

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on the Release of Three United States Citizens and One Permanent Resident From Detention in Russia in an Exchange With Reporters at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland

August 1, 2024

[The President spoke to reporters on the tarmac after he and Vice President Kamala D. Harris greeted the three U.S. citizens released from detention—Paul N. Whelan, Evan Gershkovich, and Alsu Kurmasheva—upon their return to the U.S. The Permanent Resident who was also released, Vladimir Kara-Murza, traveled separately to Germany following his release.]

Q. Mr. President, how does it feel?

The President. Wonderful. It feels wonderful. A long time in coming, but I was absolutely convinced we would get it done.

I meant what I said: Alliances make a difference. They stepped up, they took a chance for us, and it mattered a lot.

So I'm delighted they're home.

U.S. Diplomatic Efforts Leading to the Release Deal

Q. You said earlier that all these negotiations required tough calls. What was the toughest call in this one?

The President. The toughest call in this one was for other countries—is their—I asked them to do some things that were against their immediate self-interest and really very difficult for them to do, particularly Germany and Slovenia.

Slovenia came in at the last minute, and I tell you what, the Chancellor was incredible. He was incredible. So——

Safety Concerns for U.S. Citizens Overseas

Q. Sir—sir, what's your message to other countries that maybe think that taking Americans into their custody, unlawfully detaining them would be a good way to get something that they want from us?

The President. Hey, look, that's been the case for all of history. But my job is to make sure that, number one, they don't get them, and if they do, we get them back.

I don't buy this idea that you're not going to let—you're going to let these people rot in jail because other people may be captured.

We've sent out all the notifications to all the other countries—all our citizens of countries not to go to, what to do, what not to do, and they've got to pay attention.

I've got more work to do, so——

Q. Madam Vice President, how do you feel?

Vice President Harris. This is an extraordinary day. And I'm very thankful for our President and what he has done over his entire career, but in particular, as it relates to these families and these individuals; what he has been able to do to bring the allies together on many issues, but in particular, this one.

This is just an extraordinary testament to the importance of having a President who understands the power of diplomacy and understands the strength that rests in understanding the significance of diplomacy and strengthening alliances.

This is an incredible day. And I got to see it in the families and in their eyes and in their cries.

Importance of U.S. Diplomatic Relationships

Q. When did you know you got the deal done?

The President. A while ago. We've got to make sure—wanted to make sure everything was in place. And Slovenia made the right move at the right time.

So, anyway, look, it gets down trust. It's—and I really—I mean it. I know everybody thinks I talk about the notion of relationships with foreign policy—with other countries. Much of it—and you've heard me kid with Barack—he'd kid me—all politics is personal. It matters. Other leaders trust you, you trust them, you get things done. And that's how this got done: with a lot of help.

Anyway, thank you.

Israel/Conflict in Gaza, Palestinian Territories/Cease-Fire Negotiations

Q. Mr. President, how worried are you that the Middle East is going to—[inaudible]?

The President. I'm very concerned about it. I had a very direct meeting with the Prime Minister today and—very direct. We've got a—we have the basis for a cease-fire. He should move on it, and they should move on it now.

Death of Hamas Political Bureau Leader Ismail Haniyeh in an Explosion in Tehran, Iran, on July 31

Q. Is that chance for a cease-fire ruined after the assassination of Haniyeh?

The President. Pardon me?

Q. Is the chance for a cease-fire ruined after the assassination of Haniyeh?

The President. It's not helped.

Q. Do you expect Iran to strike back?

The President. That's all I'm going to say right now.

Thank you.

[At this point, the President and Vice President Harris moved to another location on the tarmac. After briefly boarding the aircraft that carried the released U.S. citizens, the President rejoined the Vice President on the tarmac, and they visited with the released detainees and their families. They then walked across the tarmac, and reporters began shouting questions.]

Q. Mr. President——

Q. Mr. President, would you come talk to us for a second, please? Mr. President, we couldn't see you. Can you come talk to us for one second? Come on, Mr. President.

[The President jogged over to where reporters were gathered, followed by Vice President Harris.]

Q. Thank you, sir. This mike right here.

Q. Mr. President——

[Several reporters began asking questions at once.]

Release of U.S. Citizens From Detention in Russia

Q. Mr. President, what—how did you process seeing those three Americans come off the plane? What—how did you process this moment?

The President. With great satisfaction and a feeling of relief for their families.

Q. Did you think that this moment would come, sir?

The President. Yes.

Value of U.S. Diplomacy

Q. What made you feel so confident?

The President. My relationship with the other heads of state that I had to get to agree on a lot of this.

Q. Tell us what you said with the heart.

Q. How did it compare——

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Q. What did you have to say to the families, sir?

Q. What did you say?

Q. And what did you have to say to the family members and the three Americans, sir?

The President. Pardon me?

Release of U.S. Citizens From Detention in Russia

Q. What did you have to say to the three Americans and their family members, sir?

The President. Welcome home and beyond that.

The President's Visits With the Families of Released Detainees

Q. You said, sir, that family is everything earlier today. What has it meant to be with the family all day today as they are now finally reunited with their loved ones?

The President. You can appreciate—look, anyone who's lost family or worried about whether family would come home, whatever the circumstance was, has to understand the extreme—and you've heard me say it before. My dad used to say, "Family is the beginning, the middle, and the end." And it really is. It's about who we are. It's about who we are as a country.

President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia

Q. What is your message tonight to Vladimir Putin?

The President. Stop.

Q. What is your message to the American people, sir?

Q. Stop. Stop what?

Q. Do you think he will stop? Do you think he will stop, sir?

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Value of U.S. Diplomacy

Q. The American people are watching this broadcast tonight, and I think it's fair to say they're celebrating with the families. What's your message to the American people?

The President. There's nothing beyond our capacity when we act together—nothing, nothing, nothing. Remember who the hell we are. We're the United States of America. The United States of America. And we put back together with—relationships with countries that we haven't had before. We rebuilt NATO. We rebuilt the circumstances allowing this to happen. That's why it happened.

Safety of U.S. Journalists Overseas

Q. And, Mr. President, should American journalists ever feel afraid about reporting abroad?

The President. I think—look, no matter where you are, there's certain places that you're going to be afraid. I mean, I'm—the idea you're never going to be afraid, you'd never show up anywhere in the Middle East, you wouldn't show up anywhere in Russia, you wouldn't show up anywhere. It matters. It matters to be aware of what you're going into and not to take undue chances because it's going to—because I'm going to come get you.

Release of U.S. Citizens and Permanent Resident From Detention in Russia

Q. Of your many achievements——

Q. And, Mr. President, how——

Q. ——where does this rank among your many achievements as President?

The President. Well, look, this is—to me, this is about the essence of who we are as a country. It really is about personal relationships. It's about family. It's about being able to have access to your own—the people you love and you adore.

Imagine how you'd all feel if you had—you were—you were being held captive unfairly and you had children waiting at home for you. Imagine how you'd feel.

How many of you have children? Raise your hand. Yes. Okay?

Well, imagine being—sitting in a prison, not know you'll ever get home and wondering what's going on with your children, how they go to bed at night crying, how they ache every night and every day you're gone. It matters.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

The President's Role in Negotiating the Release Deal

Q. Mr. President, we understand that a very important phone call that you made——

Q. Mr. President, what do you want to ask Putin? Mr. President——

Q. ——to the Prime Minister of Slovenia came hours before you announced that you were going to be leaving the 2024 race. Can you talk to us a little bit about how important it was for you to get this deal done, knowing that you were not going to seek a second term? Was it very important——

The President. I'd still get it done even if I was seeking a second term. Not in the—I'm still—you're stuck with me as President for a while, kid. There's no way out. Okay? You've got me for at least another hundred—90 days or so.

So it didn't have anything to do with that. It had to do with the opportunity and trying to convince one last country to say, okay, they'll step up.

And look——

Q. Mr. President, how critical—how critical——

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Remainder of the President's Term

Q. And, Mr. President, certainly this will now be cemented as a part of your one-term legacy. How are you thinking about the rest of your time in office? How are you——

The President. Oh, we can talk about that another time.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

Q. Mr. President, what's your message to other Americans imprisoned abroad, sir?

U.S. Diplomatic Efforts in Securing the Release Deal

Q. Mr. President, how critical—how critical was Chancellor Scholz's commitment to getting this deal across the finish line? Could it have been possible without that agreement——

The President. No.

Q. ——that he made?

Q. Mr. President——

[Reporters continued to shout questions, and Vice President Harris and the President responded to different reporters simultaneously as follows.]

Q. Madam Vice President—Madam Vice President, your reaction tonight?

Vice President Harris. It's a very good night. It's a very good night. And it's testament to the work that we prioritize under Joe Biden's leadership and our administration, which is the importance of building alliances, building the strength that we have through diplomacy to have outcomes like this. And there's so much at stake right now in our country and in this upcoming election, including who has which approach to understanding America's strength. This is an example of the strength of American leadership in bringing nations together to deliver Americans back to their families.

The President's Role in Securing the Release Deal/U.S. Diplomatic Efforts

Q. [Inaudible]—the Americans hostage—held hostage in the Middle East. You promised them that you would—[inaudible]?

The President. [Inaudible]—my power as the President to use all resources I have to get them out. That's what I promised. That's what I promised. And I can tell you, personal relationships matter. [Inaudible]—it helps. If they don't, it doesn't help. So it matters.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 11:50 p.m. on the tarmac. In his remarks, he referred to Paul N. Whelan, a U.S. citizen who was arrested and held on espionage charges by Russian security services in Moscow, Russia, on December 28, 2018; Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was arrested by Russian authorities on March 29, 2023; Alsu Kurmasheva, a journalist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tatar-Bashkir Service who was detained in Kazan, Russia, on October 18, 2023; Vladimir Kara-Murza, a British-Russian journalist and contributor to the Washington Post who was arrested by Russian authorities in April 2022 on charges of spreading false information about the armed forces; Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany; former President Barack Obama; and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of

Israel. A reporter referred to Prime Minister Robert Golob of Slovenia. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 2.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Release of U.S. citizens and permanent resident from detention in Russia at Joint Base Andrews, MD.

Locations: Joint Base Andrews, MD.

Names: Gershkovich, Evan; Harris, Kamala D.; Kara-Murza, Vladimir; Kurmasheva, Alsu; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Obama, Barack; Scholz, Olaf; Whelan, Paul N.

Subjects: Gaza, conflict with Israel; Germany, Chancellor; Iran, death of Hamas political bureau leader in Tehran explosion; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Israel, Prime Minister; Maryland, Joint Base Andrews; Maryland, President's visit; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Russia, release of U.S. citizens and permanent resident; U.S. diplomatic efforts, expansion; Vice President.

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