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Subject

RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES AT THE WHITE HOUSE AT 1137 HOURS ON THURSDAY,
29 SEPTEMBER 1983

Present: Prime Minister
Mr. Coles

President Reagan
Mr. Sommer

In a brief discussion of the situation in the Lebanon, President Reagan said that the American Commander in the Multi-National Force had said that if Suq Al-Gharb felt the position of the American contingent would be intolerable. So the Administration had taken the view that supportive action to prevent this happening could be regarded as self-defence.

He was most appreciative of the fact that the British contingent had been providing security at the location of the talks which were now proceeding in the Lebanon. The Prime Minister commented that she believed that this role was a very appropriate one. She had been telling enquirers that the participants in the MNF must work together. If one contingent pulled out unilaterally, a very difficult situation would be created.

President Reagan said that the bill placing an eighteen month limit on the presence of the American contingent had been passed by a very substantial majority in the House yesterday and would be before the Senate today.

The President then said that since this was the first time he had met the Prime Minister since the Election result he wished to convey his congratulations in person.

/ The Prime Minister

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The Prime Minister suggested that the discussion should turn to the topics of East/West relations and arms control. Later in the day she would receive the Winston Churchill Award and would be making a speech with which the Administration would agree. She felt that we had to make the most accurate assessment we could of the Soviet system and the leadership. There was plenty of evidence of the nature of both. But we all had to live in the same planet. So it was necessary to attempt to establish a reasonable relationship. When the repercussions of the Korean airliner incident had died down the question would arise of when we resumed normal relations. This would take time. The President had been right to insist that, despite the incident, the arms control negotiations on Geneva should continue. His speech to the UN General Assembly had been outstanding.

We needed to ask ourselves how we could influence Soviet thinking. It was clear that we could not do so unless we had a reasonable relationship.

President Reagan said that he had considered all these matters when the Korean airliner incident had occurred. Some of the issues concerning East/West relations had been discussed at Williamsburg. But now was not a time when we should isolate ourselves from the Soviet Union.

It was true that he had taken the view that arms talks should continue but he did not believe that he had thereby done the Soviet Union a favour because there was evidence that they were reluctant to be at the negotiating table.

He felt most strongly that the talks should continue. It was simply too dangerous for the world to live under the present nuclear threat.

As regards the British and French strategic deterrents, these had no place in the INF negotiations. With regard to START, the United States would continue to negotiate. But if agreement was reached on sizeable reductions on both sides it would be necessary to make allowances for the strategic weapons of other countries.

/ The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister said that the Soviet insistence on including British and French deterrents was a device to divert attention from the American proposal for deep reductions in strategic weapons. The facile arguments about the inclusion of the British and French deterrents were worrying. She was extremely wary of agreeing to include the British deterrent in any negotiation until it was clear what the result of that would be.

This matter had recently been discussed within the British Government. Our strategic deterrent constituted an irreducible minimum. We could not have less than four submarines. This guaranteed that one would always be on station and that two would be most of the time. This was the minimum requirement should we ever be left alone. We did not expect to be put in such a position but it was possible that the Soviet Union would try to pick off NATO countries one by one.

She and the President were agreed that the British strategic deterrent could not be included in INF. As for START, our deterrent constituted only 2½% of the numbers of Soviet strategic weapons. Unless the American and Russian holdings of strategic weapons were reduced to some 10 or 20% of what they were at the moment, our own weapons were almost immaterial.

Senator Glenn had raised this matter at her breakfast meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. She had pointed out that the inclusion of the British deterrent would mean that the United States could not have parity with the Soviet Union. Would Congress agree that the United States should have less than parity? Furthermore, if we and the French decided to increase our present numbers of weapons, the American holdings would have to ^{be} cut down by the equivalent amount. It was doubtful whether France would agree that the United States should determine how many weapons France should have. She was most anxious that people should not fall for the glib formula that our strategic weapons should be included. If the Soviet Union was really interested in strategic reductions they should take up the American proposals. If negotiations resulted in very sizeable reductions and there were comparatively few weapons

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of this kind left, then, in this totally different world, we should have to consider the position of the British and French deterrent. But this did not arise now.

NATO was a defensive, not an aggressive organisation. The Soviet Union had used force in the past. It was possible that it would try to pick off the allies singly. So each country needed its own means of defence. It would be a mistake to arrive inadvertently at the position where the United States had less than parity with the Soviet Union. She had recently explained all these matters to the Prime Minister of the Netherlands. She hoped that the American Administration would be very cautious in its references to British and French deterrents. President Reagan, who appeared to accept these arguments, said that they would be. With regard to START, a complex situation had arisen. The Americans had wished to attempt first to deal with the problem of the large land-based missiles. These were the destabilising elements and those which people most feared. But the Soviet Union was more dependent than the United States on land-based missiles. Washington could not dictate to Moscow what its mix of weapons should be. So the negotiations would become more complex.

The Prime Minister said that one point of concern to her was that the Soviet Union was negotiating through public statements and not at the negotiating table. Andropov's reference to the liquidation of SS20s had turned out, when checked in Geneva, to concern getting rid not of missiles but of launchers.

The INF negotiations would enter a difficult phase when we started to deploy Cruise and Pershing. There was no doubt that the United Kingdom and Germany would deploy at that time. President Reagan said that the Germans had just told him privately that they would be delaying their Bundestag debate until 21 November. This delay caused great concern. The Prime Minister said that Mr. Andropov's statement of 28 September on foreign policy was clearly designed to influence public opinion in Germany in the wake of the Elections in Hesse and Bremen. President Reagan said that he agreed with the Prime Minister that Chancellor Kohl was firm in his attitude but he was not so sure about the people around him, for example, Mr. Genscher.

/ He was convinced

He was convinced that the whole Soviet strategy had aimed at preventing deployment. When this failed, they might start to negotiate seriously. But two points worried him. First, the Russians were apparently paranoid about their own security. Did they really feel threatened by the West or were they merely trying to keep the offensive edge? Secondly, he had always assumed that in the Soviet Union the Politburo controlled the military. But did the fact that the first public comments on the Korean airliner incident had come from the military indicate that the Politburo were now intimidated by the Generals.

The Prime Minister said that she believed that the Soviet Union did worry about its security but its present military posture went far beyond its defensive needs. There had been no need for the Soviet Union to march into Afghanistan. Nor were their attempts to extend their influence into Africa and Central America necessary.

She had recently held a discussion with eight academics who specialised in the Soviet Union. In answer to her question, they had expressed the view that there was very little scope for change in the Soviet Union because of the nature of the Soviet system. But she wished to revert to the question of how far we could influence the Soviet leadership by developing contacts with them. She had seen a recent report about the American concern to resume a dialogue with Moscow.

The President said that the main reason why the Russians were at the negotiating table in Geneva was the build-up of American defences. The Russians would not be influenced by sweet reason. If they saw that the United States had the will and the determination to build-up its defences as far as necessary, the Soviet attitude might change because they knew that they could not keep pace. He recalled a cartoon which had Brezhnev saying to a Russian General "I liked the arms race better when we were the only one in it". When it was fully borne in upon the Soviet leadership that they could not match the American arms build-up they might conclude that it was better to negotiate in an attempt to retain parity. He believed that the Russians were now close to the limit in their expenditure on defence. Their internal economic difficulties were such that they

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could not substantially increase the proportion of resources devoted to military expenditure. The United States, on the other hand, had the capacity to double its military output. That was its strength. The task was to convince Moscow that the only way it could remain equal was by negotiation. They could not afford to compete in weaponry for very much longer.

The Prime Minister repeated that we were entering a difficult phase of the INF negotiations at the end of this year. We must then stay calm and make it plain that we still wanted to negotiate. She agreed that only when there was a rough equality of armaments could the negotiations take place on a basis of mutual respect and mutual interest. The Russians would respect the fact that we had deployed Cruise and Pershing. There would be a mutual interest because of economic pressures. She hoped there would be a mutual will to negotiate. We did not wish the Russian leaders to retreat into their blinkered, isolated world, refusing to talk. But when would it be right to resume a dialogue?

President Reagan said that he had seen Ambassador Dobrynin some time ago. He had told him that words were not enough. There were things on offer in Washington. But to obtain them the Russians must first display their good intentions by deeds. He had invited Moscow to demonstrate by deeds that it really wanted a good relationship. It would then see a response. This had produced a little movement. But there was still a need for Moscow to show that it could do more than talk. It must meet some of the American appeals on such matters as the violations of the Helsinki Agreement, policy on emigration and individual cases such as that of Anatoly Scharansky.

The Prime Minister said that it was worth reflecting on how the Geneva talks should be pursued between now and the end of the year. It might be better to proceed by way of quiet negotiation than by public statement and counter statement. President Reagan said that the American objective was to negotiate. They would be patient until deployment occurred and then Moscow would have real reason to negotiate. On resuming contacts part of the tragedy of

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the Korean airliner incident was that the Russians would now have to make a move before dialogue could be resumed. They should, for example, accept responsibility and offer compensation.

The Prime Minister commented that the handling of the incident was the first real evidence of the character of Andropov. President Reagan said that one Soviet lie had followed another. They had first claimed that no aircraft had been shot down, then that it was a spy plane.

The Prime Minister said that she was still mystified that the aircraft had been so far off course. President Reagan said that he had been too until he had seen a television programme in which senior pilots had made it plain that the computer could only give back what was put in. If the wrong information was inserted, the computer could not make corrections. The Prime Minister said that she thought this demonstrated a need for a failsafe mechanism. Another worrying aspect was the nature of the command structure and the rules of engagement revealed by the incident. President Reagan said that Soviet planes had frequently strayed over the Soviet Union. A Cuban plane had been detected over a submarine construction yard. No-one had shot at it. Soviet paranoia was again at work in the handling of the Korean airliner incident. All aircraft except Soviet aircraft had international channels for communication. The Russians refused to use these channels because it would make it easier for people to defect. If their first response had been to apologise to the world and offer compensation they would have gained great credit. The voices of those who favoured reasonable dialogue with Moscow would have been heard loud and clear.

The Prime Minister said that it was in our interest to have a reasonable relationship provided it did not jeopardise our security. President Reagan commented that it was always necessary to remember that we were dealing with people who were not like us. Gromyko had even told Shultz in Madrid that if necessary the Soviet Union would repeat their action. So the West must be strong. But America would do its best to make the Soviet Union see that it did not have offensive intentions and was not trying to obtain a first-strike capability. Nothing could have been fairer than the zero option proposal.

The Prime Minister said that the President had been right to persuade Congress to allocate more money for chemical weapons. The West had disarmed in this field without a response from the Soviet Union. President Reagan said that the Soviet Union had used chemical weapons in Cambodia and Afghanistan. One member of an Afghan delegation whom he had received had shown him the effects of chemical warfare on his own body. The Prime Minister said that she had been impressed by the anti-chemical warfare techniques adopted by the British Forces in Germany whom she had visited last week. The fact was that the West had no deterrent in this field. President Reagan said that various deserters from the Soviet Armed Forces in Afghanistan had confirmed, when interviewed separately, that every Soviet unit in Afghanistan was equipped with chemical weapons. Some had said that they had deserted both because of the nature of these weapons and because they had been ordered to kill women and children. World War II had provided a lesson - each side then knew that the other side possessed chemical weapons and had therefore not used them.

Turning to Central America, the Prime Minister said that we had consistently tried to support the Administration's policy. We had frequently quoted the President's April speech setting out his objectives. We had also given support by sending observers to the El Salvador elections. But American policy was still not understood in Europe though the visit of Vice-President Bush had been very helpful in this respect.

On Belize, we had decided that we could not take out our troops at the end of this year. (The President commented "Bless you!"). But we should have to remove the garrison some time and within 18 months. This would be after the American Elections and after the Elections in Belize in February 1985. For various reasons we were unhappy about the presence of the garrison. While it was there Belize would not negotiate seriously with Guatemala. We would tell Mr. Price of our decision and press him to negotiate. Meanwhile, British and American officials ought to discuss arrangements which could ensure Belize's security after British withdrawal.

/ President Reagan

President Reagan said that he was impressed by Mr. Price. Guatemala had said during the Presidency of Rios Montt that all it wanted was access to the sea. He agreed that American and British officials should hold discussions as proposed by the Prime Minister.

The Cubans had 2,000 military advisers in Nicaragua. But they also had several thousand teachers there who had set up schools in villages where there had previously been no education and were spreading communist propaganda among the young. The Prime Minister said that we should give more publicity to these things. The President said that there were too many people in the American media who engaged in dis-information. The Washington newspapers and the television news broadcasts were terribly slanted and carried out propaganda for the other side. El Salvador had not been in the news for a long time - because the Government was winning. At an earlier stage there were nightly stories told from the viewpoint of the guerrillas.

The Prime Minister said that she had seen Mr. Duarte a while ago. His main point had been that if democracy were not seen to work after the next Elections in El Salvador, then people would lose heart.

On another matter, she wished to ask that the President should think very carefully before the United States resumed the supply of arms to Argentina. A decision in this sense would simply not be understood in Britain. The President said that he understood the Prime Minister's concern but there would be great pressure for the resumption of arms^{supplies} if a civilian regime were established in Buenos Aires.

The tête-à-tête conversation ended at 1235 hours and was followed by a working lunch.

A. J. C.

29 September 1983