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Nightline WJLA-TV ABC Network

August 23, 1991 11:30 P.M. Washington, D.C.

Ouster of Soviet Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh

ALEXANDER BESSMERTNYKH [on telephone to Secretary of State Baker]: Hello, Jim? Good morning. Is it early morning there? I'm sorry. I hope I haven't waken you up.

TED KOPPEL: Alexander Bessmertnykh, the Soviet Foreign Minister, having just awakened James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State. Bessmertnykh's news today? He had just been fired.

BESSMERTNYKH: Actually, you're the first one to know. I brought about it. And Ted Koppel is somewhere around and he was the first man whom I talked about the situation.

KOPPEL: And what a story he tells: that he was ordered early this week by the men who overthrew Gorbachev to send a communication to Washington.

FOREIGN MINISTER BESSMERTNYKH: It was terrible, terrible document. It was the start -- if it was sent or published, it would be the start of a new Cold War.

KOPPEL: Only a few weeks ago, Bessmertnykh and Baker

were still crafting a new world order with Presidents Gorbachev and Bush at the Moscow summit. On Wednesday night, as Gorbachev flew back into Moscow after the coup had collapsed, Bessmertnykh was among those welcoming him back. Tonight he's out of a job, suspected of collaborating with those who tried to seize power at the beginning of the week.

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KOPPEL: We have a bizarre story to tell you tonight. And I'll be bringing it to you in a somewhat unconventional fashion. How this story unfolded is almost as intriguing as the event itself. Because of the time difference between Moscow and New York, we work through the nights here, putting Nightline on live early in the morning. I'd just gotten to bed after last night's broadcast. About an hour later I got a call that Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh would talk to me if I could come to his office immediately. We expected an interesting story but nothing terribly dramatic. Reassurance, perhaps, that U.S.-Soviet relations were still on track. But Bessmertnykh wanted to talk privately with me before we began the interview. He led me into his office, showed me pictures of his wife and seven-month-old son. And then out of the blue he said that Gorbachev had called him a couple of hours earlier and asked for his resignation. He had just briefed his deputies. Now he wanted to get his own version of the story on the record.

Tonight we'll bring you highlights of the videotape we recorded in Bessmertnykh's office.

Mr. Foreign Minister, is it still appropriate, in fact, to call you Mr. Foreign Minister?

BESSMERTNYKH: Well, maybe not so. I have just had a telephone conversation with my president, and he informed me that he believes I was quite passive during the three last days of the emergency situation. So we discussed my position and I have resigned.

And because this is not true at all and I was not given any information on which the conclusion is based, unfortunately it's not the best way to do it, but I would like to tell the story as it was, because you are the first person whom I meet after that telephone conversation, besides my deputies and my chiefs of the departments, whom I have immediately informed about that telephone conversation with the president. And since I agreed to meet you today and we saw each other last night at the presidential press conference, I thought that I would be talking on something else in this conference with you. But life is bringing us a lot of unexpected surprises.

KOPPEL: Full of surprises.

BESSMERTNYKH: So that's the story.

KOPPEL: I want to get into all the details of this. But first, since you just came out of a meeting with your deputies and the members of your staff, give me your own personal

feelings. For a man who has risen to such a distinguished post, this must be a very difficult moment for you.

BESSMERTNYKH: It is a difficult moment. But as I have said, I was seasoned in difficult situations. A diplomat's life is not an easy one. I'm a professional diplomat. I've spent dozens of years in this profession. And I have always served the country and the people, and I always believed that the perestroika policy, the policy of new thinking, is my policy, because I was always part of the team that worked it out.

Just the situation of today, which brings so much confusion, a lot of emotions, misjudgments, probably is the reason for the decision which has been taken by the president. But I understand him. He's in shock. He is now advised by someone around him and he's suspicious. His best friends, Yazov and Kryuchkov, have betrayed him. So I understand the man.

I just want the world to know and my colleagues in the world to know I am the man I always was. And as for the particulars of these tragic three days, I will be prepared to discuss them with you, so that you should know what terrible life we've been through when you were here.

KOPPEL: Remember now, Bessmertnykh was fired today because he was accused of being too passive during the coup. He has publicly insisted, in fact, that he was home, too ill to work. He still insists he was sick, but he also claims that he

fought what amounts to a rearguard action to protect U.S.-Soviet relations.

BESSMERTNYKH: My assistant brought a paper we received from the committee, which was called something like the Emergency Committee Statement on President Bush's Declarations. It was terrible, terrible document. It was the start -- if it was sent or published, it would be the start of a new Cold War.

KOPPEL: Why? What did it say?

BESSMERTNYKH: Oh, it was an angry paper saying that President Bush is interfering and that he's dictating us and he's not -- he never understood us and he'll never understand us. And we don't need this kind of relationship, and the previous relations were not so good because the Soviet part too much submitted itself to American pressure, but no more. Just stop it. That kind of stuff.

And I knew that I was doing a dangerous thing, but I have written on that paper, "Completely unacceptable."

KOPPEL: It was during a brief break that I asked Bessmertnykh whether he'd called Secretary of State Baker yet. Bessmertnykh instructed an aide to place the call to Washington.

When we come back, we'll show you how the U.S. Secretary of State learned that the Soviet Foreign Minister had been fired.

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KOPPEL: We've certainly grown accustomed over the last few years to witnessing unprecedented scenes involving once-

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unapproachable Soviet officials. But think about it for a moment. Here this afternoon was the Soviet Foreign Minister revealing to the world that he had just been fired by calling in an American reporter, and then inviting that reporter to bear witness, with a camera crew, as he informed the U.S. Secretary of State.

BESSMERTNYKH [on telephone]: Hello, Jim? Good morning. Is it early morning there? I'm sorry. I hope I haven't waken you up.

Jim, it's a very important piece of information for me, but I think it will be also for you. I have just resigned, and I wanted you to be the first among the foreign ministers to know about it.

Yeah. I just want you to know, since we don't have probably much time to discuss it, but I would like you to know that there have been, I am, and I will be always the man of perestroika and new-thinking policy. And I have been protecting and pursuing it all the time. And it is just because of this commotion and confusion in our capital in the afterwards of the coup d'etat that things happen that in my view should not have happened.

But anyway, I was blamed for being passive during the last few days, although out of those three days two days I was sick. But anyway, that was the case against me. And it is impossible in this situation to continue the duty. And the

president -- I had a talk with the president, and the president shall probably be declaring this somewhat later.

Actually, you are the first one to know. I brought about it. And Ted Koppel is somewhere around, and he was the first man whom I talked about the situation, since I have promised him yesterday to meet today.

Jim, we shall be maintaining the friendship and contacts. And I'll be trying to be active in foreign policy and to help to continue the cooperation with the United States and with this administration and with you personally.

KOPPEL: Even without hearing Secretary Baker's side of the conversation, you could sense that there wasn't a great deal to be said on the Washington end of the line. Bessmertnykh and Baker may still be friends, but the power relationship is gone.

BESSMERTNYKH [on telephone]: Yeah. Please do that. Thank you very much. Thank you, Jim. And my best regards to Susan. Thank you. Thank you. Bye-bye.

KOPPEL: What did Baker say? Please. Maybe if you would just stay there for a moment.

BESSMERTNYKH: Well, he thanked me very much for calling and informing him about that. He regrets very much that that has happened. And he values what we have been doing together in foreign policy. And he has always been thinking about me as a man of perestroika and new thinking. And that's true. And he

asked me to be in touch, and he said that he will report to the President.

I said, "Please do that."

And, of course, he sent his best regards from Susan to me and to Marina. And sent the same to him.

And, yes, and he also mentioned about this what's going to happen to me. And I said I think I shall be helping -- you heard that -- I shall be helping the man the best I can to pursue the policy. And I think that what we have been doing was very good.

So that's the thrust of what we have just...

KOPPEL: Were you, throughout the three days, were you in touch with Baker?

BESSMERTNYKH: Yes. I talked -- we talked only once because -- I think that was Wednesday or Tuesday. That was Wednesday afternoon.

KOPPEL: When we come back, Bessmertnykh the loyal foreign minister, or Bessmertnykh the collaborator?

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KOPPEL: Following his talk with Secretary Baker, Alexander Bessmertnykh and I resumed our conversation. For most of his professional life, he has been a career diplomat in the Soviet Foreign Service. Bessmertnykh has always been a highly regarded professional, here and abroad. But now there is a dark cloud over his career. Did he during the critical hours of the

coup early this week betray his President? The just-fired foreign minister was eager to give his version of events.

Let's go back to Sunday. Sunday, as you know, they sent the delegation down to the Crimea to meet with President Gorbachev and placed him under house arrest. Did you know?

BESSMERTNYKH: I knew nothing about that. I learned about it only from the president's press conference yesterday.

But I knew something else about Sunday. I was vacationing in Byelorussia, on one of the lakes in Byelorussia, and then I received a call to come to Moscow for an emergency discussion. I didn't know what the subject that it was. It sounded so serious that I thought, "Well, some terrible crisis is emerging somewhere," or maybe a great case of espionage, or anything, if the matter is so delicate that the foreign minister should be brought from his vacation to the capital.

So I was brought to Moscow. That was almost midnight. I was in my jeans and casual dress. I just wanted to go to my home to change, but my assistant, who met me at the airport said, "You are asked to come directly to the Kremlin."

KOPPEL: This was Sunday.

BESSMERTNYKH: That was Sunday night. It was midnight already.

And when I came to the Kremlin, I still didn't suspect what is going to happen, what is going to be there and what's going to happen.

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I was directed to a large room, and there was a long table and a lot of people sitting there, generals and military and Kryuchkov, Pavlov, some others.

So I sat next to the last one and I was waiting for the explanation, what was the subject that they are going to discuss with me. So Kryuchkov said, "I would like to have a talk with you," and he brought me to the next room. And he said, "Listen. The situation..."

KOPPEL: Let me just explain to our audience Mr. Kryuchkov is the former Chairman of the KGB.

BESSMERTNYKH: And he said, "Listen. The situation in the country is terrible. The chaotic situation emerges. The crisis is dangerous. People are disappointed. Something should be done, and we decided to do something through emergency measures and we have established a committee, emergency committee. And we would like you to be part of it."

I said, "Is that committee arranged by the instructions of the president?"

He said, "No. He's incapable of functioning now. He's laying flat in dacha."

I said, "How about the medical report about his state?"

He said, "We don't have it now."

And I said, "Mr. Kryuchkov, I'm not going to be part of that committee, and I categorically reject any participation in that."

So as we walked out of the room, Kryuchkov said, "Bessmertnykh refused."

And someone said, "Well, we needed a liberal on the committee." You know, just for -- I understand they wanted to have a kind of balanced membership.

So I told them even there, "What you are doing will bring a terrible blow to the Soviet Union and its foreign policy situation. It's going to be isolated. There will be sanctions. There will be embargoes. There'll be no grain. There'll be no food. And that will be the situation."

They said, "Well, they don't help us anyway."

The people were not listening, I think. Everything was decided already by the time I came.

KOPPEL: Whatever Bessmertnykh did or did not do behind the scenes, he neither resigned nor did he publicly criticize his colleagues who had seized power. I began to press him about some of the inconsistencies in his version of events.

But you weren't under any illusions that the story about Gorbachev's illness was true.

BESSMERTNYKH: I was maybe for a day or a day and a half, I was expecting a document. Because I told them, "Where is the document?"

They said, "Don't you believe this? It is coming. Yes, it is coming, because he's really seriously ill."

And I have been waiting till Tuesday, and on Tuesday it was clear that it's not coming.

KOPPEL: Did it not occur to you to get in touch with Gorbachev directly?

BESSMERTNYKH: Yes. We tried on Monday. We tried to get in touch with Gorbachev. Then we found that it's impossible.

KOPPEL: Mr. Bessmertnykh, you knew -- hell, the whole world knew -- that Gorbachev had been overthrown. And yet you elected to stay here.

BESSMERTNYKH: You know, it's one of those things, the loyalty to your business, which is the foreign policy. If we resigned, as they have suggested to all of us, let us resign, who will take over the foreign policy apparatus, foreign ministry? Emergency committee? KGB? The military generals?

And we decided, just a small group of us, to do everything to protect the foreign policy, whatever happens, because this a time of hardship and testing. We've got to protect what we are assigned to do. If you're assigned to protect something precious, you've got to do it. Not to run away just because it's politically advisable.

KOPPEL: When you spoke to Gorbachev a couple of hours ago, did you try to explain that to him?

BESSMERTNYKH: I tried to explain to him yesterday. I met him yesterday. And I didn't go public on this matter before I talked with the president.

This is my professional part. You know, people might say, "Why didn't you go public and make interviews?" I just can't do it without first talking with the president. So I explained to the president what I have just told you. And he listened carefully and I thought he understood it, and he was all right. And now I shouldn't go on working and go on giving instructions to the ambassadors.

KOPPEL: Bessmertnykh's account is clearly self-serving, but it may also be true. What is indisputably true is that Moscow these days is a place of political infighting, finger-pointing, and even a certain degree of witch-hunting.

Alexander Bessmertnykh discusses the increasingly nasty political climate here when we come back.

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KOPPEL: What's happening in Moscow right now is both exhilaration and dangerous. The landscape is becoming littered with broken symbols of the past and scenes of radical change.

I asked Mr. Bessmertnykh about something that happened in Moscow this morning that would have been beyond imagination even a few weeks ago.

Today here in Moscow there was a story this morning that crowds -- I don't know how large -- storm is too strong a word, but they tried to break into the KGB offices this morning. You heard about that?

BESSMERTNYKH: Yes, I've heard it.

KOPPEL: It almost sounds like the kind of thing that was going on in Bucharest, in East Germany with the Stasi. Is there that kind of a sense in the Soviet Union today, that the people now just want to tear down the past, get rid of it? Are you afraid that the Soviet Union may be swinging too far to the left now?

BESSMERTNYKH: No. I think that that is the natural reaction by people against the coup d'etat and against that junta, which was actually arranged with the KGB. And they have emotionally reacted to that. There were a lot of sentiments against the KGB before, of course, because of the previous practices, etcetera. And this emergency situation has actually climaxed that reaction. So I can explain only by that. The people are so angry, they're so desperate.

There is one guarantee that does exist for not having a repetition of these kinds of things now. And now I'm not only hopeful but I'm confident now. Things are not going to happen this way anymore in the Soviet Union because the democratic thinking, the democracy itself, the changed mentality of the public has produced such deep roots that it can't just be [unintelligible]. People are different. They may be not on the left, but they're different. They understand that they can live only in a lawful and legalistic society, a society based on good laws and constitution, and they can live only with the system

that protects those laws. Because otherwise they will come again to any kind of situation.

KOPPEL: Are you afraid of a sort of Soviet-style McCarthy era, that now perhaps people are going to be going around doing loyalty checks: Was he against the revolutionary group? Was he against the junta? Did he declare himself soon enough? That can be very damaging to a country.

BESSMERTNYKH: Yes. I think we shall have maybe a little bit of that leftist McCarthyism because of the enthusiasm of the people who -- you know, the people who were on the barricades. And now they ask everyone: Where you were for those -- during those three days? Were you on the barricades? And if you were not on the barricades, ah-ha, there's something suspicious. Who are you?

So there will probably be a witch hunt for a while, but then it will come down, because people will realize you can't divide the country. Now is the time for the consent, for the consensus and consent. We've got to unite all the democratic forces. And the democratic forces are not only those who had the chance and, let's say, the happiness to be on the barricades. The democratic forces are everywhere, and they should not be suspected because they worked quiet in their newspaper offices, they worked in the factories, they worked in the foreign ministry. By the way, several foreign ministry people were on the barricades.

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So, you've got to think about the unity. Now we see a tremendous attempt to clean the scene and to remove the people and to install new ones.

I'm not against changing the guards. I'm only for changing the guards with the better ones. So many mistakes will be made. Many new people will be coming, maybe not all of them good. But this is the initial part of any revolution. This is really another revolution now. We have destroyed the plot. We have come to the freedom of a new life. So that may happen.

KOPPEL: When I come back, I'll have a brief interview that I conducted today with Mikhail Gorbachev, and we'll hear Alexander Bessmertnykh's thoughts on his former boss and how isolated he is becoming.

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KOPPEL: Over these last few months, several of Mikhail Gorbachev's closest advisers, reformers and hardliners, have either left on their own or were trampled by this week's events. Alexander Bessmertnykh worries that Gorbachev is becoming increasingly isolated.

Let me try a theory out on you. Some of Boris Yeltsin's people the other night were saying to me when we were over at the Federation Building before it was completely over. They said when this thing is over, we are going to want a coalition government. And indeed, one of his top aides said to me -- I said how would that work. He said, well, if, for example,

Gorbachev picks the head of the KGB, we'll pick the head of the Defense Ministry, and one and then the other.

Do you have a feeling that perhaps Yeltsin's people are behind the request for your resignation so that they can sort of clear the deck and decide who's going to be the new Foreign Minister?

BESSMERTNYKH: I just don't know. I don't know who is behind it. But there was a campaign, as I said, in today's newspapers, and there was some yesterday. There was an arranged and definitely orchestrated campaign against the Foreign Ministry. It was always the most choicest place in the government. So probably the people would like to take over it. But who's going to be, whether it's going to be Gorbachev's men or Russian Federation men, we shall see.

To me it's not important. To me the most important thing is the professionalism, dedication to the work, honesty, the ability to believe in the policy you follow, and that no matter who's going to take that office you have been just in, they should continue the policy of new thinking. Because this is really the only policy which is good for the Soviet people and for the national interest of the U.S.S.R. This is my complete belief.

KOPPEL: You're too much of a professional to express anger. But are you hurt that President Gorbachev has asked for your resignation?

BESSMERTNYKH: Well, I'm disappointed. Of course, for me, it's not an easy situation. But Mr. Gorbachev -- actually, he has lost one of his loyal supporters.

KOPPEL: He's lost a lot of those loyal supporters. I mean he's lost Yakovlev. He's lost Shevardnadze. He's lost Bessmertnykh. And then on the other side, he's lost Kryuchkov; he's lost Yasov. Who's left?

BESSMERTNYKH: I don't know. I'm very much -- yesterday, Yakovlev said a very interesting thing. He said much will depend who will surround Gorbachev now. It may be, again, a group of yes men, subservient people who would create a bunch of -- I don't know how to say it in English -- a bunch of some nincompoops around him.

So much will depend on that, who is going to be around Gorbachev now, because some of his best friends betrayed him, and some of his best friends are being removed. So I don't know. We shall see. I hope he'll now pay much more attention to that, to the people who are around him, and he should not be rushed in personnel affairs. I know how it is done in the United States, and unfortunately it's not that way here. It may be done on the spur of the moment.

But any way, I wish good luck to President Gorbachev. I shall be supporting him all the way, in any capacity I am, because he's the man who embodies the best of our perestroika and the best of our hopes. He's the best man on the political scene.

He's the man who created this policy, and he needs that support. And I shall be doing that for him in any capacity I'm in, very, very honestly and with all my heart.

KOPPEL: Mr. Bessmertnykh, I thank you. It's been an extraordinary time to be here with you, and you're very, very gracious to have spent so much time with me.

BESSMERTNYKH: Thank you.

KOPPEL: There are some who believe that this week is already bearing witness to the beginnings of a second coup against Gorbachev, that Boris Yeltsin and his supporters in the Russian Republic forced Gorbachev to call on all his ministers to resign today so that they can be replaced with Yeltsin loyalists. For the moment, though, Gorbachev still insists that his program is on track.

PRESIDENT GORBACHEV [Translated]: We just sat down and talked about urgent measures to be taken. We talked for several hours about economic measures that need to be taken immediately, measures of a social character. And naturally I confirmed our course not only concerning the reforms in this country, but also in foreign policy. It's the democratic forces that are functioning today.

KOPPEL: There are no longer any tanks rolling through the streets of Moscow. The barricades are down. The crowds have dispersed. But the struggle for power in this city and in this country continue. I'll be back in a moment.

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KOPPEL: On Sunday, Secretary of State Baker will be David Brinkley's guest on "This Week with David Brinkley."

That's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel in Moscow. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.