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Conversation with Kissinger

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The *Journal* reproduces below — in their entirety — the minutes of a private discussion which took place at a brunch in the Hotel Pierre in New York on June 15, 1975, between Henry Kissinger, the then American Secretary of State, and a group of American Jewish leaders (Philip Klutznik Group*.)]

Kissinger: First of all I want you to know how much I appreciate your taking off on the weekend to come here. I explained some concerns to Mr. Klutznik about the future of Israel and the Jewish Community in America if we did not behave with wisdom. I am not here to ask you to do anything or to convince you of the wisdom of any particular approach but I would like to explain our approach.

Let me start at the beginning of my term in Washington in early 1969. The '67 war was in the recent past. I personally had nothing to do with Middle East affairs and when I first heard the wording of UN Security Council Resolution 242 I thought that it was impossible when I heard the expression "just and lasting peace" that policy could be set on the interpretation — the infinite possibilities for interpretation — of each adjective.

I left the Middle East primarily to the State Department and to my predecessor

there. But I made clear that my strategy would be to frustrate the Arab-Soviet relationship. Then once the Soviets were frustrated with the Arabs we could begin a process towards peace in the Middle East. During the first term of the Nixon Administration, I maintained that our policy was to see the Soviets expelled from Egypt. Therefore, in the various crises that occurred in the Middle East, in the Jordanian crisis and the Suez missile crisis, we adopted a posture that was very provocative in order to demonstrate the limitations of Soviet influence.

In 1971 Secretary Rogers tried for interim agreements along the Suez Canal. I did not oppose it, but neither did I support it. I am speaking very frankly now. The effort broke down over whether or not 1,000 Egyptian soldiers would be permitted across the Canal. That agreement would have prevented the 1973 war. I must say now that I am sorry

* A list of the participants at the brunch meeting appears at the end of the article — *Ed.*

that I did not support the Rogers' effort more than I did.

Then Sadat threw out the Russians. I must say I never took Sadat seriously before; but then the 1973 war started. The United States saved Israel from collapse at the end of the first week by our arms supply. And even while this was going on, Sadat was sending us notes every day saying that he knew there would have to be talks after the war and that he wanted me to come to Egypt to get the process of peace started as soon as possible. Some have claimed that it was American strategy to produce a stalemate in the 1973 war. This is absolutely wrong. What we wanted was the most massive Arab defeat possible so that it would be clear to the Arabs that they would get nowhere with dependence on the Soviets. What caused the stalemate was the fact that the Israelis were not ready for the war. Also, if anything, the Israelis did not give us sufficient information during the war. Near the end, we did not even know that they were headed south. I even asked them.

We went to Moscow because we wanted to delay Security Council consideration. We didn't go to Moscow to cave. We wanted to delay the Security Council in order to give Israel 72 more hours to fight. Going to Moscow was our way to give Israel more time. If the Israelis had trapped the Third Army during the war it would not have been an American problem and we could have left it alone. But trapping the Third Army after a US-arranged cease-fire was in effect made it our problem, and even then the United States went on nuclear alert to scare the Soviets out of unilateral action. So this group should understand that stalemate was not our goal.

What is the situation today? Now it is very easy for a group like this to try to say that American and Israeli interests are identical. But this is not exactly so and I think it is wrong for the Jewish com-

munity in the United States to get fixed on that concept. The United States has an interest in the survival of Israel; but we, of course, have an interest in the 130 million Arabs that sit athwart the world's oil supplies. Also the Soviets must assume that their problem is that their impotence has been demonstrated in each crisis. Therefore, during the next crisis they may take much greater risks than they have before. Look at our general domestic situation. Anyone who has had anything to do with sports knows that success involves inches and nuances. This is the same with foreign policy. For example, in October of 1973 what if the Soviets had not caved at noon following the night of our alert? What if they had held on for 36 more hours? Even by noon of the day following the alert everyone was saying this is just a Watergate stunt.

Then look at the Jordanian crisis of 1970; the State Department thought that we should send diplomatic notes to everyone in the world. But we said no; in fact, we told the State Department to discontinue all communications with other countries. Then we sent an armoured division down the Autobahn. We flew aircraft from the Sixth Fleet to Lod Airfort in order to pick up staging plans. We put the 82nd Airborne on alert. The Syrian tanks turned back. None of this was in the newspapers, in contrast to what happened in October of 1973.

We had to consider the following factors during the '73 war: first, what would be the impact of the oil crisis on Western Europe and Japan? And I must tell you that every European leader that I have seen has told me that under no circumstances will he allow his country to undergo a domestic depression due to an oil embargo. Secondly, our impression is that Israel must be strong, but Israeli strength does not prevent the spread of communism in the Arab world. Israeli strength provides for Israeli security. The

best defence against the spread of communism in the Arab world is to strengthen the moderate Arab governments. So it is difficult to claim that a strong Israel serves American interests because it prevents the spread of communism in the Arab world. It does not; it provides for the survival of Israel. This was our perception in October of 1973.

What was our strategy in '73? First, we sought to break up the Arab United Front. Also we wanted to ensure that the Europeans and Japanese did not get involved in the diplomacy; and, of course, we wanted to keep the Soviets out of the diplomatic arena. Finally, we sought a situation which would enable Israel to deal separately with each of its neighbours. We told the Israelis they could go to the Europeans if they wanted proclamations, but if they wanted progress towards peace they would have to come to us. Thus, the step-by-step process began.

The step-by-step led to two disengagement agreements; but then we had to make a basic strategic decision: shall we go now for overall settlement or continue the step-by-step? An overall effort has its advantages. Most importantly, one can put everything on the table; one can argue the framework of final settlement with full knowledge of the objectives of all sides involved. But the disadvantages are that it would bring all the Arabs together, and when this happens the radical Arabs would have the upper hand. Then the Soviets would always be able to outbid whatever else was on the table and the radical Arabs would, of course, have to opt for what the Soviets had to offer. Of course, the Soviets would not make an offer in the interests of achieving peace, but rather in the interest of assuring that there was no progress.

Therefore, we decided to continue with the step-by-step approach. Now the step-by-step approach requires great discipline. There are sharpshooters all

over town that say that the step-by-step approach is unsatisfactory and that it is dead. It was inevitable that opposition would develop. For one thing, the overall approach has acquired a certain lustre and it is clear that if Middle East peace is to come, the step-by-step approach must eventually merge into a comprehensive framework. But there is one thing you can say for step-by-step: it gives the parties involved a certain degree of confidence in that it is cumulative.

And now a word about the suspended negotiations and here I will be very candid. It is simply not true that there was some personal pique involved in the collapse of the negotiations. In June of 1974 when President Nixon was in Jerusalem we talked with Rabin about the step-by-step versus the overall approach. Rabin affirmed that the step-by-step was preferable as long as Israel did not have to make the first move. His was a new government and they could not afford politically, he said, to make the first move.

Then Allon came to Washington. He is an old friend of mine and I took him up to Camp David. Allon said that Israel wants to pursue step-by-step, but Israel wanted to have some time first. They wanted no negotiations before December. He even said give us until March; we are a new government and we cannot jump into this. So we gave them some time. The United States went into a protracted stall with the Arabs. I took many trips to the area — with no progress, of course.

At the same time Rabin was asking for US arms. The united bureaucracy came up with an offer which was only one seventh of what the Israelis wanted. But due to my efforts we gave him four sevenths of what he asked for and we still held back on the diplomacy.

Then Hussein offered to accept what was about half of the territory called for in the old Allon Plan. In return for this he said he would agree to end any Jordanian

pressure. But the Israelis said no; as a new government they did not feel that they were prepared to accept that. And then we had Rabat.

So you see, you have an Israeli government which says that it won't move at all on the Golan and also that precluded any movement on the West Bank by the decision on the Hussein offer and by Rabat. So we were left to try again on the Sinai.

Now the Israelis never tire of dragging out this or that part of the written record about the negotiations. But the man from Grand Rapids does not understand why these legal technicalities are so all-important. He assumes — if the parties are negotiating about the passes — that withdrawal from the passes can in fact be achieved. So Israel cannot really depend on beating the President into submission on legal technicalities.

Speaking very candidly again, I must say that I knew something wasn't right about the March negotiations before they even started. I told Sisco that something smells wrong. I said they are not as obnoxious as they would be if they really wanted an agreement. (Laughter) I told you I was speaking very candidly. Sisco said "Impossible."

When I told my deputy at the NSC [National Security Council], Brent Scowcroft, the guy who keeps the State Department in line for me, that the talks were going to be suspended just before it actually happened, he simply could not believe it. Neither could Peter Podman, who has taken all the notes for me and who is a long-time associate and friend.

We told the Israelis all along that non-belligerency was unattainable. I thought that by non-belligerency they meant non-use of force; and then when Sadat agreed to a conditional non-use of force, I thought we were half-way there. I thought that all we would have to do was to remove the conditions on the non-use of force and we would have an agree-

ment. But what the Israelis wanted was complete non-belligerency, that is, removal of all the conditions that stand between the present situation and perfectly normal relations, including all the civilian aspects of belligerency.

Well, Sadat's answer to this was, if I have to give up everything just to get them out of the passes, what will I have left to give to get back all my land?

Now Sadat did agree that the agreement should have an automatic extension. There was a one-year term of UNEF, but there was a side undertaking that there would be an extension. This was more than I thought we could get. And then to stick the United States out in front like they had, and to say on the last day that we won't leave the passes, well this we cannot regard as a minor matter.

Our first major concern after the talks broke down was to prevent an Arab blow-up. The President wrote a letter saying there would be a reassessment, but the Israelis leaked it. Then the President had to make public the fact that there would be a reassessment. What the reassessment has done is it has kept things cool with the Arabs. The arms that have not been delivered were not scheduled until 1977 anyway, and, of course, they got 200 tanks. So, you can see, we took no punitive action.

Now Israel wants 2.6 billion dollars; but we have to ask, for what? Where are we going to go from here? If the United States is seen as financing a Middle East stalemate with 2.6 billion dollars, the Arabs will turn back towards radicalism. Then you will have the Arabs putting oil pressure on the Europeans and the Japanese and eventually on the United States. At first Congress will be very tough. They will say we won't yield to blackmail, but after five years, I ask you, will we be so tough? And when this situation comes and the Jews in America put themselves up as being the spokesmen

for Israel, they will have to explain why the United States is in such a state.

Anybody can survive for six months, but the real art of diplomacy is survival over a longer, at least a medium-term, time frame. If we fail now there will be an explosion. I don't know when, but there will be one. And even if Israel takes Damascus, Cairo and Amman, the basic political problems will remain. World opinion will turn dramatically against Israel and the United States, and also the Soviets during the next explosion will be willing to take more risks. Now what if they land two battalions in the area and then call for a settlement? I, of course, would be in favour of opposing it but I don't know whether we would get Congressional support to put US forces in to prevent it.

If there are no chances for the step-by-step to succeed, then we will have to look at the possibility of a comprehensive settlement. And if that comes to pass, world public opinion will certainly favour a '67 borders settlement. When Israel faces such a situation things will be difficult for her, but sooner or later Israel will have to face these questions anyway.

The only thing that is definitely not an option is no progress at all. Any attempt by Israel to organize the American Jewish community against their government will lead to a disaster. I cannot be expected to solve all this and the American Jewish leaders cannot ask the Secretary of State to represent narrow interests.

So on the whole, we lean towards another interim agreement; but if not, we will go to Geneva because it will be the only way out. And if we go to Geneva, the dangers of explosion will be very great. We must face the problem of asking ourselves what peace in the Middle East will look like. Mock heroism could lead to the destruction of Israel.

Question: *Can you tell us about what happened at Salzburg?*

Kissinger: Well, Sadat in my judgement is an Egyptian nationalist. If you gave him the '67 borders, you would never hear from him again. He is basically upper-bourgeois. He would like to start the peace process, but he is also an Arab and he must defend his position within the Arab world.

At Salzburg,¹ he told me that he thinks that Israel wants to freeze the situation so that by 1977 some radical Arab will do something wild which will lead the United States to abandon the Arabs.

We told Sadat that Israel needed better terms than in March. And Israel also seems willing to make concessions, but I don't know if they will make the critical move out of the passes. Rabin said he would leave the passes only for non-belligerency. Egypt is willing to turn the passes over to the United Nations. They want the Israelis one kilometre out of the passes. They themselves would be 20 kilometres out of the passes.

I have no interest in achieving an interim agreement if the American Jews are going to think that is the end of history. It will help, but it cannot be seen as the end of the process.

Question: *Did the breakdown occur because of failure to achieve [the] Knesset's support?*

Kissinger: I have the impression that Rabin did want the agreement, but he had some problem with polls; he was running 30 percent, and Peres according to the polls was up to 68 percent. It doesn't seem to me that Rabin manages his domestic debate with quite the *élan* that Golda did. Apparently he never told anyone all along how far he had gone in his discussions. Therefore, he probably

¹ On June 1-2, 1975, President Sadat met with US President Ford in Salzburg to discuss alternative approaches to a Middle East settlement. Secretary of State Kissinger also attended these discussions — *Ed.*

couldn't have gotten Knesset support. While this may be true, the fact remains the United States was way out front for 10 months on this.

Question (Landes): *Has there been any discussion with Sadat or with the Israelis for that matter on just what is meant by the term "legitimate rights of the Palestinians"?*

Kissinger: Well, I know Sadat wanted to let Hussein worry about it. That was Sadat's first preference. He wanted the problem to be one of an address, that is, if you want to talk about the Palestinians I suggest you write to so and so. Of course, the Palestinians cause similar problems for most of the Arab leaders; namely, they generate domestic radicalism and they also have the assassination problem.

But I have left the Palestinian question alone in order to work on the frontier questions, hoping eventually to isolate the Palestinians. And this could work. We could have split the Palestinians from the Syrians for only a few more kilometres on the Golan, but the Israelis insisted on moving the settlements right up to the line. My feeling now is that the Syrians will be driven toward even greater radicalism. Israel must realize that it must deal with the Arab governments if it does not want to deal with the Palestinians. But you know, Israel is a lot like Germany before the First World War in that there is this tendency to produce what it most fears.

Question (Leibman): *What is your estimate of the general trends of American foreign policy? Do you see an erosion of American public support?*

Kissinger: The United States has had a whole series of shocks since the assassination of Jack Kennedy. Two Presidents have, in effect, been driven from office. We have had experience in domestic radicalism and there has been latent isolationism. It seems now that the old

isolationists in the Middle West are the ones who support us the most, whereas the Eastern intellectual establishment tends to be more isolationist.

And we have our Congressional problems. I think the War Powers Act is a calamity. We cannot move any forces anywhere without asking Congress. In January, Hanoi conducted a limited operation which we now see as a test of our reaction. I wanted to move some forces — the 7th Fleet and also in Thailand. It so happened at the same time that a carrier departed Subic [US base] destined for the Indian Ocean and, of course, this was all over the television. Everyone was saying that we were sending a carrier to Vietnam. Then we had Congressional demands for an investigation and for more information. Well, we eventually had to call off the whole operation and the carrier wasn't even going to the Tonkin Gulf.

There can be no question that Congressional restrictions would create a problem in another Middle East crisis. The reaction in Congress and probably in the country regarding the use of American forces would be very negative.

Question: *I am bothered by one thing. You said the United States was committed to '67 borders, somewhere down the line.*

Kissinger: No, I did not say that. I said that somewhere down the line we would have to face the question of what a final peace settlement looks like.

Question: *How do you see a final peace settlement in terms of Israeli security?*

Kissinger: An overall settlement will inevitably have to involve a discussion of the '67 borders. But that is why I have pushed the step-by-step. If necessary, the United States should provide guarantees for the survival of Israel and, of course, some adjustments of the borders might be possible. But at Geneva, events will get

ahead of everyone and we will be into these discussions before we want to be.

Question: *Do you think that US guarantees would be ratified by the Senate?*

Kissinger: You probably couldn't get US guarantees ratified. I think Morrie's [Morris Leibman] question was really the key.

You know, I am being lambasted all over town for holding to a geostrategic view of the world. The intellectual community attacks me for having these views. And you know these are the only guys writing. So look at what we are doing to Chile now. Look what is happening to the CIA. We are destroying our intelligence establishment. For what? Portugal is seen as a failure of American foreign policy. If so, it is because we have lost our ability to support democratic elements in Portugal. But you all can rest at peace — there are no 40 Committee activities going on in Portugal.

I agree, until we get our people thinking in geopolitical terms we are going to be in real trouble. Look at Angola. Now if we don't get in there it will go communist. And yet Jewish intellectuals are saying that the United States is being immoral if it involves itself in Chile and Portugal, but don't give up an inch in Sinai. The Jews in America will suffer if we don't develop some more awareness.

Question: *You mean, regarding these geopolitical terms?*

Kissinger: The strength of Israel is needed for its own survival but not to prevent the spread of communism in the Arab world. So it doesn't necessarily help US global interests as far as the Middle East is concerned. The survival of Israel has sentimental importance to the United States, but believe me it is not easy to maintain this. It would not be wise to push luck to an extreme. \$2.6 billion for 3 million people — I don't believe it is in the interests of the Jewish community to push it too hard.

Question (Cohen): *Don't you think there might be some Israeli fear that an assurance from the United States is all that credible due to the War Powers Act, etc? Don't you think Israel sees some American impotence?*

Kissinger: Yes, I agree, and the more impotent we look, the more the challenges will mount. This, of course, makes the Israeli problem worse. The dénouement of Indochina, which was partly our fault, must be seen very anxiously by Israel.

Question (Tisch): *Now what is Rabin's answer to the logic you have presented today?*

Kissinger: Well, I think that if we met alone, he would probably agree with 98 percent of what I have said. But you have to remember that advocates of short-term solutions always have the upper hand.

One of the tragedies of history, it seems to me, is that the Jews have been persecuted for having a cosmopolitan outlook. But now it seems that they worry too much about their own particular problem — just that one small part of the world. You see, just now when they really need a Rothschild they have a soldier peasant.

Question: *What do you say about Hoffman's argument that if the United States looks impotent, then time is not on our side and we should go for an overall agreement, namely through Geneva?*

Kissinger: Hoffman thinks that the Europeans and the Japanese will support a reasonable American proposal. I think that will never happen against Arab pressures. Also, you have to realize that Soviet pressures at Geneva would have a premium because the Arabs would think to themselves that if the United States cannot accomplish an interim agreement, it certainly cannot accomplish something bigger. Now if Geneva were to meet in a less dramatic, more controlled way, then maybe the Arabs would try to work through us. But I have not talked about

the 1967 borders in any of our discussions.

Question (Klutznik): *Why did Gromyko cool off on the idea of Geneva after he saw you recently?*

Kissinger: My personality. (Laughter) No, the Soviets don't have a master plan as far as I can see. Theirs is not a very subtle foreign policy, but they are persistent and you can accomplish much with persistence — especially against an opponent who keeps changing tactics.

But, basically the Soviets are as incapable as anyone of working with the Arabs. Gromyko told me in Vienna as soon as we sat down that he proposed to invite the PLO to Geneva. I told him, "Alright Mr. Foreign Minister, if that is your proposal, I must reject it. Now go ahead and tell the Arabs that you made the proposal and that I rejected it." I then immediately told the Arabs that Gromyko had made this proposal and that I had rejected it. That just goes to show the Arabs how little Gromyko is able to accomplish. He then, of course, told all the Arabs that he had made the proposal and that I had rejected it.

I think that Gromyko thinks he is better off waiting to see if we fail. Then he can cooperate to the extent that he wants.

But he also wants CSCE so this gives us a window into July which is when they want the conference. After that, they will become more intransigent.

Question: *What can we do?*

Kissinger: I don't know and I am not asking you to do anything. But I hope that you can prevent a Jewish assault on the United States government. The Jews may win the first battle, but you can be sure that they will lose the war. This must be avoided. On substance, don't just always assume that the Israeli government is right and the United States government is wrong. This reflects a basic misperception.

I would be glad to meet periodically with this group.

Question (Lazarus): *I am still not clear on whether you feel that Rabin is going back to Israel convinced that he has got to sell this in Israel.*

Kissinger: I think he, personally, will try to manoeuvre towards a settlement. But don't forget, he also wants very much to remain Prime Minister and he has got to be concerned about Allon and Peres. He just won't beat up the Cabinet like Golda did in order to get the Syrian negotiations completed.

Question (Landes): *Henry, what do you tell the Arabs about what they can and cannot do, you know what I mean?*

Kissinger: Yes, I know what you mean.

You know, it is now taken for granted that the Arabs look towards Washington. I have never talked to the Arabs on borders. Every time they have attempted to raise it, I have invariably said it is premature and I have always told them that they must think about their commitment to peace. I have told them that they have got to come up with some concrete ideas about how to live with Israel and I think we have convinced at least Sadat that he has got to give some serious thought to how to live with Israel. Why, Sadat has said that he would even welcome American guarantees.

We certainly have not whetted the Arab appetite.

Question: *Do you, in your geopolitical perception, think that we have gone to an extreme in our foreign policy?*

Kissinger: Well, the dominant trend, certainly with the press and the intellectual establishment and one wing, at least, of the Democratic Party, has been going away from this geopolitical awareness. But I think the public is leaning the other way. And when you have the public going one way, the result could very well be [a] populist demagogue who will want to be

tough on Russia and soft everywhere else.

We must be careful not to have our overall position eroded to the point that the Soviets don't really have to make a move. Because if our overall position is eroded, then some day we will have to face a real challenge.

Question: *Can you comment on the question of Soviet Jewry?*

Kissinger: When we came into office, Jewish emmigration from the Soviet Union was 400 per year. We increased that to 32,000 a year. The President and I never failed, when we talked to the Soviets, to tell them look, it would improve the atmosphere if you let some more Jews out.

Then it became a big political issue between Jackson and us. And for what? No country could allow its domestic regulations to be dictated as we were pushing the Soviets to do. So now it is back down to 11,000 and we have also lost the leverage. The Soviets can now get private credits and European credits. I think it was a serious mistake that the Jewish community got hung-up on it.

Question: *Would it help if we sought to remove the 300,000 million ceiling on credits?*

Kissinger: I cannot say.

Take the question of most favoured nation status for Romania. Believe me, it will be a real problem if Romania doesn't get most favoured nation. First of all, it will help the Soviets at a time when we are trying to split Romania and the Soviet Union. Secondly, it will certainly hurt Jews in Romania. And finally, it will hurt the President's general credibility in the country — the general problem we were talking about. I think it would be very painful for the American Jewish community to destroy the chances of most favoured nation for Romania.

The Romanians simply cannot face a formal commitment to the United States

Congress. It would be too embarrassing for them, *vis-à-vis* the Soviets and, of course, *vis-a-vis* the Arabs.

Klutznik: *Mr. Secretary, thank you very much. I don't think your time has been wasted.*

Kissinger: Let's meet again.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

1. Marvin Bernstein (Waltham, Massachusetts); President of Brandeis.
2. Edgar Bronfman (New York City); President of Seagrams and Chairman of North American Section of World Jewish Congress.
3. Gershon Cohen (New York City); President of Jewish Theological Seminary.
4. Lester Crown (Chicago); President of Henry Crown and Company; Executive Committee of General Dynamics TWA, etc.
5. Abraham Feinberg (New York City); Chairman of Board of American Bank and Trust Co.
6. David Ginsburg (Washington D.C.); Senior Partner of Ginsburg, Feldman and Bress.
7. Guido Goldman (Cambridge).
8. John Gutfreund (New York City); Deputy Managing Partner of Soloman Brothers.
9. Walter Haas (San Francisco); President of Levi-Strauss; Board of Bank of America.
10. Max Karl (Minneapolis); President of MGIC; Board of First Wisconsin Bank.
11. Philip Klutznik (Chicago); Chairman of Governing Council of World Jewish Congress.
12. David Landes (Cambridge); Professor of History.
13. Fred Lazarus (Ohio); Chairman of Board of Federated Department States.
14. Morris Leibman (Chicago); Senior Partner of Fidelity and Austin.

15. Raymond Nasher (Dallas); President of Nasher Investment (largest real estate developer in Dallas).
16. Abraham Pritzker (Chicago); Head of family who controls Marmon; Cerro Corp., and Hyatt.
17. Henry Rosovsky (Cambridge); Dean of Faculty of Arts and Sciences — Harvard.
18. Rabbi Alex Schindler (New York City); Head of Union of Hebrew Congregation (Reformed).
19. Albert Spiegel (Los Angeles); Private Investor and considered head of Jewish Community in Los Angeles.
20. Lawrence Tisch (New York City); Controls Leawes Corporation and Continental National Insurance Company.