

Remarks to Private Sector Leaders During a White House Briefing on the MX Missile

March 6, 1985

I appreciate this opportunity to speak with all of you today. I learned early on that if an issue was important enough, the best thing is to go directly to the people and enlist their help. And once the people are mobilized, they don't have to make politicians see the light, they just make them feel the heat. [Laughter]

So, of course, asking for help suggests a certain degree of trust, which reminds me of a story. It has to do with a fellow that fell off a cliff, and he grabbed a limb on the way down and there he hung, dangling above the rocky canyon. And he looked up and didn't see anyone. And he finally shouted out, "Oh, Lord, if you're up there, tell me what to do!" And a moment later, a voice came booming down from the heavens that said, "If you have faith, let go!" Well, he took another look down at those rocks 200 feet below and then looked up again and says, "Is there anyone else up there?" [Laughter]

Well, we can be thankful that we're not in that kind of situation, but we as a people do face a decision that's vital to the safety of our country. And that's why I've asked you here today. One of the most sacred duties of any President is keeping America secure and at peace. And peace and security are not free commodities; they're precious, and like everything of great value, there's a price to pay.

During the 1970's, perhaps as a reaction to the confusion and the division over the Vietnam war, the strength of our conventional and strategic forces was permitted to erode; and by 1980 it was clear that a weaker America was not a safer America and that it was time to get down to the business of strengthening our defenses.

I was elected in 1980 and reelected a few months ago, pledging to put our economy back on track and to rebuild our defenses. Modernizing our strategic forces was vital. We unilaterally refrained from deploying many new strategic systems in the 1970's -- unilaterally refrained, even as the Soviets rushed forward to expand and upgrade their nuclear capability, testing and deploying at least three new intercontinental ballistic missile systems and stationing them in the hardened silos. More than 800 new missiles with some 5,000 warheads were added to their arsenal.

Nuclear war would be the greatest tragedy, I think, ever experienced by mankind, in the history of mankind. And we've avoided that tragedy because we've maintained a credible deterrent force. We can't afford to play political games with the delicate balance of deterrence. No room should be left for doubt about a nuclear exchange; no one would win.

That reality has worked well for 30 years. And yet if we're not willing to modernize our forces to keep our systems current, the credibility of deterrence will vanish. Knowing this, we began immediately to make up for the irresponsibility of the seventies and to revitalize the three legs of our nuclear triad. We've had some success -- the Trident submarine and the B - 1 bomber will go a long way toward filling the gap -- but you can't sit on a three-legged stool if there's only two legs. The third leg means the Peacekeeper missile, as we call it, the MX. Our current, aging land-based missiles are suffering from attrition. The 22-year-old Titan missiles are being retired, leaving our land-based missile force with less and less punch with which to deter aggression. And that's one of the reasons we need the Peacekeeper. It's the most reliable and accurate land-based missile America has ever produced. It'll bring our deterrent to a state-of-the-art level and reinforce the futility of attack on [by] any potential adversary.

Whether or not that message is sent now depends on the Congress. We've proposed the production and deployment of 100 Peacekeeper missiles, a minimum investment needed for the security of our country. A blue-ribbon bipartisan commission, the Scowcroft commission, studied the security requirements of the United States and agreed; prominent Democrats, like the late Senator Henry ``Scoop" Jackson, also agreed. ``If America maintains a strong deterrent, and only if it does," Scoop Jackson said, ``this nation will continue to be a leader in the crucial quest for enduring peace among nations."

Well, the Senator knew the price of living free, secure, and at peace. Senator Jackson -- well, I can assure you -- I might as well say -- I don't enjoy spending money, that might have struck you already that that's -- if it wasn't absolutely essential to the security of our country, my conservative philosophy would rebel at taxing money away from those who've worked hard to earn it. I grew up in the age of Coolidge. Some people think it was McKinley, but, no, it was -- [laughter] -- it was Coolidge. [Laughter] And he was a champion of thrift and economy in government, and yet even he knew the importance of strength -- there we were in that postwar period immediately after the war to end all wars when, I think, most of us felt that we had ended all wars.

But in his 1925 inaugural address, Coolidge said: ``Our country represents nothing but peaceful intentions toward all the Earth, but it ought not to fail to maintain such a military force as comports with the dignity and security of a great people. It ought to be a balanced force, intensely modern, capable of defense by sea and land

-- beneath the surface and in the air. But it should be so conducted that all the world may see in it, not a menace, but an instrument of security and peace."

Well, that's the spirit with which we must move forward in this debate. We've requested a minimum number of Peacekeepers -- only 100. This number is far too few for any first strike, and it underscores the purely defensive nature of our proposal. The missile is now in production, and the costs are reasonable and under control, and funding would not add to the deficit, because it's already been appropriated in the fiscal '85 budget. What's more, we've had seven excellent test launches.

Of course, there are those who will continue to search for any reason to vote ``No." If the decisions were determined that way, our military could have no weapons at all; and this would be fine, except that the Soviets would not be suffering from the same handicap. Our goal is to negotiate with the Soviets, to reach agreements which will permit us to reduce the number of weapons threatening mankind, both nuclear and conventional.

And as you are aware, next week we will begin negotiations in Geneva. The vote on the Peacekeeper is also a vote on Geneva, and the Soviets are watching this with intense interest. So, let no one misjudge what is at stake.

Rejecting the Peacekeeper will knock the legs out from under the negotiating table, leaving the Soviets no conclusion but that America lacks unity and resolve. I can think of no greater disaster for the negotiating position of the United States; weakness does not make for good negotiations.

This isn't a new revelation. President Teddy Roosevelt said it a long time ago: ``We need to keep in a condition of preparedness," he said, ``not because we want war, but because we desire to stand with those whose plea for peace is listened to with respectful attention." The success we've had in getting the Soviets to the negotiating table or getting their ``respectful attention," as Teddy would say, can be traced not to vacillation, but to firmness and sense of purpose.

We pledged that if the Soviets would not work with us to reduce the number of their intermediate-range missiles aimed at Europe, we would deploy our cruise and Pershings to balance the threat. Our courage and that of our allies let the Kremlin know that we will not compromise our security and that we have the political will to stick with it. We mean no threat to them, but we'll not permit them to pose a threat to us.

There should be no mistake -- a rejection of the Peacekeeper will diminish our chance of reaching a fair and equitable arms reduction agreement now or in the future. Without the Peacekeeper, the Soviets will have little incentive to

discontinue their buildup or to reach agreements with us.

Years ago I was a negotiator for my union. When we picked a team and sent them to the bargaining table, we stood behind them; unity was the key to success -- then we were seeking higher wages and better working conditions. The team we're sending to Geneva will be seeking peace and security for our country and the free world. It's the American team, and I need your help in backing them up.

I hope that we can count on you to get the message out that now is not the time to cancel a major weapons system or undercut our allies or to reward Soviet belligerence. Now is the time for American courage, unity, and resolve -- time to stand together behind our team in Geneva so they can represent us with all the vigor and confidence that they can muster.

The Soviets respect this kind of resolve. Andrei Sakharov, a courageous voice for peace in the Soviet Union, understands this. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, and he holds the respect of the world for his struggle for peace and human rights. Well, he wrote to a friend in the West that arms control talks with the Soviets would be easier if the U.S. were to have the MX. He knew the risk of sending a message like that.

Peace is not easy to maintain; it'll take hard work and diligence. It'll take unity and sense of purpose, and yes, it will cost money. This generation of Americans must meet the test. That's up to us.

And I hope I can count on you, all of you, to give us help in this. There have been four wars in my lifetime. And I've said before, I don't know of a single war -- one of those four -- that was fought because the United States was too strong. The truth of the matter is, the two World Wars were because people on the other side looked at us, looked at our military weakness, and decided we wouldn't fight.

I don't think we should ever have to fight a third time under those circumstances. And I don't want us to ever have to fight at all.

So, thank you for joining us today, and God bless you all.

And I'm going to place you in the capable hands of Secretary Weinberger. I don't think he'll argue with any of the points that I just made. [Laughter] Thank you all very much.

Note: The President spoke at 2:04 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. Attending the briefing were leaders from various business, labor, ethnic, and other interest groups. Following the President's remarks, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and Robert C. McFarlane, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, addressed the group.