

**Record of Dinner Conversation between Gorbachev, Bush, Gonzalez
and King Juan Carlos of Spain**

October 29, 1991

Gorbachev. Tomorrow we are opening a conference that has become possible as a result of the end of the "Cold War." The road to success will be difficult. Terrorist acts¹ are an effort to disrupt the conference. But we must do everything to keep the participants in place. Today I spoke with [Yitzhak] Shamir. After we raised the question of the necessity of holding bilateral negotiations here in Madrid, he agreed that we could start them here.

Bush. I did not know about that. This is a step.

Gonzalez. We are saying that the conference, in the end, should "give birth to a baby." But of course, at least a "conception" should happen here. Overall, we must note that all sides have now come to the conclusion that they cannot, that it is not in their interest, to leave the conference.

Bush. Shamir is a very difficult partner. We took very serious measures with respect to credit assurances; [we] were not afraid of the Jewish lobby, on which he counts; [we] were

¹ Separate deadly incidents occurred in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Turkey on the eve of the conference. [Editors]

not afraid of all his sharp expressions. Now he is at the conference. But it will not be easy with him.

Gorbachev. When Shamir started telling me that we should hold bilateral negotiations in the capitals of the countries of the region, so that he would be close [and] could participate personally, give instructions and so on, I said--why should we, Mr. Prime Minister, create a situation like this? If we conduct negotiations in the region, there will be more emotions, more pressure from the press, from public opinion. You will often have to play on the "other's field." Wouldn't it be better to play on a neutral [field]? In general, we are trying to "work" with him.

Bush. This is good. We will strive to have the participants of the negotiations themselves carry as much as possible of the burden of responsibility.

Gorbachev. As we stated at the press conference: we brought the parties to the negotiating table, and we have no intention of disappearing now. But the main responsibility is on them now.

Bush. Tomorrow I will make a mainly boring, general speech. Hope you don't fall asleep. I will call for a constructive [approach].

Gorbachev. I said to Shamir: you are the first to speak, and we are counting on you to introduce a constructive tone. I am not going into details tomorrow. Notwithstanding all our

internal difficulties, we are full of determination to play a constructive role in the world. And when we create the Union of Sovereign States, it will become a powerful positive factor in the international arena. But we are facing a serious struggle. The coup-plotters have seriously undermined the future of the Union. They said they were going to save the country. And some people in the press are throwing out the question: where are the real patriots now: walking free or in jail?

Juan Carlos. Does this really have resonance?

Gorbachev. Yes, it finds a certain resonance. There are still many people who believe that democracy and the Constitution are good, but the main thing is that there should be order.

Gonzalez. For decades people were injected with a negative attitude toward "formal democracy." The actions of the coup-plotters are an example of how this kind of people are destroying something they allegedly wanted to save. Nobody encouraged the centripetal tendencies in the USSR as much as they did. Meanwhile Europe and the world need the Union. Two main circles are being created in Europe--one is in the West leaning toward the EU. The other should be in the East. It is the current Soviet Union, the Union of Sovereign States, for which you stand. If there is no second circle, then there will

be no important pillar of stability in Europe and in the world. This would be a dangerous vacuum.

Gorbachev. I am constantly saying: we need the Union, we must not tear the threads that were created over the centuries. But our partners in the international arena also need the Union. Because chaos and constant instability in our country will create a threat for everybody. And I will do everything to preserve the Union, of course a renewed one with extensive rights for sovereign republics, but at the same time with the kind of center they need, that would serve a single economic space, ensure defense with unified armed forces, ensure a coordinated foreign policy and everything that one should not disrupt--a single power grid, transportation and communications, ecology, etc.

In our country now many people think that we can separate and then come together again, that it would be sufficient just to have free association or a commonwealth. But I will insist on a full-blooded Union, I will not abandon it.

Bush. We are all concerned about this issue. What are the chances, in your view, that you will succeed in realizing your vision? How do you see the actions of the Ukraine? And how should one understand Yeltsin's latest speech? By the way, [Marlin] Fitzwater informed me that the first reactions of the mass media in the United States to our joint press conference

came under titles like this: "Bush supports Gorbachev and turns his back on Yeltsin." I don't know, maybe he dramatizes the situation, but it would be bad if they succeeded in creating such a perception. You know that nothing like that happened. And at the press conference I tried to emphasize the need of cooperation between the center and the republics, even though there were questions posed in a different spirit.

Gorbachev. Yes, I appreciate it, George. I am convinced that we should not allow a situation where Gorbachev and Yeltsin are pitted against each other.

Bush. You promised today that you would tell us all about this in detail in the evening.

Gorbachev. Yes, it is not easy to figure it all out. In my analysis, I separate Yeltsin's speech into two parts. The first one--this is the part that deals with the economy. Here, even though there are some moments that could cause objections--there are things that are voluntaristic, without mechanisms for realization (but that is just objective reality, and we are working on those now)--still, here we should emphasize the positive. In fact, this is within the framework of what I was talking about at the Supreme Soviet; it develops and adds concrete details to certain stipulations. He talks about the need for financial stabilization and price liberalization. These are painful measures, and he has finally decided to pursue them.

And I will support him. Because he--let's give him credit--takes responsibility for the radical, painful steps. And we really cannot do without them. The other part of the speech is political. He called me yesterday, and we discussed some of it. He asked what to say about Ukraine. I suggested that he should say that we keep hoping that Ukraine will be with us, in the Union, and that's what he said. In the speech, there is confirmation of the need for the Union, it says that Russia will not destroy the Union, but there are also things that lead away from the agreements that were affirmed in the draft of the Union Treaty, which he and I sent to the republics. And the majority of the republics supported that concept, and sent us their considerations. Yeltsin has also sent [his].

Juan Carlos. I understand, the situation is complex. But here everybody noted the political aspect, and first of all the call for cutting the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs by 90 percent. One has to think about how such things are perceived abroad!

Gonzalez. This is, so to speak, a metaphor. But a unified state cannot exist with such a "metaphor."

Gorbachev. I fully agree with this. And that is why I am saying that we are facing a serious struggle, because I am calling not for an amorphous union, not for an amoeba, but for a union state. And in the draft of the Union Treaty, which Yeltsin

and I sent out, it says so: union state. There are some things in the speech that lead away from that.

Bush. And he called me, he said that he wants to tell me about the substance of the speech, assured that it would be devoted to the economy, said all the good things. But he said nothing about the other part of the speech. How can that happen? I don't understand it.

Juan Carlos. Mr. President, maybe it sounds harsh, but our relationship allows me to ask you this question--isn't he clipping your wings?

Gorbachev. I would say that is not the right question. The problem is somewhat different. I think that in his soul he is sincerely in favor of the Union, he understands that not a single republic, not even Russia, can live without it. And this realization finds its expression in the fact that he works in contact with me; lately we have been working very closely together, working very intensely on the Union Treaty. However, he--even though he creates the impression of a strong and confident person--in reality he falls under influences very easily, in particular under the influence of certain forces, of people who are saying that Russia should throw off this burden, the republics are only a hindrance, the union with them is unprofitable, and that we need to go forward independently. Hence the idea that Russia should take upon itself the status of

legal heir of the Soviet Union. And this idea, even though in a veiled state, in a form of denial, showed up in the speech. And one of the people who accompanies me here, Yegor Yakovlev, said: upon reading this speech, one can say that Yeltsin is going to try to destroy the Union, but in such a way that he could shift the blame to the other republics. But this way is dangerous, deadly. And that would be trouble for Russia.

Gonzalez. I think he would want to shift [the blame] to the other republics and to the center.

Bush. But who are those forces you were speaking about? Who are these people?

Gorbachev. [Gennady] Burbulis, for example. He is a person with great influence on Yeltsin. And when a leader falls under influences so easily, it is hard to do business with him. Here, Mr. President, you were vice president for eight years, and now you are in your fourth year as president. We have known each other for a long time. Tell me, has there been at least one time when I gave you my word and did not keep it?

Bush. No, it has not happened once.

Gorbachev. A politician could not always give his word, but having given it, he has to keep it. Yeltsin--such is the reality we have to live with--is a person who is not always reliable.

Gonzalez. Exactly. I remember talking to him during my visit to the Soviet Union. He started by saying that the center

is a nuisance to us, that they did not need the center and so on. I tried to persuade him that Russia needs the Union, and the Union cannot be without the center, and in the end he agreed with me. After that conversation I went to the Kremlin for negotiations with President Gorbachev. When I arrived, I learned that in the meantime Yeltsin had been talking to the press and said just the opposite, perverted everything.

Gorbachev. Yes, this is the kind of person we are working with. Such is the reality. Honestly speaking, you cannot let him go for one day. You work with him, come to an agreement, and then it turns out that you have to start everything all over again. But I do not want us to be completely disappointed in him. I will work with him. All in all, if you consider his speech yesterday as a whole, the positive elements outweigh [the negative ones]. There is, first of all, the readiness to undertake decisive steps on the economy, affirmation of a single monetary system, and so on. This is important, this is the first time he is talking about what needs to be done. Today, it would be a big mistake to go for a fight, for a confrontation with Yeltsin. And I will be working with him, and with other leaders of the republics. By the way, they all want to work directly with you, to establish contacts, to emphasize their relations with you. And this gives us an opportunity to let them know of a

certain position. I can see that you are not indifferent to how things will turn out in our country.

Bush. Yes, I received Kravchuk and [Kyrgyz President Askar] Akayev. We do have contacts with the republics, and we are trying not to undermine your positions. And I always say that we are interested in having the republics find agreement with the center, we want to help you, and for this it is necessary that you come to an agreement. And of course, there are the military issues, disarmament, and nuclear weapons. I always emphasize President Gorbachev's role. And when Ukraine started to make statements on these issues, this caused great worry.

Gorbachev. Yes, these are serious issues. But we have to have in mind that politics gets in the way here, electoral calculations. On December 1, Ukraine will hold presidential elections. After that, a lot will change, I think. They already realized what impression they had created with their "outbursts" regarding nuclear weapons and the Ukrainian army.

Bush. Yes, senators are asking what kind of a new army of 450,000 men they are talking about when we need to ratify the CFE Treaty.

Gorbachev. However, you have to keep in mind that whatever Kravchuk is saying (and he is saying different things--one thing in the Crimea and another in Kiev), and whatever the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet is adopting, this is not the same as the people's

opinion. I am convinced that the people of such a multinational republic as Ukraine will ultimately make a decision in favor of the Union because we cannot simply separate from one another in a country where 75 million people live outside of their ethnic units. There are 15 million Russians in the Ukraine, according to the most conservative estimates. Only 40 percent of Kazakhstan is Kazakh.

Juan Carlos. Only?

Gonzalez. Kazakhstan as such is just nonsense.

Gorbachev. Apart from the Union, yes. And that is why Nazarbayev is firmly pro-Union. We never had any internal borders. How is it possible to divide oneself, how do you cut up everything? Ukraine in its present form emerged only because the Bolsheviks did not have a majority in the Rada, and they added Kharkov and Donbass to the Ukraine. And Khrushchev passed the Crimea from Russia to the Ukraine as a fraternal gesture. And when talk started about the secession of Ukraine, then a powerful movement against that began in the Donbass, in the south, and in the Crimea. The Crimea finally made the decision that either Ukraine will be in the Union, or we are returning to Russia. Kravchuk went to the Crimea, tried to calm them down. The situation is made even more difficult by the careless statements of Yeltsin and his circle about borders and territorial claims. This is an explosive topic.

Gonzalez. All this proves that in the modern states the notion of self-determination cannot be taken to the absurd. Secession is absurd. To what degree can one divide up? Up to self-determination of a town? That would be the logical result if one starts splitting up.

Bush. You are saying that Kravchuk is maneuvering before the elections. But will he be able to win? Many people in my country think he would not.

Gorbachev. I think he will win the elections. He tells me: wait until December 1; after the elections I will be able to speak definitively.

Bush. And you think that after the elections he would definitively speak in favor of the Union?

Gorbachev. I am not sure of that. But I am firmly convinced of one thing--it is not possible to tear Ukraine and Russia apart--they will be together.

Gonzalez. Of course, it is impossible to tear Russia from Russia, it began in Kiev.

Gorbachev. Many things today stem from the immaturity of our politicians, who emerged on the wave of perestroika. These are very different people. I look at them: here is a person who yesterday put all his energy into the service of the old regime, was its passionate proponent, and now he is an ultra-radical, a passionate demolisher of the center. And that is not before

August, but now, when all the totalitarian structures have been swept away. There is no longer a center that would personify those structures. And they continue fighting against it.

Gonzalez. This is a typical example of a "pseudo-discussion," an argument without a subject. How can they now fight against the center, as if nothing has changed? This reminds me of a joke about the president of Colombia, who, upon coming to power in 1980 announced that he was breaking relations with Spain. He was asked: why? He [said:] because Spain stole our gold. Yes, they say, but that happened 500 years ago. That is right, he says, but I just found out about it today.

Gorbachev. Or the joke about the man who was still blowing up trains in Belorussia twenty-five years after the war. He was caught and said: I am a partisan. But twenty-five years have gone by, you are blowing up the wrong things.

Gonzalez. The problem is that the republics see themselves as possessing substantial legitimacy, because they recently held democratic elections. Of course, your main problem is time, the objective zeitnot. But you were also being undermined by the sequence of events. If the same kind of elections were held simultaneously or earlier at the all-Union level, then maybe the situation would be different now.

Gorbachev. This is only partially true. The first free elections were held in our country in 1989, when people's

deputies of the USSR were elected. And the majority of individuals who now are playing the leading roles in the republics, in the districts, emerged then. And that sequence was justified by the fact that our changes started from the top.

Bush. I agree with that.

Gorbachev. But this is not the main thing. Our society will not be able to bear such a split, such destruction. I am sure of that and I will be doing everything for the Union. And not for any Union, but for a full-fledged one. Once I said exactly this to the presidents of the republics: if I see that we are moving not to a unitary union state with a popularly elected president, with a single economic space, unified armed forces and so on, then I will not enter the race as a candidate for the presidency, I will have to separate myself from it. I think that there is a chance to create a full-blooded new union where the republics would enjoy genuine sovereignty, but where Russia will play a special role. It has objectively the leading, forward role. But now the republics do not accept any direct leadership. The only opportunity for Russia to fulfill this role of hers is through the new center, where all the republics would be represented and where Russia, due to its weight, potential, and capabilities would be able to realize itself, to lead the others. In this, one could say, lies its historic mission. But as I have already said, we will have to fight for this.

Juan Carlos. And you believe that you will be able to win in this fight? We are with you with all our hearts.

Gorbachev. I think that there is a chance, and I am confident that we should achieve it. And I speak about it openly. When Shushkevich announced his candidacy for the position of chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, he consulted with me, and I told him: "You are not some kind of politician who has nothing else to do and who does not know any other trade. You are a physicist, a professor, you can come back and lead an institute. What do you have to lose? Therefore, I suggest that you state [your position] clearly, what you stand for." And he stated clearly: for the Union. And he got almost 70 percent of the vote. And his rival, a strong person, by the way, only got 25 percent. And I declare clearly and definitively: I am for the union state. There will be struggles, it will be hard, but I will work with everybody, individually and all together. And if I see that the other concept is winning, then I will speak about it, and I will not be president. But I repeat-- we have a chance to create a union state, a new [state], with strong republics, but above all a democratic [state].

Gonzalez. Democratic, but necessarily with a strong executive. Strong [executive] power of course is not a sufficient condition for the existence of a democratic state, but it is a necessary condition.

Gorbachev. I absolutely agree with that. For us today, it is a serious and very difficult problem, and I have been speaking about the need to strengthen executive power at all levels for a long time.

Gonzalez. If one talks about the United States, there the foundation of strong federal power is in the fact that 60 percent of government spending is done at the federal level. And the decisive instrument of executive power is the presidential veto power. It is, of course, a marvelous instrument. And more: you can win elections by a margin of one vote, issue the veto with a margin of one vote--and nonetheless, this decision would be respected, complied with by everyone, without a sound.

Juan Carlos. It is not like that yet in our country. They say that only a sizable majority is persuasive.

Gonzalez. You see, Mr. President Bush, how we are jealous of your system. However (the King is probably not listening), I have to admit that the monarchy has served the interests of contemporary Spain quite well. I, as a person without any "monarchic inclinations," can say it openly.

Juan Carlos. I heard what the chairman of the government just said. We are talking about a monarchy of a modern type. But the press needs topics, and so they try to "pour acid" into our relationship with the head of the government all the time, to depict us as rivals.

Gorbachev. Many people in my country are trying to do just the same--to put a wedge between me and Yeltsin. There are people, there are forces, who are interested in it and are working on it all the time.

Bush. And I have to face the coming year--an election year. I will tell you honestly--I think about it with horror. We have a striking ability to distort all the issues, to waste time on the issues that are not really important during electoral campaigns. You never know what will fall down on top of you. Of course I do not want, Mikhail, to compare these concerns with the gigantic task you are trying to solve today. It is a stunning, breathtaking drama. We are holding our breath as we watch it unfold, and we wish you luck.

Gorbachev. I see in your words, Mr. President, an understanding of the fact that the preservation and renewal of our Union, the solution to our problems--and they can only be solved within the Union--is necessary not just for ourselves, although for ourselves first of all. It is important and beneficial also for you, for our Western partners, for the entire world. That is why I was telling you today in our conversation that now, during the particularly difficult, decisive period of transition from a totalitarian political and economic system to a democracy and markets, we especially need the support of our partners. It is getting late already, so I

will speak very briefly about one more issue. I am meeting with President Mitterrand tomorrow.

Bush. Give my special regards to Francois.

Gorbachev. I will pass them on, by all means. It is likely that I will have to respond to his proposal regarding a meeting of four nuclear powers. What do you think about that?

Bush. He did not talk about this with me personally, as strange as that is. We know about this idea, we might have some questions, but he did not address me.

Gorbachev. We have some questions too. For example, why is China not mentioned, what should we do about it? We need to think how to react to this idea of Mitterrand. There are things there to weigh and maybe to discuss.

Bush. It is really a question--regarding China.

Gonzalez. There is one important thing behind this idea of Mitterrand--he is feverishly seeking a way to finally leave behind De Gaulle's idea of "strike forces." Some movement in that direction was noticeable some time ago. But you know how to do it beautifully? You know, when one person lies on a bed, and he suddenly changes his pose, everybody notices that. But when there are four or five people lying on that bed, one can make all kinds of body movements unnoticeably.

Gorbachev. That is a good way to put it. By the way, Mr. President, your allies--the British and the French--got alarmed

when I agreed to discuss limited ABM systems with you. They started feeling uncomfortable, afraid that creation of such a system would devalue their own nuclear forces. And they are concerned that the Soviet Union would abandon its position on the ABM Treaty. We, of course, support this treaty, we think that it has contributed greatly to stability.

Bush. I know that they had certain questions. We consulted with them. I still think that we will not have a big problem with them, we will be able to explain everything to them and remove their potential concerns. I reconsidered the concept of SDI, and now we are talking about a genuinely limited ABM system.

Gorbachev. Well, it is really late, and tomorrow we will have a big day. I think it is time to thank his Royal Highness for the wonderful evening and the magnificent dinner.

Juan Carlos. I was very glad to be the host for such company. Thank you for the very interesting conversation. We all gained a lot from it. Mr. Gonzalez and I, of course, would like to join President Bush in wishing you, Mr. President, success in the great cause of transforming your country.

Gorbachev. Thank you for these words of support.

[Source: The Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 1, Opis 1, Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.]