

**June 12, 1989**

**Record of Conversation between M. S. Gorbachev  
and Chancellor of FRG H. Kohl**

**Citation:**

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**Summary:**

Gorbachev and Kohl share their impressions of the newly elected George Bush and discuss events in Eastern Europe.

**Original Language:**

Russian

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Record of Conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and Chancellor of FRG H. Kohl.  
June 12, 1989. Bonn (one-on-one).

Kohl. [...] I've known George Bush for a long time, we have a very good, friendly relationship. In giving him an evaluation as a President, after just several months on the job, we have to take into account his previous career.

George Bush was Vice President under President Reagan for eight years. He was always a loyal person, in this respect we probably have a common point of view, we perceive such qualities as positive. However, for George Bush personally, such an assessment had a negative aspect, hurt him, because everybody was constantly asking whether he would be able to come out of Reagan's shadow, and to acquire his own political face, or whether he would always remain in the position of loyalty.

In terms of public relations, Bush has a long way to go to compete with Reagan: he has neither the actor charisma, nor the art to communicate with people via TV, nor any other similar qualities. He is an intellectual. In America they distinguish between people from the West coast and from the East coast. People from California are very different from people from the Western [sic] United States.

In this sense Bush, as a politician, is very important for Europe-- he has a more European vision of things than Reagan had. By the way, Reagan, as a politician, grew literally in front of my eyes. I've known him since 1979 when he still was the leader of the opposition; One time he came to Bonn, I received him, and we talked for 3 hours. Helmut Schmidt, who was Chancellor then, did not receive him, stating that he did not have time. I had a depressing impression from that conversation with Reagan. It came out that he did not understand anything in European affairs. My assistant [Horst] Telchik was present at that conversation, and he can tell you even now how discouraged we were then. But later Reagan became President, and you, Mr. Gorbachev, were able to find a common language with him.

Bush is a completely different person. Do not forget that he inherited a difficult domestic political situation, first of all in terms of the economy. Now the ghost of the united European market, which will be created in 1992, is knocking on the U.S. door. Japanese entrepreneurs are working in the United States, and they are capturing new positions all the time. The living standards of the U.S. population, and first of all of the disadvantaged strata, continue to stagnate.

Recently I had a chance to see it with my own eyes. Last week I flew to America on a personal, unofficial trip, to visit my son, who took exams at Harvard University. I spoke with students and with professors-- and I did not hear any positive assessments of how the American people now live from anybody. Bush has an overwhelming load of things to do in the social sphere, which could become his Achilles heel. At the same time, in Congress his situation is more favorable than the one that Reagan had. I would say that dramatic changes have happened there. The current [Democratic] leader of Congress [i.e. House of Representatives], [Rep.] Tom Foley, represents a politician of a quiet, non-aggressive type. He is oriented toward cooperation, not confrontation, he wants to build a positive political capital for himself, so that in the future he could become a presidential candidate from the Democrats. In short, it is important to follow American domestic developments, and to account for them in formulating your own political line.

[...]

Gorbachev. I had many meetings with Bush, including personal meetings. Last time

we talked in [New York City in] December of last year [1988], when he had already been elected President. We agreed on a confidential basis, that we would develop Soviet-American relations on the basis of the following formula: continuity, plus what we should supplement it with. There are a lot of sensitive issues in our relations, that is why it is important to improve the trust between Moscow and Washington. So far, I have not noticed any significant deviations from the agreement on Bush's part. However, as I have already mentioned, his last speeches gave us grounds for concern.

Kohl. Are you talking about his statements on arms control? What speeches do you have in mind?

Gorbachev. The speech at the University of Texas on May 12, and the speech at the Coast Guard Academy [on 24 May]. Also, he made quite unpleasant statements concerning Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the [6 March] conference "Veterans of Foreign Wars" before Americans of Polish origin, and so on. This is what comes to mind. However, there were other statements of this kind in the last months too. I don't see either a realism or a constructive line in those statements. Frankly speaking, those statements reminded us of Reagan's statements about the "crusade" against socialism. He appealed to the forces of freedom, called for the end to the "status quo," and for "pushing socialism back." And all this at a time when we are calling for the de-ideologization of relations. Unwillingly, questions come to mind--where is Bush genuine, and where is Bush rhetorical? Where does he just play up the rhetoric, and where does he lay down the state line?

Kohl. We will wait and see. I am convinced that everything will take its course, and with good speed. There will be progress in disarmament also. Here everything depends on the two great powers.

If we can achieve a decisive progress in Vienna in the next 12-15 months, it would change the situation on all arms control issues in a crucial way. Now there are no taboos or unresolvable problems any more.

[...] We are watching the developments in Hungary with great interest. The United States, and of course you, Mr. General Secretary, are following them too. I told Bush that as far as Hungary is concerned, we are acting on the basis of an old German proverb: let the church remain in the village. It means that the Hungarians should decide themselves what they want, but nobody should interfere in their affairs.

Gorbachev. We have a similar proverb: you do not go to somebody's monastery with your charter.

Kohl. Beautiful folk wisdom. Both sides adhere to it. And if so, there could be no talk about any "crusades".

Gorbachev. I am telling you honestly-- there are serious shifts underway in the socialist countries. Their direction originates from concrete situations in each country. The West should not be concerned about it. Everything moves in the direction of a strengthening of the democratic basis. Every country decides on its own how it does it. It is their internal affair. I think you would agree with me that you should not stick a pole into an anthill. The consequences of such an act could be absolutely unpredictable.

Kohl. There is an opinion of one side, there is an opinion of another side, but there is also a third opinion-- a common opinion. This is a common opinion of the Soviet Union, of the United States, of the FRG, and of other countries. In short, we should not interfere with anybody's development.

Gorbachev. There is a very tense situation in a number of countries. If someone was going to try to destabilize the situation, it would disrupt the process of building trust between the West and the East, and destroy everything that has been achieved so far. We want a rapprochement, not a return to the positions of confrontation.

[...]

Kohl. However, it is not a secret to anybody, that Erich Honecker is not inclined to undertake any changes or reforms, and thus he himself destabilizes the situation.

I have problems because of that in the FRG. I say all the time that I am not interested in destabilizing the situation in the GDR. However, the people ask me all the time, why does the GDR remain on frozen positions[?] I am told that we should do something in order to let the people there experience the same freedom that now characterizes Hungary, Poland, and, of course, the Soviet Union.

You cannot imagine what was going on here when the GDR banned the distribution of Soviet magazine "Sputnik." Everybody was laughing. But I did not. Because they demanded that I, as Chancellor, take new steps for the improvement of relations with the GDR, and I could not do anything about it.

[...]

Gorbachev. As far as our friends are concerned, we have a firm principle: everyone is responsible for his own country. We are not going to teach anybody, but we are not asking anybody to teach us either. I think that what I have just said makes it clear whether there is any "Brezhnev Doctrine." We are in favor of positive changes in all spheres, in favor of political normalization, of strengthening of the economy, but at the same time also in favor of preserving the special features and traditions of the socialist states.

Kohl. I support your ideas. To tell you honestly, we understand Moscow much better, and we feel much closer to it than to [East] Berlin now that 90% of the population in the GDR watch our television. They are informed about everything, but afraid to speak publicly. I just feel sorry for the people. But let me reiterate that I am not doing anything to destabilize the situation. This applies to Hungary, and Poland, as well. To interfere with anybody's internal political development now would mean to take a destructive line which would throw Europe back to the times of caution and mistrust.

Gorbachev. This is a very important statement, it fits the spirit of the time.

Kohl. [...] As far as the conventional weapons are concerned, the key to this issue is in your hands. We have a real opportunity to reach an agreement, and in a fundamental sense, on conventional weapons in the next 12, or if not, then in the next 14-15 months. An agreement on conventional weapons would put the entire arms control agenda on a qualitatively new level. I will be one of those who will make a clear and sound statement about it.

I would like to propose to you, Mr. General Secretary, that in the next several months we should stay in direct contact--not via departments--on the issues of negotiations in Vienna and in general, I believe that we should intensify our contacts, call each other more often, even if there is no concrete business to discuss. If we talk regularly, hear each other's voices, all problems would be easier to solve.

As far as special representatives are concerned, as I have already told you, I will send my closest assistant Telchik who is present here. And you can send Chernyaev to me.

Gorbachev. I agree.

Kohl. We are not exaggerating our role, but we are not underestimating it either. Others will listen to our opinion more and more. I can already feel it.

Gorbachev. We need to cooperate more closely, because our cooperation can produce very effective impulses and lead to positive changes on still unresolved issues.