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WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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July 19, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT'S FILES

SUBJECT: Briefing of the White House Staff on
the July 15 Announcement of the President's
Trip to Peking

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Henry A. Kissinger
The White House Staff

DATE, TIME & PLACE: Monday, July 19, 1971, 11:40 a.m.
The Roosevelt Room, the White House

[The President opened the meeting.]

The President: The purpose of this meeting is to give the whole staff some of the background on the China initiative. Let me put it in the context of the secrecy problem: Without secrecy, there would have been no invitation or acceptance to visit China. Without secrecy, there is no chance of success in it.

Now this may be hard for you to accept, and especially hard for Congressmen. They like to be able to put out tidbits; they like seeming to be in the know. But in the critical early stages of this, only Henry and I knew. No one else on his staff knew. Later, others on his staff had to know, and the Secretary of State had to know, to be able to brief foreign diplomats. No wife, no other staff member, no other member of the National Security Council knew.

Why? Take even our good friends the British. Well, we are in hairy negotiations now, and they have a better chance if we can be candid than if it's in the papers.

I know a guy can be a hero if he puts it out. I've heard that for 20 years. There's a great newspaper that has a motto, "All the news that's fit to print." But its real motto is, "Whatever is news is fit to print." All papers do that. I want the whole staff to assume that if one paper of that

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prestige is proceeding on that assumption, don't give them any news unless it is fit to print. With the press, first, you start with mutual suspicion, especially on their part. Second, you have to establish mutual trust. Third, to do that, you have to maintain confidence. I can't emphasize too strongly the passionate obsession people have to talk to the press. It happens on the domestic side, too, though it doesn't hurt as much. We need discipline on the domestic side, too.

The China meeting will abort if there is not total secrecy. We can't control the Congress, but we can control the Cabinet and the staff. You may wonder, why does it hurt to say "it's a great coup," "it will drive the Soviets up the wall," "it will help us in Vietnam," and so forth? The answer is that the way to make sure they don't happen is to speculate that they will. The Chinese will have to react.

What can we say? Stick to the President's announcement and say you know no more.

Don't be afraid that the press won't respect you if you aren't in the know. The press has the least respect for the babblers; they have the most contempt for the people with diarrhea of the mouth. Don't speculate. Don't claim it will help or hurt politically, or with other countries. It's a Chinese-American bilateral concern.

One final thing: It was a terribly difficult decision for the Chinese to make -- for the chief militant aggressive revolutionary power to sit down with the chief capitalist power. Three or four months ago the Chinese were kicking Moscow for collaborating with the U.S. It's also a problem for their relations with other countries.

It is also a problem for us, for example, with Taiwan.

But the reason why it has to be done -- aside from Southeast Asia on which I won't speculate -- is that they are one-fourth of the world's population. They're not a military power now but 25 years from now they will be decisive. For us not to do now what we can do to end this isolation would leave things very dangerous. Even a total detente with the Soviets would mean nothing if the third power was isolated.

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What does our moving do? It doesn't at all mean that we're with them; it means a dialogue, that's all. Looking to the future, the world will not be worth living in if we can't get the great potential explosive forces under control.

So it's not because we have illusions or are euphoric. It's ironic that I am the President who is the least euphoric about relations with Communist countries. This isn't from hardline prejudice but from experience; I know that pleasant smiles and small talk about our grandchildren won't solve problems. Where vital interests are involved, great powers consult their vital interests -- or else they're played for suckers by those powers that do. But interests may coincide.

It's traumatic for both sides. We're taking this step not for the next year or the next four years, but for the next twenty. It may make the world a little safer.

That's the background. I have total confidence in all of you -- otherwise you wouldn't be here in this room. But secrecy is essential. Anything in a column, even if not attributed, hurts us. Our Chinese friends read everything of significance coming out of the U.S. No one would want that on his shoulders. The stakes are too high for us to engage in the luxury of seeming to be smart.

Thank you.

[The President then turned the meeting over to Dr. Kissinger and left.]

Dr. Kissinger: Let me make one point, though it may seem ungracious. The most impressive thing we can do as far as the Chinese are concerned is to shut up.

Don't even quote what the President said here. The more we are quiet, the more it seems that something significant is going on. Put down a curtain. We say nothing whatever. Don't downplay the implications for Vietnam, just say nothing. It is pushing itself; everyone knows that preparations are going on.

Many internal forces are going on -- in the Soviet Union, in China, in North Vietnam. You saw the Hanoi editorial complaining about big powers dividing things up. Who would have thought Hanoi would be calling China an imperialist power? (Now, don't point that out, either.)

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This is something that has been nurtured over two and a half years.

Just say, "we will not talk about this situation." Even from the PR point of view, that will be more impressive. There will be no rewards from a trip that aborts; there will be rewards only if there are concrete results. So we will confine comment to a few senior officials. Some speculation by the public and the press maybe won't be harmful, but we want to be in a position to say we didn't feed it.

Mr. Haldeman: I just want to add that while some staff meetings are for the purpose of disseminating the line to take, this is just the opposite. This briefing is for your information only. None of it is for you to transmit to anyone else.

Dr. Kissinger: Note that the Chinese haven't said a word. James Reston is in Peking yammering that he can't get a word out of anyone there. They have meticulously kept their word.

Look at their problem: They are a country led by a group of monks -- Communist monks -- who have fought for 50 years and kept their revolutionary purity. A year ago people thought they wouldn't allow Hanoi to make peace with us, and here they invite the arch-capitalist to visit their capital! The mere fact that our communique took Mme. Binh's 7 Points off the front page must have made it harder for them. Drafting the communique was a painful process. They had to check it and recheck it. It must have been painful -- even though they had already made the basic decision.

Our problem is to keep discipline. We kept it a secret so we would not have to negotiate with the New York Times. The speculation we got afterwards we would have gotten beforehand, and we would have been judged by whether we brought back what the New York Times demanded.

The Chinese wanted it secret, as we did, but they wondered about us. It still rankled that Dulles didn't want to shake Chou's hand. Then, after we told them we would keep it a secret, the Pentagon papers blew! Then the New York Times had an item that said I would be a likely Ambassador to Peking. That nearly wrecked it. Some character in the State Department -- who didn't have a clue about this trip -- was probably looking at a map with a compass and speculating about the farthest point from Washington they could send me!

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In Peking, the Chinese went to great lengths to keep the meetings secret. They completely cleared out the Forbidden City of people when we went through. They drove us around in cars with silk curtains. The number of people who saw us was kept to an absolute minimum.

Now as to substance, why did we do this? The choice for us was this: to sit still, with our whole foreign policy under assault at home, and let ourselves be chopped up, or to try to bring the Chinese into play. With two formidable opponents contesting against each other, it is not obvious that it is in our interest to side with the stronger one against the weaker one.

Chou En-lai personally was, next to deGaulle, the most impressive foreign leader I have ever met. We spoke for 20 hours, he completely without notes. The conversations broke off in the evening so he could go to a dinner in honor of the North Korean foreign minister; but then he came back afterwards for several more hours of talks. These 20 hours were the most impressive conversations I have ever had.

The Chinese were extremely serious people. They don't wish us well. We have no illusions on that score. But in terms of our overall situation, with Soviet pressure and with the situation in Southeast Asia, it is in our interest to bring the Chinese in.

Their situation is complex, too. Their enemies will accuse them of selling out. Whatever criticism we hear from Taiwan, they will hear from North Vietnam. What we hear from Japan, they'll get from the Soviet Union. We want to keep quiet so we don't give their enemies ammunition.

Chou did it all himself, except for the drafting of the communique, which he assigned to two senior subordinates. I think he wanted to avoid the painful part. But at the end, when it was virtually settled, he came in and finished it.

Their hospitality was considerable. It was obvious that a command decision had been made that they had to have this relationship. Now all this newspaper speculation that we gave assurances on Taiwan, etc., is total nonsense. There were no preconditions set whatever. It was not that sort of a meeting.

The Chinese style is impressive. The Russians will fight you for every nickel and dime and elbow you at every point, and lose a million dollars in goodwill in the process. The Chinese have a sense of the longer trends and focus on that, not on ploymanship.

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The President got us to this point by being cool and calm and precise. We needed Cambodia and Laos. The Chinese need a strong American President for the game they are playing. A Hubert Humphrey sucking around would have only aroused their contempt. U.S. businessmen, too, arouse their monumental disdain; the Chinese will buy what they want when they want. (On this they are more disciplined, more bureaucratic, and more ideological than the Soviets.)

If we abandoned our vital interests, they would despise us. Of all the people I have talked with, they are the easiest to whom to say, "this is our position and these are our interests." They understand this language.

They have decided they need to end their isolation. They have paid the price now, simply in inviting us. They won't regain their virginity by cancelling the visit, as the press thinks they are likely to do. They will cancel the visit if the President loses all prestige at home or if the situation radically changes in some other way. They are playing for very high stakes. They conducted the conversations on a very high level, without any attempt to score little points. They conducted themselves with a sense that they were starting an historical process.

The cloak and dagger exercise in Pakistan arranging the trip was fascinating. Yahya hasn't had such fun since the last Hindu massacre!

Can I take any questions?

Mr. Flanigan: Did you have the impression that Mao was the complete master of the situation, or was Chou?

Dr. Kissinger: I was confined to the State Guest House most of the time. But the people I came in contact with spoke of Mao with an enormous sense of reverence, with an almost mystical feeling. I do know they checked everything important with him. In fact, some modifications in the communique were made, which we wanted but hadn't pressed for, and these I believe came from him.

There was one curious incident. They asked me early on if I would make a tape of our basic position. I didn't know what this meant, and I begged off until later. Then later when we were finishing drafting the communique, Chou commented, "we don't need the tape now; the Chairman is satisfied." Apparently they had wanted the tape for Mao.

Mr. Flanigan: Did they speak in English?

Dr. Kissinger: They spoke through interpreters, but Chou understands English and even corrected his interpreter.

As to who runs the government, I think Chou runs it on a day-to-day basis. For example, he settled a number of decisions right at the table, except for big policy questions which he had to check with Mao.

Chou reads English. He asked detailed questions about American politics, some based on the President's Kansas City speech of July 6. He kept probing about the amount of economic aid the U.S. had given to Europe. I told him I hadn't seen it since I had been on the trip.

The next day -- and this is characteristic -- they handed me a copy of a verbatim text of the Kansas City speech. It was Chou's personal copy, with his underlinings and question marks, and marginal notes. They told me it was his only copy and they needed it back! (They don't yet have Xerox machines.) There was a handwritten question mark next to the figure of \$1100 billion in U.S. aid to Europe. When I got back here I asked about the figure and it turned out that the \$1100 was a misprint, it should have been \$100 billion.

At another point I made a joking remark about an American newsman who was just then visiting China and was on his way to Peking. Chou responded that the newsman was at that moment on a train and would not arrive in Peking until two days after I had left.

This gives you some idea of the sense of detail Chou has.

Dr. McCracken: What was your impression of their interest in politics as opposed to economics?

Dr. Kissinger: Their interest is 100 percent political. There was no emphasis at all on the economic side. Even as we arrived at the airport, one of them commented to me, "We are being overwhelmed with your businessmen. In due time we'll do business, but in our own time."

Remember, these are men of ideological purity. Chou En-lai joined the Communist Party in France in 1920, long before there was a Chinese Communist Party. This generation didn't fight for 50 years and go on the Long March for trade.

Mr. Shultz: In Marxist theory, economics is paramount and all else is superstructure.

Dr. Kissinger: In Marxist practice, politics is paramount.

Mr. Shultz: Then this is ideological impurity.

Question: The little red book of Mao's quotations has many pragmatic parts that read like a college engineering textbook. Don't they seem to have a pragmatic ability to get things done?

Dr. Kissinger: What I am saying is that they are not interested in trade for trade's sake. I am not saying they are not interested in getting things done.

Another thing struck me: When you have read of the formalism of old China, it is remarkable to see the absence of hierarchy, for example, in the personal relationship between Chou and his interpreter. There was an easy personal relationship unlike what you would see in any Western official counterpart.

Mr. MacGregor: What did they say about the USSR?

Dr. Kissinger: They did not speak of the Soviet Union with unqualified admiration.

Dr. McCracken: Was this out of practical concern about an adversary or because of ideological impurity?

Dr. Kissinger: They are concerned with the Soviet military buildup on their border.

Mr. Haldeman: Let me interrupt for a second. Rogers Morton raised a point at the Cabinet meeting. Because of this enormous coup we have to be prepared for a Democratic onslaught on domestic issues. They can't get a hold of anything in foreign policy, so we have to be prepared -- and should counterattack, too -- on domestic issues. We've got to stay together on that. We have a lot to do in that area. We have to get the idea across that the President is doing things there too.

Mr. Flanigan: Henry, did you get the feeling the Chinese had any friends in the West by virtue of having diplomatic recognition from the British and French and others?

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Dr. Kissinger: I talked with Chou for 20 hours. This is more than all the Western Ambassadors put together have talked with Chou En-lai in all the years they have had diplomatic relations. Ambassadors don't get to see Chou En-lai. The Soviets have a Deputy Foreign Minister in China negotiating on the border issue but he has never seen Chou. The Chinese talk when they have something to say; they don't talk for talking's sake.

Frankly, I sensed that the other Western nations are of no account to them. They use the Western Europeans. They're not interested in abstract friendship. The fact that the British recognized them in 1951 has no impact that I can see.

Question: Do you see them as more Communist or more Chinese? What is the influence of Chinese history and culture?

Dr. Kissinger: Whenever I mentioned Chinese history to them, they emphasized what was new. But we were given a special tour of the Forbidden City by their chief archaeologist. Their grace and style did not give you a sense of an enormous break in continuity. At the same time, you get a mystical sense of their revolution as a tremendous emotional experience. This whole generation of leaders has been formed by that experience. Mao is right. It is hard to see how the next generation will feel and act the same way.

Mr. Colson: Why was it in their vital interest to invite the President?

Dr. Kissinger: I would rather not speculate. But it was a longer-term reason than ours. We have more short-term reasons for doing it.

Mr. Peterson: Well, Henry, it's good to have a reason to congratulate you for something other than your presumed sexual exploits.

Dr. Kissinger: You know I believe in the linkage theory!

[End of Meeting]