

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters on the Relaxation of East German Border Controls

1989-11-09

The President. We just wanted to make a brief statement here. I've just been briefed by the Secretary of State and my national security adviser on the latest news coming out of Germany. And of course, I welcome the decision by the East German leadership to open the borders to those wishing to emigrate or travel. And this, if it's implemented fully, certainly conforms with the Helsinki Final Act, which the GDR [German Democratic Republic] signed. And if the GDR goes forward now, this wall built in '61 will have very little relevance. And it clearly is a good development in terms of human rights. And I must say that after discussing this here with the Secretary of State and the national security adviser, I am very pleased with this development.

Q. Mr. President, would the United States now consider doing more to help West Germany to take care of some of these East Germans coming into that country? Is there more that you could do now to help West Germany accommodate -- --

The President. Well, we have such a close relationship with the Federal Republic that if Chancellor Kohl asks us to be of some assistance I'm certain we would give it serious consideration. I mean, I don't know what it is they'd have in mind, because I think with a truly open border it is hard to predict how many will be trying to leave. And so, it's a dynamic development, and we just have to wait and see. But our relationship with the Federal Republic is such that we would want to be of the maximum help if it was needed. So far, Germany has done a magnificent job in handling those who have preceded this new exodus.

Q. Have you assured Mr. Kohl that if he does need help that we'll be there for them?

The President. Well, I haven't talked to him, Lesley [Lesley Stahl, CBS News], since this development because he just went off to Poland. I talked to him about this last week and made very clear to him that we thought -- I think it was last week -- made very clear to him that we thought they were handling it with great sensitivity. It's an enormous burden on the Federal Republic. And I don't remember in that conversation if I said if we can be of any help, please let me know; but I'm sure he knows that's the case.

Q. Did he give any indication of how far he'd be able to go to accommodate this influx of refugees? I think the number stands at about 110,000 now. Did he say if it hits a million we're going to have real problems?

The President. No, he didn't go into numbers at all, but he demonstrates a quiet confidence that the Federal Republic can cope. As I say, they have done a good job. And here's a new development in this rapidly changing part of the world that we can salute. And it's a dramatic happening for East Germany and, of course, for freedom.

Q. Is this the end of the Iron Curtain, sir?

The President. Well, I don't think any single event is the end of what you might call the Iron Curtain, but clearly this is a long way from the harshest Iron Curtain days -- a long way from that.

Q. Mr. President, what do you think the implications are for the Warsaw Pact now? I mean, can we say that this may be an indication that they're headed toward a loosening or even a dismantling of the Warsaw Pact?

The President. I think you have to say what you mean by Warsaw Pact. I mean, it seems to me that it's certainly a loosening up in terms of travel. It concurs with the Helsinki Final Act, and it is a very good development.

Our objective is a Europe whole and free. And is it a step towards that? I would say yes. Gorbachev talks about a common home. Is it a step towards that? Probably so.

Q. What do you think the implications are for immigration to this country, Mr. President? Do you think we'll be seeing very many of these new refugees?

The President. There's no indication of that. These are Germans going to the Federal Republic of Germany.

Q. What's the danger here of events just spinning out of control? Secretary Baker commented earlier about how rapid the pace of change has been in Eastern Europe. Nobody really expected this to happen as quickly as it did. Is there a danger here that things are accelerating too quickly?

The President. I wouldn't want to say this kind of development makes things to be moving too quickly at all. It's the kind of development that we have long encouraged by our strong support for the Helsinki Final Act. So, I'm not going to hypothecate that anything goes too fast.

Q. So, you don't see -- --

The President. But we are handling it in a way where we are not trying to give anybody a hard time. We're saluting those who can move forward with democracy. We are encouraging the concept of a Europe whole and free. And so, we just welcome it. But I don't like to go into a lot of hypotheses about too much change or too rapid change or what I'd do, what our whole team here would do, if something went wrong. I think it's been handled by the West very well; and certainly we salute the people in East Germany, the GDR, whose aspirations for freedom seem to be a little further down the road now.

Q. Mr. President, do you think now that East Germany appears to be moving in the direction of Poland and Hungary that the rest of the Eastern bloc can continue to resist this? I'm thinking of Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania -- will they be the next?

The President. No, I don't think anyone can resist it, in Europe or in the Western Hemisphere.

Q. Did you ever imagine -- --

The President. That's one of the great things about dynamic change in Central America [Europe]: It's moving in our direction.

Q. Did you ever imagine anything like this happening?

Q. On your watch?

The President. We've imagined it, but I can't say that I foresaw this development at this stage. Now, I didn't foresee it, but imagining it -- yes. When I talk about a Europe whole and free, we're talking about this kind of freedom to come and go, this kind of staying with and living by the Helsinki Final Act, which gives the people the rights to come and go.

Q. In what you just said, that this is a sort of great victory for our side in the big East-West battle, but you don't seem elated. And I'm wondering if you're thinking of the problems.

The President. I am not an emotional kind of guy.

Q. Well, how elated are you?

The President. I'm very pleased. And I've been very pleased with a lot of other developments. And, as I've told you, I think the United States part of this, which is not related to this development today particularly, is being handled in a proper fashion. And we'll have some that'll suggest more flamboyant courses of action for this country, and we're, I think, handling this properly with allies, staying in close touch in this dynamic change -- try to help as development takes place, try to enhance reform, both political and economic.

And so, the fact that I'm not bubbling over -- maybe it's getting along towards evening, because I feel very good about it.

Q. Well, what I wanted to ask is -- the second part of that was, is your second thought: What are we going to do if it really does explode over there -- coming into play here? I mean, obviously, if they just flood into West Germany, they're handling it now, but they've only gotten 200,000. What if they get a million? What if they get 2 million?

The President. Well, what I'd like to think is that the political change in the GDR would catch up very fast with this liberation, if you will. You may remember that before I went to Poland -- I think, I don't know whether Jim Baker was sitting next to me, I know Brent was there and John Sununu -- and I was asked by a Polish journalist if I were a young Pole, what would my advice be. And what I said is I think you ought to stay there and participate in

this dramatic change in your country. You ought to feel the surge of freedom, feel the move toward democracy, and be a part of it.

These are Germans, and Germans love their country. And at some point, I think a lot of Germans who had felt pent-in and unable to move are going to say, look, we can move. But wouldn't it be better to participate in the reforms that are taking place in our own country? So, I think it's too early to predict that because these openings are there that that means everybody is going to take off.

Q. Do you think this will give you a stronger position when you go on the ship next month and you're talking to President Gorbachev -- I mean, that your side is winning? I mean, is that the kind of thing you're going to communicate to him? Are you going to say the -- --

The President. He's already expressed his interest in a common European home. We've phrased it differently. We've said a Europe whole and free. And when you see citizens wanting to go and flee what has been an oppressive society, clearly that is a message that Mr. Gorbachev will understand. He sees it not only in Eastern Europe, but he sees it inside the Soviet Union. And so, we'll have a good, lively -- before these developments took place, I have said that we would be discussing the rapid change inside Eastern Europe. And we've been talking about that today, just before you all came in here. We've been talking about the Gorbachev meeting. And one of the things that we are determined we will discuss, and I know he'll want to discuss, is this change.

Q. Mr. President, are you saying you think maybe East Germans will want to stay and participate in reforming their country? That suggests you think German reunification is some ways off. What is your view on German reunification? Does this bring it closer?

The President. I don't know. I think it's way too early to speak on that. I've spoken out on the question of German reunification. I notice the President of France, President Mitterrand, spoke out. I've heard what Chancellor Kohl has had to say about it. But Michael [Mike Gelb, Reuters], I don't know whether the development of today speeds up the day or not.

Q. Mr. President, will you consider lifting Jackson-Vanik restrictions on East Germany?

The President. I will be discussing a wide array of those subjects with the Soviets, I'm sure, including -- I know of their interest in talking about that, so we'll be prepared to talk about it.

Q. Are you going to be speaking to Chancellor Kohl in the next couple of days?

The President. I'd like to talk to him soon, but he's off in Poland. I may try to get him there, but I talked to him quite recently. We confer quite regularly.

Q. Do you talk to any of the other Western European -- --

Q. Will you try to reach Mitterrand?

The President. Well, personally I don't know. We're in -- again, I talked to him very recently, but he might want to talk about it.

Note: The President spoke at 3:34 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

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