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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

I am glad to have this opportunity, before taking off for Europe tomorrow, to discuss with you frankly how I feel about the forthcoming European Security Conference in Helsinki.

I know there are some honest doubts and disagreements among good Americans about this meeting with the leaders of Eastern and Western European countries and Canada -- 35 nations altogether.

There are those who fear the Conference will put a seal of approval on the political division of Europe that has existed since the Soviet Union incorporated the Baltic nations and set new boundaries elsewhere in Europe by military action in World War II. These critics contend that participation by the United States in the Helsinki understandings amounts to tacit recognition of a status quo which favors the Soviet Union and perpetuates its control over countries allied with it.

On the other extreme there are critics who say the meeting is a meaningless exercise because the Helsinki declarations are merely statements of principles and good intentions which are neither legally binding nor enforceable and cannot be depended upon. They express concern, however, that the result will be to make the free governments of Western Europe and North America less wary and lead to a letting down of NATO's political guard and military defenses.

If I seriously shared these reservations I would not be going, but I certainly understand the historical reasons for them and, especially, the anxiety of Americans whose ancestral homelands, families and friends have been and still are profoundly affected by East-West political developments in Europe.

I would emphasize that the document I will sign is neither a treaty nor is it legally binding on any participating State. The Helsinki documents involve political and moral commitments aimed at lessening tensions and opening further the lines of communication between the peoples of East and West.

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It is the policy of the United States, and it has been my policy ever since I entered public life, to support the aspirations for freedom and national independence of the peoples of Eastern Europe--with whom we have close ties of culture and blood--by every proper and peaceful means. I believe the outcome of this European Security Conference will be a step--how long a step remains to be tested--in that direction. I hope my visits to Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia will again demonstrate our continuing friendship and interest in the welfare and progress of the fine people of Eastern Europe.

To keep the Helsinki Conference in perspective, we must remember that it is not simply another summit between the superpowers. On the contrary, it is primarily a political dialogue among the Europeans, East, West, and neutral, with primary emphasis on European relationships rather than global differences. The United States has taken part, along with Canada, to maintain the solidarity of the Atlantic Alliance and because our absence would have caused a serious imbalance for the West.

We have acted in concert with our free and democratic partners to preserve our interests in Berlin and Germany, and have obtained the public commitment of the Warsaw Pact governments to the possibility of peaceful adjustment of frontiers--a major concession which runs quite contrary to the allegation that present borders are being permanently frozen.

The Warsaw Pact nations met important Western preconditions--the Berlin Agreement of 1971, the force reduction talks now underway in Vienna--before our agreement to go to Helsinki.

Specifically addressing the understandable concern about the effect of the Helsinki declarations on the Baltic nations, I can assure you as one who has long been interested in this question that the United States has never recognized the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and is not doing so now. Our official policy of non-recognition is not affected by the results of the European Security Conference.

There is included in the declaration of principles on territorial integrity the provision that no occupation or acquisition of territory in violation of international law will be recognized as legal. This is not to raise the hope that there will be any immediate change in the map of Europe, but the United States has not abandoned and will not compromise this long-standing principle.

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The question has been asked: What have we given up in these negotiations and what have we obtained in return from the other side? I have studied the negotiations and declarations carefully and will discuss them even more intensely with other leaders in Helsinki. In my judgment, the United States and the open countries of the West already practice what the Helsinki accords preach, and have no intention of doing what they prohibit -- such as using force or restricting freedoms. We are not committing ourselves to anything beyond what we are already committed to by our own moral and legal standards and by more formal treaty agreements such as the United Nations Charter and Declaration of Human Rights.

We are getting a public commitment by the leaders of the more closed and controlled countries to a greater measure of freedom and movement for individuals, information and ideas than has existed there in the past, and establishing a yardstick by which the world can measure how well they live up to these stated intentions. It is a step in the direction of a greater degree of European community, of expanding East West contacts, of more normal and healthier relations in an area where we have the closest historic ties. Surely this is the best interest of the United States and of peace in the world.

I think we are all agreed that our world cannot be changed for the better by war; that in the thermonuclear age our primary task is to reduce the danger of unprecedented destruction. This we are doing through continuing Strategic Arms Limitations talks with the Soviet Union and the talks on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions in Europe. This European Security Conference in Helsinki, while it contains some military understandings such as advance notice of maneuvers, should not be confused with either the SALT or MBFR negotiations. The Helsinki summit is linked with our overall policy of working to reduce East-West tensions and pursuing peace, but it is a much more general and modest undertaking.

Its success or failure depends not alone on the United States and the Soviet Union but primarily upon its 33 European signatories, East, West and Neutral. The fact that each of them, large and small, can have their voices heard is itself a good sign. The fact that these very different governments can agree, even on paper, to such principles as greater human contacts and exchanges, improved conditions for journalists, reunification of families and international marriages, a freer flow of information and publications, and increased tourism and travel, seems to me a development well worthy of positive and public encouragement by the United States. If it all fails, Europe will be no worse off than it is now. If even a part of it succeeds, the lot of the people in Eastern Europe will be that much better, and the cause of freedom will advance at least that far.

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I saw an editorial the other day entitled: "Jerry, Don't Go."

But I would rather read that than headlines all over Europe saying: "United States Boycotts Peace Hopes".

So I am going, and I hope your support goes with me.

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