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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Private Meeting Between President Nixon and Ceausescu

Participants: President Nicolae Ceausescu
Ion Gheorghe Maurer
Interpreter

President Richard Nixon
Henry A. Kissinger
Colonel Burbec

Date: August 3, 1969
Bucharest, Romania

Ceausescu: I will listen to you, Mr. President, for according to our talks yesterday you have something to say about Vietnam.

Nixon: First, I appreciate the role the Prime Minister played in 1967 in trying to open channels of communications to resolve the Vietnam problem. I was not in the government at that time but I am current on this. The actions were responsible and helpful. As we recognized in 1967, the problem in Vietnam is very difficult. We must recognize that neither side can win or suffer defeat. Some believe that Hanoi and the VC should take over and that the U.S. should get out of Vietnam. Frankly, the U.S. can't do that; it is not just a matter of national honor. Leaving aside emotion, the U.S. committed over 500,000 troops, suffered 35,000 deaths and 200,000 wounded. To withdraw and let Hanoi take over would be a defeat for the U.S. and this, as President, I can't let happen. We can argue about whether we should have gone in or about how the war was conducted. The fact is we're there now and committed. We can't run away without giving the South Vietnamese the option to decide their own future. Hanoi says Thieu should get out and a peace cabinet should take over. We cannot accept that. You, Mr. President, suggest that the answer may be found in a coalition government. That would not be acceptable if it were imposed without giving the people of South Vietnam a chance to decide on it.

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I have said what we can't do, and these we do insist on. We do not, however, insist on:

--- The defeat of Hanoi

--- Hanoi's withdrawal without the opportunity to go to the people of South Vietnam and ask for support.

Look at what we have done:

--- We stopped all bombing of North Vietnam.

--- We withdrew 25,000 combat troops and an additional announcement on this subject will be made later this month.

--- We offered to withdraw all troops within one year if North Vietnam does likewise

--- And we have offered that the future of South Vietnam be determined by internationally supervised elections. President Thieu has offered to accept the VC in supervisory bodies and this is acceptable to me.

The international group would see to it that all groups in the country including the VC have a chance to participate, and if they get the verdict of the people to hold office. We do not propose to stop there. I said on May 14 that we are open to suggestions from the North but that they should talk substantively. If they don't like what proposals I have made, they should make suggestions. Look at our position: We stopped the bombing, have offered to negotiate seriously, will withdraw more troops, have offered elections in which the VC have an equal chance. Yet Hanoi has given absolutely no indication that they are willing to talk substance. True they have the 10 point program, but it simply tells the U.S. to get out and accept defeat. This we won't do. I am concerned by reports from Paris that the North Vietnamese leaders have concluded that their best tactics are to continue to talk in Paris with no substance and to continue to fight in Vietnam, thinking that public opinion will force us to capitulate and get out.

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I never make idle threats; I do say that we can't indefinitely continue to have 200 deaths per week with no progress in Paris. On November 1 this year--one year after the halt of the bombing, after the withdrawal of troops, after reasonable offers for peaceful negotiation--if there is no progress, we must re-evaluate our policy.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear about North Vietnam. I don't hate the North Vietnamese. While I disagree with their government, I admire the courage of the people, their willingness to sacrifice. We want an equal chance for both sides; we want justice and peace for both sides. All we get from them is a take it or leave it position. There is nothing more important to me than to end this war on a fair basis. It will make possible the many Romanian-U.S. actions we talked about, could make possible U.S. -Chinese relations, and would help relations with the Soviet Union. All this is possible.

I want peace, but I will never accept defeat and will not have the U.S. humiliated by Hanoi. What may be necessary here is to open another channel of communications. (Kissinger notes add here: "Get any help in it.")

Mr. President, you implied yesterday that they do want peace on reasonable terms. We have had no indication of this. This is our problem. Dr. Kissinger negotiated with the North Vietnamese during the Johnson Administration. He may have something to add. If we can find an answer it will be a breakthrough to finding peace all over the world.

Kissinger:

Mr. President, I can add one or two things to what you said. We have no thought of humiliating Hanoi. We will not try to achieve at the conference table what was not achieved at the battlefield. A political solution must reflect the balance of political forces. We object to the other side's position because they want us to destroy Thieu and thus destroy their enemy. They are asking us for a U.S. defeat. President Nixon said the other side will not negotiate seriously. I'll give a brief example to you: The other side has offered the ten points. We agreed to talk about them together with other proposals. But at every meeting they treat us as if we are school boys

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taking examinations in their 10 points, and discuss nothing else. At last week's private meeting, after every statement by us, they said we had no right to say it for we have said it before. They demand something new. What we are asking is that we both recognize the existing balance of political forces. We would still have disagreements, but they could be resolved rapidly.

Nixon: I know you know the people of North Vietnam and you know me. I think that what is needed is a recognition of the fact that they are now making a grave mistake if they think they can wait us out. You can be assured we want nothing but a fair settlement, but it takes two to achieve this.

Ceausescu: Certainly the problem is serious, and as you said, it is a hinderance to the solution of other problems. In our view, a continuation of the war will lead to an unforeseeable situation with very grave consequences. It was good the bombing ceased but you need to go farther. I think here the problem is not the war with North Vietnam but the war which takes place in South Vietnam with internal forces of South Vietnam. A government has been created in South Vietnam by the NLF. We gather this government is ready to accept the creation of a new government to start ending the war, settling it through an understanding between all forces in South Vietnam. I will not discuss the history of how you got into Vietnam. If a political solution is wanted, it then appears that the idea of a government built on a wide base is acceptable and equitable. In our discussion with representatives of the NLF, they said that they wish to arrive at an equitable solution and not in any way to humiliate the U.S. They wish to maintain relations with the U.S. after.

Nixon: When was your last discussion?

Ceausescu: About four weeks ago. About five days ago with their ambassador, the Front ambassador. They asked me, both the representative of the Front and the ambassador from the PRG, to use our relations with the U.S. to assist in reaching a solution as quickly as possible. In my opinion, they want a solution equitable and acceptable to both sides.

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Nixon: How do we get them to talk? They won't talk to Lodge in Paris. We will not accept their negotiating on a take it or leave it basis. Maybe we need a very private channel.

Kissinger: They think they can make us lose without us noticing it.

Nixon: The least we can do for all people in South Vietnam is not to impose anything on them.

Kissinger: They refuse to talk to Thieu, which was the agreement at the time of the bombing halt. This makes it difficult to get a balance of forces, which is all we want.

Ceausescu: I want to ask two questions. If you don't want to answer, I understand. We will not convey your answers to anyone. First, is the U. S. ready to accept and favor a coalition government on an equal basis with the government of South Vietnam to resolve the problem of South Vietnam?

Nixon: Only if the coalition is the result of elections and not negotiation. There could be a coalition in the sense of setting up the machinery for organizing an election.

Kissinger: I must explain this point. The other side says we have proposed elections run by the government of South Vietnam. We actually propose an electoral commission with both sides represented, and an international commission.

Ceausescu: Why not accept a coalition government which bears the responsibility to end the war immediately and prepares for elections, because these can be conducted only without fighting. Elections in time of war are of little value.

Nixon: In addition to an internationally supervised cease fire. You are absolutely right, no election is possible during fighting. I want to emphasize why we cannot agree to a coalition (a hard word for us)...

Ceausescu: Change the word...

Nixon: A coalition government to supervise setting up an election. We have said that we prefer a mixed commission. That's a start.

Kissinger: The other side excludes our side by definition in a coalition government.

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Nixon: We can't dump our people.

Kissinger: We recognize that the NLF exists; we want them to recognize that the Thieu Government exists. We believe this commission makes possible the establishment of a balance of forces, through elections which could produce a government to end the war. We do not want to destroy the balance of forces.

Nixon: We do not ask the Front to disappear. They must not ask that Thieu disappear. I think that if we can start there we can make a settlement.

Maurer: I would like to know if I have the correct understanding. The mixed commission, in the American point of view, should watch over a cease fire and organize under international supervision the elections. Then after the elections they will have a government elected representing South Vietnam.

Nixon: Correct.

Maurer: I want to make sure I understand a number of things as seen by the U.S. Will the elections take place while American troops are still in South Vietnam?

Kissinger: That depends on Hanoi. We offered an international commission to supervise the withdrawal of all outside forces, the U.S. as well as North Vietnamese. We believe it is best if all outside forces are withdrawn.

Nixon: I suggested this be done in one year, and that elections be held with all forces gone.

Maurer: The reason I asked for clarification was that the whole context of your discussions shows you know Romania wants the war to end. If Romania did something to help this solution it did it as a result of its interest, and this interest is stronger today because we may now see a new opening in relations between states. Of course, it is difficult to review the history, the rights and wrongs of the war. This is not useful. We must find a flexible, subtle solution. This requires an inventive spirit. President Ceausescu stressed one idea which you should consider. If you don't arrive at a

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solution to end the war peacefully, what will you do then? We find in all this that the major interests get more involved-- even interests not willing to get involved get involved. Therefore, it appears flexibility is required from the stronger. President Ceausescu and I have talked with the heads of Vietnam. I have spoken with the leaders of North Vietnam, and a little with South Vietnamese leaders. I observed two very important things in these people. First, they must be masters of their own solutions and these must not be imposed from the outside. I'm thinking of those who support the effort. Secondly, they want to gain a solution without closing the door to future relations with the U. S. It is possible that the best idea is to find a man who could most appropriately provide the best flexibility and inventive spirit. I hope President Ceausescu also believes that talks can yield results. Patience is difficult for the U. S., but it is, in my opinion, advisable.

- Nixon: I have one very frank question. Does North Vietnam believe they should talk in Paris and fight in Vietnam, figuring that the U. S. will quit in a year or so, or do you think they want a settlement?
- Maurer: On this point, absolutely frankly, it appears possible they think the former. But this fighting is costing them. In our discussions they appear to want a solution. This is clearly my own idea and I cannot guarantee that they are the thoughts of the North Vietnamese. I think they are oriented towards finding a solution.
- Ceausescu: I have two problems. It is certain that South Vietnam and the PRG want to reach a peaceful solution and not to be tied to North Vietnam under present conditions. And North Vietnam and South Vietnam know that there is little chance for the war to end quickly in the present way. They stick to the position that a solution must have a finality conducive to self-determination. With a broadly based government composed of religious, cultural and other forces, one can't think this will bring unification with North Vietnam overnight. The commission as proposed by the U. S. is no solution. It leaves two governments in South Vietnam with the right to administer the territory under their control. This will not create conditions suitable for a solution. My idea is for a government coalition, maybe called by some other word, which may include all forces in South Vietnam. I know from what

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they told us that the PRG is not rigid in these matters. A broadly based government would facilitate a solution in a reasonable way.

Nixon: Were they rigid about the exclusion of Thieu?

Ceausescu: I asked them frankly if they were willing to accept members of the Thieu Government. They said this is a problem to be discussed. I think this problem must be looked at with more flexibility and in a practical way.

Nixon: It takes two to be flexible. They say no.

Ceausescu: I asked this for in a day or so they will come and ask your opinion on that point. I can't see an encouraging thing in your reply on this point. Are you ready to withdraw all troops from South Vietnam?

Nixon: If North Vietnam does also--tomorrow.

Ceausescu: It is difficult to tell which troops are from the North.

Nixon: Yes.

Ceausescu: Half of the North Vietnamese government is from the South.

Nixon: Some in the South were born in the North.

Kissinger: Some say the easiest way is to change the Northern and Southern governments.

Nixon: I want to sum up to be perfectly clear. We are flexible and willing to talk in another channel but only if they have an intention to settle. When you ask if we will dump Thieu and form a coalition government, the answer is no, and we are rigid on this. We do not ask the Front to eliminate people from their government. We will work to get a subtle peace. We cannot and will not just pull out. Second, we cannot and will not continue indefinitely to talk in Paris with no progress and while the fighting continues in Vietnam. I know the consequences referred to by the Prime Minister, but ^{it} is necessary to end the war by that route it will be because we have no other choice. We would be willing to work out

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solutions having the Front represented on the government to the extent its popular support and its strength justify it. As you know, you can only win at the conference table what was won on the battlefield. Another point--one very delicate and not for publication, but for your use as you want: If we can end the war, my plan is for an economic assistance program for South Vietnam and to make it available to North Vietnam if they want, as North Vietnam recovers from the wounds of war. This is good for North Vietnam and peace in the area. You can see that we are flexible. I want you to realize that only on Thieu are we rigid.

Maurer: You also set a condition, the preservation of the Thieu Government. This is a blind alley; why not try some other way?

Nixon: We say that Thieu and the Viet Cong should submit their courses to the public.

Ceausescu: This is not a solution conducive to ending the war. I think in the long run there are two elements. Thieu on the one hand and the PRG on the other--out of this a new government should emerge.

Nixon: No, not a government, but an instrument to conduct elections. Until elections, the Viet Cong have control over their land and Thieu over his.

Ceausescu: This is no solution.

Nixon: Let's say this in conclusion. I've conducted negotiation over the years--labor negotiations, for example--very tough ones. I know we never settled until both sides were willing to talk. Time is running out. We appreciate President Ceausescu and the Prime Minister's interest. Possibly as we meditate, you may have some ideas. We want to end the war and we will be reasonable. I want to establish a channel of communication with you on these matters. This can be done through the embassy,

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but where they are matter of highest importance, they should be transmitted through Dr. Kissinger. What you said to me remains in this room. What you send me will be in confidence. I may contact you in that way.

Kissinger: If you want to communicate with me, you can do so through your embassy.

Ceausescu: On special problems, I'll send someone.