

Exchange With Reporters Prior to a Meeting With Released U.S. Army Infantrymen at Ramstein Air Base, Germany May 5, 1999

Q. Mr. President, would you favor releasing the Yugoslav soldiers, now that the U.S. soldiers have been released?

The President. I think Secretary Cohen answered this earlier today, but several days ago I raised this issue with our national security people, asking them if they would look at it and make recommendations, and I expect to get it in a couple days. And right now I'm just glad they're home, or they're halfway home, anyway—a couple days they'll be home.

What I think all Americans want for these fine soldiers is what we also want for the over one million people of Kosovo. We want them to go home, too.

And their families—I want to tell you, I had occasion to talk with their families on a couple of occasions, and they were concerned, loving, and they were vigorous advocates for their loved ones. And I was very proud of the way they conducted themselves during this incredibly difficult time for them as well. And I want to thank them for the loyalty they had for their

children, husbands, nephews, brothers and for the love they have for their country. I was also very moved by them.

Q. Why do you think Milosevic let them go, sir?

The President. I think he had a number of motives. The important thing is that he did let them go. They were in a peacekeeping mission in Macedonia; they had nothing whatever to do with this. They never should have been taken in the first place. I appreciate what they were doing in Macedonia and their service to our country, and I'm glad they're free.

NOTE: The exchange began at 5:53 p.m. at the air base. In his remarks, the President referred to Staff Sgt. Andrew A. Ramirez, USA, Staff Sgt. Christopher J. Stone, USA, and Spec. Steven M. Gonzales, USA, infantrymen released from custody in Serbia; and President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks Following Dinner With the Troops at Ramstein Air Base May 5, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. General Jumper, General Wooley, ladies and gentlemen, let me first of all say that I know I speak for all the people in our group—the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, General Shelton, and others—in saying that we are delighted to be here and very proud of you.

I have been to Ramstein at least three times since I've been President. I was trying to think; it may be four. But I feel a special affinity for this base. I flew from here into Bosnia in 1995, when the people who were stationed here then did so much to restore freedom and peace to the people there.

There are a lot of things I'd like to say, as briefly as I can. First of all, I'd like to tell you I had a real good time tonight taking all the pictures and—[laughter]—I like having the

opportunity to look our men and women in uniform in the eye and see where you're from and hear a little about your views. I thank especially the people who had dinner with me at the table over there tonight. I got questions about the Middle East peace process and the situation in Iraq and the long-term prospects in Kosovo and——

Audience member. Pay raises.

The President. ——and pay raises, that's right. [Laughter] And they did a very good job. I want you to know, the guys at the table, they did a good job, because we talked a lot about how the Air Force and the Navy and this year probably the Army will be down on their recruitment goals and the reenlistment problems and how we face the converging pressures of

a very, very strong economy in the private sector—the strongest it has been maybe ever, certainly in a generation—and a very much increased operations tempo for people in the military, taking people away from their families more frequently and often for extended periods of time. And if that results in—those two things result in our not meeting our enlistment or reenlistment quotas, obviously, that only aggravates the up-tempo problem further.

I think there is strong, overwhelming bipartisan support in the Congress this year to make some changes in pay, in retirement, in enlistment and reenlistment bonuses. And those three things, plus some other things we're going to do, I hope will help to keep more of you in the service, and I hope will help to get more young people coming in.

The job market is very, very strong out there, as all of you know. And particularly after you've been in the service for a while and you've gotten the invaluable training that you get, I understand the temptations and the lures of taking those offers which wouldn't require you to be away from home so much and so far.

But I can tell you this: The United States military, because of people like you, can do things for a troubled world that no one else can do. And I am profoundly grateful. You're taking those supplies into the refugees in Macedonia and Albania—you must have talked to some of them. You must know what they have been through. And if you were involved in the operation in Bosnia or you talked to anybody else who was, you must know what they were put through and what it is that NATO is trying to stop in the heart of Europe.

At the end of the cold war, the question was, do we need a NATO? And the 19 Allies decided that, yes, we did; that if we wanted Europe to be free and united and at peace, we needed NATO, and that would be our mission. And I wish there had been nothing for us to do—nothing for you to do. I wish none of you reservists or guards people had to be called up or had to volunteer. But it happened. And it is truly ironic that after all the wars in the 20th

century, that here in Europe we would still be fighting over religious and ethnic bigotry, being used to dehumanize people to the point of justifying killing them, burning them, looting their homes, running them out, burning their villages, eradicating every last vestige of historical, cultural records, burning their houses of worship. And that's not the world I want your children to live in.

And if your children are wearing the uniform of our Armed Services, I don't want them to have to fight a war because we didn't nip in the bud a cancer that can never sweep across Europe again.

So this is profoundly important. And the humanitarian aid you're taking to those desperate people is profoundly important. They are good people. They have their dignity. You are enabling them to keep what they can when most of them are running out of their country with nothing but the clothes on their back.

I just want you to know that back home people do know what you're going through; they do know what a sacrifice it is. We will do everything we can to make it better. In the Congress this year, I do believe there was overwhelming bipartisan support to respond to the problems you face and the challenges you face and the private market you face.

But nothing can ever compensate or take the place of the profound sense of satisfaction you must get when you go to bed at night knowing that you did something that was good and decent, not because your country wanted to dominate another people or control land but because we want our children and their children to live in a decent world.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:10 p.m. in Hangar 3. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. John P. Jumper, USAF, Commander, U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Allied Air Forces Central Europe; and Brig. Gen. Michael W. Wooley, USAF, Commander, 86th Airlift Wing and Kaiserslautern Military Community.