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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSEREMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
TO ETHNIC LEADERS

I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you today because I want to set the record straight on an issue that has received prominent attention in the past week-- the question of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

Let me be blunt: I did not express myself clearly when this question came up in the debate last Wednesday night. So that there can be no doubt about where I stand, let me spell out precisely what I believe:

--First, the countries of Eastern Europe are, of course, dominated by the Soviet Union. Were it not for the presence of more than 30 Russian divisions there now, the countries of Eastern Europe would long since have achieved their freedom.

--Second, the United States never has, does not now, and never will recognize, accept or acquiesce in this Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

--Third, the peoples of Eastern Europe yearn for freedom; while their countries may be physically dominated, their spirit is not. Their spirit has never been broken and never will be. And some day they will be free.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the essence of my position. It is what my commitment to the dignity of man and his inalienable right to freedom compels me to believe. It is what my whole record of public service has demonstrated I believe. And any man who seeks to persuade you that I think otherwise is engaging in deceit and distortion.

The original mistake was mine. I did not express myself clearly; I admit it. But in the last analysis, my record of 30 years of service in the Congress, as Vice President, and as President must speak for itself. More than a year ago, in July of 1975, I said that, "It has always 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 stand by that record today, and I am proud of it. I welcome making it an issue in this campaign.

But another critical issue -- one which you, with particularly close ties to Eastern Europe, as well as the American people as a whole, should consider-- is whether a man who shows so little appreciation of America's strength, America's respect, and America's needs -- as my opponent has done in this campaign -- should be allowed to guide the fortunes of the most powerful nation on earth.

The American people have a right to ask whether a political candidate who has variously called for a \$15 billion cut, or a \$7 or 8 billion cut, or a \$5 to 7 billion cut in the defense budget, and who then complains that we are "not strong anymore," as Governor Carter has done, is truly the man to govern the only country in the world that can assure the defense of freedom and give hope to the millions of oppressed in Eastern Europe and throughout the world.

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Finally, let me address the critical question of leadership, which Governor Carter has rightly raised. Do we want to entrust the leadership of this great Nation to a man who seeks to lift himself up to the White House by running down the reputation of the United States? Is the leadership we want that which claims that America "is not respected anymore" when it is the United States -- and the United States alone -- that is trusted by all sides in the Middle East, and by both black and white in Southern Africa?

America is the leader of the free world, and the American people are proud of it. But the kind of leadership America seeks for itself, the kind of leadership America offers the world, the kind of leadership we need for the future is the leadership of example, compassion and common sense. And if that is what we are, if that is what we want to be, then phrases such as "a disgrace to our country" -- phrases that demonstrate moral conceit rather than example, compassion, or common sense -- have no place.

I want the American people to understand the profound differences between us in areas of policy as well as philosophy. Therefore, I intend to fight Mr. Carter on the issues with all the ability I can command.

The challenges before us are immense if we are to successfully defend the principles of freedom and independence we celebrate this Bicentennial year. The free world looks to us as the last best hope for preserving this heritage. To be successful we must be strong. The fact is we are, and I intend to assure that in this critical hour America remains the strong, steady defender of freedom for all humanity.

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