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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
PRESS CONFERENCE  
OF  
ROBERT C. BYRD  
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA  
AND  
JOHN J. RHODES  
REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE STATE OF ARIZONA  
THE BRIEFING ROOM

9:30 A.M. EDT

MR. HUSHEN: Good morning.

The meeting with the bipartisan Congressional leaders lasted approximately an hour and a half.

We have Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the majority whip, and Congressman John Rhodes of Arizona, the House minority leader, here to give a brief statement about the meeting and to take a few of your questions.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The President reported on his recent trip to Europe. He first reported on the state of NATO and the fact that one of his prime objectives was to reassure the nations of NATO, our allies in the NATO consortium, that the United States stands firmly by its NATO commitments and is also firm in its determination to keep whatever powers necessary to live up to those commitments; and assurances were received from other nations which are in the NATO Alliance that they have the same type of determination.

Secretary Schlesinger also discussed the defense minister's part of the whole NATO conclave and came to very much the same conclusion.

Insofar as other matters are concerned, the President also indicated he had conversations with the Chiefs of State of Portugal and other countries which are in the NATO Alliance. He went to Italy and had a very fruitful conversation with the President and the Prime Minister, and particularly with His Holiness Pope Paul, and he indicated particularly that Pope Paul wanted the United States very much to continue with its humanitarian activities throughout the world.

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Then he went to Salzburg and conferred with the President of Egypt, and the conference with the President of Egypt, he indicated, was very fruitful and very friendly, and he felt that progress had been made, although certainly there are many problems remaining unsolved in the Middle East.

My impression of the trip was that it was highly successful; that certainly the problems of the world continue. They have not all been settled but that the posture which the President took was one of a positive nature and put the people, the Government of the United States, squarely in back of the various efforts being made for world peace.

SENATOR BYRD: I would add nothing with respect to the briefing. I would want to say, however, I felt very proud of the President's efforts and I must say that I felt it was a very positive approach made by the President. He spoke my sentiments when he conveyed the concern of this country with respect to Portugal, and he also conveyed my strong belief that Spain certainly is a very important component of the defense of Western Europe.

I think that -- and I so stated -- that the President is to be commended on this effort and I don't think there is any doubt, or there should be no doubt in the minds of the leaders of Western European countries or the leaders of any other countries, that the United States is serious about its commitments to the defense of Western Europe.

Q Senator, did the President indicate any degree of optimism about the situation in the Middle East as a result of his talks with President Sadat?

SENATOR BYRD: Yes he did, and he is, as you know, going to have discussions with Mr. Rabin next week, I believe it is, and hopefully out of these discussions will come a continuation of what we view as a positive forward movement in the final resolution of the problems there.

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Q Senator, everywhere we went, both at NATO, but especially in Salzburg, where the Egyptians were involved, the primary concern was not with the President. It was with the Congress on the part of the NATO Alliance and on the part of the Egyptians, in particular, where it came to an evenhanded policy. Is there anything you would like to say in behalf of these Democrats in the Congress as to supporting the positions taken publicly by the President?

SENATOR BYRD: The Democrats in Congress I don't think have indicated anything other than support for the President in his efforts to bring about a resolution of the problems in the Middle East.

If you are referring to the letter that was signed by a number of Senators, that was an indication on the part of those Senators -- and I think it expressed the sentiments of not only the majority of Senators in the Senate -- and I don't think it is to be taken as an expression of sentiment on the part of only 76 Senators, whatever the number was. It also, I think, is an expression of sentiment on the part of the majority of the American people.

A lot of things may be read into that letter that should not be read into it. I think, basically, it is a letter of support for the idea that the State of Israel is a fact and that the United States stands behind the viability of that State of Israel. And it is a recognition -- even though it may not say so in plain words -- it is a recognition that both sides are going to have to get together and each side is going to have to give a little, but, that, in the final analysis, that the United States stands behind the territorial integrity of the State of Israel.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: May I help on that for just a moment, because the President was certainly very forthcoming in his praise of some of the actions taken by Democrats in the Congress, particularly he mentioned the vote by which the Senate agreed to the restoration of Turkish aid as being very helpful in his discussions with not only Premier Demirel but Caramanlis. Also, Senator Mansfield's statement that this was not the time to weaken our presence in Europe was very helpful. He also, on previous occasions, has mentioned the votes which were taken in the House and in the Senate on the Defense Procurement bills as having been very helpful to him in his negotiations.

Q That still leaves the two stickiest items which were the Senate's opposition to the President's policy between the Turks and the Greeks and the Congress' prodding the President -- very obviously he did not want it on the Middle East issue.

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SENATOR BYRD: I don't view the Senate's action, vis-a-vis the Turkish-Greek situation, as an indication of opposition on the part of Democrats there to the policies that are being enunciated and followed by the President. It seems to me it was an action in support of the President's position.

Q The margin, of course, bothers the Turks?

SENATOR BYRD: Well, the margin was only one, but I think that was a considerable switch.

Q Gentlemen, did the President have anything to say about the outlook for American military bases in Spain?

SENATOR BYRD: He indicated very strongly that the countries of Western Europe, other than Spain, viewed the U. S. bases in Spain as a contribution to the overall defense of Western Europe.

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Q What did he say about the negotiations now underway for renewal of the lease?

SENATOR BYRD: I don't recall that he said anything in that regard.

Q Did he discuss the U.S. air installation in the Azores?

SENATOR BYRD: He did not.

Q Senator, you said that this letter represented the American people. On what do you base that? Were they consulted in any way?

SENATOR BYRD: I would hope that most of us who are in the Congress pretty well know what the sentiments are of the American people. I don't think the American people would, for one moment, relax their support of the existence and the continued existence of the state of Israel.

Q But you spoke of territorial integrity. The Arab States seem to think they have some territory that has been taken away.

SENATOR BYRD: But, as I also indicated, both sides are going to have to give a little if the resolution of this problem is ever going to be effectuated.

Q Senator, did you get the drift of American movement in the Middle East as forwarding another shuttle attempt by Secretary Kissinger to mediate some sort of interim solution between Egypt and Israel, that that is what we are headed for?

SENATOR BYRD: There are various options that are obviously open. By whatever name you call it, whether you call it step-by-step shuttle diplomacy or otherwise, it is hoped that some forward movement can continue to bring about a resolution of the problems there.

There is always the final option of going to Geneva, and that is not the best option, and it is hoped that both sides will recognize this. And there is indication, I think, from the President's discussions with Mr. Sadat and indications from the Israelis that they recognize these things, too, and they too would hope that this matter can be resolved. And I think there is not a great deal of optimism, but certainly I don't think we ought to be pessimistic.

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I think there ought to be room for optimism that both sides in their recognition of the gravity of what could occur are willing to give, and we have seen that only in the last few days. We have seen some indications on the part of both Mr. Sadat and the Israelis.

Q Gentlemen, did the Rockefeller report come up this morning?

SENATOR BYRD: It did not.

Q Not at all?

SENATOR BYRD: It did not.

THE PRESS: Thank you very much.

END (AT 9:50 A.M. EDT)