

“Keep the Flag Flying”

Date: 1972-09-06

Participant: Richard M. Nixon

Participant: Henry A. Kissinger

Participant: H. R. “Bob” Haldeman

Start Time: 09:53

Place: Oval Office

In a discussion about lowering the American flag in response to the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games, President Nixon, White House Chief of Staff H. R. “Bob” Haldeman, and National Security Adviser Henry A. Kissinger advocated instead for more individual expressions of sympathy. They also examined the President’s standing with American Jews and the virtues of a settlement in the Middle East.

President Nixon: Let’s talk a little about lowering the flag on the [*unclear*]. Everybody’s--what I’m concerned about is that, as sure as hell, [John V.] Lindsay’s for it. Congress is going to call for lowering the flag. Uh . . .

Henry A. Kissinger: Well, I don’t know how it will strike--

President Nixon: [*Unclear*] about it. Here’s the point: Henry, [*unclear*] [*speaking over Kissinger*] might be lowering the flag when some Irish nationals get killed.

Kissinger: That’s right.

President Nixon: See my point?

Kissinger: What will Irishmen say if you didn’t lower it when the schoolchildren got killed in Belfast [Northern Ireland]?

President Nixon: That’s right. It really gets to the point the goddamn flag would be low all the time. Now, this is just a--

H. R. “Bob” Haldeman: Did we lower it when the guys went in the airport and shot up the people?

President Nixon: Well, it’s the Olympics [*unclear*]. The Olympics, international, and all that business. Suppose, for example, somebody went in and machine-gunned the U.N. and killed six Arabs there.

Kissinger: [*Pause.*] My instinct is that, sure, right now, you’ll get a lot of indignation of whether more people won’t feel this is the president of all the people.

President Nixon: Going too far?

Kissinger: But Bob would have a better sentiment on that than I.

President Nixon: Well, [William P.] Bill [Rogers]'s reaction, of course, is public relations oriented. He's strong for lowering the flag.

Kissinger: Well, he's been around too [*unclear*].

Haldeman: I wonder if that isn't overreacting, though.

President Nixon: Yeah. Over--

Kissinger: Lowering--

President Nixon: Now, the idea of the church thing appeals to me. If I do it my way, my way would be anonymous. "I call upon all Americans to go to church in a moment of silence." Then I [*unclear*]. But I think that, in my way, at the time of the funeral, I quietly slip out this damn door, and--

Kissinger: That doesn't bother me.

President Nixon: --and pick the, maybe the little church across the way, without--

Kissinger: I'm mean, that's--

President Nixon: --without any publicity. [*Kissinger attempts to interject.*] I'd just walk around, and I sit in a church for five minutes and walk out. Get my point?

Kissinger: I mean, that you would do--

President Nixon: That's my moment of silence.

Kissinger: That you would do--

President Nixon: Each in an individual way, not as a government. How's that sound to you?

Haldeman: I think this one's good.

President Nixon: Yeah.

Kissinger: That I sort of like. That's Richard Nixon.

President Nixon: That's right.

Kissinger: Not the Office of the President.

President Nixon: That's the way I deal with it.

Kissinger: And that, I think, that has meaning. That has human compassion. You show where you stand, but you don't get involved. You don't involve the presidency of the United States in an official act. On behalf--I mean, let's say, if Pakistan entered Kashmir and killed 80 [*unclear*] [*a loud crash is audible near the microphone*] in the Olympic stadium in front of everybody, we wouldn't [*unclear*].

President Nixon: Yeah. Yeah. We also have to realize, too, that in terms of these things, why don't we lower the flag every [*unclear*] somebody gets shot [*unclear*] South Vietnam or North Vietnam? You know what I mean? You're going to get the damnedest business on flag-lowering. It'll always be

low; that's my point. We just got to keep the flag flying. I think we just should say, "Well, it's international."

Haldeman: Yeah. The flag thing doesn't--

President Nixon: Yeah.

Haldeman: --just kind of doesn't seem right.

President Nixon: Right. Right. Right. Right.

Kissinger: [*speaking over President Nixon*] That's really, basically, my objection to it.

President Nixon: [*Unclear*], and then on the other thing, let's just do it privately. But, you see, Lindsay obviously is reacting with the Jewish community in New York.

Haldeman: Oh, yeah.

President Nixon: And--but he always does. He lowers the flag [*unclear*]

Kissinger: But the Jewish community--

President Nixon: --for the demonstrators [*unclear*].

Haldeman: May 30th, there was--

President Nixon: No, no, no, no, no, no. That was Kent State [University]. Kent State.

Haldeman: Yeah, but he [*unclear*]

Kissinger: But the Jewish community isn't our community anyway. And I don't think that the usual ethnic maneuvers . . . I think you are very well established with them now for what you've done for Israel. I think the Israelis--

President Nixon: Well, frankly, I think the best thing I did was to call her [Golda Meir] on the phone.

Kissinger: That's right. That is a--

President Nixon: That got through.

Haldeman: This was the argument [Herbert L.] Herb Stein made in the staff meeting. [*Unclear*] was hoping that maybe, you know, this was a chance to save some move for the Middle East or something. And Stein said, "Jesus Christ, you know--" Well, he didn't say, "Jesus Christ." [*laughing*] He said, "Don't do that. That you're--you don't understand: you people are oversimplifying the political situation as far as the American Jew is concerned. And that the last thing the American Jew wants, or that Israel wants, is a settlement in the Middle East."

Kissinger: That's right.

Haldeman: "And for you to start running over and doing something now . . ." To do that, as we had suggested [*President Nixon acknowledges throughout*] send Rogers over or send a delegation over and reopen the talks or something. [*Unclear*].

Kissinger: [*Unclear*] Rogers--

Haldeman: In the first place, Rogers is the last guy to send, 'cause the Jews don't trust him. But, secondly, that you shouldn't do *anything* on that. That isn't what the Jews want.

Kissinger: Exactly.

Haldeman: And it's the wrong political move. He said, "I don't know what the right diplomatic move is, but you're not arguing from a diplomatic viewpoint; you're arguing in here"--he's talking about a staff meeting--"from a political viewpoint. And there, let me tell you, that if you think you're gaining Jewish votes by playing around with this, you're dead wrong."

Kissinger: Yeah, this is--Herb Stein is one thousand percent right.

President Nixon: Herb is not typical of our Jewish people, though.

Haldeman: Herb sat there very quietly. [*Unclear exchange.*]

President Nixon: Let me say something: Henry, you're not a professional Jew, and neither is Herb, just as I'm not a professional Quaker. So I can't speak for the Quakers, and you can't speak for the Jews.

Kissinger: No, but I can speak for the Israeli government, which I *do* understand.

President Nixon: I know.

Kissinger: And I know that the last--

President Nixon: Oh, the government? I know that. They don't want a settlement.

Kissinger: And they affect the Jewish community here.

End of excerpt.

"Richard M. Nixon, Henry A. Kissinger, H. R. 'Bob' Haldeman on 6 September 1972," Conversation 771-005, Draft Transcript, Presidential Recordings Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia.