



Kissinger Told Soviet Envoy during 1973 Arab-Israeli War : “My Nightmare is a Victory for Either Side” – The Soviet Agreed

Only days after the outbreak of the October War and not long after his confirmation as Secretary of State, Kissinger at one of his first press conferences, on 12 October 1973. During this event, he declared that the Soviet Union airlift of supplies to the Arab countries had been “moderate,” a statement that Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) criticized. (National Archives, Still Picture Unit, Record Group 59-BP, box 35, envelope VS 1053-73 Secy’s Press Conf)

Published: Aug 9, 2019
Briefing Book #680

Edited by William Burr

For more information, contact:
202-994-7000 or nsarchiv@gwu.edu

New Kissinger Telcons Shed Light on U.S. Policy during the War as Well as Nixon's Nomination of Gerald Ford for Vice President

Nixon Described Ford to HAK as a “Bright Truman”

Posting Comes on Anniversary of Nixon's Resignation in 1974

Washington, D.C., August 9, 2019 – Several previously unknown Henry Kissinger memoranda of telephone conversations – or telcons – from October 1973, uncovered by the National Security Archive, provide blunt and fascinating vignettes from a significant moment during the Nixon presidency.

In one record about the Yom Kippur War, the secretary of state candidly tells Soviet envoy Anatoly Dobrynin it would be a “nightmare” if either side won. In another, the president comments that Gerald Ford, who would soon be named vice president, was a “safe” choice, reminding Nixon of a “bright Truman.” That telcon consisted of a somewhat disjointed conversation with the president that prompted Kissinger to confide in his deputy later that the “President was loaded.”

The telcons posted today, on the anniversary of Nixon's resignation as president, were included in the National Archives' response to a declassification request by the National Security Archive 19 years ago, in 2000. It is not clear why they were not part of the previously known major collections released since 2004 by the National Archives and the State Department largely in response to the threat of legal action.

Newly Discovered Kissinger Telcons from October 1973

By William Burr

During the Arab-Israeli War in October 1973, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had frequent discussions with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. During a conversation on 18 October 1973, after he agreed that the military situation was stable, even stalemated, Kissinger declared that “my nightmare is a victory for either side.” Dobrynin observed: “it is not only your nightmare.” Kissinger would say different things to different interlocutors, but he may have worried that if either Egypt or Israel attained a decisive military advantage it would weaken U.S. influence over post-war peace talks. Dobrynin likely had the same concern for the Soviet position.

A conversation with President Richard Nixon sheds light on Nixon’s decision to choose Congressman Gerald Ford (R-MI) as vice president to replace Spiro Agnew who had just resigned owing to corruption charges. Nixon told Kissinger that the top candidates were Ford, former Secretary of State William Rogers, former Treasury Secretary John Connolly, and California Governor Ronald Reagan. Dismissing Reagan as a possibility, Kissinger suggested someone, unlike Connolly or New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who would not be a “presidential candidate” in 1976. Nixon and Kissinger agreed that Ford would not be “the candidate” in 1976, with Nixon characterizing him as “safe”, and a “bright Truman.”

Both of these recently declassified telephone conversation transcripts were previously unknown. Found in a collection of Kissinger material in State Department records at the National Archives, they were declassified in response to an October 2000 request by the

National Security Archive. Other Kissinger telephone conversations in this release were with White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, and White House counsel Leonard Garment.

The discussions covered by these telcons occurred during the 1973 Middle East War and a major topic was U.S. policy to supply Israel with arms and ammunition. The coordinated Egyptian-Syrian attack on 6 October 1973 against Israeli forces in the Sinai and the Golan Heights had come as a shock to Washington. A State Department intelligence analyst had estimated the possibility of war months earlier and U.S. intelligence had picked up warning signs in the weeks before, but the Nixon administration was relatively complacent. Never considering the possibility that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat would launch war to force negotiations, Kissinger and his Israeli counterparts believed that they could control the pace of diplomacy over territory occupied during the 1967 war. At a staff meeting on 23 October, State Department analyst Ray Cline captured some of the reasons for pre-war complacency when he observed that "we were brainwashed by the Israelis, who brainwashed themselves."^[1]

When the war broke out, Nixon and Kissinger wanted to make sure that Israel did not lose, but they favored a low profile for the U.S. role, so as not to anger Arab countries that were already suspicious of U.S. policy. Moreover, Kissinger wanted to calibrate supply availabilities to influence Israeli war aims. The telcons from 13 October 1973 are especially revealing because they illustrate Kissinger's suspicion that the Pentagon was "sabotaging" supply operations, which could risk putting "the whole goddamn strategy out of whack." After Nixon decided in favor of a large-scale U.S. airlift of supplies, Kissinger told Leonard Garment that "we are going to wind up with the Arabs mad."

The National Archives released these telcons from a collection "The Records of Henry A. Kissinger," found in State Department records at the Archives. It is essentially a collection of document copies, with (to the best of the editor's recollection) no original typed copies. Some of the documents are marked with chapter numbers suggesting that the papers had something to do with the preparation of Henry Kissinger's memoirs. The telcons found there are also copies, some of them poorly reproduced second or third generation versions of the originals.

Copies of these telcons cannot be found in the otherwise comprehensive Kissinger telcon collection at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum (a copy of the originals in Kissinger's Library of Congress collection), which the National Archives secured from Kissinger's papers as a result of legal action threatened by the National Security Archive. The absence of the telcons from the records at the Nixon Library (or even the Library of Congress) may have been a clerical oversight or a deliberate decision, but at least copies are available. This may not be the case for Kissinger's records of his meetings with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin during 1973-1976, which to date are nowhere to be found, despite the efforts of State Department historians to locate them.

The Department of State made no objection to declassifying the new telcons, but the Department of Defense excised three of them, one of them extensively (the Nixon-Kissinger telcon). The Pentagon's justification for the redactions is exemption 3.3 (b) (6) in Executive Order 13526: that disclosure would "reveal information, including foreign government information, that would cause serious harm to relations between the United States and a foreign government, or to ongoing diplomatic activities of the United States."

It is not clear why the Defense Department leadership believes that its declassification reviewers have special skills compared to State Department professionals for determining which information could harm U.S. diplomacy; nevertheless, they have used exemption 6 frequently when reviewing State Department records at the National Archives, even from even the early 1960s. It is equally mysterious why Pentagon reviewers suppose that declassification of Nixon's or Kissinger's statements from 1973 could actually cause damage today, but the National Security Archive routinely challenges such claims in administrative appeals to the National Archives and the Department of Defense.

* The editor thanks Melissa Lew Heddon, an archivist at the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, for her kind help in checking the documents in this posting against the Library's collection of Henry Kissinger telcons. Alexander Chang, a student at George Washington University, helped with transcriptions.

Note: The archival source for these telcons is: National Archives (College Park), Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-1977, box 25, 1974 Arab-Israeli War.

Documents



Document 01

TELCON Schlesinger/HAK October 9, 1973/5:35 p.m.

1973-10-09

Three days after the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war, Kissinger spoke with Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger to review priorities for providing Israel with military supplies. According to Kissinger, Nixon had made the following selections from an options paper^[2]: option 1 (provide military "consumables," e.g., ammunition and weapons, with Israeli responsibility for transportation), option 4 ("replacement equipment", such as F-4 fighter jets that the Israelis "can haul away themselves"), and option 5: ("use of US delivery means, including C-5As for M-60 tank delivery"). Providing the F-4s was a problem because not only would they have to be accompanied by a tanker, they would have U.S. Air Force markings on them making the U.S. origin "obvious." And they couldn't

fly over Western European airspace because the Europeans were “unsympathetic” to the Israelis.

At this stage, Nixon and Kissinger favored a low U.S. profile for the supply operation so as to minimize antagonizing the Arab states. According to Kissinger, Nixon wanted the Israelis to get tanks, but they should not be supplied until after the fighting had ended; the White House assumption was that “they don’t need them for the current fighting.” Nevertheless, Kissinger asked Schlesinger to make plans for sending them in case the need arose.

Schlesinger advised going for option 5, to use long-range C5As to ship tanks, but Kissinger was more interested in moving quickly on option 1 to minimize the direct U.S. role. Schlesinger spoke of the need for a “Flying Tigers” operation to move supplies. An hour later, however, Kissinger would learn from Ambassador Dinitz about major tank losses, on the order of 400 from the fighting with the Egyptians. It would be several days before Nixon approved a major airlift.



Document 02

Telecon, Nixon/Kissinger, October 11, 1973 6:35 p.m., excised copy

1973-10-11

Five days into the October War and a day after a disgraced Spiro Agnew had resigned from the vice presidency, a possibly inebriated President Richard Nixon called Henry Kissinger to ask for the latest news. Kissinger later told his deputy, General Brent Scowcroft, that the “President was loaded” when he spoke with him. A possible clue to Nixon’s lack of focus was that when Kissinger mentioned that Israeli forces had gone 20 kilometers into Syria, Nixon observed “That is about as far ... as Egypt. You have been up there haven’t you. You can look across the desert.”

Kissinger tried to keep the conversation on track with a discussion of strategy, mainly his interest in stalling a ceasefire presumably so that Israel could cement additional territorial gains. The transcript is incomplete because the transcriber plainly had trouble catching some of Kissinger’s points about Soviet policy and the possibility of “MFN” (most-favored-nation) commercial status for the Soviet Union. Nixon later made clear his position that he wanted to “see that Israel doesn’t lose” and that there would be no foot dragging in providing supplies.

Part of the discussion concerned Agnew’s replacement. Nixon mentioned former Secretary of State William Rogers, former Treasury Secretary John Connolly, California Governor Ronald Reagan, and Representative Gerald R. Ford (R-MI). Kissinger dismissed Reagan as a possibility and suggested someone, unlike Connolly or New York Governor

Nelson Rockefeller, who would not be a “presidential candidate” in 1976. Nixon and Kissinger agreed that Ford would not be “the candidate” in 1976, and Nixon characterized him approvingly as “safe”, and a “bright Truman.” Nixon nominated Ford the next day.[3]

The comment about a “smart Truman” reflected the bad blood with President Harry S. Truman that had developed during the late 1940s and early 1950s when Nixon, then in Congress, waged relentless partisan warfare against the Truman administration on all fronts.



Document 03

Telecon Secretary Kissinger/Gen. Haig 12:45 a.m., 10/13/1973, excised copy[4] 1973-10-13

This conversation with White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig took place after Kissinger met with Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz who told him that promised U.S. supplies for the war had not arrived and that Israeli forces were running out of ammunition. While meeting with Dinitz, Kissinger spoke with Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger and accused the Pentagon of “sabotaging” the supply operation.

Supplies were not coming through because to keep a low U.S. official profile Kissinger had insisted on using private charter flights but the Defense Department had not convinced or compelled any contractor to move the equipment.[5] That was the “sabotage” Kissinger saw yet he strongly opposed to a direct U.S. role, e.g. by Military Airlift Command, in providing the Israeli support. “That would be a disaster, Al,” Kissinger said.

What aggravated Kissinger was that the failure to provide supplies could cause a diplomatic failure. Once supplies became available, “the whole goddamn strategy [will be] out of whack because ...the stuff will arrive just in time when we want to stop” the Israelis from expanding their military operations. Seeking to influence Israeli war aims, he explained that if the supplies had been available, “the Israelis would be rolling now, then we could stop them while they are rolling.” Tacitly he was referring to the cease fire then under discussion with the Soviets and the British that would stop the fighting before the Israelis had gained so much ground that Washington would lose influence with the Arabs. Now, because the Israelis had not met their objectives, “they will hoard the stuff we are getting in, drive out the negotiations, and then strike.”

To get the supply problem resolved and diplomacy on track, Kissinger rang up Schlesinger but it became less clear that the Israelis were actually running out of ammunition or if they were, why they had not said so earlier. That angered Kissinger, but he dropped his opposition to a direct U.S. role and agreed with Schlesinger on sending 10 C-130s loaded with supplies and on putting pressure on charter flight operators. As furious with the

Israelis as he was, Kissinger nevertheless “wanted to have them going as a fierce force while [the war] is going on.”



Document 04

TELCON Henry Kissinger/Len Garment 10/13/73 12:55 p.m., excised copy

1973-10-13

The morning of 13 October, Nixon was in command and doubled the number of C-130s to be sent to Israel. At a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group, Kissinger told senior officials that if there were “any further delays in carrying out orders, we want the resignation of the officials involved.” A few hours later, Counselor to the President Leonard Garment told Kissinger that “people in the [Jewish] community” saw Schlesinger as a “roadblock” to the supply operation and that they were “going after people,” such as Republican Party Chairman George H.W. Bush and others, who were apparently not sufficiently helpful.

Kissinger mollified Garment, telling him that he had “put the fear of God” in Schlesinger, but was resentful that the Jewish community was “coming after me” (Garment didn’t think they were) and was especially angry that Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) had made “threatening” phone calls about “mismanagement of the crisis.” After telling Garment that the “massive sabotage [had] been broken,” he exclaimed that “this Administration is a disaster.” There would be a cease-fire early in the coming week, Kissinger argued, if the “Defense Department Arabists” had not blocked needed supplies to Israel. Now, “they have to pour in high-profile stuff into Israel [and] now we are going to wind up with the Arabs mad.”



Document 05

TELCON Gen. Haig – Secretary Kissinger Oct. 13, 1973 2:45 p.m.

1973-10-13

With Haig, Kissinger spoke about cease-fire diplomacy and the supply operation. News that an Egyptian armored division was crossing over the Suez Canal produced an emotional response with Kissinger claiming that “the defense department may have inflicted a diplomatic and military defeat on us.”

The British had been playing a role in the cease-fire negotiations but were backing away because Anwar Sadat objected, thinking that Egyptian forces would gain more ground. Kissinger explained that London did not want to be “accused of collusion with the

Russians to make Sadat swallow something he doesn't want." When Kissinger noted that the British didn't want "to bear the onus alone" for the plan, Haig accused "perfidious Albion" but Kissinger remained interested in a cease-fire because if it "doesn't work," he saw a "massive airlift, massive confrontation with the United Arabs and the Soviets," all because of the failure of the "goddamned Arabists" in the Pentagon.

Kissinger may have been of two minds on short-term diplomacy, however, because a minute or two later he told Haig that "we have to ... have a massive airlift [and] stop consultation with the Arab world and with the Soviets." Perhaps seeing confrontation ahead, Kissinger spoke about the need for higher defense spending, a "sharp turn right" (away from détente?), and greater competition with the Soviets over military assistance.



Document 06

TELCON October 13, 1973 Amb. Dobrynin – Secretary Kissinger [No time indicated]

1973-10-13

This garbled transcript begins by conveying Kissinger's anger with Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) who was going to make a speech criticizing Kissinger for observing during a press conference that the Soviet airlift of supplies to Egypt and Syria had been "moderate." The discussion turned to the cease-fire resolution that was complicated by Sadat's opposition. Worried about the war's impact on détente with Washington, the Soviets wanted a cease fire, but ran into Egyptian opposition that they were not willing to overrule.[6] Speaking with Kissinger, Dobrynin repeatedly asked "what could be done." After noting that U.S. supplies were being kept to "rather small proportions" (that was about to change), Kissinger mentioned the possibility of including references to UN Security Resolution 242 to a cease-fire resolution. Dobrynin asked whether Kissinger preferred a "simple cease-fire," but the transcriber did not catch all of the reply.



Document 07 (transcript attached)

TELCON Amb. Dobrynin- Secretary Kissinger October 13, 1973 [No time indicated]; best copy available.

1973-10-13

This conversation, which probably took place in the late afternoon, indicated that the cease-fire discussions were collapsing. The record is also garbled but Kissinger made it plain that the U.S. supported a cease-fire based on the "status quo ante" requiring Arab and Israeli forces to return to prewar lines.[7] According to Dobrynin, that was impossible for the Arabs: they were "doing what they feel necessary," trying to seize territory

occupied by Israel after the Six Day War. It “was very difficult for us to tell them, look here you shouldn’t do that.”

For Kissinger, Arab opposition to a cease-fire was a big mistake: they “are now going to be pushed back, possibly ... annihilated.” They had “proved their point” that negotiations had to take place. Kissinger worried that if the war continued “the Israelis [will] have pushed the Arabs out of every territory.” “If we do nothing by Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest, Arabs will have been defeated.” Such an outcome Kissinger opposed because it would leave the Israelis with too much leverage in peace talks.

A conversation between the two a few hours later demonstrated that the possibility of a cease-fire had collapsed. Kissinger stated that he had been trying to avoid a U.S.-Soviet “collision,” but “we cannot not supply our friends while you are supplying yours.”^[8]



Document 08 (transcript attached)

TELECON Amb. Dobrynin- Secretary Kissinger October 18, 1973 7:14 p.m.

1973-10-18

U.S.-Soviet cease-fire discussions resumed on 18 October. During a conversation with Dobrynin (who jokingly referred to Kissinger’s recent Nobel Peace prize), Kissinger said he believed that the Israelis would accept a cease fire resolution that referred to U.N. Resolution 242 but it would depend on the military situation. (He soon found out that the Israelis objected to any such reference.) Kosygin was in Cairo where Dobrynin hoped there would be “straight talk” with Sadat, but Kissinger was not so sure: “I have told my associates the Arabs are [as] lying as Arabs [the Israelis?] and the Israelis are [as] lying as the Arabs and it is hard to tell what is going on.” Both agreed that the military situation was stable, perhaps stalemated, but Kissinger admitted that “my nightmare is a victory for either side.” Dobrynin observed “it is not only your nightmare.”

An hour or so later, Dobrynin called again with Brezhnev’s proposal for a cease-fire resolution. As these conversations were unfolding, the Israelis were beginning to make such significant gains on the ground in the Sinai, beginning a move to encircle Egypt’s Third Army, that Sadat became ready to accept a cease-fire and Kissinger traveled to Moscow and Tel Aviv to negotiate a cease-fire. Once that was arranged and a U.S.-Soviet crisis over the conflict had occurred, Kissinger would work to exclude Moscow from the Middle East peace process to reduce its influence in the region



Nixon, Dobrynin, and Kissinger at Camp David in 1973. Source: NPMP

Notes

[1]For helpful perspective on U.S. policy during the war, see Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[2]. Nixon chose from an options paper attached to the record of a Washington Special Actions Group meeting, 9 October 1973, at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library Web site.

[3]. On Nixon's selection of Ford, see Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 288.

[4]. A copy of this telcon is probably in the papers of some former official because Walter Isaacson had access to it and quoted several sentences in *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1992), at page 521.

[5]. According to Isaacson, Kissinger's decision to rely on charter flights was "the most bothersome mistake of the resupply effort." See Isaacson, *Kissinger*, at 519.

[6]. "Remarks of Ambassador Victor Israelyan," in Richard Parker, *The October War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 219-222. Israelyan recalled that he

and his colleagues “favored putting strong pressure on Sadat,” but the Soviet leadership ignored the advice.

[7]. Kissinger later argued that it was necessary to get the Israelis to “sign on to [that] principle so we could use it against them if they turned the war around.” Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 515.

[8]. “TELCON Amb. Dobrynin- Secretary Kissinger, October 13, 1973, 7:55 p.m.,” copy available on Digital National Security Archive.

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