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BACKGROUND BRIEFING

BY

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
REGARDING THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
ON THE SITUATIONS IN
LEBANON AND GRENADA

October 27, 1983

The Briefing Room

7:22 P.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just one or two moments here and I will take your questions. As many of you know, about 10 years ago an important threshold was crossed. And that was the establishment of rough parity between ourselves and the Soviet Union in terms of strategic power. It was an important threshold because, for all of the post-war history to that point, the Soviet Union, in a position of relative inferiority, had had to consider, whenever it wished to expand its influence, whether that effort would bring it into confrontation with the United States. And if it had that potential, they had to discard that initiative and not do it.

However, upon the achievement of parity, the result was not to make nuclear conflict more likely. But it does seem to have been to raise the willingness of the Soviet Union to take risks here and there. I say that not as conjecture so much as an acknowledgment of the history of events from Angola to Ethiopia, South Yemen, Indo-China, finally in Afghanistan. In short, the lesson of the establishment of this parity has been that nuclear conflict is not more likely. But it is, apparently, probable that we will see more low-order probes, a higher level of efforts to probe weaknesses and to omit violence in areas ever closer to vital U.S. interests.

A second lesson of this apparent change in Soviet activity is that rather than prepare for the set-piece battle in the northern plain of Europe, deterrence has to be a more flexible activity. Effective deterrence has to be able to cope with low-order probes whether they are, terrorism or liberation movements, insurgencies, but in various places around the globe. And that has an implication for the kinds of forces that we build, not those that are geared toward a set-piece battle, but those that can move quickly, are very mobile and so forth. Well, this is underway. And there is every basis for optimism that in the out years, effective deterrence can be maintained, and that calm and stability can be preserved. But we have to be ready in that period to deter and to cope with conflict if deterrence fails.

However, this is not a despairing set of lessons. It does not mean that we can afford to adopt a confrontational attitude with the Soviet Union. Indeed, if anything, the importance of solving problems peacefully is reinforced. And that, surely, is the thinking of the President and of his administration. As a consequence, efforts to solve problems -- or the readiness of this administration to solve problems where they exist is surely as great today as ever. The importance of it is surely as great.

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Now, in his speech tonight, the President deals with two examples of probes -- we've seen a lot of violence in the last two months: Korea, Rangoon, Beirut, Grenada -- the President deals with two of these: Beirut and Grenada. The speech opens with a narrative -- and I won't bore you; you've read it and you've gone through it. The intentions of the administration with regard to next steps are laid out. That is, to accelerate our efforts to advance the peace process, first in the short term in Lebanon; beyond that, more broadly, to coordinate better with our allies on how together we can work to improve the chances for a success in national reconciliation in Lebanon, and finally to take steps to lessen the vulnerability of the Marines in Lebanon.

The President then turns in his remarks to Grenada, going over once more the chronology of the request that came to us dealing with the objectives of the United States to protect its own citizens as well as local nationals, to restore law and order and to get out as soon as possible thereafter.

With regard to Grenada, I wanted to offer one final comment or -- myself -- and take your questions.

Several things come out of this that are striking to me. First of all, there is the size of the Cuban presence there and apparent intentions to exploit this island as a major Cuban outpost or base, this documented by the find on the base discovered today -- last evening, actually -- with sophisticated cryptographic communications and ammunition, all excluded -- or in an exclusion area -- away from the Grenadans, built by the Cubans, for the Cubans, and not for Grenadans. Weapons stores sufficient to equip terrorists in the thousands, clearly not for local security on the island of Grenada.

The second element that was striking was the excellence, frankly, with which our own military performed. And I could give you self-serving pitch. I won't, but I would just give you one statistic. Thus far, there has not yet been one civilian, non-belligerent casualty, and that's incredible -- to me, at any rate. It's a difficult kind of combat, and the American forces have executed it extremely well.

I will take your questions now.

Sam?

Q How many casualties were there?

Q I have a question about your statement that the two probes the President deals with tonight with the Soviet Union are Beirut and Grenada. Are you saying that the Soviet Union directed the bombing of our Marines in Beirut?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I am not. And to clarify, my intention is that the Soviet Union has exemplified indirectly through surrogates in Angola, Ethiopia, and the others that I mentioned, doesn't always act directly, nor am I charging that they directed this attack. I don't think that is the case. The family of those associated with the Soviet Union enjoy a climate in which these kinds of activities can take place with lessened risk, or at least they perceive there to be lessened risk than they had in the past. That's all.

Q Well, what do you really -- don't you think --

Q Mr. McFarlane, there are two questions based on a report CBS ran about an hour ago. One, did we tip off the Soviets and/or the Cubans Monday night to the invasion coming down Tuesday morning? And two, does the United States government have any knowledge of Soviets and Cubans leaving that island on a ship bearing the name Vietnam Star, or for that matter, any other name in any other language, say between Monday morning and the time the invasion happened Tuesday morning?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: On the first question, after the decision was taken to make the landing, the Soviet Union and Cuba were advised that we intended to do this and what our objectives were, as well as our assurance of safe passage for non-belligerent civilians, noncombatants. With regard --

Q When?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, this would have been Monday night.

Q About when? Do you know about when Monday night?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I will get it for you in just a moment.

Q Why, Mr. McFarlane? Why did we do that?

Q Wait a minute.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Let me follow on the second question, and I will take this one on the right.

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The departure of Soviets or others I cannot document for you. The ship you may be referring to is the Vietnam Heroico. The Vietnam Heroico called in St. George a week ago Monday, we believed had delivered stores and dry cargo, left, subsequently returned for no reason that we could identify. But I don't place the Vietnam Star. And as to the departure of Soviets and others, I have no evidence of that.

Q Monday night?

Q When did the Heroico go in and out?

Q We informed them Monday night before our troops landed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The actual notification reached them at about the same time that it had happened, but it was not a -- I will get it for you. I am sorry.

Q But we didn't inform them before our troops landed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q When did the Heroica go out and back in?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: A week ago Monday it arrived, and it was there for a couple of days, turned around and left, and then came back again.

Q Last week? And when did it come back?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It came back last week toward the end of the week. But it had not called at any other port before it came back. It just steamed out and came back.

Q And it is there now?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

Q Bud, I am confused. Two things. One, can you clear up for us when we notified the Soviets and the Cubans? Was it Monday night or was it 5:30 Tuesday morning?

And secondly, could you explain the reference that the evidence from that base in Grenada makes it clear a Cuban occupation of the island was planned?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay. The notification of the Russians and Cubans was at 6 a.m. on Tuesday morning.

Q So it was after the invasion had begun?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

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Q What was the Monday night reference?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, it is all a kind of a blur for me, but it was developed, and I, you know, approved it and chopped off, and I guess that is when it was. But it wasn't actually delivered -- and that is true, I recall, it was a Monday morning delivery, or Tuesday morning. Sorry.

Q Can you talk about this Cuban occupation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, my reference was to --

Q Was it in the President's speech, the reference?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The capacity, the level of sophistication of the communications equipment and the physical facilities as well as the level of munitions and weapons were well beyond any reasonable requirement of Grenadan local security. And they constituted an aggregate capability to sustain, well significant ground force operations or terrorists operations that would have no place within the island of Grenada.

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Q What type of weapons were these, and in what quantity?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They are conventional weapons. They're AK-47s. Another -- small arms, automatic weapons, mortars, ammunitions on a very high scale for those things.

Q -- anything large like that?

Q Is it appropriate to repel an invasion?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: These are the weapons of light infantry, as well; that's true.

Q During an invasion, would that be an appropriate cache to have?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: These are weapons that can be used for light infantry; that is true. The base in which they are found is a base that isn't suitable for defending against some kind of invasion. This is -- if that's your point.

Q The Soviet --

Q -- reports about hostages --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Excuse me in the front, and I'll get in the back in a moment.

Q Are those Soviet-made weapons --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

Q Can you comment on the story moving on one wire tonight that some very large underground bunkers were discovered, with concrete walls and supposedly similar to the kinds of things you'd see in eastern Europe where missile elements are stored. Is there anything to that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't confirm that, Mike. I haven't heard that.

Q On the story about hostages --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I have no knowledge of hostages. I've heard that there is a report running that General Austin is not yet located and is holding hostages. I have not received that report.

Q Do you have any idea --

Q What were the casualties amongst the Cuban and Grenadian armed services personnel?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't have a figure for you on that.

Q There's about --

Q Are there any --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Excuse me, do you have a question?

Q Do you have any idea of what specific objective these weapons were being gathered there for?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I can't say anything more than what I've said. I can tell you what they can be used for, but I -- you can draw your own conclusions from it. The base was new, there were VIP quarters, there are barracks, there are communications gear that are not typical for low -- light infantry. This is sophisticated gear.

Q Well, sir --

Q What conclusions, though, did you draw -- would you draw from that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My conclusion is -- and it is only personal -- that --

Q Is it --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Excuse me, the question was what did I conclude about the apparent purpose of this base and trove. And it is only a personal conclusion, and that is that Cuba intended to exploit Grenada as a major base of Cuban operations in that part of the world; nothing more. Sara?

Q Yes, sir, why did this government feel the need to inform the Soviets and Cuba at 6:00 a.m. when they had -- and they really landed at 5:30 a.m. before that? Had they had time to really get in there? And why did you notify them before you even told your press officers here at the White House at -- (laughter) -- at 6:30 a.m. --

Q Pretty good question.

Q -- and you didn't tell any of the rest of the press in the country. Why did you do that? Why did you feel the need to let those people have an edge in?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: At the time the -- you cannot know how what you are doing will be perceived by the Soviets or anybody else. But in the case of the use of force by the United States, the -- particularly where it calls into confrontation and combat conflict with the Soviet Union or a Soviet client, the engagement by that combat of Soviet obligations and the probabilities, or at least the possibility of the Soviet Union reinforcing its own client or acting in its behalf is high.

And it is sensible, unless you intend to provoke some kind of response, that they understand your purpose, if it is a limited objective, so that they don't miscalculate and take actions which would be imprudent, Sara. Excuse me -- Helen?

Q How is it that you know that there is no -- that no belligerent was killed

and for three days we cannot find out how many people we killed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the foremost concern of our soldiers I think is rightfully to protect their own colleagues on the battlefield, to assure that they're evacuated and that the wounded are cared for. It is, further, their humane practice to take wounded from the other side, if they're captured, treat them, too. But we cannot, at the time, notify the next of kin of the Cuban wounded. And, therefore, the accounting by numbers has to be of secondary importance at the time, because --

Q I'm not --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: -- the objective --

Q -- asking for names. I'm asking for a figure.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't have a figure. And this is not one of those --

Q Was anybody killed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Of Cubans I'm sure that there were.

Q Soviets?

Q How about --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We have no evidence that there were any Soviets killed or injured.

Q How about Grenadians?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We have no evidence, and that was the startling point to me that I have no evidence that there were civilian killed at all. Now there may be some, but that's been a striking -- in fact, that was an affirmative report from the island; it's not speculation. Yes?

Q Are you redefining the mission of the Marines in Lebanon by these changes?

Q Question?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Bob's question is, are we redefining the mission of the Marines today or in the speech or by these changes. No. The mission is portrayed in the speech in political terms as well as in military terms, politically, to sustain the efforts of the government and people of Lebanon to establish their institutions and extend their authority throughout the country -- militarily, to protect a piece of terrain. The piece of terrain is related to the terrain held by other MNF partners, and in the aggregate to the city of Beirut, so that this political reconciliation and institutional maturity can take place.

But the conduct of that mission isn't being changed today.

Q -- number of casualties, and are there still pockets of resistance in Grenada? What is the number of American troops there at this point?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The number of American

troops right now still there is about 3000.

Q In the President's speech --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The casualty figure hasn't changed since this morning, when the figure of eight -- and I'll get it for you -- of wounded was put out.

Q How many Marines in Lebanon?

Q In the President's speech he seems to assign a different reason for the communications equipment than you expressed as your own opinion. He says that it makes it clear the Cuban occupation of the island had been planned, and you said you thought it was the kind of equipment that could be used as a base for terrorist activities, etcetera, outside of the island.

Do you disagree with the President about that? What does he mean --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: We talked together about that, and the intent -- the sense of what is said there is the same as my own, really, that when he says an occupation, an exploitation, a use of Grenada as a base of operations.

Q Occupation? What did you think the Cubans were going to try to do on Grenada?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What I said, to exploit it as a base of operations for activities in that region.

Q How many Cubans are --

Q Are there still pockets of resistance, in your view, in Grenada?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, I think our information is that there are still in the low hundreds of Cubans still at large, and these are not, however, in the urban areas, and are concentrated in the -- call it the "jungle terrain" in the interior.

Q What is the number of Cubans -- the total number that we estimate is on the island?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: On the order of 1100.
Yes?

Q The President refers at the bottom of Page 5 to "The nightmare of our hostages in Iran must never be repeated." Is there any evidence that there was ever a threat to the American medical students, that they might be taken hostage?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I've had several calls today from the students that have come out, and I expect you all have, too. And I urge you to seek them out. I -- the calls that I've had expressed in at least two cases that very real fear.

Q Have they all been accounted for?

Q Was that fear based on anything beyond that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the people that talked to me cited, for example, Cubans coming to homes, homes in which they lived with families, local families, living off campus, and one girl, a girl named Helen Nagrand, who

was a final year med student there said that she and her friends had been, the homes in which they lived had been visited on occasion by Cubans menacing rifles and things like that, and that it was alarming; that there were frequently rifle shots in the vicinity of the campus of the University; and that there was a state of tension, that it had been there since October 12th, about an uncertain future; that she felt unsafe, at risk and wanted to leave very badly.

Q Were there any radio intercepts of any transmissions from the island that raised in any way the possibility of taking any of these students hostage?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not to my knowledge, no.

Q Given the situation as you described it, what makes you think that a police force of local island people can maintain peace there after the U.S. forces leave?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think it does require that the aliens, the Cubans leave. That is a decision for the government to take.

Q But do you think that the island people can maintain peace there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think they can if they establish a constabulary. The other islands in the area have been able to do that. I expect that they will maintain a small internal security force for the island, and it can be effective.

Q How long do you expect that the American forces will be remaining on the island?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would say not long. Now that is not a good answer, but I can't measure it for you in specific number of days. But I wouldn't put it in, surely not months. We are talking at the outside weeks.

Q Have all of the Americans been accounted for, the students? There are reports tonight that some may be missing.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There were a few who lived off campus in a residential area which has not yet been reached, and so they have not yet been entirely accounted for.

Q Is there any reason to believe that they are being held hostage by Mr. Austin?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

Q What are the reports from Paris talking about retaliatory action in Beirut? What do those mean?

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Ask the Parisians. I haven't seen that, John.

Q This comes from sources who the Secretary quoted as, that the meeting of foreign ministers of Lebanon talked about taking measures against those who committed the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'll have to wait until he comes back. The President has already said publicly his interest in determining those responsible for the attack. But we haven't --

Q Mr. McFarlane, several times you all have said that they would be there until elections were held. You have indicated that our troops might be there until elections were held in Grenada. Are you planning that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No. The hope, and I think the expectation is that the Governor General can, indeed has, issued the orders for the formation of a provisional government. That provisional government can preside over the conduct of elections, but that if the foreign force is removed from the island, that local security could be maintained by perhaps units contributed by the neighboring islands or perhaps the Commonwealth force, or indeed perhaps a small contingent of Americans. What I am saying is that the level of force that is there now I do not anticipate is going to be there for a lengthy stay, not through the election.

Q Would you be willing to continue this after the speech, sir? Would you be willing to continue after the speech?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I am going to do something else after the speech. I am sorry.

Q Do you have any information on the Syrians being tied to the recent bombing of the Marines in Beirut?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not yet concretely.

Q Where are the Russians now? Are we holding the Russians, or what actually has happened to the Russians? Are they in custody, or where are they?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, they are, at my last report, in their own facilities there.

Q Are we guarding them or anything?

Q Are we now saying that --

Q When did all these Cubans come in?

Q Are we now saying that in addition to the previously stated reasons, another reason for why we went into Grenada was to wipe out this incipient Cuban outpost?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we had no knowledge of this before we got there.

Q So this is strictly a side benefit unanticipated?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is correct.

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Q Who is the Middle East envoy? Is there going to be one soon?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

Q Or you are not naming him tonight?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not tonight.

Q Mr. McFarlane, what makes you so sure that the Soviets, given the low order, the step up in low order activities that you are talking about, but also given the fact that they never accepted deterrents and that they are obviously operating on the old Sokolofsky doctrine, they are trying to get in place everything they can, especially for defense, and certainly for offense, as the President lays out time after time, what makes you so sure that they are not aiming for a higher level confrontation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think that the strategic equilibrium is such as to make their uncertainty of the outcome too high to warrant the risk.

Q Sir, would you give us --

Q What if they develop beam weapons before we do, sir?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think there are isolated technologies which if breakthroughs occurred could be extremely worrisome. I think that our own advanced state of development in virtually all of those gives us a certain measure of confidence that we won't fall behind.

Q Could you explain the discrepancy that is apparent between holding four American reporters incommunicado overnight and the values this nation stands for when we go in to defend free people?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, if that ever happens, I think there would be a contradiction.

Q Didn't it happen last night?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No.

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