

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on Production of the MX Missile

December 10, 1982

The President. I have a statement here first. I just wanted to say a word about the importance of the defense issue in the closing days of this congressional session.

It's vital that we in government demonstrate to friends and potential foes alike that the United States is determined to remain a credible force for peace in the world. There are several critical decisions now facing the Senate, including their votes on the B - 1 and a second carrier. But none is more critical than their vote on the production of the Peacekeeper missile.

Frankly I was disturbed by the debate in the House earlier this week because of the confusion over what the vote meant. The key vote in the House and now in the Senate is over money for production of the missile, not for the basing mode. And I believe it's absolutely essential to a strong, secure defense that we vote now on funds for that missile. Then next year, as we have more time, I'd welcome a vigorous debate on the best way to base the missile.

I agree that more time is needed before we achieve a consensus in Congress on the basing mode, but the need for the missile itself has long been apparent. Both Presidents Ford and Carter before me have vigorously argued that the country needs this new system. Later today I am meeting with our arms negotiator, Ed Rowney, and I'm sure that his message will be the same as in the past -- a vote against MX production today is a vote against arms control tomorrow.

I also think it's fair to mention a couple of headlines that I came across earlier this week after the House voted. One said, "Soviets Voice Satisfaction on MX Rejection." The other read, "Soviets Cheer House for Rejecting MX Missile Appropriation." Well, if the Soviets are so pleased, perhaps we should be a little more concerned.

I can tell you that I'm vitally concerned about this matter, and I urge the Senate to stand together and assure adequate funds for the Peacekeeper.

And now I just have a faint suspicion that you may have a few questions.

Q. Are you ready to go back to the drawingboard on the dense pack? And you do sound like you are maybe willing to compromise on the whole question.

The President. Well, in the selection of a basing mode there was long study, and there was long consideration of any number of proposals. Now, any proposal for basing faces a time in which the other side is going to create a vulnerability of this system. This one did finally come down as probably offering the best opportunity. But from the very first, and in all my conversations with the Congress and the debate up there, I said that there's a time element involved here in which, yes, if there is more debate needed and if the Congress wants to debate and discuss and see if there are possible other options that could conceivably be improvements over this, we're willing for that.

All this bill entailed is money to start production of the missile. And yet, unfairly, the opponents -- or the proponents of that amendment in the House made the entire debate not on whether we need the missile, but on the basing mode. And this was unfair, and it was lacking a little in honesty to do that. And I think that the message that came out was that they were opposed to the basing mode.

Q. Mr. President, aren't you wavering then on the dense pack? How willing are you to listen to a vigorous debate?

The President. Why is it wavering when you've spent months trying to find -- and gone over months -- there have been basing modes suggested before we even came here, and there was great debate over those and my own opposition to one that had been proposed. But when you've spent that much time -- and the Congress, on the other hand, has not been engaged in the debate on that -- I made it plain from the first that we were asking for money to start production of the missile and that I would welcome further discussion and debate on the basing mode. That's not as if we made -- we made a decision in answer to a demand by the Congress. They demanded that we make a recommendation of a basing mode, so we chose the best one of all those that had been proposed.

Q. Are you concerned that dense pack is going to be defeated in the Senate the way it did in the House? Is that why you're trying to deemphasize dense pack?

The President. I tried to deemphasize it in the House.

Q. Sir, are you apprehensive that up on Capitol Hill the MX might become not just a symbol of defense, but a symbol of the deficit -- you've got to cut somewhere, this might be it.

The President. Well, as I said all during the campaign and continue to say, the first responsibility of the Federal Government is the security and the freedom of the people of this country. And if it comes down to a choice, in a deficit period of this kind of -- deficit or national defense, national security, I have to come down on the side of national security, and the Congress should also.

And the drumbeat, constant drumbeat, with which I'm sure many of you are familiar, about supposedly excessive defense spending at this time ignore the fact that the percentage of the budget that is devoted to defense -- even in this attempt to rectify the errors of years past -- is a smaller percentage than has been customary in times past for defense spending. It normally has been about a half of the budget. It is down to about a fourth of the budget.

Q. Mr. President, there's such confusion about -- --

The President. Wait a minute. There's a hand back here.

Q. Mr. President, assuming the Senate does go with the production funds, do you have any reason to believe the House conferees will reverse their own body's action in the conference? Will they go along with it in a conference report?

The President. Well, there's always that opportunity. You have a second go at it.

Q. Mr. President, there's such confusion about dense pack. Can you explain why it's the best system and how it would work?

The President. Well, it was the best system in that there is scientific evidence -- and from pretty reputable people -- given that it presented an obstacle to an enemy attempting to zero in with nuclear weapons to destroy our missiles, that what was called fratricide -- that they would have to come in at such

proximity that the first explosion would render the incoming ones harmless, and, thus, where you might lose one or two missiles, you would have the others then to reply. And there's a great deal of confidence and a great many scientists -- that this is true.

But it also lends itself down the line a ways. It lends itself to future defense without violating the ABM treaty -- and that has been a dishonest statement that it violates that treaty. It also lends itself to further deception, the possibility of additional silos and leaving some question to an enemy as to which ones had missiles in them.

Q. Mr. President, are you saying that you're backing the MX but you are not specifically backing the dense pack -- main basing system. That's flexible?

The President. I'm saying in answer to the demand of the Congress that we come forth with a basing mode, we came up with the best one in all the discussion and all the alternatives that have been presented and met their deadline for presenting such a system. At the same time, I said in submitting this that the Congress has not had time to debate that particular basing mode. And there is time available and that they can go forward with the missile. At the same time, we're perfectly willing to sit down with them and debate and discuss and see if there are other alternatives.

Q. But, Mr. President -- --

Q. Was there undue pressure on you -- --

The President. What?

Q. Was there undue pressure upon you to make a decision by this deadline?

The President. This is what had been -- the deal that had been made with the Congress. This is what they asked for, and I met the deadline.

Q. But, Mr. President, if Congress overwhelmingly rejected this -- --

Q. Mr. President, if -- --

The President. Wait a minute.

Q. If this, you know, dense pack set-up is so good in your estimation, why did the Joint Chiefs vote 3 to 2

against it, and why did you move against their decision on this? I mean, these are supposedly the military experts of the country.

The President. Because, except for one, the others favored the one thing that we had first proposed to Congress and that Congress refused to accept, which was placing the missiles as they came off the assembly line in Minuteman silos. And Congress refused that absolutely.

Well, it wasn't a bad idea, as is evidenced by the fact that two of the three Chiefs of Staff -- that was the thing that they advocated. But they did all agree that, since we couldn't use that system, that they would support whatever decision I made.

Q. But, Mr. President, Congress overwhelming rejection of a missile that you're saying is so essential, does it concern you now that you have perhaps lost your ability to have your way with Congress -- to work your will with Congress?

The President. Well, I never went to bed every night with great confidence that I could work my will with Congress. They're a stubborn bunch, and you ride 'em the best you can. The -- no -- the -- [laughter] -- --

I would like to call to your attention that from the very first, I have never gotten all that I asked for. I didn't get the tax program that I asked for. And I think that had I gotten it, we might find less of a recession today. I never got all the cuts that I asked for in spending, but I accepted what I could get and said we'll come back again and try again for more the next time around.

Q. But, are you fearful that you're now going to start to get an awful lot less?

The President. You know me. I'm an eternal optimist.

Q. Mr. President, sir, you mentioned earlier that the MX vote was good news in the Kremlin. Do you accept the House Intelligence Committee report that proponents of the nuclear freeze are not being manipulated by Soviet agents?

The President. There have been several rather well-documented articles that have appeared in print with regard to, let us say then, participation in the peace move by the Soviets. We know that the originator -- the originating organization of that was the World

Peace Council, which is a Soviet organization supported by and maintained by them.

I can tell you that I have made inquiry on some of the articles that have appeared and asked for an analysis of whether they were factual or not, and the reports that I have received back, though, is that with here and there, an exception for journalistic exaggeration, they did check out.

I say again that the millions of people who are supportive of that movement, I'm sure, are sincere and well-intentioned and from that standpoint that we share the same goals. I think that a freeze would be just fine if we can get down first to equality between the two countries. But in this country today, we have less megatonnage, less force in our ballistic missile system, land-based system, than we had 20 years ago. And the Soviets, in the meantime, are now producing their fifth generation of missiles. They have improved in accuracy. They have improved in MIRV'ing. They've improved in the megatonnage. And all I'm saying is that one must look to see whether, well-intentioned though it may be, this movement might be carrying water that they're not aware of for another purpose.

Incidentally, the first man who proposed the nuclear freeze was in February 21st, 1981, in Moscow -- Leonid Brezhnev.

Reporters. Thank you, Mr. President.

Q. What is that "No More Mr. Nice Guy" on your desk?

The President. What?

Q. Is that quote meant for Tip?

The President. That was a gift. You know, they just -- some people just think that I've got to stop being so nice to all of you.

Q. Can you show it to the cameras?

The President. What?

Q. Can you hold it up for -- --

Q. How about Congress?

The President. No, it was a gift.

Q. Are you going to be nice to them?

The President. Of course.

I find that it helps a little with some of the memos that I scratch out. [Laughter]

Q. Do you think you're going to lose on the Senate -- --

Deputy Press Secretary Speakes. There aren't any more questions now.

The President. Helen Thomas it. [Helen Thomas, United Press International].

Q. You don't sound as optimistic.

The President. No, let me be perfectly honest with it. I have no doubt this is -- we're faced with a tough fight, and we're going to wage that fight. But, no, I couldn't sit here and say, well, you know, this is going to be a breeze.

And, again, I think the difficulty is making them consider the need for the missile and recognize that they can voice their considerations in debate with regard to the basing mode. But every argument that I've heard against it has to do with the basing mode.

I don't recall -- I didn't hear all the debate in the House, but I heard very few people saying that the missile -- or complaining that the missile was unnecessary.

Q. The expense.

The President. What?

Q. Except for the expense. The cost of the missile.

The President. Oh, well, the greatest way that we're going to save money on defense is getting the Soviet Union to join us in arms reduction. That will be a

Note: The President spoke at 11:56 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. His remarks were broadcast live over nationwide radio and television.

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legitimate savings and greater. And this works against that. This is very obviously a detriment to our negotiators.

Q. Would you comment on the death of Leon Jaworski?

The President. Helen said I can't take any more, and Larry's over here seconding Helen and, you know -- -

Mr. Speakes. Everybody agreed to 10 minutes. [Laughter]

Q. I plead innocent. [Laughter]

Reporters. Thank you.

Q. When are we going to see you again?

Q. Could we see you more often?

The President. Yes.

Q. News conference?

Q. Wednesday? [Laughter]

The President. Yes, I had asked -- --

Q. News conference next week?

The President. What?

Q. News conference maybe?

Q. Wednesday?

The President. Well, that, or I think that more things of this kind in between, so that you don't have so much time to think of ammunition. [Laughter]

Q. Thank you.