

Governor Thornburgh press conference following National Governors Association trip to the Soviet Union, Harrisburg: lessons of Three Mile Island and other international sensitive issues, December 4, 1979 (22:40)

>> Thornburgh: As you know, we returned last night from a trip of 10 days to the Soviet Union, and I thought it might be of some interest to Pennsylvanians to give you some of our impressions, some of the activities that were undertaken, and to answer questions that might be on your minds with regard to the trip to the Soviet Union. Four things that I think might bear some examination in connection with the trip that the governors made. First of all, we used every opportunity we could in meeting with top Soviet officials to impress upon them the sense of outrage and concern that all Americans feel about the retention of hostages in Tehran. We stated this not as representatives of the American government but as governors who are sensitive to the feelings of people within our states in an effort to convince the Soviet Union that this is the overriding concern in our nation today, and that their interest in the ratification of SALT II and other initiatives that they have urged upon the United States really was secondary in importance to American citizens unless and until some favorable resolution is attained with regard to the situation in Tehran. We urged every Soviet official that we talked with to exert efforts to see that the Soviet Union took as much of a lead role as they could in helping to resolve the situation in Tehran and expressed the view that that would immeasurably improve the climate with regard to Soviet-American relations in other regards.

Secondly, as I indicated prior to departure, we had requested and there were arranged for us a series of meetings with regard to energy problems within the Soviet Union and in particular with regard to their attitude respecting the development of nuclear energy. The feeling that we came away with is that the Soviet Union is indeed concerned about applying the lessons of Three Mile Island, that there is a concern about safety, there does appear to be a considerable controversy as to what specifics they will take in consequence of the Three Mile Island accident. One official we spoke with more or less waived the issue off, stating that they felt that the safety issues had been solved in the USSR. Another official with more direct-line authority for energy indicated quite the contrary, that as a consequence of the Three Mile Island accident, for example, their new 1,000-megawatt reactors will incorporate a containment building, which has not been present on their present 440-megawatt reactors within the Soviet Union. And there is a good deal of expression of concern among the -- in academic journals about threats to the environment and the safety

of the people. And we did whatever we could to try to be specific about lessons that had been learned in the United States as a result of the Three Mile Island incident, in which they expressed a great deal of interest.

Our third area of concern with regard to making sure that Soviet leaders were fully apprised of attitudes within the United States relates to the whole area of human rights. We met with a group of a dozen or so Jewish refuseniks who had been kept in the Soviet Union against their wishes. The group included the mother of Alexander Sharansky and his brother. Sharansky is serving a prison term in the Soviet Union because of his activity in regard to Soviet Jewry. We expressed those concerns consistently to officials with whom we met, that the area of human rights and of free immigration of Soviet Jews and others who may wish to leave the Soviet Union, in accord with the Helsinki agreements, be respected. Again, this is not an area that lends itself to easy resolution, but we thought it was terribly important that those within the Soviet hierarchy that we dealt with knew that this was an issue on which Americans were informed and about which they had very strong feelings.

Finally, we had extensive discussions with regard to trade opportunities. The Russians are most interested in availing themselves of American technology to the maximum extent possible and to providing the type of climate that ultimately will produce a maximum of commercial interchange between the two nations. Once again, however, it was clear that they are less than fully aware of the political and human-rights implications of our trade policies. The existence of restrictions on trade between the United States and the Soviet Union from our end, we reiterated, had the support of Americans when those restrictions found their base in concerns about human rights of Soviet citizens and about the political climate worldwide.

We, of course, had many other opportunities to view life in the Soviet Union, but I must say that all of those insights and the learning process that we went through during this very challenging and, at times, very confusing encounter with that society, they all pale beside our great relief and happiness in returning to the United States of America. There is not only no place like home, but there is no place like the United States, where, for all of our problems and shortcomings, we do have those basic, fundamental rights, which are systematically denied and have been systematically denied to Soviet citizens under their system. So, we are pleased to be home, even to have to face up to the things

that I know that are piled on my desk, but it won't take long to slip back into gear.

>> Reporter: Governor, what was the Soviet official's response to your concern about the Iranian situation?

>> Thornburgh: It was twofold. First of all, they disavowed any responsibility for the Iranian situation. Not surprising, since that was not the thrust of our observations in the first place. And secondly, they treated initially the matter to be an internal affair between the Iranian government and our government. But I am hopeful that the cumulative effect of our reiteration of this concern will cause them, in the United Nations and elsewhere, to recognize that this is not just a side event as far as the American public is concerned, that it is one of overwhelming interest.

>> Reporter: Governor, in view of the fact that the Russians are not apparently -- or at least they disavowed any responsibility, do you think it's fair for this country to tie the SALT II agreement to the release of the hostages? You seem to have indicated..

>> Thornburgh: No.

>> Reporter: [Further question indistinct]

>> Thornburgh: Yes, what we did -- the Soviets have an overriding interest in the ratification of the SALT II treaty. Our delegation was not there to discuss SALT II. That's a matter for the administration and the Senate. But what we did was offer them some practical political advice, frankly, that the man on the street in the United States of America probably is unaware of the fine details that occupy so much of the diplomatic effort with regard to SALT II. But there's not a single living American on the streets today who is unaware of the fact that our hostages are being held by a regime in Iran which is acting solely outside of the sanctions of international law. And our advice was, if the Soviet Union wants to create a climate within the United States within which SALT II and its ratification will be looked upon favorably by the American people, one of the things that they can do to create that climate is to assume a lead role in bringing this situation in Tehran to a favorable conclusion. That their activities in that regard, should they result in success, would be looked upon favorably by the American people. And that the environment within which consideration of SALT II by the United States Senate and the American people would go forward would be

enhanced by their recognition that this situation in Tehran is not simply a question of the safety of American citizens, but it could well affect the whole fabric of international law. That was the message that we were trying to get across.

>> Reporter: Governor, how freely were you able to move about and how much did you achieve personally...

>> Thornburgh: I think we probably accomplished about 50% of the meetings and visits that we wanted to carry out. But that missing 50% was in large part due to time constraints. We were treated cordially. We were kept busy. We were not able to move about as freely as one would in the United States. There was a definite effort as a technique to ensure that our encounters with the man on the street were limited. Although they did occur, and they were most meaningful because they enabled us to pierce from time to time the prearranged fabric of the trip that had been arranged, set up by our hosts. But that, again, was only an underscoring of the kind of almost -- You could almost feel it physically, the oppressive nature, the lack of any free press, the lack of the ability to travel and move about, the strange environment within which religious exercise is permitted. Saying all of this, though, it is quite clear that the Soviet Union has made gigantic strides -- and I'm not the first or the only one to notice that -- with regard to the well-being of their citizenry. As compared with their lot under previous regimes, they are considerably better off materially. But the total lack of those things which we unfortunately often take too much for granted in the way of personal freedoms and personal liberties can't help but be -- come home to you very vividly during a trip even as short as the one that we had there.

>> Reporter: Do you recall whom you spoke to specifically about the political impressions on SALT and the Iranian situation and what his response might have been?

>> Thornburgh: We spoke with nearly every Soviet official that we were there, because they, as a matter of course, raised the SALT question almost at the head of every discussion, whether the discussion was of a collective farm or of an automobile factory or of energy or whatsoever, their preamble always related to the desirability of the ratification of SALT II. And our rejoinder was similarly expressed. The two highest-ranking officials that this was raised with specifically were Vice President Kuznetsov and the chairman of the council of ministers for the Russian Republic, Mikhail Solomentsev, both of them members of the politburo and in positions that affect national policy. But invariably it would

come up in discussions with every one of the officials that we met throughout the country.

>> Reporter: I'm wondering, what was their response to that concept?

>> Thornburgh: Well, please, I don't want to be misunderstood, and I've got to repeat this again. We did not link the one to the other. What we did was try to express our view that if the Soviet Union wants to create a favorable climate among the populace of this country and probably among the Senate of the United States for favorable consideration of the SALT II ratification, that we as governors, and knowledgeable of the attitudes of the people of our state, offered them the advice that any lead role that they could assume in securing the release of the hostages would go a long way towards creating that kind of climate. Their response was to, first of all, to respond to something we did not raise -- that is to decline any responsibility for the Iranian incident -- and secondly to indicate that they regarded the Iranian situation to be an internal matter in which they would not interfere. The response was not a response, in effect, but I can't help but feel that our reiteration of that suggestion didn't get the point across, and I would hope that it would have some effect on their posture in the security council and in other forums where their activity could have some positive effect on the situation in Tehran.

>> Reporter: Governor, was the interpreter you used supplied by the Soviet Union?

>> Thornburgh: Yes.

>> Reporter: Did you have any Russian-speaking members of your delegation?

>> Thornburgh: No. Both of those are severe handicaps in interchange with the man on the street, the fact that our interpreter was supplied by the Soviets and the fact that we had no facility in the language. While they didn't affect the quality of our discourse with officials, because clarity of expression was important from both sides there and was monitored by our embassy officials in terms of its accuracy, it did make a great difference when it came to being able to relate to the man or woman on the street, because our ability to accurately transmit our views and the recognition on the part of those individuals that their views were being filtered back through a Soviet official, I am convinced

severely handicapped us in any opportunity to get a true view of those people to whom we talked.

>> Reporter: Governor, did you plug any specific Pennsylvania products or technologies?

>> Thornburgh: Well, the interest that was expressed by the Soviets was largely in technology. We discussed the pending negotiations between the Aluminum Company of America and the Soviet Union about an aluminum plant in Russia. They expressed a great desire for help from the technology of our steel-producing enterprises with regard to pending plans for the construction of new steel-manufacturing facilities in Siberia using Siberian ore. We, of course, discussed ways of using our food surpluses to help even out their peaks and valleys with regard to agricultural resources. But all of that was secondary to the -- In other words, there will not be any effective trade avenues open with the Soviet Union until the political climate, and the human-rights climate, have been improved substantially. And I think that this is a move that we can follow with some confidence. I am convinced that the existence of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, for example, has improved a lot of Jews in the Soviet Union. The emigration rates from the Soviet Union are estimated to be around the 50,000 level this year, which is substantially up from previous years, but still not adequate in terms of the number of Jews who want to leave the Soviet Union as compared to those that are leaving. And this, I think, is a result of trade policies that we have followed which tie our response with regard to trade to their response with regard to the implementation of the Helsinki accords within their own nation.

>> Reporter: Ginny, were you able to visit any schools or handicapped centers like you wanted to?

>> Ginny Thornburgh: I did. I had an appointment with the Institute of Defectology, which is the Soviet term for handicapped people. I found it one of the highlights of my visit because there was none of the political posturing that had occurred in all of our other meetings. This was a meeting of professional people who cared as deeply for the handicapped as I did, and we shared the strengths of our nation and the problems within our nation. And it was a very, very moving experience. I visited two classrooms for handicapped children, and much of the technology, the modern technology, that we are using and the new insights which we have is missing. They are not mainstreaming handicapped people as we are in the United States. That is not a high goal as it is for me.

>> Reporter: Governor, I understand you're going to have a press conference in the next day or two. Can you tell us what you have in mind for the PUC chairman?

>> Thornburgh: Well, there will be a vacancy on the PUC, and I will once again seek the best appointee possible and hope that that person is quickly ratified by the Senate, and then we'll see what ensues about the chairmanship.

>> Reporter: I was wondering, are you looking at someone outside the PUC?

>> Thornburgh: I'm not looking at anybody. I just got back last night, and I heard of Chairman Goode's resignation this morning. So, I think, while it had been hinted at previously, I wouldn't want to indicate where -- We're looking for the best -- again, the best person we can get to serve here and elsewhere in the administration or as appointments to the administration.

>> Reporter: Governor, did your Russian hosts suggest to you what they would have done in the Iranian situation if it had been their embassy that was seized instead of ours?

>> Thornburgh: No.

>> Reporter: Would you ask them if you had had the chance?

>> Thornburgh: No.

[Laughter]

Let me be honest about that. The conduct of international affairs is a very sensitive matter that we look to our State Department to provide a lead role in. I'm not -- I don't really approve of governors or private citizens or others gratuitously interfering in the conduct of those affairs. I think it can have a harmful effect on the very delicate process of negotiation between nations if private citizens or elected officials or political candidates interfere in that process. And accordingly, the views that I indicated this morning that we expressed about Iran were expressed as private citizens, much more in the way of advice or suggestion to the Soviet Union than being couched in terms of policy of the United States of America, which we were really not and scrupulously tried to avoid an expression of. So, that kind of question, John, while I'd love to have asked it, would have really been inappropriate from the point of view of ensuring that our relations with the Soviet and more importantly the president's

options with regard to the freeing of those who are already still being held in Tehran be kept fully open. Thank you.