April 5, 1946
Cable from B. Smith to Secretary of State

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Summary:

Ambassador Smith and Stalin discuss relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, both expressing their desire to avoid a deterioration of relations in the post-war time frame.

Original Language:

English

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711.61/4-546: Telegram

The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Smith) to the Secretary of State

TOP SECRET
PRIORITY
Moscow, April 5, 1946 - 6 p.m.
[Received 6:38 p.m.]

1053. I had an interview with Generalissimo Stalin at 9 o'clock last night. Because I thought that the conversation might become stormy I went alone. Mr. Molotov was with
Stalin.

The conference lasted a little over 2 hours, and opened on a very restrained note. The interpreter read President Truman's letter[1] after which I stated that when I left the United States the most important question in the minds of the American people was "What does the Soviet Union want, and how far is Russia going to go?" While the United States could appreciate Soviet desires for security and participation in exploiting the world's raw materials, and consequently did not strongly criticize what seemed to be some of the Soviet objectives, the methods used by the Soviet Union caused grave apprehension, and gave the general impression in America that the Soviet Government did not mean what it said. Neither the American people nor the American Government could take seriously the possibility of aggressive action against the Soviet Union by any nation or group of nations in the world today. We felt certain that no possible combination of powers could threaten the Soviet Union without the active support of the United States, and our entire history precluded the possibility that we would ever lend support to aggressive action. If further proof were wanted, it could be found in the speed with which we were demobilizing our vast military strength.

The United States is willing and anxious to meet the Soviet Union half way because we are convinced that if our two nations understand and cooperate with each other the peace of the world is assured. Indeed, we felt that we had already gone more than half way. We appreciate and admire the strength of the Soviet Union, but at the same time we are fully conscious of our own strength.

The United States entered the United Nations organization with the full support of its people and with a complete sense of the responsibility we assumed for the peace of the world. We believe profoundly that only by the sincere observance of the principles and obligations of the United Nations Charter on the part of all members is there any hope for a stable and peaceful world. Events which have taken place in the Near East, in Asia, and later in the early sessions of the present Security Council meeting had caused doubts in the minds of the American people that the Soviet Union really intended fully to support the United Nations as an agency for insuring world peace to the extent that the United States intended to support it, although by the end of the war we had been assured that unqualified support would be forthcoming from the USSR. These apprehensions had been somewhat allayed by the Generalissimo Stalin's statement to the Associated Press, but more was needed.

The President had asked me to say that both he and Secretary Byrnes had always believed that when the Generalissimo made a statement or a commitment he meant to keep it, and the American people hoped that events would confirm that belief, but it would be misinterpreting the character of the United States to assume that because we are basically peaceful and deeply interested in world security, we are either divided, weak or unwilling to face our responsibilities. If the people of the United States were ever to become convinced that we are faced with a wave of progressive aggression on the part of any powerful nation or group of nations, we would react exactly as we have in the past.

The fact is that we are faced in America, as is the USSR, with the responsibility of making important long-range decisions on our future military policy, and these decisions will depend to a large extent on what our people believe to be the policies of the Soviet Union. I f each of our two nations is convinced of the other's sincerity in supporting the principles of the United Nations Charter, then these policies can be settled without difficulty in the way we most earnestly desire. On the other hand, if both nations remain apprehensive and suspicious of each other, we may both find ourselves embarked upon an expensive policy of rearmament and the maintenance of large military establishments which we wish to avoid.

Generalissimo Stalin replied at length and in great detail, and his remarks included counter-charges directed against our own actions and policies. The sequence and length of his argument made it obvious that the United States' comments had been anticipated.

He discussed the Iranian question, beginning with a history of Soviet-Iranian relations from the time of the Treaty of Versailles as known to the Department. He stated quite frankly that Qavam's predecessor[2] was definitely unfriendly to Russia and that pressure had been exerted for his removal and for the appointment of a successor who was not unfriendly. He cited similar instances from British and American international relations.

He then spoke at length of the obstacles placed in the way of Soviet efforts to obtain oil concessions, particularly by Great Britain and later by the United States and commented somewhat bitterly on the fact that the delay asked by Russia in considering the Iranian question in the Security Council had been opposed by the US, saying that if such a request had been made by the US in similar circumstances the Soviet Union would willingly and gladly have conceded it. Now, however, an agreement had been reached with the Iranian Government, the Soviet Union was committed to the complete withdrawal of its troops by May 5th, and this commitment would be met. He remarked that he had made known to President Truman and to Secretary Byrnes the reasons why he felt unable to meet the previous withdrawal date, and had encountered no objection at that time.

He then discussed the general question of Soviet adherence to the United Nations Charter, which he reaffirmed, but deplored the fact that the American press and American statesmen had given an entirely incorrect idea of Russia's objectives. The USSR had no intentions of taking over the Balkan nations, nor would this be an easy matter as the Balkan nations were determined to maintain their national integrity.

He spoke very strongly about Mr. Churchill's speech in Fulton which he interpreted as an unfriendly act and an unwarranted attack on himself and the USSR which, if it had been directed against the United States, would never have been permitted in Russia. He implied that this speech and many other occurrences could indicate nothing but a definite alignment of Great Britain and the United States against the USSR. With regard to the Far East, he said that twice the withdrawal of Soviet troops had been delayed at the request of the Chinese Government which later complained, remarking contemptuously: "That is just like such people."

He then said that Russia was anxious to reduce her military establishment, and, apparently under the impression that I had intended to propose some such thing, said that the Soviet Government would be very willing to discuss with the US a mutual reduction of armaments.

In reply I said. that with regard to Iran there was no slightest idea on the part of the US of denying to USSR an equal opportunity with others to exploit natural resources, and we would, in fact, give moral support to such equal opportunity, but we deplored the approach to a concession under threat of armed force when it seemed entirely possible for the Soviet Union to have kept her commitment on the agreed date of withdrawal of her troops from Iran and still have obtained the oil concessions they desired. The Generalissimo said that on previous occasions when their attempt to obtain concession for Iranian oil had been blocked by Great Britain he had not noticed that the US had supported Russia's just requests. I replied that I recalled no instance where the matter had been brought officially to the attention of the US, or that we had ever been in a position to express an opinion or to give moral support to the USSR at the time.

With regard to the Soviet Union's security aspirations, I said again that the people of the US could not take seriously the idea that any combination of powers now constituted a threat to the USSR. On the contrary, we had noted the fate of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the present situation in the Balkan States and in the Near East, and we asked ourselves if this were only the beginning; that it must be said that we were beginning to believe that the Soviet idea of a friendly government and our own was very different. It seemed to us that what the USSR meant by a friendly government was a government which was under the complete control of Moscow, and not one which was capable of self-determination.

I then asked directly why the Generalissimo thought that any power or powers seemed a threat to the USSR. To this he replied: "Churchill – He tried to instigate war against Russia, and persuaded the US to join him in armed occupation of part of our territory in 1919, and lately he has been at it again."

"Russia," he said, "as the events of the past few years have proved, is not stupid, and we can recognize our friends from our potential enemies."

I replied that we ourselves must plead stupidity since it was impossible for us to imagine a threat to Russia, particularly in the direction of the Baku oil fields, or any serious attempt at aggression without the support of the United States, which would never be given to aggression.

I then asked him categorically if he really believed that the US and Great Britain were united in an alliance to thwart Russia. He replied that he did so believe. I said that this was certainly not the case; that, while the US had many ties with Britain, including common language and many common interests, we were interested primarily in world security and justice; that this interest and responsibility extended to small nations as well as large; and that while recent events had caused the US Delegation to vote with Britain, it was because we felt that justice required us to do so. On the other hand, there was no nation in the world with whom we were more interested in arriving at a basis of understanding than with Russia, as we felt that the future of the world for a long time to come lay in the hands of our two

With regard to his statement that Russia did not intend to go much further, I asked if this implied active expansion at the expense of Turkey. He stated that he had assured President Truman that the Soviet Union had no intention of attacking Turkey, nor did this intention exist. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was conscious of the danger to Russia which existed in foreign control of the Straits which Turkey, with a government unfriendly to Russia, was too weak to protect. Consequently, the Soviets demanded a base in the Dardanelles. I replied that it would seem that this was a matter which could and should be handled by the United Nations, the agency set up to provide such security, and that by so doing Soviet security might be safeguarded without aggression toward Turkey. He then said that the USSR could possibly agree that as an alternative the Security Council of the United Nations might be able to undertake this responsibility.

By this time the atmosphere had become distinctly more cordial, and Stalin's remarks, interspersed with complimentary references to the accomplishments of the American Army and various American Generals, became very much more personal in tone. Since I felt that the position of the US had been made quite clear, and the conference had already lasted more than 2 hours, I concluded by restating our desires for a closer relationship and mutual understanding with the Government of the USSR which we considered essential for world peace. Marshal Stalin replied: "Prosper your efforts. I will help you. I am at your disposal at any time." He then re-affirmed his desire for peace and adherence to the principles of the United Nations going to some length in discussing the differences in our political ideologies, which were nevertheless not incompatible, and stated that we "should not be alarmed or apprehensive because of differences of opinion and arguments which occur • in families and even between brothers because with patience and good will these differences would be reconciled." He hoped in the future that they might be reconciled before coming formally on the floor of the United Nations Conference, since that resulted in embarrassment to one side or the other.

Speaking of the President's invitation to visit the United States, he said he would like much to be able to accept. However, he said: "Age has taken its toll. My doctors tell me that I must not travel, and I am kept on a strict diet. I will write to the President,

thank him, and explain the reasons why I cannot now accept."

SMITH

[1] Text of this letter has not been found in the Department files, but it is known to have contained an invitation to Stalin to visit the United States. See the final paragraph of the present telegram: and see also Walter Bedell Smith. Moscow Mission, 1946-1949 (London. 1950). pp. 15, 35, and 88. President Truman was himself questioned about this invitation at his news conference of May 31, 1946: see Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1946 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1962). pp. 281-283 passim.

[2] Ibrahim Hakimi was the predecessor of Ahmad Qavam as Prime Minister of Iran.