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10 reconstructed hours between Kissinger, Chou

WASHINGTON — The voluminous record of Chou En-lai's conversations with Dr. Henry A. Kissinger is the most closely guarded government document in a great many years. Pains of death have been threatened — or very nearly — for anyone who divulges anything.

Inevitably, the record is familiar to those staff members who accompanied Kissinger on his astonishing journey. Inevitably, the record has also been communicated to one or two other members of the White House staff.

Beyond these, however, the short list of those who really know the record constitutes a record in itself, simply because of its shortness. The President, Secretary of State William Rogers, Director of the CIA Richard Helms and Dr. Kissinger himself — such is the reported short list.

Furthermore, the President has issued stringent orders that no crumb or fragment of the record is to be communicated to anyone else in the government, however highly placed, except on the strictest basis of the "need to know." These orders are being obeyed, too.

As a reportorial exercise, then, it is quite fruitless to investigate what happened in the 20 hours of continuous talks between Kissinger and Chou En-lai. The talks cannot be reported because no one truly knows what happened except the small group above described. As a strictly reconstructive exercise, however, the problem is quite different.

A good deal is known

First of all, a good deal — though by no means everything — is known about what happened before Dr. Kissinger ever took off for Peking. There were many preparatory exchanges between the White House and the Forbidden City, over a long period. These settled in broad principle all the questions that had been standing in the way of the great step forward.

The President would have been lunatic to let Kissinger make his trip, in fact, if he had not been sure there would be no unforeseen difficulties about the right ways to handle the U.N. problem or the Formosa problem or the problem of his own eventual visit to Peking. Since only the details of these problems needed to be tied up, one may therefore allow only two hours of the Chou-Kissinger talks for dealing with the details. That leaves 18 hours to fill up; and now pure reconstruction begins.

Soviet Union led the list

Topics of urgent common interest to the two countries must surely have occupied

most of the 18 hours. Here, beyond all reasonable doubt the Soviet Union led the list.

President Nixon has never let himself cherish foolish delusions about the Kremlin and its purposes. The Chinese have actually changed their policy toward the United States because of the deep fear inspired by the Soviet military buildup on their own frontier. So one may be sure that both sides' interest in this topic was very vivid indeed.

One may be pretty sure, too, that data were compared on the Soviet military buildup that has so profoundly affected the

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Chinese. Chou En-lai, for instance, has reportedly told an unofficial foreign visitor, long pre-Kissinger, that there were a million Russian troops along China's border. The American figure is just a bit lower. The difference in estimates was probably discussed, and one may be sure that overall Soviet intentions were also discussed with even greater absorption.

The Vietnamese war, of course, was the next most urgent topic of common interest, albeit one of very different character. Each side, beyond doubt, tried to feel out the other side's intentions toward the war. If Chou En-lai was fully honest, he must have told his American interlocutor two things.

Best remaining hope

He must have said, first, that Peking had always heartily disapproved of Hanoi's war strategy, though not of Hanoi's war aims. And he must have pointed out, second, that Peking's advice, when proffered, had usually been rejected by Hanoi; and that this was highly likely to happen again. If Chou was honest, therefore, the Americans' best remaining hope must have been the psychological impact on Hanoi's policy, of the new Peking-Washington relationship.

With no other subject mentioned, the Soviet Union and the Vietnamese war are topics that could have absorbed many, many hours of talks between Chou and Kissinger. As to trade relations, China's own intentions along her southern border in Laos, Thailand and Burma; the nasty matter of India and Pakistan — all these and other matters can easily have been touched on, filling out the chinks of time.

But the importance attached to the Chou-Kissinger talks is sufficiently indicated by the closeness with which they are being guarded. And that means the very greatest topics predominated, as suggested above.