Nixon Legacy Forum Transcript:

The Opening to China: A Discussion with Henry Kissinger

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Panelists:

Dr. Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor to President Nixon (1969-1975), Secretary of State (1973-1977)

Tom Brokaw (Moderator), NBC News Anchor

Ron Walker: Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention, please. It's my distinct pleasure to introduce our luncheon speakers. But, first, I would like to, once again, thank Mr. Hank Greenberg for helping us with the hospitality for this event and the Starr Foundation. I have two individuals sitting on this stage today, but probably, if there's anyone in the western hemisphere that doesn't know him, it'd be a surprise. So, with that, I'm going to make a lot of friends and say, Dr. Kissinger, glad you're here, Tom Brokaw, it's a pleasure. God bless.

Tom Brokaw: Thank you, Ron. Thank you, everyone. I am very happy to play a very small role in this auspicious occasion. It was quite startling to me when Frank Gannon called and said, "We're going to mark the 40th anniversary of the opening of China." And then I tried to, in my own mind, play the tape back about how much things have changed, and obviously, they have changed profoundly. Tricia Nixon has just entered the room, everyone. And which reminds me of the other part of the passage of time, Mrs. Cox is going to be here, and Julie, her sister, could not be here, I was told, because she had visited her grandchildren and had gotten a cold. And I thought, "Oh, my God, Julie Eisenhower is a grandmother." It's been 40 years since the opening of China. The clock is moving much more swiftly than anything I'd like to contemplate. But let's go back to that time when the opening occurred 40 years ago. Even those of us who are alive and conscious of what was going on in the world still have a hard time computing the kind of seismic change that has occurred. China might as well had been one of those medieval maps that said, "Beyond here, serpents lie." It was a completely closed society. We had no relationship with it whatsoever. The only images that emerged from China in those days were kind of grainy black-and-white films. Obviously, we've been through the Korean War, but then everything closed up behind it.

And then, as I was preparing for this interview, I was reminded of President Nixon's prescience and his vision, because he began to talk about creating a dialogue and opening a way to China as early as 1967. He talked about it in the 1968 campaign, although it did not rise to the level of Vietnam, "the silent majority," and counterculture. And in his first month in office, he shared a memo with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, and talked about the importance of opening something to China because the world cannot have, at that time, think about this, 800 million angry Chinese, as opposed to 1.3 billion now. Henry Kissinger was primarily known as the European expert, obviously, an authority on Soviet affairs, picked up the brief and began to try to find a way that we could establish contact with China. You did not dial 1-800-Zhou-Enlai. Mao Zedong did not have a Facebook. There was no dotcom China or Beijing. And it took them two years to establish a real contact with the Chinese. Think about that. Romania was in play, France was in play, Poland was in play, and the Pakistanis finally were the key. You've started there and then ended up back there.

So let me just cut to the chase if I can, Henry. You get the note from Zhou Enlai that you would be welcome to come. You, and it's not so hard to do obviously, you came up with a cover story in Pakistan about being ill, and you lifted off for Beijing.

Male: Sounds very good. Let's make sure we start Henry off nice and strong. He's going to be soft spoken. Don't overdo it, but start strong.

Tom Brokaw: In the airplane, your aide, Winston Lord, ran to the nose of the plane so he could be the first to cross the border going into China. But let's just start on something very personal and very anecdotal. When you arrived in Beijing, in the capital, and then were driven through the streets, do you remember what your first personal impressions were of what you were seeing?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Yes. When I arrived, I was greeted by Marshall Yeh Chienying, who represented the military. But we did not fully know that...we didn't know at all, that there were some tensions going on between Lin Biao, who was in front of the military and he was deputy to Mao. He greeted me in one of these huge Russian-type limousines. And I was struck by the fact how empty the streets were, that there were no cars, there were a lot of pedestrians. And we've been taken to a state guest house that had probably been built by the Russians. It was the same style but not... And the first thing Marshall Yeh Chienying said to me was, "Why don't you take a rest, and the Prime Minister is going to greet you at 4:30," which was 4 hours

away. So here I was, I had 48 hours in Beijing, and it begins with telling me to go to bed.

Tom Brokaw: Ten percent of your visit, "Go take a nap," right?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Ten percent of the visit, it's gone. And next morning, the same thing happened, that they took me to the Forbidden City and we spent four hours at the Forbidden City. And when you read the conversation, both of us had a great deal at stake. If President Nixon sent his Security Advisor at the time and nothing happened, with the bureaucracy saying only amateurs could have done something so stupid, it would have been a huge humiliation. Whatever reasons the Chinese had, if I came to China or a Security Advisor came to China and nothing happened, Moscow would know that the opening to America didn't exist. But both Zhou Enlai and I had decided we were not going to talk about the invitation. So we were spending 36 hours never mentioning the Nixon trip to China. And we were talking about Japan, we were talking about Vietnam, we were talking about Taiwan, almost like two college professors assessing international relations. So it was, I would say, from Friday noon to Saturday noon, up to Sunday noon. And Saturday evening, at 6:00, Zhou Enlai said he had to go to a dinner for the North Koreans that they couldn't cancel. But he said, "We can do some preparatory work." I said, "On what?" He said, "On the invitation." It was a great try, but he had mentioned the word first. So I said, "Which invitation? The one to me?" I said, "The one to me or the one about President Nixon?" He said, "Let's work with both invitations."

So then he disappeared, and I was working with Huang Hua on the communique, on the question of historic importance, who had extended the invitation. And we did not want to say that we had invited ourselves, Chinese didn't want to say they had invited us, and we got to that point at midnight. And I had to leave Sunday at noon, but Mao had gone to bed. That I didn't know then, but we know it now, Mao had gone to bed. So they had to wait and they took this competing text to Mao, and he said, "Why don't we say they invited each other?" So then, two hours before I left, Zhou Enlai came back with this text, "knowing of President's Nixon's desire to visit China, the Chinese government extended an invitation." Anyway, that's how... If I could mention one other thing about the preparation, about the difficulty of communication. When Nixon handed me this memo, neither he nor I had the foggiest idea how we were going to contact the Chinese. And we were dropping hints all over the place that we wanted to talk. But this was in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, so the only diplomat...

Tom Brokaw: But you were you not aware that that was underway even when you were there, right?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: No, we knew... In '69, we knew something called the Cultural Revolution was going on and we knew they had an ambassador in only one place, in Cairo. And I think, some of it was also an impasse for talks with us. And so the difficulty was Nixon instructed me to tell our ambassador in Warsaw to stop the Chinese, any Chinese diplomat that he ran into, in the normal course of events, to say we wanted to talk. Stoessel thought, "This is another Kissinger idea which he's trying to pass." Well, it passed the State Department and didn't carry it out. So I brought it back, walked with him into the Oval Office, President Nixon said, "I want you to stop the next diplomat," and he did it. So then that diplomat ran away. He was not the right one to receive the communication, but they finally handed him, got him to stop long enough. Two weeks later, the Chinese ambassador showed up at the American Embassy and said, "They're ready to talk." But then the problem was, to prepare for these meetings, we spent so much bureaucratic time on clearing it all over the place, and they wanted to tell 25 congressmen, X number of... Nixon said, "They're going to kill this baby before it's born." So luckily, after the incursion into, or invasion of Cambodia, the Chinese broke off. There was no contact, and we never resumed it, and there was no contact. So then, how do we communicate with each other?

We went to the Romanians, thinking they were the most independent of the East Europeans, and they were Communists and, therefore, the Chinese would like that. It turned out the one group that the Chinese didn't trust were Communists, because they were afraid that any East European Communist would have ties to Moscow. Mao wanted to communicate with us, so he invited Edgar Snow to Beijing and gave a very thoughtful interview to him. And then he put him next to himself on the reviewing stand in the October parade. And Mao must have thought that we would pick it up. Why would an American stand next to Mao? But we thought, "Edgar Snow, that's one of these left-wing kooks, and he's a Communist tool, and he's the one guy we don't pay any attention to." So we never got the message, we never even read the interview. So then, finally, on Nixon's trip around the world, he told the Pakistan president what we told everybody that we thought knew China. Nixon said to him, "If you ever see a Chinese leader, tell him we want to talk." And that the Chinese picked up. And we got a message.

And then, it took about four messages before it crystalized into an invitation, and each message was delivered by courier. So we didn't use any of the formal... So it took about 10 days for every exchange. And in the middle of one of these exchanges, I want to get one thing straight, the Chinese developed the idea of the ping-pong diplomacy, which horrified us. It wasn't our idea. Because they invited the ping-pong team, which was in the middle

of our secret exchanges, and I think they did the ping-pong thing to warn us that if we were too dilatory on the secret exchanges, they have the public opinion. But for us, the problem was that once there was a ping-pong Diplomacy, everybody popped off. The vice president made a terrible statement against China, and the executive defense made a statement. We survived that. And then, finally, they said, they proposed that somebody should come to China on a high level, but it was very... And in the first two messages, they still said, "This is on behalf of Chairman Mao and Lin Biao." In the last message, they had finally made it formal. Lin Biao had disappeared.

Tom Brokaw: These are how great events occur in a long course of history. The remarkable thing for me, especially as a journalist, is it didn't leak out. It was so tightly held, both within the administration and within the public arena. There was not really a clue that all of that was going on. And so when you made the announcement from the NBC Studios when you returned, the country was appropriately stunned. Now let's do our own...

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Nixon made the announcement.

Tom Brokaw: Pardon me?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Nixon made the announcement.

Tom Brokaw: Nixon made the announcement. But nonetheless, it was done and no one knew quite what to expect. We were suddenly told to have the studios hot, and this would be a message of national interest and urgency. Let's leap ahead. The President arrives. In those days, especially because we're dealing with the Chinese, how much of the agenda was worked out in advance? Not the sightseeing part of it, but what the expectations were, the Shanghai communiqué and what I would call the DNA of the new relationship.

Dr. Henry Kissinger: You know, Nixon was a careful student, and he didn't like to meet too many people anyway. So, he liked to read rather than talk. So, as a general rule, Nixon did not like to meet people unless he knew in advance, I mean foreign negotiators, unless he knew in advance what the issues would be so that he could prepare his thinking. So, in pursuit of this, I went to China in October, he was going in February, to prepare the communiqué and to prepare the visit, to work out an agenda, to pick the topics. And we had prepared a sort of typical kind of communiqué. And at the first session, Zhou Enlai said, "Okay, we'll look at it." But then he came back having consulted with Mao, and Mao said, "This is bullshit."

Tom Brokaw: Well, and in fact, that's how he talked precisely, right?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Yeah, exactly.

Tom Brokaw: I mean, I've heard he described one aide as a dog fart for example.

Dr. Henry Kissinger: And he said, "Everybody knows that we've been quarreling. If we suddenly publish a typical communiqué which state all the things we agree on, that will not work." So it's a unique diplomatic communiqué in the sense that it lists large areas of disagreement, but it made the areas of agreement all the more significant. And here I was stuck in Beijing without communication that's watching. And I was given a totally different thing. I mean, the essence, the pertinent part would remain more or less as is. But Nixon and I had so frequent meetings that I knew his thinking, and I sort of accepted his approach. And he, of course, accepted, but I am not saying, there was nothing in the communiqué that he had not approved before, except the format of listing all the disagreements. The only thing that was left open for his visit was the section on Taiwan. Most of the rest, and the agenda of what the conversations with Zhou Enlai would cover, that was covered only in terms of titles. So that's what I've been... But the audience, if Tricia will forgive me, I would like to make one point.

When I was in China on my secret visit, I think I made a world record. I was the only foreign visitor who desperately tried not to meet Mao. Because, on my first visit...because I knew Nixon had his heart set on being the first person, American, to meet Mao. And after all he had gone through, he was entitled to that. So I knew if I saw Mao before he did, my life might not be worth living after I came back. So Mao had given instructions that if I requested a meeting, which I didn't know then, that if I requested a meeting with him, I was to be taken to him. But I didn't request a meeting. So all the good conversations were with Zhou Enlai, and it was as it should have been, with the tone to put a blessing on the whole thing. The most important aspect for Chinese public opinion was a picture of Mao beaming on Nixon and taking his hand in both of his hands. That told 800 million Chinese something fundamental is happening. So it was right that it be done that way.

Tom Brokaw: There are so many big substantive issues, but I'm also, because we've been reviewing them here today and in your works and the other historians of the time, but describe for us briefly the difference between dealing with Zhou and dealing with Mao.

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Zhou was an extraordinary fellow and had wonderful human instinct. I mean, he was a man who was really infinitely thoughtful, one that's not important, but each guest houses in China all had a bridge connecting to another guest house. And whenever I stepped on a bridge, there was a PLA soldier standing on the bridge telling me I couldn't go across. So once I said to Zhou Enlai, "You know, I'm getting obsessed with getting across that bridge." I'm like a Kafka character who was the plumber, and Kafka was called to a castle and wasn't admitted in and spent all his life trying to get in. So Zhou smiled, didn't say anything. On my next visit, when I was packing to leave, a protocol girl came to my room and said, "The Prime Minister would like you to come and take you with him." They drove me to the other side of the lake, in the middle of the guest house, and we had a conversation. And then he took me to the door and he said in English, which he almost never did, he said, "Let's take a walk."

And we walked across one bridge and another bridge, and the car was following him. And when we got across that second bridge, he said in English, "And why did you want to walk across that bridge?" And in our very first conversation, when we were in that [inaudible 00:25:16], he began with some historical explanation. He said, "You're an old country, you are 200 years old. We are a young country, we are only 40 years old since the Communist revolution." So he gave us the 2,000 years advantage that the Chinese had. I must say, nobody ever returned to that again in my experience in terms of...anyway. He was elegant, thoughtful, well-prepared, infinitely patient. I used to say to him, "If you come to Washington, I will never be able to do for you what you are doing for me, sitting through long hours without anyone bringing you a note, without anyone ever interrupting you." And he'd have eight-hour meetings.

Mao was quite different. When you enter the room with Mao, and he lived, at least I'm told, he had many houses, but the one in which he received foreign visitors was a very simple state guest house type and with books scattered on the floor in that semi-circle. But when he got up, very similar to De Gaulle, and you knew that was the center of the room, and he would conduct his conversation in a Socratic manner. He'd ask you a question, and then you'd say something, and then he'd say, "Have you considered the following?" The way he'd make a sarcastic comment like, "You Americans remind me of swallows who fly up in the air in an approaching storm and flap your wings. But you, professor, and I know that the flapping of the wings does not affect the coming of the storm." So it was not a compliment.

So, very early in my meeting with him, I think my first meeting with him, he said, "Let me tell you a story." He said, "The Romanians sent somebody here to compose my differences, our differences with the Soviets and I told them

we will fight them, 10,000 years. And the Romanians said, 'I've come all this distance and [inaudible 00:28:06].' So I said to him, 'In consideration of your long journey, I will take off 1,000 years, 5,000 years.'" So he said, "And I continued this until I was down to 7,000 years. But when we had reached 7,000 years," said Mao, "I told him I have made my last concession." Then he said, "You see, professor, it is very easy to deal with me." He said, "Every time I make a concession, it's for 1,000 years." But what he was really saying was, "Watch out. If you get into a quarrel with me, it will never end." So he was strong, but he was a brilliant analyst. His analysis of the international situation was...the only comparable international figure I've met like that was De Gaulle. He was brilliant, to the point, and everything he said had a purpose and it's handled in the morning.

People said, "We could have gotten more on Taiwan." Mao made sure they'd give us the maximum of what was attainable at the time by saying right away to Nixon, before anyone had asked him, "We're not interested to settle it now. We'll settle it in the future." And in every conversation I had with him, I had five, he began by saying, "Let's put it aside." So the purpose of his doing it was he did not want me to ask him. He did not want to make a concession to me or to America. So he was a man of demonic capacities and extraordinary perceptions. Of course, he imposed huge suffering in pursuit of his domestic goals. But in his analysis of the international situation, I have met nobody that was better than he.

Tom Brokaw: On the other hand, the China that we know today, this extraordinary country, this historic rise that they have made, would not have occurred without the death of Mao and the removal of his Gang of Four, do you believe?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Yeah, it would not have happened under Mao, because you can make two contradictory arguments. You can say it could not have happened without Mao because he unified the country, he brought women into the society, and he made it in that sense a modern state. But it could not have happened under Mao's rule. It absolutely required Deng Xiaoping. In fact, I would say, having known all the Chinese leaders now, into the fifth generation, I know none of the other leaders who would have had the vision and courage to do what Deng Xiaoping did, and then to leave a system that has perpetuated itself with all its problems over the succeeding generation.

Tom Brokaw: We want to take questions from the audience, but we also want to leave time for Dr. Kissinger to make some concluding remarks about how to manage now the Sino-U.S. relationship. And I also want to share something from the record of President Nixon talking in his office to aides

before he went to China about what the purpose of the trip was. The extraordinarily prescient observation on his part demonstrated his vision in the international arena. We're going to try to make these questions as specific as possible so we can get something. Any questions over in this area at all? Any answers over in this area at all? Yes, right here. Can you wait for the microphone, tell us who you are, please?

Jim Mann: Jim Mann, author...

Tom Brokaw: Why don't you stand up?

Jim Mann: Yeah, Jim Mann, author-in-residence. I'm curious. Of course, we can't know, but you knew Nixon as, you know, better than anybody. What would he say and be thinking today on current problems, say the South China Sea or on economic differences? He took a fairly strong stand with Japan on the economy. I'm just wondering what you think he would be saying about current issues involving China?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: I think, and this really gives me a chance to... First of all, my views and Nixon's were practically identical on these issues. It's a cottage industry that shows, tries to show where there were differences. He had a better tactical sense in the political world. I was more in historic and strategic. I think the South China Sea problem would not bother him, particularly because he would think this is an issue that arises in the competition, a result of the evolution of China. It will be settled by negotiation unless China really wants to challenge us and all of its neighbors by force, which then would worsen our relationship, whatever the outcome. And therefore, he would judge, as I judge, that it is not now in China's interest or purpose to have a showdown with the United States. And so I think he would know there are some things that happen, that we would approach differently. But he would not make that the test case of our relationship. Do you think that's right, friend?

So he would think, and I would say, and I would think, that here we have two great societies. If you look at it in strictly historical terms, you would have to say they are bound to conflict, and it's bound to lead to some... But if you look at it in terms of the world, with instantaneous communication, weapons of mass destruction, a globalized economy and problems that have no solution on a bilateral basis, I'm convinced he would say we have to find an international system in which both sides find a means of cooperating. And I agreed with what Brzezinski said at the end, both sides have to overcome domestic obstacles, both sides can find arguments on the other side. So I think he would consider this a combination of his efforts. And if you look at what did he talk about when he was in Beijing and what did I talk about in

my conversations with Zhou, we were talking about the structure of the international system. We were not arguing about... And we're criticized for that, people said we could have gotten a better deal. What deal? We wanted to build China into the international system.

So that's what I think he would say. I don't consider the South China Sea a problem. It cannot be settled by force, in my opinion. So, at some point, there will have to be an arrangement. When? That depends on circumstances, and I believe one can separate the issue of freedom of navigation from the issue of the various islands. I think there's no issue in principle about freedom of navigation as long as it's an international recognized thing and not something granted by China. So that is my view on the South China Sea, and I'm confident that on issues like this, Nixon and I always thought alike.

Tom Brokaw: We obviously are going to have a new generation of leaders. There's about to be a substantial change in the Politburo. Xi Jinping, who was just here, is a much younger leader. The early book on him is that he's more flexible than some of the immediate past leadership. Do you think that we're in for a new phase of leadership in China that will fine tune it in another direction, or will it be a continuum of the policies that are in place right now? Is there another Deng Xiaoping in the next generation coming up who will make some changes?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Well, this is now the fifth generation of Chinese leaders with which I have become acquainted. And the remarkable thing is every generation has been significantly different from its predecessor and has had its own character. Now, this generation is a generation that grew up in the Cultural Revolution, some as victims, some as participants. And the Cultural Revolution has had a huge psychological impact. It's also the first generation of Chinese that have lived at peace in hundreds of years. It's also the first generation of Chinese that has to absorb the movement of 400 million people from the countryside into cities, which in every other country has loosened traditional values, and with all respect to the Chinese ambassador, they cannot know what values will emerge through such a mass migration.

So I believe that this new generation has to readjust its political thinking and will want to do it to the new reality, not because we lectured them on democracy, but because the internal necessities of China are going to have to absorb this new complexity. And in the limited conversations I have had with them, my impression is that they think about this problem and what values emerge under such conditions. How much of it can be traditional, how much of it comes from ideology, and how much will they have to invent. I

think that is the big drama of China in the next 10 years. And for that reason alone, I don't think that strategic confrontation with the United States, pushing a fleet beyond the island chain, is going to be what China will do.

Tom Brokaw: Question? Let me conclude by asking you the question that you and I talked about before you got up here. What about from this point of view, managing the Sino-United States relationship?

Dr. Henry Kissinger: I think both countries are going through a domestic drama. The Chinese is the one as I described it. When I was in China in January, I met with a group of 40 Beijing students, Beijing University students, selected by the CPIFA, which is a government organization for VIP foreigners. So they're not dissidents, but the questions they ask me were mostly of a philosophical nature, not anti-regime, but they were really, I was fascinated by the questions were, how do you give meaning to all of...? What is the role of various elements of...? So that's on the Chinese side. And there must be...if the ambassador will forgive me, when you look in the preparation for the succession with ambitious people, it is inevitable that there are groups that are competing for attention. That has to be going on right now. And unless human conduct is totally different in China than in the rest of the world, once the new administration is in office, differences will have to be adjusted before. So, that's on the Chinese side.

On the American side, we all know, we are dealing with our deficit in a dysfunctional manner. We have been profoundly divided, and we also think of foreign policy in very short terms. Every time we have a presidential campaign, there are candidates who offer solutions. They say they are going to solve every problem in the world. Well, those of us who have been engaged in foreign policy know that, except for rare events like the Nixon trip to China, every change is marginal. It's an accumulation of nuances. So, now, on China relations, we hear arguments that I am, and I would say all of us who have been engaged from both parties on China policy, are very uneasy about. We feel there has to be essential continuity and we have to learn as a country that competition with China is inevitable in some respect. But we also have to do it in the context of a gray division, and both of our countries have to avoid the easy temptation of putting things in terms as if the books are balanced at the end of every month. And this requires strong leaders on both sides who are committed to this relationship and who can overcome their domestic pressures.

This is the big management challenge for America, and I really think...and for China, because both have to do it. One can't do it alone. And I would say this, if you look at the history of World War I, nobody doubts anymore that World War I destroyed European civilization as it then existed. Nobody

doubts today that, if the leaders of the time pursuing marginal advantages could do it over again, they would not start that war at the end of which everybody was worse off. I can see no outcome in a permanent conflict with China. I don't know what the victor would ask of the defeated if there were a war. And if there is no war and there is a cold war, everybody in the world will have to choose between one side or the other so that, then, everybody's politics will get distorted. So, in that sense, the relationship between China and the United States is a key to the peace of the world. Not that we can write a paper that solves it all, but our attitudes will determine that. And that's what Nixon started, but it had been pursued by eight American administrations in one way or another. And I certainly hope that if there is a change of administration, that it will be pursued, and I think it will be pursued. Just have to hope there isn't too long an interval before people learn their lesson.

Tom Brokaw: That is a perfect lead-in to some thoughts with the man whose vision brought us to this occasion, changed the world by sending his National Security Advisor to Beijing. President Nixon, a month before he left in the Oval Office, musing with, among others, Alexander Haig and other aides, "It was not our common beliefs which brought us together but, frankly, our common interests and our common hopes. No one in this world knows how great the gulf is between their philosophy and ours, their interest and ours, but also no one in this world I think knows better than I do how imperative it is to see that great nations that have enormous differences, where you've got the nuclear thing hanging in the balance, have got to find ways to talk, to get along. Getting to know each other better will reduce the possibility of miscalculation." I can't think of a better coda to this conversation or a better watchword if you will, for the conditions that exist in the world today. So, Dr. Kissinger, we're very grateful to you, and we all, I think, should pause for a moment and think what a privilege it is to be witness to this extraordinary event that occurred 40 years ago, the transformative effect it's had on the world. Never in the history of mankind has one nation changed as profoundly and swiftly as China has, and it's just the beginning. So thank you all very much.

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Good fun to be with you.

Tom Brokaw: That was great, being with you, like old days.

Dr. Henry Kissinger: Yeah.