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Haig Said Nixon Joked of Nuking Hill

Transcripts of Phone Talks Are Released by Archives

By Michael Dobbs
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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President Richard M. Nixon jokingly threatened to drop a nuclear bomb on Capitol Hill in March 1974 as Congress was moving to impeach him over the Watergate scandal, according to transcripts of telephone conversations among his closest aides that were released yesterday.

"I was told to get the football," White House Chief of Staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. told Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger less than five months before the president's forced resignation, during a conversation in which the two men exchanged stories about Nixon's increasingly erratic behavior.

"What do you mean?" asked Kissinger, who had called Haig to express concern that the president might unwittingly unleash a Middle East war with his new, get-tough policy against Israel.

"His black nuclear bag," replied Haig. "He is going to drop it on the Hill."

The March 20, 1974, exchange is among 20,000 pages of transcripts of telephone conversations that Kissinger deposited in the Library of Congress in 1976 with the stipulation that they remain secret until at least five years after his death. Kissinger turned the transcripts over to the National Archives in February 2002 after being threatened with legal action by the National Security Archive, a nonprofit group that campaigns against government secrecy. The National Archives reviewed the transcripts for national security and privacy purposes and released almost all of them yesterday.

The transcripts shed light on the extraordinarily complex relationship between Nixon and Kissinger during a turbulent period in American foreign policy, from the bombing of Cambodia in 1970 to the Yom Kippur war of 1973 and diplomatic breakthroughs with China and the Soviet Union. Even as Kissinger attempted to convince Nixon of his loyalty, he adopted a sardonic tone in conversations with Haig and other aides.

In the March 20 transcript, neither Kissinger nor Haig seems alarmed by threats to bomb Congress or "to go after the Israelis" after "he is through with the Europeans."

"He is just unwinding," Haig told Kissinger. "Don't take him too seriously."

On other occasions, as in December 1970, when Nixon proposed an escalation in the bombing of Cambodia, Kissinger and Haig felt obliged to humor the president while laughing at him behind his

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back. During that episode, Kissinger was still serving as national security adviser, and Haig was one of his deputies.

The Air Force is "not designed for any war we are likely to have to fight," Kissinger told Nixon after the president railed against U.S. pilots for "farting around doing nothing" over Cambodia and "running goddamn milk runs in order to get the air medal." Both men suspected North Vietnamese guerrillas of using Cambodia as a sanctuary and supply line to South Vietnam.

"It's a disgraceful performance," Nixon went on. "I want gunships in there. That means armed helicopters, DC-3s, anything else that will destroy personnel that can fly. I want it done!! Get them off their ass."

"We will get it done immediately, Mr. President," Kissinger replied.

After talking to Nixon, Kissinger got on the phone with Haig to pass on the president's orders for "a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia," using "anything that flies on anything that moves." The transcript then records an unintelligible comment that "sounded like Haig laughing."

The transcripts include several episodes that appear at odds with Kissinger's version of events, such as his claim that Washington had nothing to do with the September 1973 military coup in Chile that toppled the democratically elected, leftist government of Salvador Allende. "We didn't do it," Kissinger told Nixon, "I mean we helped them. [unintelligible] created the conditions as great as possible."

Peter Kornbluh, a Latin America specialist at the National Security Archive, said the passage appeared to mark an acknowledgment by Kissinger that U.S. policy paved the way for the coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power. "It's diametrically opposed to the account he provides in his memoirs," Kornbluh said.

The transcripts show Nixon and Kissinger congratulating each other on the overthrow of "a pro-Communist . . . anti-American" government in Chile. The president agreed with Kissinger's assessment that the American press was guilty of "unbelievable, filthy hypocrisy" in expressing concern over Allende's overthrow while calling for the outlawing of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

In return for Kissinger's flattery, Nixon expressed concern for his aide's state of health and his frenetic lifestyle. In February 1974, he told Kissinger he was sending one of his doctors "over tonight to rub you down. Use him every night you need him. A couple or three times a week."

As the Watergate crisis deepened, Kissinger began to worry about Nixon's mental state. On October 11, 1973, according to the transcripts, he rejected a British request for a telephone conversation between the president and Prime Minister Edward Heath on the grounds that Nixon was in no condition to take the call.

"Can we tell them no?" Kissinger said to his deputy, Brent Scowcroft. "When I talked to the president, he was loaded."

While Kissinger continued to express support for the president in their private conversations, he

criticized him behind his back. Speaking of what became known as the Saturday Night Massacre of top Justice Department officials in October 1973, Kissinger told former defense secretary Melvin Laird, "it's a goddamn disaster." The following day, he told Nixon that Attorney General Elliott Richardson "stabbed you in the back."

The transcripts show that Kissinger cultivated close contacts with leading journalists and publishers, including several who were being frozen out by the White House because of their newspapers' aggressive pursuit of Watergate. In November 1973, for example, he telephoned Katharine Graham of The Washington Post to invite her to lunch, while insisting that she keep the meeting secret from her own reporters. "I will be looking for a job if my leader finds out," Kissinger said, in an apparent reference to Nixon.

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