

Office of the White House Press Secretary
(Tyler, Texas)

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED AT A FORUM
AT TYLER JUNIOR COLLEGE

TYLER, TEXAS
APRIL 28, 1976

I'm glad to be here today at Tyler for several reasons: First, it was just great to see your famous Apache Belles and marching band in action. Second, it's an honor to be a guest at this outstanding Junior College, one of the biggest and best in the country. Finally, one of the primary responsibilities of this institution of learning and all others is to provide its students with facts. Facts and expertise that will prepare you for the decision-making that every job, career or profession calls for.

The President of the United States must also deal in facts -- and today, I want to share some of those facts with you, so that you can intelligently reach your own conclusions on a matter of supreme importance to our United States.

Somewhere between the snows of New Hampshire and the sunny climes down in Florida, the focus of this year's Republican campaign for the Presidency began to shift away from the growing strength and prosperity of the American economy to a new and more complex issue: the strength of America's military forces.

Now, I've been down the campaign trail before and I know there's a reason why a challenger will try to shift his attack. It's called second place. It makes you try harder -- and swing wilder, too.

Having failed on the economic issue, the central thrust of my opponent's new strategy is to claim that the United States has become inferior to the Soviet Union, especially in military strength. He glibly quotes statistics without any in-depth understanding of them. His answer to this alleged inferiority, apparently, is to change our force structure so that it matches the Soviets -- ship for ship, weapon for weapon, man for man -- rather than looking at overall capabilities.

First let me say that the issue is not our military capabilities today -- they are adequate to any challenge -- let there be no doubt about it. By the testimony of all who know, and I've spent much of my life dealing with defense matters, by the testimony of Secretaries of Defense past and present, Deputy Secretary Bill Clements, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, our military forces are capable of fulfilling their assigned missions.

The important issue is not today, but tomorrow. That's why I've been working with the Congress and the country to adopt a defense budget for the United States which will provide for our national security in the years ahead. But let us look a moment at this question of whether, as my opponent implies, we should try to re-shape our Armed Forces so that they mirror those of the Soviet Union. What steps would we have to take in order to be exactly like them?

The answers, I think, show a great deal about how superficial his charges are.

In order to parallel Soviet forces, we would have to begin by mothballing the 13 aircraft carriers that now sail the seas flying the American flag. Our huge nuclear aircraft carriers like the ENTERPRISE, the NIMITZ and the FORRESTAL, have no Soviet counterparts. Over one-half the Russian navy consists of small patrol craft, minesweepers and other small vessels. So to match the Soviet Union as my opponent seems to suggest, we would have to retire our own larger more sophisticated ships with their awesome firepower, and replace them with many, many more patrol craft, minesweepers and the like.

No one would truly believe that this would be a sane defense policy to protect America and defend our freedoms in the world?

Look at our Air Force and ask what it would be like to make it exactly like the Soviet Air Force. We would have to begin by grounding most of our B-52 bombers and calling off the progress we are making in developing a new, more capable B-1 bomber. Or think of our Marines, those valiant men who have won so many famous battles for us in the past. To parallel the Soviets we would have to jettison the Marine Corps because the Russians have nothing comparable in either quality or dedication.

Now, obviously my opponent isn't foolish enough to seriously suggest that we should do away with our carriers, our B-52's or our Marine Corps. The significant point to be made, however, is that simplistic and superficial charges based on limited information and experience, could lead to irresponsible and fundamentally harmful policy decisions.

Let's take one of his favorite charges--that the Soviets have twice as many men in uniform as we do. Presumably that means he wants to double the number of men and women we have in uniform from 2.1 million to more than 4 million. Obviously that would require us to reimpose the draft to obtain sufficient manpower.

In turn, more than 2 million of our young people now in school or working would have to go into the Armed Forces, probably most of them under Selective Service. We would have to divert billions of dollars now being spent for sophisticated new weapons systems for the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines to pay the added manpower costs. Money that should be spent on the new B-1 Bomber, or the development of a new ballistic missile, or expanding our fleet would be wasted on maintaining personnel levels that would add little to our overall military capabilities.

No reputable military expert I know has suggested such a course of action. Such a policy, if you can call it that, would undermine rather than strengthen our defenses.

Let's look at the manpower question another way. The United States today has some 3 million farm workers. The Soviet Union has 39 million farm workers. Does that mean that we have to increase the number of our farmers by 36 million in order to be equal to the Soviet Union? Of course not.

Our American farmers--equipped with the best technology in the world, relying upon the free market and their own ingenuity--feed 7 times more people than their Soviet counterparts year-in, year-out.

Indeed, American farmers even help to feed the Soviet people. The bottom line is this: it isn't always the number of men that count, but the quality--and as far as I'm concerned, the men and women of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines are the best in the world, bar none.

Obviously, we should exercise great caution before heeding the words of a man who obviously has no experience and little understanding of the complexity of national defense matters. Superficial arguments based on incomplete knowledge are fundamentally harmful rather than helpful.

I believe that a man who is campaigning for the highest office in the land must be willing to talk seriously about his policies and the consequences of his policies. When it comes to the life and death decisions of our national security, the decisions made must be the right ones. There are no retakes in the Oval Office. Glibness is not good enough; superficiality is not good enough. Every serious candidate for the Presidency must be equal to the burdens and the responsibilities of the Presidency.

(MORE)

Sometimes when I hear the critics complaining about American defense policy and American foreign policy--always complaining but never offering any programs of their own--I am reminded of one of the finest Texans I ever had the privilege to know in the Congress. Sam Rayburn served 50 years in Washington with over 3,000 Congressmen and Senators and 8 different Presidents. At the end of a long day, after he had worked hard to make a better life for America, when he heard from the chronic complainers, he loved to recall what his father once told him: "Any donkey can kick a barn down, but it takes an awful good carpenter to build one up."

Now as far as the national security policies of the United States are concerned, I am convinced that the American people would rather have a President who is constructively seeking to build the foundations of lasting security than someone who spends most of his time trying to kick them down.

It is irresponsible and a disservice to the American people to lead them to believe that we are inferior when we are not, that our military strength is insufficient when it is not, or that there are pat answers and simple solutions to the complex issues of national security when there are none.

This country must have a President who can do more than scratch the surface of complicated problems. It is not enough to ask questions. It is not enough to offer criticism. It is the obligation of every candidate for the Presidency of the United States to offer alternatives, to deal in specifics, to provide some answers to the questions he raises.

If a candidate fails in that responsibility, he has failed to satisfy a most fundamental requirement of a political campaign and of political leadership in this country: he has failed to level with the American people.

You must demand more than that of Presidential candidates. The elections of 1976 are much too important for you to make your decisions on the basis of less-than-complete knowledge. My record is clear. I have served as your President for more than 21 months, and during that period I have recommended the two largest military budgets in our nation's history; they were needed to see that our military capabilities continue to be strong in the years ahead as they must be if we are to find the peace and security we all seek.

A budget must also be based on facts and hard realities. One fact is that in recent years, the Soviet Union has been spending more and more for armaments--while successive American military budgets have been cut back by the Congress.

It is a trend that cannot, must not, and will not continue. My budget for fiscal year 1977 both reverses this trend and makes very sure that our American fighting forces will continue to be unsurpassed by any nation on earth. It is a fact--and in this real world, a very comforting fact.

Today America is a nation at peace, a nation with new confidence in itself and its future, a nation that stands tall and proud and free as it enters its third century.

If this is your idea of what America should be, I ask for your support this Saturday, next November, and in the challenging years ahead.

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