



H. R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969 – April 30, 1973

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Wednesday, December 6th at Camp David. The whole day today was virtually taken up with the Kissinger-Vietnam negotiation problems. Although the President did have some personnel meetings and Ehrlichman and I met during the afternoon on Under Secretaries and Agency heads for a while.

The President called me over first thing this morning when I arrived to get into the question of Kissinger. He made the point that we can't rally the establishment behind this—that's the liberal media, and so forth—and we don't need to rally the people. The key now is how to psyche Kissinger up for the briefing. He wants me to get this across, that this is the view of Connally, Colson, Ziegler and me: there's nothing to rally the people to. So he thinks I should get a cable to Kissinger regarding the rallying, making the point that at the present time we don't need public support. We just need to act and let the actions speak louder than words. Escalating the Presidential rallying also would rally the opposition, which is now quiet. We have to expect criticism among the media and the left, but the question is, can, whether they can enlist public support for further opposition. The fact that there are no draftees to Vietnam, low casualties, etcetera, means the American people are not going to be shocked; they're just disappointed, not enraged, by the settlement not coming off. Our main goal must be as low key, to play this as low-key as possible, and to ignore Hanoi's intransigence, not Saigon's. We have to realize that Hanoi will play it the other way, but they won't be believed. This has been polled extensively and we feel that this is the right track on public opinion. The main sticking point is the POW problem, and we just have to weather that. Regarding the negotiations breaking down; but as for our major objective, the POW's, we are confident we can achieve it. Then he wanted me to talk to Ziegler and get his arguments on why it would be a mistake to go on television, and also list Connally's points. He makes the point that we are in the same problems with Henry as we were in India-Pakistan, where we failed and Kissinger's reaction was to get into a big funk about it.



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After I left the President's meeting Kennedy called and said he'd had a call very late last evening from the Soviets, and that they were working hard on trying to help on this....

...that the group in Paris met at 10:30, took a break for lunch at 1:30, and they were still in the meeting. The guess is that they'll meet tomorrow, if there is any movement today, which is at least a 50-50 chance. He raised the point that he just met with the VP, who wants to be sure that the President realizes a possible complication if the VP's message is to go to, or mission is to go to Saigon, that there'd be a concern if Truman dies, which is a little idiotic, but sort of typical of the Agnew approach.

Kennedy called at noon to say they had finished the afternoon meeting, and it had run, that the total they had run was five and a half hours. They are going to meet again tomorrow at 3:00, and a reports coming, but he had no clues as to what it might be.

Then the President had me over at 1:00. Went over a few odds and ends on personnel and general items; then said the real problem is that Kissinger is trying to cover his own mistakes. He can't bear to come back and face the press because he knows they'll attack him this time; the only other time that he was like this was India-Pakistan. It's clear that he wants the President out as the blocking back to clear the way. Ziegler makes the point that if the talks break down, it will be a defeat and we have to ride through that. We've got to stand with the statement that we will only



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sign when it's right; we're stronger with that base than we are explaining. There will be a big media deal regarding the failure, but it won't penetrate to the public unless the President goes on television and makes something out of it. Kissinger must do a strong, brief statement—positive—play from the position of strength, not failure.

Later in the afternoon we got the cable from Kissinger giving the report on the meetings that basically says that they are almost totally sure of failure. I've got the cable in the file. And the President went through a long discussion—really agony—on the decision that Kissinger poses for him, which is whether to make one last offer in the hope that they'll take it, or to go the other way and pull out: Kissinger lays out the options on it. The President said I should get Ehrlichman's view on whether we should wait six months for the POW's, which would, which is what would happen if we pull out, and start bombing. And Henry thinks in, within six months, or in six months, we'd be able to make a deal with them to get our POW's...

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...but that would be the end of South Vietnam.

Or, to take the other option, which is to put one more peace proposal in and to try to keep it going, and not put it on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. The President said—this was at about 6:00—he said to meet again at 8:30 with Ehrlichman. I went over the whole thing with John. He made the point, first, that any agreement's better than no agreement, and we're in a stronger



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position to try to deal with the North than try to deal with the South, and vice versa. Also he feels that if there's no agreement, it would be a monumental blow to America in Vietnam policy, but the President should not go on television; he should not personify that failure; he should jettison Kissinger instead, and let Kissinger do the briefing.

The President had Ehrlichman and me over at 8:15, and we met in the Aspen living room by the fire with the lights low on a cold night, and the President was slumped down in his chair and sort of went through the whole thing with John. John feels we have to try the finesse before going with our big gun, the President—the finesse being to try to maintain the appearance—at least, that the negotiations are continuing. He's concerned regarding the height of expectation in the country. The President said his view is that we have to get Kissinger out of the meetings for a while, to take a look and consult, and that's the key need at this point. But both of Kissinger's options really lead to the same conclusion, which is that we start bombing now. One way, we get the POW's now, and the other way we get them in July, but Congress may pull the string on us.

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This poisons our relations with China and the Soviet, which is the big game right at the time we're building for the Soviet summit. That we don't have any great goals as we did on May 8th; that the October 8th solution would have worked, if Thieu had taken it, but Thieu couldn't take it because of Kennedy, Kissinger's schedule, which would have shown that we did it without them, and then forces it down their throats. So it comes down to the fact that we're facing a situation basically the same as at the start of the first term. Either we're got to flush it, take the heat, and



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get on to other things, or we're got to continue, which is what we did then, and it worked very well. And the situation is infinitely better now than it was at that time. North Viet--, South Vietnamese can survive if we support them. But, if we now that the flamboyant cutoff that Kissinger wants to take and resume bombing until we get the POW's back, then it would be okay. But, the major goal that we've always had of South Vietnam surviving would be the real question. Or we can face the fact that we can't make a deal between the Vietnams, so we have to make a deal with North Vietnam for the POW's. Give all we have to get that, give all we have to give to get it, stop the bombing and the mining, stop, but continue our support of Vietnam. The problem is, Kissinger believes, South Vietnam would fall, but it might not, and that's the point, at least there's a chance of it not falling.

The President says we may be at that critical point, but we have to make the decision. We've gone a long way, we've done our best, so now we get our POW's out; help South Vietnam. If they fall, so be it. It's better to have it over now and get it behind us. At least that would be one argument.

The price that North Vietnam will exact is the question; they may require that we stop all military assistance to South Vietnam, and we can't, because that would be a sellout. But Kissinger's course would keep the agony going until July, and cut then. The problem is he's tired and emotional, and he's afraid to have his negotiations fail. So the message to Kissinger now must be to ask the question; and not to say that this is the final offer, especially not that he knows that they'll turn it down and go home. The main thing is to get Kissinger back here and decide here, not through the channels across the Atlantic. We can't go back to the October 8th position, which Ehrlichman suggested, because it won't work if South Vietnam doesn't accept it; in fact, there isn't anything if South Vietnam doesn't accept it. Haig is partly colored by the military



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desire to continue the war. We'll have a lot more heat if the President goes on TV than we would have otherwise. He feels Kissinger's approach now is not very rational. We have to consider his paranoia: what he said before, the emotional effect of the Italian article, and all those things.

At that point, he had Colonel Kennedy come in. The President read Kennedy's draft of instructions to Kissinger and then read aloud his own draft, which is much longer and more on the basis of continuing the talks. He said we have to recognize that the North Vietnamese are evaluating Kissinger, personally, too. They think he has more authority than he does, and they think he has no choice but to make a deal because of what he said. You have to look at the historical perspective; if the talks break, we resume the bombing, and our only goal is the POW's, and we estimate that by July that North Vietnam will cave and give us the POW's. If you assume that's right, then look at what happens in the meantime. One, we have a fight with the Congress regarding supporting South Vietnam, and they will claim South Vietnam's intransigence.

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Two, it exacerbates our problems with China and the Soviets.

Three, the Congress is likely to drag their feet on aid to South Vietnam, both economic and military, and to limit our funding for bombing and so on.



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Duration: 17 seconds

So Saigon collapses anyway. So one way we get the POW's now, the other way we maybe get the POW's in July and Saigon probably collapses either way. If they're going to collapse now, they'll collapse in eight months anyway.

Ehrlichman suggested the ploy of the lawyers, saying the next guy to negotiate will be tougher than I am. The answer to that is, we played it last summer and lost that position with Henry's statement that peace is at hand. So we can't do anything with that. The President told Kennedy to send both messages: Kennedy's as the official instructions, the President's to give the flavor and background—the President's ideas on how to approach the meeting. Kennedy's concern, he expressed his concern regarding the total break with Thieu and thus his collapse, which would mean a waste of ten years, and he is worried about the effect that would have on the American psyche. The President answers that you come to a point where you have to weigh the cost. If we've made the total effort, we can do no more. Ehrlichman makes the point that we have to cut the budget \$10 billion tomorrow, all across the social spectrum, and at the same time we're going to ask for more money for South Vietnam, which would be rough to do. Kennedy's concerned regarding how we may be perceived over the long haul—over time. What will the effect be regarding our relations in the world? There's a real question as to how this war is ended, and that's important in world relations. The President then said to fold these two messages into one cable.



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Kennedy brought up the Dobrynin message. The Russians are working on this. Dobrynin emphasized three times that Kissinger and the President should know that they are in touch with North Vietnam, and that he wants them to know this, and it will take time to make the contacts.

The President said Kissinger must not bring this to such a sharp head that he has to say the negotiations have collapsed. Don't say take it or leave it and get backed into a corner, just leave the implication, that we'll have a long period of more or less silent. Oh, there was a long period then in the meeting: a more or less silent review of the messages with slight changes in phrases and that sort of thing. Then the President said that Kissinger is in his India-Pakistan mood, that the feeling that all is lost, but nothing is ever totally lost. We need to get Henry here and talk to him, have him talk to the President at length, to review the options carefully. The President just feels the bomb-them-to-submission idea won't work. The goal of just saving the POW's is not enough, and we can't guarantee Congress support for eight months. Kennedy then left to send the messages to Henry, going by chopper back down to the office. The President sort of evaluated the whole thing and said the real problem is we have a weak reed as a negotiator at this point.

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He thought it would be useful to have Rush up tomorrow and have him bring up on the QT the contingency plans for the strikes on North Vietnam if the negotiations break down. Then he had me call Kennedy and tell him the President wants to see the plans, to get them up tomorrow, that he should bring them up, and we'll have Rush come too.

The other things that arose during the session were Harry Truman's imminent death, and the President's ideas on a message regarding that. And then the fact that the moon shot's been delayed, due to a mechanical problems, and that Dole should go out and talk to the press tomorrow.

End of December 6th.