

May 29, 1988

**Memorandum of Conversation, the President's First
One-on-One Meeting with General Secretary
Gorbachev**

Citation:

"Memorandum of Conversation, the President's First One-on-One Meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev", May 29, 1988, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Reagan Library declassification, FOIA request by National Security Archives.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/134082>

Summary:

Reagan and Gorbachev's first conversation during Reagan's 1988 visit to Moscow.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~SYSTEM II
90497

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: The President's First One-on-One Meeting
With General Secretary Gorbachev (U)

PARTICIPANTS: U.S.
The President
Thomas W. Simons, Jr., Deputy Assistant
Secretary of State for European Affairs
Rudolf V. Perina, Director for European and
Soviet Affairs, NSC Staff
Dimitri Zarechnak (Interpreter)

USSR
General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev
Viktor M. Sukhodrev, Acting Department
Director
Vadim I. Kuznetsov, Section Chief, MFA
Pavel Palazhchenko (Interpreter)

DATE, TIME May 29, 1988, 3:26 p.m. - 4:37 p.m.
AND PLACE: St. Catherine Hall, The Kremlin, Moscow

Gorbachev said he greeted the President warmly, and wanted to say right away that he was very determined to continue the growing dialogue which was gaining momentum in Soviet-American relations. They would be going into the details later, but he wished to say at the outset that he thought that in recent years, since the statement they had signed in Geneva, there was reason to see change for the better, and not only in bilateral relations, but, thanks to that, in the world. The most important result of the change was to make the whole international climate better and healthier. (S)

Gorbachev went on to say that because neither side could have done it alone, the Soviet leadership could not have done it alone. The two sides had to do it together, and had. There was an important symbolism in that. The President's personal contribution had counted for a lot. Gorbachev emphasized that he was not just saying nice words. (S)

The President said that both sides had come a long way since he first wrote to Gorbachev in 1985. History would record the period positively, and that was true not just for our relations. As with the INF Accord, they had made the world a little bit safer with some of the things they had done. Gorbachev said he agreed. The President continued that they still had much to do.

~~SECRET~~

DECLASSIFY ON: OADR

CLASSIFIED

~~SECRET~~

F78-004/2 #9

shar/22

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

2

He was particularly pleased with what Gorbachev was doing in Afghanistan, that he was withdrawing his troops. Afghanistan was a problem Gorbachev had inherited; he had not been involved in its creation. The whole world approved the courage he was showing in what he was doing there. (S)

Gorbachev said he would like to return to what he had said about their first meeting in Geneva. The President had mentioned it. It had been their first meeting; they would return to it again and again. It had been a difficult but necessary beginning. Looking back on Geneva, from the position achieved today, it was possible to give high marks to the important political statements that they had made there. There they had said in their joint statement that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought; that no war was admissible; that neither side sought military superiority. It had been a strong statement by the leaders of the two great powers, and it had received much attention in the world. (S)

Gorbachev said he wanted to invite the President to build on that Geneva experience, to make in their joint document a political statement on the same scale. Both sides and their allies now thought it necessary to move forward in arms control. Joint efforts were needed. But it was also evident that no problems in the world could be solved by military means. War made things too unpredictable. Therefore, the only way to resolve problems, including regional conflicts, was by political means. Building on their four meetings since Geneva, they should say that, in this diverse world of varied ideologies and nations, it was essential to live together in peace. That should be a universal principle. He wanted to give the President his proposed language for a draft statement. He asked the President to think about how to reflect what they had thought about in their four meetings and would be thinking about here in Moscow. (S)

Gorbachev asked the President what he would say in principle to making such a statement. It was a question of reflecting policies as they were. (S)

The President asked if he could repeat it, and Gorbachev said he would pass it to him in writing. Noting that an English text was included, the President said he had thought for a minute Gorbachev thought he read Russian; no, said Gorbachev; the English text was there. (S)

(The English text Gorbachev passed to to the President in writing read:)

"Proceeding from their understanding of the realities that have taken shape in the world today, the two leaders believe that

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

3

no problem in dispute can be resolved, nor should it be resolved, by military means. They regard peaceful coexistence as a universal principle of international relations. Equality of all states, non-interference in internal affairs and freedom of socio-political choice must be recognized as the inalienable and mandatory standards of international relations." (S)

After reading the statement, the President said he liked it, and their people should look at it. Gorbachev noted that he was passing it over for consideration and discussion. (S)

The President said he was somewhat older than Gorbachev, and remembered when the two countries were allies in World War II against the evil of Hitler. Then, after the war, something happened between the countries, and, as Churchill said, an iron curtain fell between them. He did not hear the term used much anymore, and he thought that in their meetings he and Gorbachev had something to do with that. That did not mean that all the problems between the two countries were solved, but they had done things, and could do things, in the spirit of the statement that Gorbachev had just given him. (S)

The President said he wished to digress for a minute and hand Gorbachev a list, as he had done on previous occasions. The United States was a country to which people came from all over the world, and many of them maintained an interest in the countries they had come from. All the cases on the list had been brought to his personal attention, by relatives and friends, and he wanted to mention two specifically. (S)

The first was that of Yuriy Zieman. He was a writer. His children were in America, and he was seriously ill, and wished to come to America for medical treatment. The President said he had wanted to visit him. Zieman's children wanted to do something for him, if not to cure him, at least to ease his illness. (S)

The President continued that he would not go through the whole list; there were a dozen or so. But for some reason he felt a particularly affinity to one man on the list, Abe Stolar. He was an American, whose parents had come to America in the time of the czars. He had been born on the very same day as the President, in the state of Illinois, so they had been born not many miles apart. When Stolar was young, he and his parents returned to Russia, and his son had eventually married a young lady in Russia. Now they had all decided they wanted to return to the land where Stolar was born, the United States, and the Soviet government gave permission to all but the daughter-in-law. So they all decided to stay behind until they could leave together. As Stolar put it, he wanted to die where he was born, and the President thought the Soviet authorities should allow the whole family to leave. He hoped he would not die on same day as Stolar, even though they were born on the same day. (S)

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

4

Gorbachev responded that as always when the President presented specific humanitarian problems to him, especially concerning departures, these would be given careful attention. There was no obstacle to departure from the Soviet Union but one -- possession of state secrets -- and that was natural, since all countries wished to protect such secrets. But basically the Soviets did not keep people against their will. (S)

Gorbachev went on to say that on the eve of his departure, in his statements in the U.S., in Washington, in Helsinki, the President had spoken about raising human rights in Moscow. Gorbachev said with a smile that he felt it was incumbent upon him to respond, since otherwise, people might feel the President had him (Gorbachev) in a corner, and that more pressure should be put on him. He wanted to say that they in the Soviet leadership were ready to work with the U.S., with the Administration and with the Congress, on an ongoing basis, for solutions to humanitarian problems. He was saying that because he was convinced of it, and because it was quite clear that both in the Administration and in the Congress there were people who did not have a clear idea of what the human rights situation really was in the Soviet Union. (S)

Gorbachev went on to say that the Soviets had many comments to make about the U.S. human rights situation; about problems of political rights, the rights of blacks and colored people, social and economic rights, the treatment of anti-war protesters and movements. They got many facts from the U.S. press. Probably they still did not know everything well. But they were ready to listen to what the U.S. side had to say. They were ready to have a conversation with the U.S. Congress. Gorbachev said he was calling for a seminar, on a continuous basis, involving officials, legislators and academics of the two sides, to discuss what was happening in the two countries. (S)

It was not just a question of cases, Gorbachev continued, but of generalizations with which the Soviets disagreed; the U.S. probably heard some things it disagreed with on the Soviet side, too. But these things should be discussed. The Soviets were open to that kind of discussion. (S)

The President said he knew what Gorbachev was saying. Some of it was true, as it was anyplace, because the U.S. was a big and varied country. It had many races, and one race, the blacks, had once been slaves. They were then freed, and discriminating against them was now illegal, but all the individual prejudices could not be immediately overcome. Some people in our country had brought them with them when they immigrated. But there was one difference: the U.S. had passed laws, and under the law no one could use prejudice to keep someone from getting a job,

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

5

finding housing, getting an education, and the like. That would be against the law, and that person would be punished under the law, not because of his race or religion. (S)

Gorbachev responded that there were many declarations and many provisions in the U.S. Constitution and U.S. laws. The problem was to look at how they were implemented in real life. If one looked at figures on unemployment of Blacks and Hispanics, on per capita income of Whites and Blacks, on access to education and health, there were big differences. In the Soviet Union, living standards were lower, even much lower than in the United States, but there was nothing like such large contrasts among groups of people in the country when it came to pay and the like. (S)

The President responded that when slavery was lifted from the Blacks they started at a much lower level than others, and even the civil rights laws could not guarantee them equality when it came to jobs and schools, and the like. But when you considered that they had started lower, under the economic expansion of the past six years, wages and employment among Blacks were rising faster than for Whites. In other words, they were catching up. (S)

Gorbachev said he had not been inventing figures. He was citing facts from the American Congress. He did not want to teach lessons to the United States President on how to run America. He just wanted to note that the President had ideas about the Soviets, and the Soviets had ideas about the United States. Recently, the Soviets had become much more self-critical, but the U.S. had not. Once the Soviets had begun to be self-critical, it seemed that the U.S. spoke more about civil and ethical rights. Of course, the President was completing his term as President. Gorbachev said he thought the President's successors would be more self-critical than he was. Maybe everything was not "alright" (Gorbachev used the English word) in the United States, as the President's Administration seemed to think. He wanted only to say that he was suggesting an ongoing seminar between legislators and others to examine the issues and compare notes. (S)

The President said he thought that was a wonderful idea. One goal of the session should be to work out misunderstandings. (S)

The President continued that he wished to take up another topic that had been a kind of personal dream of his. He had been reluctant to raise it with Gorbachev, but he was going to do it now anyway. He wanted no hint that anything had been negotiated, where we had insisted on something the Soviets had to do. If word got out that this was even being discussed, the President would deny he had said anything about it. (S)

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

6

The President went on that he was suggesting this because they were friends, and Gorbachev could do something of benefit not only to him but to the image of his country worldwide. The Soviet Union had a church -- in a recent speech Gorbachev had liberalized some of its rules -- the Orthodox Church. The President asked Gorbachev what if he ruled that religious freedom was part of the people's rights, that people of any religion -- whether Islam with its mosque, the Jewish faith, Protestants or the Ukrainian church -- could go to the church of their choice. (S)

The President said that in the United States, under our Constitution, there was complete separation of church and state from each other. People had endured a long sea voyage to a primitive land to worship as they pleased. So what the President had suggested could go a long way to solving the Soviet emigration problem. Potential emigrants often wanted to go because of their limited ability to worship the God they believed in. (S)

Gorbachev said that the Soviets judged the problem of religion in the Soviet Union as not a serious one. There were not big problems with freedom of worship. He, himself, had been baptized, but was not now a believer, and that reflected a certain evolution of Soviet society. There was a difference of approach to that problem. The Soviets said that all were free to believe or not to believe in God. That was a person's freedom. The U.S. side was actively for freedom, but why did it then happen that non-believers in the U.S. sometimes felt suppressed. He asked why non-believers did not have the same rights as believers. The President said they did. He had a son who was an atheist, though he called himself an agnostic. (S)

Gorbachev asked again why atheists were criticized in the United States. This meant a certain infringement of their freedom. It meant there was a limitation on their freedom. He read the U.S. press. There should be free choice to believe or not to believe in God. (S)

The President said that was also true for people in the United States. Religion could not be taught in a public school. When we said freedom, that meant the government had nothing to do with it. There were people who spent considerable money to build and maintain schools that were religious. He had heard Gorbachev had recently lifted restrictions on such contributions. There were people volunteering to restore churches. In our country the government could not prevent that, but could not help it either. Tax money could not be spent to help churches. It was true there were private schools, with the same courses as public schools but with religious education besides, because people were willing to pay to create and support them. But in public schools supported by taxes you could not even say a prayer. (S)

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

7

Gorbachev said that after the Revolution there had been excesses in that sphere. As in any revolution there had been certain excesses, and not only in that sphere but in others as well. But today the trend was precisely in the direction the President had mentioned. There had been some conflicts between the authorities and religious activists, but only when they were anti-Soviet, and there had been fewer such conflicts recently, and he was sure they would disappear. And when they spoke of perestroika, that meant change, a democratic expansion of democratic procedures, of rights, of making them real; and that referred to religion, too. (S)

The President invited Gorbachev to look at religious rights under our Constitution. There were some people -- not many, but some -- who were against war. They were allowed to declare themselves conscientious objectors, when they could prove that it was a matter of faith with them not to take up arms even to defend their country. They could be put in uniform doing non-violent jobs -- they could not escape from service -- but they could not be made to kill against their religion. In every war there were a few such people, and sometimes they performed heroic deeds in the service of others. They could refuse to bear arms. (S)

If Gorbachev could see his way clear to do what the President had asked, continued the President, he felt very strongly that he would be a hero, and that much of the feeling against his country would disappear like water in hot sun. If there was anyone in the room who said he had given such advice, he would say that person was lying, that he had never said it. This was not something to be negotiated, something someone should be told to do. (S)

The President said he had a letter from the widow of a young World War II soldier. He was lying in a shell hole at midnight, awaiting an order to attack. He had never been a believer, because he had been told God did not exist. But as he looked up at the stars he voiced a prayer hoping that, if he died in battle, God would accept him. That piece of paper was found on the body of a young Russian soldier who was killed in that battle. (S)

Gorbachev responded that he still felt the President did not have the full picture concerning freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had not only many nationalities and ethnic groups, but many religious denominations -- Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, various denominations of Protestants, like the Baptists -- and they practiced their religion on a very large scale. The President would meet the Patriarch, would go to one of the monasteries. If the President asked him, the Patriarch would tell him about the situation concerning religion in their country. (S)

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

8

Gorbachev said he would like to make one more suggestion. It was true that they did not have much time to do much that was new. But they should try to work not just for the present but also for the future. Perhaps the President would give thought to opening up even greater cooperation in space between the two countries. If that came out of this meeting as a common desire, that would be a good result. The two countries had good capabilities and doing something jointly would be a very big thing. It was very difficult for one country to operate in space. As he had already said to the Washington Post, now the Soviets would like the U.S. to begin cooperation on a joint mission to Mars. He understood this would be a long-term project; it meant lots of work and could not be accomplished overnight. But it was important to begin, and cooperation would be very useful. (S)

The President said that the U.S. program had been set back by the Challenger tragedy. But he had asked his people to look into the General Secretary's suggestion. Space was in the direction of heaven, but not as close to heaven as some other things they had been discussing. Gorbachev said it was at least closer to heaven. (S)

The President noted that there was a young man giving him the signal that the wives of the two leaders were waiting. Gorbachev said he understood. Gorbachev said he wished to give the President his proposal for joint statement language on Mars. (Its English text read:)

"The two sides noted that preparation and implementation of a manned mission to Mars would be a major and promising bilateral Soviet-American program, which at subsequent stages could become international. It was agreed that experts from both countries would begin joint consideration of various aspects of such a program." (S)

Gorbachev said he was very pleased with this first discussion. It confirmed that the two leaders were still on very friendly terms. He hoped this meant they were truly beginning to build trust between the two countries. He had told Secretary Shultz -- who must have conveyed it to the President -- that they were just beginning to be on good terms with the Administration, and along came an election. But he still wanted movement; there was still time to accomplish many things. (S)

The President said he agreed. He knew it was not protocol, but between the two of them they were Mikhail and Ron. Gorbachev said he had noticed they were on a first-name basis since the Washington meeting. (S)

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

9

The President concluded that there was one thing he had long yearned to do for his atheist son. He wanted to serve his son the perfect gourmet dinner, to have him enjoy the meal, and then to ask him if he believed there was a cook. The President said he wondered how his son would answer. As the meeting ended, Gorbachev said that the only answer possible was "yes." (S)

~~SECRET~~~~SECRET~~