

THE WHITE HOUSE
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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with President Kuchma of Ukraine (C)

PARTICIPANTS: U.S.

The President
The Vice President
Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State
Robert Rubin, Secretary of the Treasury
Samuel Berger, Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs
Leon Fuerth, National Security Advisor to the
Vice President
Ambassador James Collins, Special Adviser to
the Secretary for New Independent States
William Miller, Ambassador to Ukraine
Steve Pifer, NSC
Carlos Pascual, NSC (notetaker)
Marta Zielyk, Interpreter

Ukraine

President Kuchma
Volodymyr Horbulyn, Secretary of the National
Security and Defense Council
Sergei Tyhypko, Deputy Prime Minister
Gennady Udovenko, Minister of Foreign
Affairs
Yuri Shcherbak, Ambassador to the United
States
Mykhaylo Skuratovsky, Interpreter

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: May 16, 1997, 4:25 p.m.-5:10 p.m.
Oval Office

The President: So, Mr. President, I am encouraged by what I am hearing. Thank you for your efforts to get reform back on track; thank you for your approval of the CFE flank agreement. I hope we can work out at least the outlines of a NATO-Ukraine document that the Secretary General and Minister Udovenko can initial at Sintra, so that we can have a signing ceremony in connection with my trip to Madrid. This will be valuable for your people to see

that Ukraine has a relationship with NATO and that we're not trying to divide Europe up. (S)

President Kuchma: Thank you. I am very pleased to have this opportunity. I appreciate the benevolent and constructive attitude you have had. But I must start with an issue that is unpleasant for me, and I think that not even your ambassador may know this. It turns out that in a recent poll in Ukraine that President Clinton came out as the most popular politician with a 69 percent rating, far ahead of me. (S) (Laughter)

The President: I'm more popular in Ukraine than in the United States. There's a part of the Christian Bible that says that three times a prophet will go without honor in his own land. (S) (Laughter)

President Kuchma: I'm looking forward to the future, although the prospects are not always pink. By this I mean our neighbors as well. We're dealing with the Russia of Boris Nikolayevich today, but there may be someone else with a completely different policy in the future. The NATO-Ukraine relationship is a warning to all. It is in the interest of Europe to have an independent Ukraine. (S)

This is why we discussed with Albert the text of a NATO-Ukraine agreement. It should not be just a mere declaration. The texts of the Russia and Ukraine agreements will be compared, and that comparison will be personified in the person of the President of Ukraine. The situation is not so quiet in Ukraine, and the contents are of utmost importance. People must understand we will be supported. I am prepared to give instructions to our foreign ministers to initial this document on May 30. (S)

CFE approval was also a hard problem to solve. It started with different interpretations of the flank agreement by the United States and Russia. Russia immediately said it had the right to deploy troops and weapons on the territory of the former Soviet Union. I am pleased we found a way out. (S)

You have another diplomat working for you, not just Secretary Albright -- you have Al as well. By hook or by crook we decided to resolve this issue. We decided to ratify the flank agreement without the parliament due to the lack of time. We are waiting for the negative reaction from the parliament. (S)

As for the domestic situation in Ukraine, it may be that the adoption of the constitution or monetary reform drew all the attention of the President and that the President did not give sufficient attention to certain economic issues. Sometimes we

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fall down in our lives. But I think we are now of the same opinion on what needs to be done. (S)

I wrote to you on fighting organized crime and the mafia. These things are hard to do alone, and I would welcome your support and practical assistance and the cooperation of your law enforcement structures. We agreed to have a subcommittee under the Commission to deal with this issue. (S)

In fact, honestly speaking, the preparation of the work of the Commission allowed us to solve a lot of problems we couldn't do at first. (S)

The President: That is a very encouraging statement. On organized crime, no one can fight alone. Criminals can take money and weapons across borders. I just took a trip to Mexico and discussed how narco-traffickers can move across borders. I told the media civilized nations need to think about this and band together to fight problems like this. (S)

You made a statement earlier about Russia and what happens if President Yeltsin is succeeded by someone with a reactionary view. If that happens and it results in the subjugation of Ukraine, not only will it be an immediate tragedy for Ukraine, but it would then be a tragedy for Russia. Not only would it bankrupt Russia to try to repress Ukraine, it would destroy their authority. Today's world is not the same place as the world of the 1950s or 1960s. (S)

Now, as you pointed out on the economy, there is no such thing as a straight line to tomorrow; you get there in fits and starts. But if you keep going in the right direction and put the pieces in place properly, you can change the way your successors will think. (S)

This may be our biggest responsibility. It may be to create a new conventional wisdom so that the young people realize that going back to the past is impossible. (S)

President Kuchma: But where is the answer to why Russia started the war in Chechnya? There is no answer. I am deeply confident that Russia will never agree to an independent Ukraine in its mentality and thinking. The only way out is a strong economy for Ukraine, and this may even serve as an example for Russia. You can only guess at the sort of talks we have in Moscow. If another crisis comes, they have a weapon -- closing the gas tap. (S)

They don't like the policies we pursue. In fact, we succeeded in changing the attitude to NATO in Ukraine even in just a year. A

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year ago 99 percent of the population was negative toward NATO. Today, the polls show that the answer to whether NATO is a factor of stability in Europe is 50/50. (S)

The NATO-Ukraine agreement is another basis to appeal to the population. This is the reason we opened on May 7 the NATO Information Office with Solana. This is a way to open information to our people and to carry out propaganda work. This trip to Madrid, the signing of the document are not important for me, but for the image of the presidency of Ukraine. (S)

The Vice President: During the last four years in my trips to Russia I have had conversations on Chechnya and Ukraine. I view the situation slightly differently. If I was a neighbor and heard that Ukraine must be subject to Russian hegemony, I would probably react the same way as you. (S)

But from the distance of thousands of miles away, it seems to me that a significant number of Russians respond that Chechnya must be part of Russia. But the majority say as far as Ukraine is concerned that it should be independent. Crimea, of course, is a special case, and you have done a masterful job of working through this issue with President Yeltsin. I think the weight of opinion in Russia is moving toward resolving the Black Sea Fleet issue and Crimea peacefully. (S)

President Kuchma: You know, I cannot help but be concerned that the Duma has taken decisions on Sevastopol, and none of the people in the top places of the Russian government had reactions. But I should admit that President Yeltsin is under the influence of some of his young advisers now and wants to resolve some of these problems -- Transdneister, Chechnya -- and he proposed to come to Kiev to sign an agreement and dot all the "i's" and cross all the "t's" on territorial claims. (S)

I also want to mention it is important to solve the Georgia-Abkhazia problem, if you could raise this with President Yeltsin next time you see him. Ukraine is doing everything possible to maintain good neighborly relations. But there are certain bounds that we cannot cross. (S)

The Vice President: Many of us are concerned that the real answer to securing Ukraine and consolidating its independence is to use the next six months to advance economic reform, put the economy on a sound footing, get investment in, and then the questions about Russia and the questions about the past will disappear. (S)

President Kuchma: OK, settled! Thank you for the diplomatic support with Romania. On the second or third of June we will

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sign the treaty and have a chance to dot the "i's" and end this long-term dispute. On May 20 we will sign a cooperation agreement with President Kwasniewski of Poland. And we achieved a breakthrough in the CIS and signed the first internal border agreement in the region with Belarus. Russia, however, doesn't want to recognize interior borders. (C)

Mr. Berger: Mr. President, I think there is a very eager press corps anxious to ask you questions. (U)

President Kuchma: Yes, we should move on. Thank you very much. (U)

The Vice President: We first need to witness the signing by Secretary Albright and Minister Udovenko of the joint statement on the CFE flank agreement. (U)

The President: It was a pleasure to see you again. (U)

-- End of Conversation --