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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: President's Working Lunch with Agostino Cardinal Casaroli

PARTICIPANTS: The President  
The Vice President  
Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr.  
President's Chief of Staff James Baker  
Acting Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs James W. Nance  
President's Personal Envoy to the Vatican William A. Wilson  
Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, H. Allen Holmes  
NSC Staff Member Dennis C. Blair

Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, Vatican Secretary of State  
Archbishop Pio Laghi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States  
Monsignor Audrys Backis, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: December 15, 1981, 12:45 p.m. to 2:15 p.m.  
The Map Room

After an exchange of pleasantries, Cardinal Casaroli observed that, based on his conversations with Secretary of State Haig, the U.S. and the Vatican analyses of the situation in Poland had many points in common. (S)

Secretary Haig stated he had described two scenarios for what had happened in Poland: Under the first, President Jaruzelski had acted to prevent Soviet intervention, and under the second he had acted as a result of Soviet pressure to do so. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli stated that he believed that Jaruzelski had acted both because of Soviet pressure and to prevent the Soviets themselves from intervening. He believed that without Soviet pressure Jaruzelski would not have imposed martial law, but based on his personal knowledge of Jaruzelski, Cardinal Casaroli felt that he was nationalist enough not to want the Soviet Union to intervene directly. (S)

The President said that he found it hard to believe, as had been announced, that Polish troops would actually shoot Polish workers for labor violations. (S)

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Cardinal Casaroli stated that he too found it hard to believe and wondered if the United States had any evidence that shootings had occurred. (S)

Secretary Haig stated that there had been no evidence of shootings, only reports of the threat. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli said that when the Pope had discussed the imposition of martial law with Polish representatives in the Vatican, he had characterized the manner of imposition of martial law as moderate, but the measures themselves as extremely strong. Cardinal Casaroli believed that the Pope would have spoken differently if he had believed there to be danger of executions of Polish workers. Cardinal Casaroli, for his part, could understand harsh punishments for sabotage, but could hardly see them applying to workers who failed to come to work. (S)

The President recalled one news broadcast describing an observation of soldiers in Polish army uniforms speaking Russian and asked if anyone present had seen any confirmation of this report. No one had. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli recalled that he had been told by Cardinal Wyszynski that the Soviets could "kill" Poland economically any time they wished, so there was no need to take military action. (S)

Mr. Wilson pointed out that such an action would "kill" further Western economic and financial assistance to Poland. (S)

The President stated that we should take full propaganda advantage of the fact that what had sparked the imposition of martial law was the Solidarity demand that there be a national referendum on the government. This was a clear comment on the lack of popular support for the government. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli agreed that this was a telling point, but added that it was unrealistic to think that one East European country could be extensively liberalized on its own. The Soviets would simply not tolerate such a development. (S)

The President wondered if in our emphasis on the impressive buildup of Soviet military power whether we had failed to appreciate how tenuous was the Soviet hold on the people in its empire. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli stated that it was important to support movements for liberalization in Eastern Europe, but reiterated his point that no country could be far ahead of the others. The Poland situation is unique: completely surrounded by Warsaw Pact countries, cut off from any direct contact with the West. (S)

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Cardinal Casaroli stated that the Pope's belief was that change in Eastern Europe would come only gradually and at the same rate in all Eastern European countries. He was convinced that over time such liberalization would occur, but no one could know how long the process would take. (S)

In reply to Mr. Baker's question on Romania, Cardinal Casaroli pointed out that although in foreign policy Romania acted independently of the Soviet Union, the internal regime was more Stalinist than any other Eastern European country. He recalled a conversation of a Romanian diplomat with Pope Paul VI. The diplomat had said that it was a conscious policy of the Romanian government to remain strong internally in order to resist "pressure from its friends." Concerning Hungary, Cardinal Casaroli recalled the views of priests in that country, that although they were unhappy with the lack of religious freedom, they were relatively happy with the political situation there. (S)

The President noted that some observers had conjectured that Israel had annexed the Golan Heights under the cover of the events in Poland. He wondered if the Soviets had allowed Liza Alekseeva to leave the Soviet Union, ending Sakharov's hunger strike, to counteract the unfavorable publicity generated by the imposition of martial law in Poland. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli said that the events in Poland were unfortunate, but predictable. He recalled a visit to the Vatican six months ago by the Polish Minister of Transportation who was decrying the economic deterioration in Poland caused by the lack of worker discipline and had spoken openly of Soviet pressure on the Polish government to take action. He had predicted that the Polish government would be forced to intervene openly. (S)

Secretary Haig pointed out that the imposition of martial law had been weeks in the planning; it was not something which had been planned in the half-day after Solidarity called for a referendum. He stated that the U.S. policy dilemma was not to appear to welcome a repressive regime of martial law, but not to incite Soviet intervention. Although in reality the effect of indirect Soviet pressure and direct Soviet intervention was the same. The distinction was important in the stance that the United States adopted. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli said that he would not rule out the possibility that Solidarity had been infiltrated by the Polish government and that these infiltrators had generated the pretext for the imposition of martial law. In response to a question from the Vice President, Cardinal Casaroli stated that the United States and other Western observers could not act until they knew what the real situation was in Poland. He lamented the lack of good information. (S)

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The President said that the Vatican and the Pope had a key role to play in events in Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The Pope's visit to Poland had showed the "terrible hunger" for God in Eastern Europe. The President said he had heard reports of the fervor of the underground Church in the Soviet Union itself. He had heard stories of Bibles being distributed page-by-page among the believers. (N)

Cardinal Casaroli acknowledged that there was a hunger for God in specific groups in Eastern Europe, but that in general, youth was "insensible" to God. Despite strong religious beliefs among certain minorities, young people in general were apathetic. He told a story of the Pope's visit to Poland. The Pope in Krakow was prepared to address a group of some 30,000 young people. Having been told that some of these had prepared a demonstration, he put aside his prepared speech and improvised remarks to exert a moderate influence on the crowd. That night the youth held their demonstration in the streets, and the Police had called a priest to tell the demonstrating youths to wait until the Pope left town. This illustrates that there are changes coming in Eastern Europe little by little, but that the time is not ripe for real change in Eastern Europe. He recalled the advice given to him in 1963 by an American diplomat in Budapest. He had said that the policy of the United States was to avoid a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union but to work for small openings in the Iron Curtain, to plant the seeds of freedom. Although times had changed since 1963, the same principle still applied. The time was not yet ripe for major change in Eastern Europe. (N)

Mr. Wilson pointed out that we will probably only know in retrospect what the time for real change actually was. (N)

Cardinal Casaroli stated that he and others considered the United States "the sanctuary" for the future of the world. It was a big responsibility for the President, but he should know that the world relied on his good judgment and wisdom. (N)

The President replied that he hoped he could live up to this challenge. He turned to the visit the day before by the Papal delegation to deliver the study on nuclear war. He stated that currently the only way to deter nuclear war was to arm as strongly as the potential opponent. However, this was not good enough. There could be miscalculations and accidents. It was necessary to reduce the number of forces on both sides. The United States had made a start in Geneva, offering to dismantle one type of missile. It was hoped that this start could be turned into wider moves towards arms reduction. He stated that he had been struck by the Papal report's conclusion that in the event of a war there would be no way to care for the huge numbers of wounded. (N)

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Cardinal Casaroli replied that it was relatively simple to understand the horror of nuclear war. It was less easy to figure out how to keep it from occurring. A credible military deterrent depended on a resolve to incur the horrors of that war if necessary. There should be some better way. He pointed out that another group of scientists was meeting that day with President Brezhnev of the Soviet Union to present him the same report. (S)

The President told the story of an American farmer's opinion of the best place for a nuclear war to take place: far enough away that he could say, "What was that?" (S)

Cardinal Casaroli said that it was a challenge of our time to find the wisdom to avoid nuclear war. He said that although the Vatican of course maintained no formal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, it liked to maintain some communication with the Soviet government. It was necessary to be able to speak to them, although everything that they said must be interpreted. Because of the Vatican's position, it had to rely not only on the United States but also on the Soviet Union for peace in the world. (S)

Secretary Haig told Cardinal Casaroli that he expected the negotiations in Geneva to go slowly because the United States had little leverage in the negotiations with the large imbalance of weapons in the Soviet favor. He said that Cardinal Casaroli had asked him if it might not be better to accept an imbalance so long as the United States and NATO had a small but significant deterrent of their own. In rejecting such an approach, the Secretary had explained that significant imbalances created conditions for more aggressive diplomacy by the other side, and in addition they removed the incentive for arms controls and reductions. (S)

There was a discussion of the possibility of a technological breakthrough which would make the present Soviet strategic advantage obsolete, and agreement that there was nothing of this type on the horizon. (S)

Cardinal Casaroli pointed out that some way was needed to break out of the arms spiral in which each side wanted a little cushion and this spurred the other side to further escalate. Some way was needed to break that cycle, or to find a balance at a lower level. (S)

The President said that there was no miracle weapon available with which to deal with the Soviets, but that we could threaten the Soviets with our ability to outbuild them, which the Soviets knew we could do if we chose. Once we had established this, we could invite the Soviets to join us in lowering the level of weapons on both sides. (S)

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Cardinal Casaroli asked if we thought of the Chinese aspect of the problem. In his opinion the Soviets were very worried about the Chinese, especially possible future Chinese weapons systems, and this made them build extra weapons beyond those they thought they needed to deal with the United States. (X)

Admiral Nance pointed out that such weapons would be of considerably less range than those which threatened the United States and that we would be able to distinguish those weapons directed against China from those directed against us. (X)

The President added that China was many years away from an ability to threaten the Soviet Union. (X)

Cardinal Casaroli said that he thought that arms reductions either had to be global, including all countries, or they could not be accomplished at all. (X)

The President argued that if the superpowers were engaged in a serious process of reducing their armaments, the other nations of the world would feel obliged to join in. He recalled that President Eisenhower, at a time when the United States had a marked nuclear advantage over the Soviet Union, offered to turn over all nuclear weapons to an international authority. The world would be different today if the Soviets had not refused to join in this offer. (X)

Cardinal Casaroli repeated that it was an extremely difficult question, but one that it was vital for the nations of the world to address and solve. The Vatican for its part could not play a major role, but would provide the moral assistance that it could. If an informal channel was needed to deal with the Soviet Union, one that would remain private, the Pope would be available to establish it. It was important that a major power be able to "save face," and for that reason some discreet diplomacy might be valuable. Although the Holy See was politically weak, it was morally strong and might be helpful. (X)

The President agreed that quiet diplomacy was often extremely important. He recalled that President Nixon, without making a public show of it, had been able to secure the emigration from the Soviet Union of a large number of Soviet Jews. (X)

Cardinal Casaroli recalled another incident in which a Soviet ambassador had been able to accomplish a specific humanitarian action through quiet diplomacy which would not have been possible through a public campaign. He then told the President that Mr. Wilson was a "unique envoy" to the Vatican. He said that he spoke for the Pope in expressing his gratitude that an envoy of the quality of Mr. Wilson had been sent by the President. (X)

The meeting ended with pleasantries on both sides. (X)

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