

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
AMERICAN LEADERS OF EAST EUROPEAN ANCESTRY

10:47 A.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: The meeting has just broken up and the leaders of the ethnic groups will be down to speak to you. They are on their way right now.

The President read to them a statement at the beginning of the meeting which we have put into writing and will hand out immediately after this meeting. There was applause at the end of the President's remarks and then the ethnic leaders made statements and asked some questions. They will describe to you further the meeting.

Q How can we ask questions if we don't know what the President said?

MR. NESSEN: Would you like to have the statement handed out first?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: We can do that.

Q Were all of these people pro Ford?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so but you can ask them yourselves.

Q You told us the President would make a statement.

MR. NESSEN: There was a misunderstanding on my part about whether the President would read the statement or distribute the statement. It was a mistake on my part. The President has four stacks of bills that he is trying to get through before he leaves, which is in less than 30 minutes, and that is where he is.

Q How long was the meeting?

MR. NESSEN: The meeting was approximately 45 minutes.

I am going to let the leaders come up and introduce themselves and begin to answer your questions and I will hand the President's statement out so you will have it with you in order to ask questions.

MR. MAZEWSKI: I am President of the Polish American Congress which is a national organization. I did attend the session this morning. I am very much satisfied with the statement that the President has spoken. As a matter of fact he has reiterated his position on the acknowledgement on the freedom and independence of Poland as well as the self-determination of these European countries. He has clarified the position more fully. Not only that, he has admitted that he made a mistake. The statement was not accurate at all, and that --

Q He acknowledged he made a mistake?

MR. MAZEWSKI: Definitely he made a mistake. It was an error. It was never his true feeling and as a matter of fact we have checked his Captive Nations Proclamation. As a matter of fact the speech that he delivered at the Polish American Congress in Philadelphia on September 24 will definitely make anyone reading that, and hearing the statements, will know it must have been an error because he couldn't have changed his position of long standing in the last 30 years. Therefore I enjoyed hearing that and I am sure that our community will accept it as stated.

There will be a determination that will be made by any member of my community but for myself I am very much satisfied.

Q Do you think he will have the Polish ethnic vote?

MR. MAZEWSKI: There is no one that can guarantee anybody's vote. We have problems in guaranteeing our wife's vote, and our wife has a problem guaranteeing a husband's vote. But I am sure that the community is knowledgeable and that they will weigh the statement the way it should be.

Q I gather from your statement about the abortion issue that was reported in the newspaper the other day that you yourself personally opposed Mr. Carter because of the abortion issue. Was that correct?

MR. MAZEWSKI: Where you received that information I don't know. My name is Mayewski and I never made a statement on the abortion issue.

Q I am sorry about that.

MR. MAZEWSKI: And it was not made.

Q Are you pro Ford?

MR. MAZEWSKI: I am pro every American and in this case I have not committed myself to either candidate. I am president of a national organization and I don't want to influence my organization either way because they have the intelligence to decide on their own after hearing the facts.

Q But you have your own personal views, don't you?

MR. MAZEWSKI: I have my personal views. I have made a decision which I will disclose in the secrecy of the booth in November.

Q Were you wearing one of those Ford buttons?

MR. MAZEWSKI: I was not, absolutely not. I don't wear anybody's button.

Q Is there such a thing as an ethnic vote? Why are we all here?

MR. MAZEWSKI: I would say that it is a misnomer. We are all Americans and we speak about Americans and we speak about Americans of different ethnic background, and I happen to be of a Polish background. I am an American of Polish heritage.

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MR. NESSEN: I think some of the other leaders have brief statements they might like to make, and then we can go to questions, okay?

MR. PASZTOR: My name is Laszlo Pasztor. I am Chairman of the Board of Directors of the American Hungarian Federation. I came here not because I wasn't convinced of President Ford's stand on these very important issues as far as Eastern Europe is concerned.

I have known President Ford when he was a Congressman and I admire him for his stand on the cause of freedom and liberty for all nations. He always emphasized that he doesn't make any difference as far as freedom and basic human rights are concerned, whether they are Eastern Europeans or from other nations.

I think that I was surprised that Mr. Carter wasn't aware of President Ford's statements in this area. I was very surprised that he made an issue of it and I think in the order of the fact that the President mentioned, as Mr. Mazewski said, that he made an inaccurate statement showing what a great President we have and what a human being he is.

I think, you know, that he can still speak with public opinion as far as the ethnic Americans are concerned. I think that the President's statements and his recent statement that he gave to us today, will clarify everything with some people who don't know him as well as some of us do, and that continue to support him as they did in the past.

Q Why did it take him so long to admit his mistake?

MR. PASZTOR: In my opinion, it was a slip of the tongue, and I think, right the next day, he made, in a positive way, a restating of his position. Even if you check his speech, right after that he made that statement, that Eastern Europe is not under -- I believe he said Soviet domination -- immediately, he stated that he will never concede the domination of Eastern Europe.

That was such an obvious correction, even in his statement that I, personally knowing him, didn't even catch the mistake in the first place. I have to admit that.

Q Did he say to you today that he made a mistake? How did he express it?

MR. PASZTOR: "I did not express myself clearly." I believe those were his words, and it is in his written statement. I believe you have that and you will have it in your hands, but he had the courage to say he didn't express himself clearly. I think that he showed to us that he is not ashamed to admit it if he didn't use the right expression.

Q You are now favoring President Ford?

MR. PASZTOR: I am working for him and I am going to continue to work for him.

Q Are you wearing a button this morning?

MR. PASZTOR: No, because I am a Hungarian and that was a Romanian button.

MR. PLEER: My name is Ilmar Pleer, President of the Estonian National Council. I am very much satisfied with the President's statement this morning regarding the situation in Eastern Europe and his slip of the tongue. He rectified his statement. We are very much satisfied with it.

He, himself, again mentioned that he will never recognize the overthrow of the Baltis States and the occupation by the Soviet Union, as he has done prior to the Helsinki Conference, and afterwards in statements to the Estonian and Baltic people. I will be very confident with the statement at this point, and I believe that the Estonian people will follow him and certainly support Mr. Ford for the Presidency.

MR. NESSEN: Let me put one thing in perspective before we go on, and that is as to who you are supporting and so forth.

One of the leaders at the meeting, and maybe he will identify himself, pointed out that last week, when there was a rash of complaining public statements about the President's remarks in the debate, that many of those, or most of them in fact, were elected Democratic officials in various areas of the country. Maybe one of the leaders will want to talk about that because it was mentioned to the President this morning.

MR. BOBELIS: I am Dr. Bobelis, National President of the Lithuanian American Council. I was very pleased with the President's statement. However, I do have some reservations about our foreign policy as conducted by Secretary Kissinger.

Q What are the reservations?

MR. BOBELIS: He has never expressed himself in behalf of Eastern European countries. He made many statements announcing human rights violations in South Africa, Rhodesia and Chile, but at no time, has he ever made any statement announcing any human rights violations, which are much more severe in Eastern European countries.

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MR. KIPEL: My name is Vitaut Kipel, representing the Byelorussian American Association of the United States. We are very pleased with the statement made by the President this morning and I must tell you that we as Russian Americans never considered as serious what happened last week in the debate. We considered that it was a mistake. However, we are very much disturbed that nobody from the press picked up that Jimmy Carter did not know that there were two radio stations broadcasting in the Soviet Union when he said Voice of Radio Free Europe, and then he stopped and he didn't know that the other station was Radio Liberty.

MR. LEJINS: My name is Adolfs Lejins, President of American Latvian Association of the United States. Now, we have a bipartisan organization. However, some of our groups had worked with President Ford for some 20 years and know him very well. However his statement last week did raise some questions and I hope President Ford's statement as distributed this morning will clarify some of those issues.

The Latvians, of course, are bipartisan and at least I hope that those who supported Mr. Ford in the past will also support him now.

MR. GECYS: My name is Stanley Gecys. I am National President of the Lithuanian American Community of the United States. As far as I personally am concerned, the President did admit his mistake and the case is closed. I think we should look towards the statement with the same eyes as the press looked toward Jimmy Carter's ethnic purity statement.

In a way I think it is fortunate that Eastern Europe was able to receive all of this attention from the press. We have felt that Eastern Europe had been forgotten and that primarily our concerns were directed to Africa, South America and Asia.

I just would like to point out that the Baltic States which are enslaved by the Soviet Union are strong and the people are fighting the Soviet regime, and I also hope that one of these days the Baltic States will be free.

I realize that President Ford is our friend. His record of 30 years in public office does show him to be the friend of captive nations, and therefore there are some things that all of us should forgive as one minute error in judgment.

MR. MEYER: My name is George Meyer. I am a representative of the Congress of Russian Americans. I have to confess to you that our 400,000 Americans of Russian descent, as all other of the voters in our country here, are for a solution. We have three ways to participate and to vote -- to support Governor Carter, to support President Ford, or to abstain.

I have to confess to you the mood of this group of American citizens is that they are very much afraid of Governor Carter, just as we were afraid of Senator McGovern. The problem is, is Governor Carter conservative or liberal? He has not cleared that up, up to now.

There are several facts which show that Mr. Carter, in this house, we believe, is the incarnation of Senator McGovern. He chose as Vice President Senator Mondale and the record of the Senator shows that Senator Mondale, by his votes in the Senate, is standing to the left of Senator McGovern.

Governor Carter has chosen, during the primaries, as his speechwriter the same person who had written the speeches for McGovern during the old campaign. Governor Carter has chosen as his counsel for foreign policy Averell Harriman and Dewey Rashin, and all of the people from Middle Europe very well know what advice these advisers gave and what advice Mr. Harriman and Mr. Hawkins gave to the late President Roosevelt. We cannot forget it.

The last thing we would like to bring to your attention is a speech which Governor Carter delivered three weeks ago in Penn Station, when he started his trip to Pittsburg. Have you noticed who stood at the side of Governor Carter when he delivered his speech? It was not Mr. Moynihan, who recently was nominated by the Democratic Party of the State of New York. It was Mrs. Bella Abzug, who was beaten by Mr. Moynihan. She was smiling and showing signs of victory.

This choice of Mr. Carter shows very clearly for us toward which part of the Democratis Party he is inclined.

MR. SEFFER: I am Dr. Uros Seffer, President of the Serbian National Committee, representing 26 Serbian organizations in the United States, Canada and the free world.

We know President Ford's record since coming to Congress. We consider him a very strong leader. We are very satisfied with his explanation today. We trust him and most of us will vote for him because we believe that he deserves to be President of the United States for the next term.

MR. MEDWED: Good morning. My name is Nick Medwed and I am West Coast Representative for the Ukranian Congress Committee of America. We are the eyes and ears of President Ford in our respective heritage communities. Therefore we were asked to come here because there was a feeling of urgency, particularly because it affected partially and to a great extent the American foreign policy towards the peoples that we as citizens are representing as the various ethnic heritage communities.

We came here today and are leaving greatly satisfied with the acknowledgement by President Ford that a mistake was made, and I am sure it is in the published statements being released to you, and we are going back with other statements that will be presented in the paper from now to November 2, and we want to thank you expressly, each of you, for giving us these front page headlines, and we need it very badly. Thank you very much.

MR. ABRAHAMIAN: I am Dr. Hratch Abrahamian, I am National President of the Armenian National Committee. I am from Eastern Europe and working for President Ford, and I don't know yet how my people are going to vote, but I was quite comfortable after the meeting today when the President restated or reconfirmed his previous statements when he was a Congressman about all of the people who were deprived of independence, freedom and self determination. He clearly reaffirmed all of the statements and I am very glad for that. At this time I don't have any reason to have doubt about his sincerity.

MR. SABAN: My name is Joseph Saban, National President of the Croatian Catholic Union of the United States of America. President Ford has convinced me this morning with his statement that he is for all people that are striving for their independence in their own countries, regardless of where they might be. Thank you very much.

MR. KIJ: I am Daniel Kij from Buffalo. I am a national officer of the Polish American Congress. I, like many of the others, was neither born in Eastern Europe nor were my parents who were born in Western New York. However, I feel what the President did today was clarify the record. There was little doubt in the minds of the ethnics in Western New York, and in the area served by our organization, that he really meant what he said, or as it sounded as it came over the television screen. Today, the President wanted to set the record straight and I think he did that.

I don't believe there was any doubt in the minds of those except Democratic Party leaders. I was the one alluded to earlier and I did state to the President that in Buffalo, this past Sunday when Betty Ford was the guest of honor at our annual Pulaski Day Parade, at which she was present, and also Senator Mondale, the feeling was neither pro-Ford nor pro-Carter. Both equally received the attention of the great Polish American community in our area.

I think that the President's statement may have caused a temporary slowdown in the ethnic inroads he was making, but I feel that the record that he set straight today is going to put him back on the track and people will not stop and be turned off simply because of something that he said during the debate.

Q Before you get off the stand, Mr. Kij, you are identified here on the list put out by the White House as being with the Polish Union of America.

MR. KIJ: The Polish Union of America is a fraternal benefit society founded in 1890 in Buffalo. I am the president of that organization, and is part of the Polish American Congress, which is the umbrella organization representing approximately 12 million Americans of Polish descent.

Q Which one do you prefer to be identified with? That is all I am asking.

MR. KIJ: It is immaterial.

Q Can you tell us how the meeting was organized? Were you earlier here in the week or last week for organizational purposes?

MR. KIJ: No, I was here in September at which time the Pulaski Day Proclamation, yesterday, was designated by the President on the anniversary of the American Revolutionary War heroes' death. This was done in September and at that time a member of the Polish American Congress was presented to the President bringing up several of the items that he covered, and at that time we were very well pleased with his answers to questions about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine which were put to rest for the last time.

This is why just a bit of confusion erupted when the President said those words during the debate. I don't think that those of us who were here from throughout the country, there were only a dozen of us, I don't think we really felt there was a change in the United States or Administration policy, but we did want to have this matter clarified, and I fully believe that everyone that was here today was satisfied with his explanation that he misspoke. And I believe the actual words that he used are right in the prepared text.

We all knew this. I was notified yesterday there might be a meeting of people from the Eastern European nations, that is representatives of groups from that area.

Q Was Mr. Osajda there from the Polish Croatian Roman Catholic Union?

MR. KIJ: Mr. Osajda was not present here today. He is from Chicago.

MR. ROBERTS: The President is about to depart from the South Ground and those who wish to photograph or witness the departure should assemble up here at this time.

MRS. FALTUS: I just want to make a short statement. I am representing the Czechoslovak National Council of America and my name is Anna Faltus. The President admitted that he made a mistake in the debate and his statement that he released today should clarify the issue, and we are all convinced that President Ford's record in Congress speaks for itself.

Q Can anyone tell us how this meeting was organized? Who called whom?

MR. MEDWED: There was a telephone call made from the White House in regards to the statement because of the numerous telegrams and letters and phone calls, and we were bombarded in our local communities, and we in turn passed on to the White House the urgency of such a meeting. It was agreed by Mr. Ford to have this meeting this morning and some of us have traveled half of the night and early morning to be here in order to be present, those who were able to be available.

Q Did you travel at your own expense?

MR. MEDWED: We traveled at our own expense, that is right.

Q When did this start?

MR. MEDWED: I would imagine sometime yesterday afternoon. I was reached at 4:00 in the afternoon and made a plane right away.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 11:15 A.M. EDT)