

The President's News Conference

April 24, 1999

The President. Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to read a brief statement after which we will entertain questions, alternating from the American press corps and the international press corps here.

We have just about completed the first two days of our NATO meeting—welcoming new members, adopting very important changes to make NATO operations more relevant and more effective in meeting the new challenges of the 21st century.

We have also reaffirmed our determination on Kosovo to get the Serb forces out, to get the refugees back home under the protection of an international security force moving toward self-government.

Yesterday we sent a strong message of support to the frontline states who have risked and sacrificed so very much in this crisis. NATO will respond to any actions by Serbia against its neighbors as a result of NATO presence on their territory during this crisis or to any move to undermine the democratically elected government of Montenegro. We also expressed our support for a genuine democratic transition in Serbia.

For 5 years now, we have been working to build a new NATO, prepared to deal with the security challenges of the new century. Today we have reaffirmed our readiness in appropriate circumstances to address regional and ethnic conflicts beyond the territory of NATO members. I am pleased that our strategic concept specifically endorses the actions such as those we are now undertaking in Kosovo.

Now, this afternoon we will meet with President Kuchma to advance our cooperation with Ukraine. Tonight and tomorrow we will gather with 23 of NATO's partner nations. The Partnership for Peace launched in 1994, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership started in 1997, have clearly exceeded expectations. Sixteen partner nations are now serving with NATO in Bosnia. Our forces have conducted literally hundreds of exercises with forces from partner countries. These are the nations of central and eastern Europe, of the Caucasus, and central Asia, whose futures are clearly intertwined with ours.

Our Alliance also recognizes the tremendous importance of Russia to Europe's future, and we are determined to support Russia's transition to stronger democracy and more effective free markets and to strengthen our partnership with Russia.

We worked closely with Russia for a peaceful solution for Kosovo at Rambouillet. While our allied nations all agree that the offer Mr. Milosevic has apparently made to former Prime Minister Chernomyrdin on Thursday was inadequate, nevertheless, we welcome Russia's efforts and hope they will continue and ultimately result in Serb agreement to our conditions so that we can reverse the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

That concludes my statement. Go ahead, Sandra [Sandra Sobieraj, Associated Press].

Effectiveness of Policy in the Balkans

Q. [*Inaudible*—the Pentagon will be sending more tanks and more troops to the Balkans, American Reserves will be called up, NATO may well end up searching ships as part of an oil embargo, and still, Milosevic is not backing down. What specific assurances can you give the American people that we are not drifting into a long and endless conflict with no end in sight?

The President. Well, we're not drifting. We are moving forward with a strategy that I believe strongly will succeed, one that we have reaffirmed here and intensified. I think the important thing for everyone to understand is that in order for this strategy to succeed, we need two things: one, vigorous execution, and two, patience.

Keep in mind, we now know from the evidence that has come out that the campaign Mr. Milosevic and the Serb leaders have carried out against the people of Kosovo was planned in detail last year. It was not executed in October in no small measure because of the threat of action by NATO. It was executed when we began our air campaign.

They had 40,000 troops in and around Kosovo, and almost 300 tanks. It takes time to reverse that. But we are working on it, and we will prevail if we execute well with real determination and if we have the patience.

I would remind all of you that it may seem like a long time—I don't think this air campaign has been going on a particularly long time. In the Persian Gulf, there were 44 days of bombing before there was any kind of land action. And the land was flatter, the targets were clearer, the weather was better. We are doing what needs to be done here with great vigor, and I am convinced we will prevail if we have the patience. We have to be prepared not only to execute with determination but to pay the price of time.

Yes?

European Security

Q. [*Inaudible*—European pillar in NATO. Are you satisfied that the outcome in the statement will not allow a split to occur between the European forces and the American forces? And specifically, what role will the Western European Union play in the UK?

The President. Well, first of all, I think the language speaks for itself. Europe will have to decide exactly how to constitute this force and also how to make it effective. One of the things that I think that will receive nearly no publicity during this meeting, obviously because of the dominance—appropriate dominance of Kosovo in the news—is the document we adopted today that deals with the European security initiative but also deals with what we can do to make all of our efforts more effective, including enhancing the defense capabilities of all of our allies.

As long as this operation—however it's constituted by the Europeans—operates within and in cooperation with NATO, I think it will strengthen the capability of the Alliance, and I think it will actually help to maintain America's involvement with NATO.

We have Members of the Congress here today—Senator Roth sitting here on the front row, has been one of the strongest supporters of our partnership with NATO and with our European allies. But I believe this is a very, very positive thing. The details are for the Europeans to decide, and you should ask them that. But as long as it's consistent with the Berlin principle—that is, separable but not separate from NATO—I think it will work very well.

Helen [Helen Thomas, United Press International].

NATO Ground Troops

Q. Mr. President, the buildup of American troops and allied troops in Macedonia and Albania seem to smack of potential intervention, military intervention, despite ground troops, all your protestations.

The President. Is that a question?

Q. That's a question. I mean, is that true? [*Laughter*]

The President. The short answer is, no. Let me remind you, we are in Macedonia and Albania to try to help them, two very brave countries with very strong-willed leaders, operating under extreme duress. We're trying to help them manage a massive refugee problem. And in Albania, we have troops there, also, to secure the helicopter operation we have put in there and to make sure that we can secure it not only as it's moved in, but as it becomes operational.

Yes, ma'am?

Future of Southeast Europe

Q. How much of a guarantee can countries in the southeast Europe region get that they will actually be an important part of the reconstruction once the Kosovo conflict is over?

The President. Well, that is what we will deal with tomorrow when we meet with the leaders of all those nations. Last week I went to San Francisco to speak to the American newspaper editors to outline what I believe is an essential part of the long-term solution to the problems of the Balkans and southeast Europe generally. They are not yet sufficiently a part of the future we all imagine for Europe in the 21st century, which is not only peace and stability but also prosperity and shared decisionmaking.

So my view is that we should do more to draw those nations closer to one another, to give them a positive reason to work together and to properly treat the ethnic minorities within their borders and work out ways for them to participate in the life of their country, as well as to maintain their own religious and cultural traditions. And we should work

out ways for the nations of that region to relate more closely to all the European institutions and to Canada and the United States in North America.

So, to me, this will not work over the long run—if you don't want to see this repeated, what we're doing now, it is not enough to defeat this moment of aggression and to reverse it and to send the Kosovars back home. We are going to have to create an alternative positive future. We know what the history of ethnic animosity in the Balkans is. We know that there is not a single ethnic group, even the Serbs, who cannot cite some historic example of legitimate grievance that can be manipulated by an unscrupulous politician.

So what we need, with all these magnets pulling the people apart, we need a powerful set of magnets pulling the people together. And those have to be economic, as well as political and security. So the NATO open-door policy, the European Union's open-door policy, the prospect of new cooperation with all the states of southeastern Europe among themselves and with Europe and the United States and Canada—I think this is a very, very important thing.

Over the long run, we have to do this: We have to create a positive future for this part of Europe if we want to avoid being in the very position we're in today again in a few years, in another place.

Yes, Larry [Larry McQuillan, Reuters].

Oil Embargo

Q. Mr. President, there seems to be a great deal of concern about the oil embargo that NATO has endorsed. The French are expressing concern that if military force is used to enforce it, that it would amount to an act of war. I'm wondering, do you agree with that assessment? And are you concerned that, on one hand, you're encouraging the Russians to negotiate a settlement, and on the other hand, they may be caught in the middle of an oil embargo clash?

The President. Well, of course, I hope that won't happen. But let me tell you where we're coming from. We sent our pilots into the air to destroy the oil refinery and supply systems of Serbia, and they did so successfully. They risked their lives to do it. How can we justify risking the lives of the pilots

to go up and destroy the refinery and the supply capacity of Serbia and then say, "but it's okay with us if people want to continue to supply this nation and its outlaw actions in Kosovo in another way?"

So what we have done is we've asked our ministers of defense to come up with a plan that will apply in an even-handed way. Obviously, we don't expect it to and we will not do anything to try to see that it leads to violence. But we have to be firm about it. And if we want this campaign to succeed with economic and political pressure and with the air action, then we have to take every reasonable means to give it the chance to succeed. And that's what we intend to do.

Yes, sir?

Proposed United Nations Peace Mission

Q. Mr. President, the Austrian former Prime Minister, Franz Vranitzky, was proposed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a possible candidate for a peace mission to Kosovo. Would you kindly explain to us whether this has your approval and what you would expect from such a mission?

The President. Well, I can't respond to your specific question for a very simple reason; I did not know which individuals were being considered by the Secretary-General until, oh, a couple of hours ago. So I've had no direct communication with the Secretary-General, nor have I even discussed it with the members of my staff.

I have, as it happens, known Mr. Vranitzky for many years; I knew him before I was President, before I was a candidate for President. I have an enormously high regard for him, personally. But in order to make a judgment about that, I would have to have a clear idea about exactly what it is—what is the mission and what would be the parameters of it. So I can't really comment on the specifics. But I do have a very high regard for him, personally. I think he's an excellent man.

Wolf [Wolf Blitzer, Cable News Network].

Bombing of Serb Television

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, a lot of people have a clear understanding when you authorize bombing missions against military targets, tanks, armor, military headquarters. But they have a little

bit more difficulty understanding why you would authorize bombing Serb television in the middle of the night, knowing there are journalists working there, knowing there are cleaning crews there, knowing these people have no choice but to work there, and also know that within a matter of hours Serb TV would be back on the air from other locations.

So the question is, what goes through your mind, knowing you're going to, in effect, authorize the killing of these people for questionable military gains?

The President. Our military leaders at NATO believe, based on what they have seen and what others in the area have told them, that the Serb television is an essential instrument of Mr. Milosevic's command and control. He uses it to spew hatred and to basically spread disinformation. He does not use it to show all the Kosovar villages he's burned, to show the mass graves, to show the children that have been raped by the soldiers that he sent there.

It is not, in a conventional sense, therefore, a media outlet. That was a decision they made, and I did not reverse it, and I believe that I did the right thing in not reversing that decision.

Yes, sir?

NATO New Strategic Concept

Q. Mr. President, the new strategic concept practically legitimates NATO action beyond the borders. How far geographically will NATO go?

The President. I don't think it's a geographical issue. I think that what we tried to do was to say that there are some things which can occur in Europe, in non-member nations, that can affect the security and stability of all of Europe, including NATO members. And I think the language should speak for itself.

Sam [Sam Donaldson, ABC News].

Effectiveness of Airstrikes

Q. Mr. President, before the air campaign began, Pentagon planners advised you, according to reports that have not been denied, that the air campaign could degrade, it could damage, it could diminish, but it could not by itself stop the killing on the ground in

Kosovo if Milosevic intended to persevere. You have said again today that you will continue the air campaign and that you believe it will prevail. Have the Pentagon planners given you new advice? Have they changed their mind? And if not, sir, on what do you base your optimism?

The President. Well, first of all, I believe, first, the report that you have from the Pentagon planners is an accurate one and is what I believed to be the case at the time.

Keep in mind—and I think I made this clear at the time—the reason we went forward with the air actions is because we thought there was some chance it would deter Mr. Milosevic based on two previous examples: number one, last October in Kosovo, when he was well poised to do the same thing; and number two, in Bosnia, where there were 12 days of NATO attacks over a 20-day period. However, I also well understood that the underlying facts were somewhat different. I still believe we did the right thing. And I believe, as one of the area's leaders said in the last couple of days, it would have been much worse had we not taken action.

Now, there is a literal sense, Sam, in which, from the air, you cannot take every Serbian body in a uniform on the ground in Kosovo and extract them from Kosovo and put them back in Serbia. That, I think, is self-evident to everyone. So when I tell you that I think this will work, what I mean by that is I think if we execute well, if we are determined and if we spend enough time doing it, we will either break down his military capacity to retain control over Kosovo or the price of staying there will be far greater than the perceived benefits.

That is the logic behind the campaign, not that it will physically extract every person and put them back across the border. Everyone knows that's not true. And I'm glad you asked the question because I think it's very important that everyone be clear on this.

This is—my belief is that if we vigorously, comprehensively execute the air campaign and if we are prepared to take the time and do our very best to care for the refugees as best we can in the meanwhile and to provide stability and support to the frontline states, and especially to Albania and Macedonia,

that we will prevail. That is what I believe. And I believe we will do it because we have the capacity to dramatically degrade his military operation which is the instrument of his control and because we have the capacity to make this policy very, very expensive for him militarily and economically and in other ways.

Yes, sir, in the back.

Effectiveness of Policy

Q. Mr. President, under the scenario that you've just laid out doesn't mean that he would necessarily comply with the five conditions, which would also mean that it might be too high to keep his forces there, the cost, but then you would have to be willing to move some forces in to take the ground that they could no longer hold. And it seems at the moment there's no willingness to do that.

The President. Our position on that I think is the correct one. The Secretary General has recommended a reassessment of what would be required. I think that everybody in the Alliance agrees with his decision; that is the correct decision. But we have not weakened our conditions, nor will we. If anything, I think this meeting has seen not only a reaffirmation but an intensification of our determination to see the refugees back in, the Serb forces out, an international force to protect them, and the movement toward self-government for the Kosovars.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President's 173d news conference began at 3:50 p.m. in the amphitheater at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center. In his remarks, he referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin of Russia; former Chancellor Franz Vranitzky of Austria; U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan; and Secretary General Javier Solana of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Remarks at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-Ukraine Commission

April 24, 1999

Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary General. Like all the NATO leaders, I am very pleased to welcome President Kuchma to

this first summit meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission.

When we launched this commission 2 years ago in Madrid, we hoped it would lead to a pragmatic and truly distinctive working partnership. Ukraine is a nation critical to our vision of an undivided, peaceful, democratic Europe.

The experience of the last 2 years has vindicated our hopes. Our Armed Forces are working together well in Bosnia. Ukraine played a vital role in Kosovo in the verification mission until it was driven out by the regime in Belgrade.

I appreciate President Kuchma's efforts to persuade Mr. Milosevic to end his campaign against the Kosovar Albanians so that the Kosovar people can come home with security and self-government.

Ukraine has also proposed an ambitious program of cooperation with NATO, and the Alliance has agreed to establish our very first Partnership for Peace training center in the Ukrainian town of Yavorov. Our nations also will support Ukraine's efforts to reform its economy, deepen its democracy, and advance the rule of law, all vital to Ukraine's security and the success of our partnership.

When we act to maintain peace and security in Europe we will strive to do so with our partners, including Ukraine. That is what we hope to do with Ukraine and other nations in Kosovo once peace is restored there.

We have taken many practical, good steps toward realizing the promise of our partnership. But we should also not lose sight of the larger significance of what we are trying to do here, in light of the history of Ukraine and the history of Europe. For the people of Ukraine have felt the horrors of communism and fascism and famine. At different points in this century, the flags of five outside powers have flown over Ukrainian territory. Now Ukraine flies its own flag, and it is incumbent upon all of us to support Ukraine's transition and what its people have called their European choice.

Ukraine still faces large challenges: political, economic, environmental. But now it is free to choose its destiny. And it has used that freedom to choose democracy and tolerance and free markets, integration, and the choice to dismantle its nuclear arsenal.