doing it."

BS: "That's right. They're, they're, ah, very good and ah..."

RN: "That's the point. Here is a hell of a lot of conjecture _____."

BS: There is very much so. And..."

RN: "Particularly, you have problems as far as the domestic situation here, is that for better or worse, the damn people that were playing up the infiltration, now play it down."

BS: "Yes, they have."

RN: "Right."

RZ: "That's right."

BS: "That's the last few days."

RN: "Well, what would be your view? Would a strike on southern Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail _____?"

RZ: "Well..."

RN: "The domestic effect _____. [pause] Basically, three or four more POWs isn't worth talking about. That's the problem."

BS: "That's right. It's really , then, a whole new negotiation. Ah, in a way, it has to be _____."

RN: "You see, what we have, Ron, is this situation where the provocation which was last week becoming insignificant, now appears less than _____ not a hell of a lot less than _____ but it is some, let's face it."

BS: "That's right."

RZ: "My, my view would be that, uh, if we were talking just about a strike on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, because supplies are coming down, the domestic impact would be nil."

RN: "Even if you lost one plane?"

RZ: "Yes, but, but, but, if that was all that was under consideration. But with the POW factor, not even if you lose three more, but with the POW factor as it stands today, with the military commissions' statement coming out in question of troop withdrawals being accepted, still, men over there, a question about the POW list in Laos and we, ah, ran, ah, a flight in there at this point, the domestic impact, I think, would be quite great because of the reaction in some of the-- towards some of the POWs would be kinda like, oh come on now, you call yourself a POW _____ what are we doing here."

RN: "You let them _____."

RZ: "After they would be out."

RN: "_____ people would be loyal then to take a crack at it again."

RZ: "I, I think if, if the U.S. prisoners are all home..."

RN: "Right."

RZ: "...if the U.S. forces are out..."

RN: "Right."

RZ: "...after the 29th and, and there was a blatant, ah..."

RN: "invasion."

RZ: "Yes sir. Invasion; or a very clear violation of the agreement I think you could move.
_____ exaggeration, but I think...."

RN: "Let me say, incidentally, you got the, you got the line didn't you, Ron, ah,

_____ one small thing. Did you announce, the 24th, ah, the party on the 24th?"

RZ: "I have all the materials but I could not get through to Mrs. Nixon to tell her we're going to announce it so I'm going to talk to her, and uh, do it this afternoon."

RN: "Fine."

RZ: "Yeah."

RN: "Fine."

RZ: "But I want to talk to her and, ah..."

RN: "Yeah, right."

RZ: "...I couldn't get through to Helen or Mrs. Nixon..."

RN: "Yeah."

RZ: "...so I'll..."

RN: "Yeah, alright."

RZ: "...they were in a meeting, ah so..."

RN: "Yeah."

RZ: "...so we'll announce it later today."

RN: "Fine, fine. I guess this a good day to get this out."

RZ: "Yes sir."

RN: "The second point is that ah, with regard to this business, you know of, they're saying we'll, they'll, they will get all the POWs out Saturday if we'll withdraw by Saturday, you under-- you got across the point that we're conditioning that on a withdrawal of the, of the Laotian ones too."

RZ: "The agreement clearly states prisoners throughout Indochina."

RN: "Does it?"

BS: "Well, no the agreement itself..."

RN: "_____."

BS: "...does not."

RN: "But did you find out the _____ yet."

BS: "Yes. Yes we did."

RN: "Henry's press conference."

BS: "Ah..."

RN: "He stated it."

BS: "His press conference and you, ah, in your, ah, in your speech on the 23rd made it very clear, and..."

RN: "All of our prisoners."

BS: "That's right."

RN: "Throughout Indochina."

BS: "That's right."

RZ: "Throughout Indochina. _____ it's not written...."

RN: "You see, you see Ron, be sure that you don't let the press go off in some kick that failing withdrawal, we're, they're holding prisoners because the last nine _____ are as important as the first nine. I mean, people understand that, don't you agree?"

RZ: "Yes sir."

RN: "Until every last prisoner is out, there will be Americans in and out of Indochina, we're gonna keep Americans, see, we don't, we won't have no military forces whatever in Indochina after we withdraw, you realize that, I have always said that until all of our prisoners are withdrawn, there will be American forces in South Vietnam. And I don't mean just from the North. That's the line. Play it very tough. _____ see, to see that the Pentagon understands that and the State Department _____. [pause] Okay, fine."

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