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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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November 4, 1968

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: The Hot Line Exchanges

Participants: Ambassador Llewellyn E. Thompson
Mr. Nathaniel DavisDECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4
NEJ 74-382
By ing, NARA, Date 4-5-95

I called on Ambassador Thompson today at Bethesda Naval Hospital to get his recollections of the hot line exchanges between President Johnson and Premier Kosygin. Ambassador Thompson refreshed his memory by leafing through the hot line texts, and made the following comments:

At the start, the Russians made quite a point that the President be physically present at our end of the hot line before they would start the exchange. They asked more than once when he would be there. (Notice that the first sentence of the Russian text of Kosygin's first message observes that Kosygin would like to know if President Johnson was at the machine.)

President Johnson's first message to Kosygin (Page 6, June 5, 8:47 a.m.) was actually addressed to "Comrade Kosygin." Apparently what had happened was that the American hot line telegraph operators asked the Moscow operators what was the proper way to address Kosygin. They got back the answer "Comrade Kosygin." So the message went. Ambassador Thompson talked with Dobrynin, about this afterward, and Dobrynin -- who had been at the Moscow end of the line -- said he had been quite startled. The Russians wondered if the President was making a joke, or making fun of them in some way. However, Dobrynin said he guessed how it had happened.

Ambassador Thompson said the first substantive question he remembered was that of cease-fire, or cease-fire and withdrawal. On Tuesday morning (Page 10, June 6, 10:02 a.m.) the President suggested that the Soviets support the resolution Ambassador Goldberg gave to Federenko the night before, calling for cease-fire and a prompt withdrawal behind the armistice lines. Kosygin did not reply for more than eight hours. In the meantime, Federenko had agreed to a simple cease-fire in New York. In Ambassador Thompson's words, he had agreed "to a resolution Kosygin now wanted to get away from."

There was some discussion in the Situation Room, according to Ambassador Thompson, whether we should take advantage of what Federenko had done -- that is the simple cease-fire -- or whether we should stick to the message sent in the morning (cease-fire and withdrawal). Everybody agreed we should take

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advantage of what had happened in New York. There were some calls to Goldberg. The people in the Situation Room were elated -- and surprised Federenko had done what he had. There was some speculation around the room that Federenko would get into trouble. The fact of the matter was that we would probably have been prepared to accept the earlier formulation that included withdrawal. The Russians suffered from a communications problem.

What the President did in his message of Tuesday evening (Page 14, June 6, 7:45 p.m.) was to point out to Kosygin that Goldberg and Federenko had agreed to a very short cease-fire resolution, and suggest that both the Soviets and we assist the Security Council's further efforts to restore peace. What we wanted to do in this message, according to Ambassador Thompson, was simply to nail down the cease-fire.

In his message of June 8 (Page 20, June 8, 9:48 a.m.) Kosygin again called for withdrawal.

In his reply (Page 22, June 8, 11:00 a.m.), President Johnson informed Kosygin of the torpedoing of the Liberty and the dispatch of our aircraft to the scene. Ambassador Thompson comments that this was a very successful use of the hot line. We were using it in the right way, to prevent a danger of war arising out of misunderstanding. Ambassador Thompson says it made a big impression on the Russians.

The next crisis came with Kosygin's message of Saturday morning (Page 30, June 10, 8:48 a.m.). This message asserted the Russians were ready to act independently if Israeli military actions against Syria were not stopped in the "next few hours." It went on to say that such independent actions "may bring us into a clash, which will lead to a grave catastrophe." The message concluded by saying that Soviet actions "including military" would be taken if Israel did not cease military action.

Ambassador Thompson said he personally checked the Russian text to make sure "including military" was actually there. He was impressed how much greater Soviet sensitivity was to the plight of the Syrians than to that of the Egyptians. At the time, the Syrians were the apple of the Russians' eye (although this changed later). Ambassador Thompson voiced a concern in the Situation Room meeting whether the Russians might suspect that our intention was really to knock off the Syrian government.

The main focus of the discussion in the Situation Room was over what was actually happening in Syria. Richard Helms was brought into the meeting to see if he could check the situation on the spot, and verify whether the Israelis were smashing ahead as the Russians said (see pages 34 and 38). The feeling of those in the Situation Room was that the Israelis were probably doing so. Mr. Helms tried in a number of ways to reach friendly powers with diplomatic missions still open in Damascus, etc.

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There was some discussion whether the Soviet message actually meant that the Russians wanted to move into the area with force. There was some back and forth about the tenor of the Soviet message, and the danger that the Russians might be testing us out. If our replies were too polite, we might look as if we were backing down under a threat. Nevertheless, the President -- while he could have gone back to the Russians making threats of his own -- chose to send the calm and reasoned message he did (Page 32, June 10, 9:30 a.m.).

Kosygin came back with a message saying the Israelis were "conducting an offensive towards Damascus, "and that action cannot be postponed."

There was some discussion whether the Soviets had actually weighed in with the Syrians to get their agreements to a cease-fire or not. A request for confirmation that they had was drafted into President Johnson's message of reply. Fortunately, the televised proceedings at the Security Council in New York soon showed that Israel had informed General Bull that it would accept any cease-fire arrangements General Bull's representative suggested and that Israel regarded the cease-fire as in effect. McGeorge Bundy drafted a paragraph for the President incorporating this information, and tension soon eased -- as it became clear that military action on the Syrian front was being concluded.

As a post mortem, according to Ambassador Thompson, there was some discussion among senior U.S. officials whether we might not have been well advised to let the Israelis move on to Damascus. It was clear the Israelis could have done so. Ambassador Thompson says this was strictly post mortem, however, and this possibility was not discussed at the Situation Room meeting.

Ambassador Thompson concludes that this crisis shows how important it was for the President to keep his cool. He adds, like Richard Helms (see Harold Saunders; memorandum of October 22) that June 10 was a time of great concern and utmost gravity.


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