

Did Nixon Even Read the CIA's Daily Briefs?

Nixon's Attention Focused on Kissinger's Cover Memos That Packaged the PDB

Recently Declassified Kissinger Memos Include Nixon's Handwritten Comments

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President Richard M. Nixon meeting with national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger in the Oval Office, n.d. (Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Photo collections, Master Print File with Staff Individuals)

Nixon, Kissinger, and the President's Daily Brief

Washington D.C., September 14, 2016 - President Richard Nixon may never have even read the President's Daily Briefs partially declassified and released by the CIA with great fanfare on August 24, 2016. The CIA's claim that the PDBs were "the primary vehicle for summarizing the day-to-day sensitive intelligence and analysis ... for the White House" is

partly true, but Nixon's prejudices against the Agency and the distinctive role of national security adviser Henry Kissinger suggest that his cover memos to the PDBs were far more important to the President than whatever the CIA had to say.

Kissinger served as Nixon's *de facto* intelligence adviser and it was Kissinger, not the CIA, whom Nixon counted on to help him keep informed about global events. In part, Kissinger did this each day by sending Nixon a memorandum prepared at the White House Situation Room, to which the PDB was appended, that consisted of Kissinger's take of what developments were important for Nixon to keep in mind.

As a contribution to the ongoing discussion about the role of the PDBs in the Nixon White House, the National Security Archive today publishes together for the first time the six Kissinger daily briefing memoranda from 1969 through 1973 that have been declassified so far.

Three of the cover memos demonstrate that Nixon reacted to some of Kissinger's daily briefing memos by writing comments and questions on them. Some of the comments were critical, e.g., about Peruvian President Juan Velasco whom Nixon believed owed the U.S. "good deeds" in light of recent emergency aid for earthquake victims (see Document 2B). Or a reaction to an item about the slow response to North Korea's capture of a South Korean "propaganda ship": "Disgraceful!" An item from January 1972 included a denunciation of U.S. Air Force strategy in Southeast Asia, which Nixon deemed a "failure," and a demand for a study of the problem, which Kissinger ignored (see Document 5A).

One of the Kissinger memos, from 14 December 1971, includes fascinating intelligence information concerning the 1971 India-Pakistan war. One item in the memo demonstrates that U.S. intelligence was able to interpret Soviet reconnaissance satellite activities – for example, whether the photographic intelligence satellites were directed at airfields and other installations in India and Pakistan. Another item in the memo is a detailed report of a recent meeting of Indira Gandhi's cabinet about the pros and cons of accepting a cease-fire once a government was installed in Bangladesh. The CIA provided the information based on a source in Gandhi's cabinet, confirming Seymour Hersh's finding in *The Price of Power* that the CIA had a highly-placed mole in the Indian government.

-- Hanoi Takes Tough Line in Political Report:

North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong has delivered a tough-worded report to the North Vietnamese National Assembly. The report calls for continued fighting and suggests no change in Hanoi's negotiating position. At the same time, it admits to difficulties in the economic sphere. It also stresses the importance of "historical forces" allegedly aiding Hanoi's cause, and indirect suggestion that the leadership needs to project dogma and external factors as causes for optimism. I shall send you a more detailed memorandum on this report.

K - They need another jolt.

-- Swedish Aid to North Vietnam: Swedish and

North Vietnamese Red Cross organizations have now reached agreement on the first stage of Swedish humanitarian aid to North Vietnam. According to a Swedish daily newspaper, the first increment will include condensed milk, laboratory equipment for the university hospital in Hanoi, and textiles. This agreement is in line with the Swedish Government's plans to provide the North Vietnamese with some \$40 million during the next three fiscal years, one third of which in the form of humanitarian grant aid and the remainder as reconstruction loans after the cessation of hostilities. (Tab B)

-- MAC Meeting on Captured Korean Ship: The

Panmunjom meeting Tuesday on the captured South Korean propaganda ship produced nothing. The North Koreans accused the United Nations Command of sending an "armed spy ship" into North Korean waters, continued to claim that the ship had sunk, and refused to address the question of the crew.

ROK military leaders have grumbled to the press about military procedures which allegedly made it impossible to take action in support of the ship without going through UN Command clearances. This is at variance with our understanding that the UN Command knew nothing about the ship or about the Korean fighters scrambled to save it. The Korean grumbling is probably an effort to save "face." The question of operational control could be more serious. Ambassador Porter has already told the Prime Minister that we should tighten up liaison procedures. (Tab C)

Disgraceful! - I want them to have procedures which will allow immediate response in such cases in the future.

Nixon's handwritten comments on the Kissinger briefing memorandum for 11 June 1970 [Document 3A]. Next to the item on "Hanoi Takes Tough Line," Nixon wrote "K - They need another jolt." Next to the item, "MAC [Military Armistice Commission] Meeting on Captured Korean Ship," Nixon jotted: "Disgraceful! I want them to have procedures which will allow immediate response in such cases in the future." (Document 3A, page 2)

That Nixon may not have read the PDBs was a point that CIA historian [David Robarge](#) made in his presentation at a recent Nixon Presidential Library conference. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had been regular consumers of the CIA's daily briefing paper; Kennedy in particular gave feedback to the Agency. The situation changed greatly, however, when Nixon became president. According to John Helgerson's fascinating study, [Getting to Know the President: Intelligence Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-2004](#), CIA officials who worked at a special transition office in Manhattan soon learned from Kissinger, the newly appointed national security adviser, that "the president-elect had no intention of reading anything that had not at first been perused and perhaps summarized by one of his senior staff." (p. 68).

During the transition, the CIA sent Nixon envelopes filled with PDBs and other reports, but they simply piled up. Nixon had not read them and his secretary soon returned them. Some of that probably reflected the new president's animus toward the CIA; since his defeat in the 1960 presidential election he had believed the CIA had mishandled the "missile gap" by overestimating Soviet capabilities, which had worked to Kennedy's advantage in the campaign. To tailor the PDBs to Nixon's liking, CIA officials tried to get a sense of his preferences from his close advisers. Accordingly, the CIA double-spaced the text and put it on legal size paper (reflecting Nixon's professional background). But the Agency never received feedback from the president; it would only come from Kissinger.

What is known is that for Nixon the "primary vehicle" for receiving intelligence information was Henry Kissinger, who essentially acted as the president's chief intelligence officer. Consistent with what CIA officials had been told about Nixon's working methods, every working day he would receive a memorandum from Kissinger, prepared by the White House Situation Room staff, to which was appended the PDB and sometimes other documents that Kissinger thought Nixon needed to see. Kissinger's cover memo, usually around 3 or 4 pages long, summarized the events and developments that he believed Nixon would want to know about, including the most recent events not covered by the briefing material. Sometimes there was a connection between the information summarized in the cover memo and the PDBs, but sometime, it seems, there was little relationship between the two.

A March 1970 report to Kissinger by the RAND Corporation's Andrew Marshall, then serving as a White House consultant, addressed the apparently ephemeral role of the PDB in President Nixon's reading. Marshall explained how the Situation Room staff prepared the briefing memo for Kissinger's signature, partly on the basis of contributions from Kissinger's aides and the reproduction of items from various intelligence publications. According to Marshall, "the memorandum signed by you and prepared in the Situation Room is a success; it probably is the only part of the package which the President regularly reads. Indeed, judging from a survey of marginal jottings by the President, it may be the only piece he ever reads." This raised various problems: did the one-third overlap between the PDB and the Situation room memo raise the risk that important intelligence might get overlooked? Or was the PDB a "wasted effort"? Wondering whether the PDB can "be saved

or made useful,” Marshall raised questions about possible changes in the Situation Room product and the feedback process so that it would be even more useful to the President. [\[1\]](#)

So far only six of the Kissinger/Situation Room memos have been reviewed and declassified in their entirety; excerpts from a few can be found in the State Department’s historical series, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (For example, an excerpt from [1973](#). These six are a thimble full of water compared to a lake, because the complete record of the briefing memos and the attached PDBs and other materials consists of 61 archival boxes at the Nixon Presidential Library. That collection begins with documents dated 1 January 1969, three weeks before Nixon’s inauguration, and concludes with material dated 9 August 1974, the last day of Nixon’s presidency. Except for the six memos and the excerpts in *FRUS*, the entire collection remains classified, although it is slated to become a major declassification project at the Nixon Library during the next year. A [partial list](#) of the collection appears on the Nixon Library web site; for a complete inventory see Document 7. Only a declassification review of that material, with all of the attachments, will shed light on the intelligence items that Nixon read daily and whether he read the PDBs, with comments and questions, in the same way that he read Kissinger’s cover memos.

It is worth noting here that the briefing material that Nixon received from Kissinger every day was only one aspect of their working relationship. Every work day Kissinger met with Nixon to discuss ongoing developments and decisions. The times and places of the frequent meetings were recorded in the “[Presidential Daily Diary](#).” Apparently Kissinger took handwritten notes during these meetings so he could follow up on Nixon’s instructions. If such notes still survive and ever become available to researchers, they will be an invaluable resource for tracing national security policy during the Nixon years. The same can be said about any diary material that Kissinger and Nixon prepared when they were in office. [\[2\]](#)

Making this discussion of PDBs even possible was the series of actions and decisions that led to their release, first from the Kennedy-Johnson years, then the Nixon-Ford period. Included in the Kennedy-Johnson release were the [three specific PDBs](#) that the CIA had gone to the mat for when the National Security Archive sued the Agency, on behalf of Professor Larry Berman of the University of California Davis, for those documents. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against release on the grounds that disclosure could “reveal protected intelligence sources and methods.” Nevertheless, the Court gave an opening for future declassification by rejecting the CIA’s “attempt to create a per se status exemption for PDBs.” President Obama further undercut the CIA’s assertion that PDBs were impossible to declassify by asserting in Executive Order 13526 that “No information may be excluded from declassification ... based solely on the type of document or record in which it is found. Rather, the classified information must be considered on the basis of its content.” What part the Obama administration may have played in impelling the Agency to declassify the PDBs remains to be learned, but members of the CIA’s Historical Advisory Committee, including Professors Robert Jervis and Melvyn P. Leffler, played a significant role by regularly pressing the CIA leadership to begin declassification review.

Read the Documents

Documents 1A-B: 13 February 1969

1A: Kissinger to the President, "Intelligence Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: Nixon Presidential Library, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 2, Folder: President's Daily Briefs February 9-14, 1969 (1 of 2)

1B: President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised copy

Produced a few weeks into the new administration, this Kissinger memo covered the typical range of issues, starting with Vietnam and Cambodia (which, in a few weeks, would undergo secret U.S. bombing), as well as China, Germany and Peru. Nixon's handwriting, "Good," appears next to a comment about the "uneasiness" of North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris. The memo includes references to a number of attachments, A through L, so plainly the PDB was only one element in a larger compendium of papers that Kissinger sent to Nixon.

The corresponding PDB includes an update of developments from the day before along with current items on the Middle East, Soviet affairs, Thailand, and Soviet strategic developments, none of which correspond to the declassified portions of the Kissinger memo.

Documents 2A-B: 22 August 1969

2A: Kissinger to the President, "Morning Briefing Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: NPL, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 10, Folder: President's Daily Briefs August 10-31, 1969

2B: President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised Copy

Kissinger's cover memo includes items relating to Vietnam, Soviet-Czech relations, and "Indicators Concerning Chinese and Soviet Behavior." One of the latter includes a reference to a famous [approach](#) by a KGB officer (although Kissinger does not mention his affiliation) to a State Department official in August 1969 concerning U.S. reaction to a possible Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities.

The PDB covers Vietnam, Soviet affairs, the Middle East, and Pakistan.

Documents 3A-B: 11 June 1970

3A: Kissinger to the President, "Information Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: NPL, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 23, Folder: President's Daily Briefs June 6-15, 1970

3B: President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised Copy

Kissinger's cover memo includes items on Jordan, where a crisis was developing, North Vietnam, South Korea, Argentina, and Peru. Nixon wrote copiously on this cover memo with comments on "Viet Cong terrorism" (a sign of "desperation" and determination by North Vietnamese leaders to keep fighting – for which "they need another jolt"), North Korea's capture of a South Korean "propaganda ship" ("disgraceful" that there were no procedures in place for an "immediate response"), and the Peruvian response to U.S. relief assistance in the wake of the 31 May earthquake which killed 20,000 people. The chief of the military government that had ruled Peru since a coup in October 1968, President Juan Velasco, had said he had "no words" to describe his gratitude for the assistance. Nixon tartly commented: "how about a deed or two, if he can't find the words?" U.S.-Peruvian relations had been complicated by disputes over the 1968 expropriation of the International Petroleum Company and Peru's determination to set a two hundred-mile limit for its territorial waters. The cover memo included a number of attachments, A through F.

Kissinger's handwriting appears on the top of the first page of the cover memo. It begins with "Before these directions are followed on they must be ..." but the next few words are difficult to read.

No longer double-spaced, the PDB covered a variety of issues: Cambodia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Pakistan and the USSR, none of which, except Joran, match the issues covered by Kissinger's memo. The PDB from the previous day, [10 June 1970](#), includes an item on Argentina which roughly corresponds to the one in the Kissinger cover memo for 11 June.

Documents 4A-B: 14 December 1971

[4A:](#) Kissinger to the President, "Information Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: NPL, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 37, Folder: President's Daily Briefs December 1-16, 1971

[4B:](#) President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised Copy

The daily briefings during this period were prepared as the South Asian crisis was winding down. Kissinger's cover memo includes a fascinating item on Soviet satellite – photographic and electronic intelligence – coverage of South Asia and the dissemination of the photography to a Soviet embassy. U.S. intelligence easily collected telemetry data (electronic signals) from Soviet satellites which made it possible to determine what the target areas were. Thus, Washington learned that Soviet photographic satellites were targeting airfields in India and Pakistan as well as specific installations in Pakistan (ground force headquarters, naval facilities, and oil refineries and storage sites).

Kissinger's item on the India-Pakistan war include information derived from a CIA report on an Indian cabinet meeting held a few days earlier. As noted above, the fact that the CIA had a source inside the Indian cabinet corroborates the finding of investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. According to Hersh's sources – former Nixon administration officials – the

CIA's mole was Morarji Desai, who attended cabinet meetings even though he had resigned as Indira Gandhi's deputy prime minister. Desai later responded to Hersh's disclosure with a [libel suit](#), losing the case in a Chicago court in 1989. In open court Kissinger denied that Desai had provided information to the CIA, although he had reportedly praised the Agency for having a high-level source in the Indian government. Whether it was Desai or not, the CIA clearly had a spy in the Indian cabinet.

The PDB for that day covers India-Pakistan developments and the establishment of a new military region in China.

Documents 5A-B: 3 January 1972

[5A](#): Kissinger to the President, "Information Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: NPL, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 38, Folder: President's Daily Briefs January 3-17, 1972

[5B](#): President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised Copy

This cover memo includes items on the military situation in Laos, with reference to U.S. bombing, Cambodia, Pakistan, Prime Minister Gandhi's annual press conference, and Mexico's crackdown on "subversion." Nine pages are excised in their entirety; presumably, they reproduce the PDB text. On the cover memo is Nixon's lengthy handwritten comment, which reflects his long-standing concern about Air Force bombing strategy in the Vietnam War:

"K. We have had 10 years of *total* control of the air in Laos and V.Nam. The result=Zilch. There is something wrong with the strategy or the Air Force. I want a 'bark of' study – no snow job – on my desk in 2 weeks as to what the reason for the failure is. Otherwise continued air operations make no sense in Cambodia, Laos etc. after we complete withdrawal." "Shake them up."

Kissinger probably saw Nixon's irate comment as predictable or at least familiar – he had heard such complaints before and may have believed that this was not the time to reform the Air Force.^[3] Therefore, as he was wont to do when Nixon let off steam, Kissinger ignored the demand for a study. Attached to the briefing memo was this note to Kissinger's deputy, General Alexander Haig, possibly from White House aide Alexander Butterfield: "Al: HAK saw this and said 'do not turn this into a directive.'"

This cover memorandum and Nixon's handwriting came to light in 2015 when journalist Bob Woodward published *The Last of the President's Men*, a book about Butterfield (who made the first disclosure of the Nixon tapes), based on interviews and Butterfield's unpublished memoirs. Butterfield had a copy of the Kissinger memo in his papers and, owing to the sensational nature of Nixon's comments, Woodward reproduced the first page on page 116 of the book, although he did not know exactly what the memo was or whether it could be found at the Nixon Library. Once this posting's editor determined that it was one

of the Kissinger cover memos, the National Security Archive filed a mandatory declassification review request for the document and the Nixon Library had it quickly declassified.

The PDB for that day includes a few topics covered by the Kissinger memo, notably military developments in Laos and Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's decision to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from custody. Rahman had been a leader of the Awami League, which played a key role in the Bangladeshi independence struggle in 1971.

Documents 6A-B: 1 May 1973

6A: Kissinger to the President, "Information Items," Top Secret, Excised Copy

Source: NPL, NSC Files, President's Daily Briefings, box 51, Folder: President's Daily Briefs May 1-15, 1973

6B: President's Daily Brief, Top Secret, Excised Copy

Kissinger's cover memo and the PDB were prepared as the Watergate crisis was deepening: top Nixon aides Robert Haldeman and John Ehrlichman had resigned the day before and Nixon had fired White House Counsel John Dean. The cover memo included items on Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, South Asia, and Egypt. The first few pages, possibly a late memorandum covering 30 April, are completely sanitized; moreover, an "evening report," dated 30 April, from Secretary of State William Rogers on his Senate testimony, is included. Probably distracted by other events, Nixon made no comments. The rest of the excised pages presumably are the PDB text in the Nixon Library copy.

The PDB for 1 May includes items on Algeria and Libya, Communist military activities in South Vietnam, Soviet ICBM developments, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Document 7: Box and file list of "President Daily Briefings" collection at the Nixon Presidential Library

Source: Initial inventory of Nixon Presidential Materials collection; copy at National Security Archive

Archivists at the Nixon Presidential Materials Project compiled this preliminary list of the 61 boxes of daily briefings in 1978. According to the description, the PDBs were supplemented by materials from the NSC, State Department and FBI, as well as Kissinger's memos.

Notes

[1]. Memorandum From the Consultant to the National Security Council (Marshall) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 18 March 1970, U.S. Department of State, [*Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. III Organization and Management of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1969–1972*](#) (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 424-431.

[2] . For Kissinger’s diary or “office journal,” see Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 108, 112, 583-584, 621, and 637.

[3] . Nixon had made such complaints before and would continue to do so, with Kissinger doing the same. For example, in August 1970, Nixon wrote on a Kissinger memorandum on “Air Activity in Southeast Asia”: “This study shows the hopeless inadequacy of Air Force. I want a *new* study for a *new* approach.” In February 1971, in a meeting with JCS Chairman Thomas Moorer and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Nixon said: “I assume that our Air Force, as usual, does not have the capacity to know how to hit such [North Vietnamese/NLF] headquarters, is that correct?” See Documents 13 and 140 respectively, U.S. Department of State, [Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VII, Vietnam, July 1970–January 1972](#) (Washington, D.C., 2010), pages 26 and 429. Later in January 1972 both Nixon and Kissinger complained about the Air Force treating it as a problem that was not correctable. According to Kissinger: “[I]t’s one of the worst disgraces, that here the great U.S. Air Force can’t keep a road from being built” on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Later Nixon observed, “I don’t know what we can do. We don’t have any cards there, Henry, nothing but the damned Air Force, but we’ll use it. We’ve got to use the Air Force.” For this and other examples, see Document 2, U.S. Department of State, [Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VIII, Vietnam, January–October 1972](#) (Washington, D.C., 2010), pp 9-10.

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