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Letter From the Ambassador to Chile (Korry) to President Nixon

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At the White House last October you said I was one of those “who told it like it is.” Your predecessor, in a final chat in the same office in late 1968, remarked that I was one of the too few Ambassadors who did “not have to be told what to do and who knew how to take initiative and to assume responsibility.” With those two gratuitous judgments in mind, I write my only substantive letter to you who, until now, had conferred your trust.

During these past two years and three months, as with the two preceding administrations, I have been guided by what I consider to be the moral contract between civil servant and his president that is essential to good and effective government. In return for undiluted loyalty, I had the right, indeed the obligation, to set forth my views on pertinent themes.

To me, loyalty goes beyond what every president must assume to be the obligation of his representatives; for me, an ambassador’s loyalty demands a second effort, a positive readiness to act without instructions as a lightning rod that deflects or absorbs the bolts directed at the presidency. It does not imply accord with every presidential perception, with every policy, with every decision; if the sum of those actions is intolerable, he can and should resign. Yet, if he is to retain the privilege of representing the presidency, then his loyalty must be dynamic. If he believes in our institutions, if he believes that disciplined dissent can strengthen our democratic processes, if he has faith in reason as an effective instrument of persuasion and of progress, then he can and should utilize those internal channels of communication that provide for a dialogue with his Chief Executive. Such communication can at once be provocative and proper, can be challenging and correct, discomforting and disciplined.

For eight and a half years, I have abided unwaveringly by the terms of this implied contract. I do not admit to any deviation from its self-imposed criteria. At times, particularly the past year, the strains provoked by an undisciplined bureaucracy have been so wounding, so slyly vicious, so nihilistic, that decency has almost succumbed to despair.

You know better than I, Mr. President, that the wages of loyalty can be very unrewarding. Politicians demand partisanship; bureaucrats insist upon conformity; media feed on mendacity and muddle. To be independent of mind and of expression yet loyal to the guard-ian of our institutions is considered by most to be a romantic aberra-tion, an intolerable challenge to their own aberrated norms. Dialogue is converted into delirium, communication to chaos, loyalty to li-cense. Every cable, even of the most sensitive variety, that I have sent from Santiago has been aired, as I can verify after hearing the questions of correspondents; every recommendation is placed against the measure of bureaucratic truth and then artfully leaked to destroy the non-conforming; every action is distorted into self-serving political or careerist advancement.

For one, such as myself, who has refused to enlist in the establishment of politics or of bureaucracy, the test of loyalty to the presidency becomes a daily struggle for survival. If I am co-opted to write for Elliot Richardson a report that becomes the basis for the findings of the Peterson Task Force and for your recommendations to the Congress, my absolute isolation from the media does not inhibit a partial, distorted version from appearing; I am expected to prove that I did not hand it out, that I did not form a cabal with Henry Kissinger to reduce the powers of the State Department, that I was not being disloyal to President Kennedy and the activism of the Alliance for Progress and so on. My silence is taken to be confirmation of these absurdities. If my passionate devotion to the rights of the individual, if my conviction that the destruction of democracy anywhere affects in some measure our own democracy, then the New York Times and Washington Post conclude that I am a White House hard-hat who wishes hostility with Chile and whose influence prevails; and if I had denied the charge and stated that I had authored the State Department's recommendations that were submitted to you in October, then I would be challenged to prove that I am not a dissident. If I seek to persuade the Johnson Administration of the need for a low-profile manner of U.S. behavior in a continent heaving with nationalism, then it is translated into disloyalty to the man who plucked me from well-merited obscurity and into crass catering to the prejudices of President Nixon. If I heed the insistent expertise of both the CIA and the senior State representatives in my Mission who say it is "impossible" for Allende to win, then my equally insistent caveats and doubts are disregarded by those in your government who require scapegoats. If I take issue with a State Department convinced that Allende's election would have no significant consequences for U.S. interests or for your management of our policies, then I am portrayed as an exaggerating emotionalist. If I oppose interventionist adventures, I am held responsible for the election of Allende; if I discreetly embark last November on establishing an effective relationship with Allende, discretion is prismed into hostility, effectiveness into lack of contact. If I urge the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Easter Island because it is a costly operation of marginal, if any, value and because its planned departure would coincide inopportunely with later complex negotiations in Chile, then those who inveigh every day against a distended U.S. military presence and an inflated U.S. defense budget shout that it is provocation, a display of ill-considered boorishness.

It is self-indulgence to state these sentiments to you who endure in an hour what I may feel in a year. I yield to the impulse because I, unlike you, Sir, have neither bureaucratic nor political loyalties nor support, because I am uniquely dependent on the presidency and because I continue to believe that presidents require independent minds and forthright voices within their official circle. I vent this conviction, not in behest of a personal hearing. I have always maintained that ambassadors are expendable, but I do not accept that the kind of government executive I strived to symbolize be totally spent in the name of partisan or bureaucratic expediency. Too many of our citizens already feel alienated from our government, too many have a "we" and "they" perception to promote a further division.

I confess to profound disappointment that you have decided to end the "contract" that began in Ethiopia in 1967 when I, in response to your query, said that I would feel privileged to serve the Presidency, whatever the prevailing political coloration, so long as my work had significance and my views had a hearing. Yet, however pained I feel today, however unjust I consider the lack of any rebuttal by anyone, even now, to the calumnies that have irreparably impaired me and mine, however persuaded I am that such conduct by the Washington mafia will foment further deceit and decomposition in our processes of government, pride of accomplishment in these years of opportunity of national service remains.

I recognize my apprehensions are not universally appreciated, but I make no apologies; I confess to excesses of zeal, but I offer no excuses. As with loyalty, the pursuit of excellence is a manner not a measure. I shall leave Chile convinced that, given the circumstances, we have attained an optimal position. Relations with the Allende government are correct and effective; U.S. business interests have in every instance tested so far been compensated in accordance with our norms; a pragmatic if difficult negotiation of the remaining copper and ITT interests is already well advanced; the anti-Communist, indigenous forces are satisfied they can wage a meaningful struggle for Chile's independence; the democratic parties state they are now, in contrast to three months ago, flexed to fight for pluralism in Chile. To attain these ends without sacrifice

of principle, without disclosure of your instructions, without compromising the dignity of our government, without disloyalty within my Mission here and without flagging in my dedication to our Presidency, has required the personal assumption of a multiplicity of roles and of responsibilities not usually associated with ambassadorial performance.

Firmness, forthrightness and fairness have characterized my efforts to define an acceptable relationship with the new government here. I acted no differently, if with less success, to arrive at an equilibrium with our own bureaucracy. Recently, my colleagues in the State Department issued their judgment on Chile: they had always assumed that the Nixon policy for Latin America would inevitably lead to “our losing some countries.” My reply to this curious formulation, offered at the recent Chiefs of Mission Conference in Panama City, was that while this conclusion had a reasonable ring, they had failed to gain the prior policy indorsement of the President to whom I was responsible.

If I depart Chile distressed to discover that slander, or at best silence, are the final judgments on my performance, I believe nonetheless that certain contributions to the Presidency have sufficient significance to be recorded in an attachment that I submit with this respectful farewell. My wife, who has been an extraordinarily loyal and effective partner and who, as I, gave you unstintingly the best effort, joins me in expressing our most heartfelt wishes for your attainment of peace and prosperity for our nation.

Sincerely,

1. The unmarred protection of all U.S. life and property in my jurisdiction for eight and a half years resulted in no U.S. citizen ever being done physical harm as a result of hostile action of any kind. At no time in some four years in Ethiopia was any U.S. installation under my responsibility menaced by crowd or other action. And for the past almost three full years in Chile, a cockpit of nationalism, no demonstration of any significance was mounted against any U.S. office. These results were not happenstances but the consequences of self-starting action.

2. The African report that President Johnson commissioned in 1966 is still U.S. policy for the area. It was the first official policy adopted by our government that recognized that the costs of the Viet-Nam war and the over-extension of U.S. responsibilities dictated a more rigorous definition of our interests and a more judicious application of resources to interest. It was also the first to apply the multilateral mechanism of World and regional banks to support U.S. global goals and it was the first to prompt the IBRD to a dynamic developmental role in an area.

3. The 1969–1970 report commissioned by Elliot Richardson was incorporated almost in toto by the Peterson Task Force. Its major recommendations were adopted by the President as national policy. It articulated basic foreign policy themes that have since been incorporated in the President’s two annual foreign policy messages and in the Secretary’s recent yearly report.

4. A gratuitous letter to President Johnson in 1965 proposed U.S. Government support for a world-wide satellite communication network. It provoked an immediate reversal of policy and the adoption of a dynamic program that led to an Intelsat based on U.S. systems.

5. The negotiation of an accord in 1969 resulted in an unique nationalization of the largest U.S. enterprise ever to be sold to a threatening foreign government. Then Under Secretary Richardson wrote that the negotiated nationalization of Anaconda was a diplomatic experience that would be a text-book classic for all aspiring diplomats for the next 50 years.

6. The negotiation of accords for the compensation in adequate, effective and prompt form for a dozen U.S. enterprises in contemporary Marxist-led Chile, the most notable of which was the recent sizable Bethlehem agreement. Very significant progress has been achieved to permit an acceptable resolution of the copper problem in Chile.

7. The blunting of all efforts designed to implicate the U.S. in improper interference in Chilean political processes during the past 14 months has enabled respect for the U.S. to be maintained and U.S. influence to be retained in a tense and complex period.

8. A three year campaign from 1964 to 1967 sought to convince the JCS, NIE and the State Department that the Soviets were seeking to thrust down the Eastern Mediterranean, into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, a personal campaign that finally provoked the formation of the Holmes Task Force that was at work at the time of the Arab-Israeli war.

9. A 1967–1968 initiative to persuade Washington that nationalism was about to engulf U.S. traditional interests in South America, that our high-profile activism was incompatible with the times, and that we had to adopt policies of the kind proposed by the Peterson Task Force.

10. The management of an Embassy that received the most enthusiastic inspection report of 1969, that was and is both self-reliant and democratic, and that maintained its unity despite the tremendous strains imposed by Washington in the past seven months.