

Exchange With Reporters Aboard Air Force One June 6, 1991

Soviet-U.S. Relations

The President. —a couple of experts to answer your questions.

Q. What's going on in Geneva tomorrow?

The President. Well, I assume they'll be talking about a possible summit meeting. As we've said before, we want to move START further along. So, they'll be talking substance. I am going to have a meeting with—back this afternoon—a rather important meeting. That will help Secretary Baker, if I can get a hold of him.

Q. Who will be at that meeting this afternoon?

The President. It's an NSC meeting. I don't know exactly the participants or who's in town or not, but it's an NSC meeting. And one of the main agenda items is on the strategic arms topic.

Q. What has to be decided?

The President. Well, there are some very technical issues; I'm not exactly the world's greatest expert, but downloading and counting. I mean, there are some things that are highly technical, but are very, very important. And so, we have to hammer out some remaining differences. But a lot of the work has been done. So, we're pushing. We're going to start getting—

Q. Will Secretary Baker be able to set the date for the summit in this meeting tomorrow, do you think?

The President. Well, it depends a lot on what we do today and then on how those ideas are received by Mr. Bessmertnykh and on what they bring to the table. I mean, it's a two-way street here, and both sides are dealing in very good faith at this point. And both sides want to have a summit, and both sides obviously want to get a strategic arms agreement. So, that's a given at this point. That hasn't always been the case necessarily, but we'd like to have that—I mean, if we start with that spirit, and then we'd like to have the meeting.

Civil Rights Legislation

Q. What do you think of Senator Danforth's proposal in the Senate on civil rights?

The President. Well, he has three bills, and our people are taking a hard look at them. What I want to see happen somewhere along the line here is somebody take a look at our legislation. It's good legislation; it is strong in terms of elimination of discrimination in the workplace. It avoids the quota problem that's dividing the forces in Congress. I'd like to see people deal from our legislation. We've been fighting on "theirs" legislation, and I've said very frankly for 2 years now what's wrong with it. And I think a lot of the American people agree with me, very candidly, on this. But I keep saying I want a civil rights bill that will bar discrimination in the workplace, and I think we can get it. But I don't believe any of you have heard a serious analysis of our bill, and the reason is, we're always playing from somebody else's sheet of music.

So, we've got this power to veto bad legislation. I want an antidiscrimination bill. So, as the action shifts to the Senate, what we're going to try to do is talk to the Democrats about trying to give our bill a fair chance. It hasn't had it. Most of the editorials that oppose me don't even know what's in our bill. And part of my responsibility is to try for what I believe, and I think what I believe in, most of the American people believe in—antidiscrimination, but no quotas. So, what happens? They flail me for divisive politics; that means not doing it Ralph Neas' way, some civil-appointed guy up there in Washington that calls all the shots. Well, that's not good enough now.

Q. Are you willing to compromise on yours?

The President. I have compromised. Sure I am. So, that's the spirit I bring to it. But my problem has been, we had a deal worked out with one of the leading Senators last year and a handshake and a look in the eye. And he goes up, and some of the people in Washington, beltway crowd, says that's not good enough. So, I've given you

my—politics in this, I must say I really still honestly feel that it's on the other side. And I must say I get offended a little bit when people question my motives on this because we've been out front on what we are for. And it's very seldom you hear any discussion of it.

Persian Gulf Conflict

Q. Were you embarrassed to get a little teary up there?

The President. No, I do that in church. No embarrassed, but maybe in public it's kind of a first or maybe third.

No, I feel very emotionally about the war and about having to send other people's sons and daughters halfway across the world and commit our troops to battle. So, I was trying to speak to them from the heart. Maybe I'm not too proud of myself, but I felt strongly. I'll never forget that day. I knew what was over the horizon in terms of our air war, and I stood there with the tears coming down my face, and that's the way it was. So, why not say it?

Q. Did you think it was going to be worse? Did you think the air war was going to be worse?

The President. Well, I just wondered about it, and one life—you remember all the talk about body bags. And I'm a human being, and I felt a great responsibility to the American people and to the families. I hope it doesn't get too emotional at the service at Arlington. I still feel it. I feel very strongly about those kids that gave their lives for this country. So, if I show some emotion, that is just the way I am.

Q. Mr. President, the Southern Baptists—

The President. And so does the rest of the family, I might add. I'm putting this off on Barbara, too.

National Endowment for the Arts Chairman

Q. They want you to fire John

Frohnmayr for supporting sacrilegious art.

The President. I support John Frohnmayr. I support him, and I oppose sacrilegious art. Some of the things in the name of art that are put forward and called art that are totally sacrilegious are deeply offensive to me. But I also think they're offensive to Frohnmayr. He's in a very difficult position, and in my view he's doing a good job. So, we have a difference, and I think if some of his critics had a chance to understand his role, they would understand he is trying very hard. It is tough. And we don't want censorship, but we don't want just plain sacrilegious junk being peddled as art. And I'll spare the American people the one vivid offensive example that comes to my mind, and it is so bad that I don't even want to tell you what it is. I think most of you know what it is.

Lesbian Episcopal Priest

Q. Mr. President, your home church ordained a lesbian woman as a priest today. What do you feel about that?

The President. Well, I'll be very candid with you, I think the churches, regional churches and branch churches, have a right to do what they want. Perhaps I'm a little old-fashioned, but I'm not quite ready for that.

Note: The exchange began at 12:40 p.m., prior to the President's departure from Dobbins Air Force Base in Atlanta, GA, for Washington, DC. In his responses, the President referred to Secretary of State James A. Baker III; Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh of the Soviet Union; Senator John C. Danforth; Ralph G. Neas, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; and John E. Frohnmayr, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.