

John F. Kennedy: 1961-63

107 - The President's News Conference of

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THE PRESIDENT. Good evening.

[1.] Last night I returned from a 3-day meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica, with the Presidents of the five Central American Republics and Panama. This was a most useful meeting. For the first time a President of the United States journeyed to Central America and conferred with all of the leaders of this vital area, which in terms of history, geography, common interest, and common goals is as closely allied with the United States as any area in the world. We agreed to continue our efforts under the Alliance for Progress to build and strengthen the machinery for economic cooperation with and among the nations of Central America and Panama, including the creation of a unified economic community in Central America. And we also agreed on the necessity for measures to halt the flow of agents, money, arms, and propaganda from Cuba to Central America.

Every nation present was determined that we would both protect ourselves against immediate danger and go forward with the great work of constructing dynamic, progressive societies, immune to the false promises of communism. This is the fourth Latin American country which I have visited. Here, as in all the others, we found a spontaneous outpouring of friendship and affection for the United States; and here, as in all the others, we saw impressive evidence of the work now being made and done under the Alliance for Progress.

Each trip makes it clear that Latin Americans, by an overwhelming majority are ready to work, to sacrifice, to fight if necessary, to maintain their own freedom and to build societies which serve the welfare of all their people. They lack only the full measure of resources necessary to build a hemisphere where all can be secure and free. They know that they bear the fundamental responsibility for their own welfare and progress, but the receptions we have received in Costa Rica, in Mexico, in Venezuela, and in Colombia demonstrate that they also know that we in the United States today have a deep concern for their problems, a common dedication to their aspirations, and a faithful commitment to help them in their efforts. For all these reasons, I return from San Jose with increased confidence that we will continue to live in a hemisphere of independent, firm, and faithful friends.

[2.] Q. Mr. President, did the Soviets honor their commitment on withdrawing troops from Cuba and where do we go from here?

THE PRESIDENT. We estimate that they have withdrawn approximately 3,000 troops in these past weeks. We are waiting to see whether more will be withdrawn, as we would hope they would be. The month of March is not finished yet and we should have a clearer idea as to what the total numbers should be in the coming days.

[3.] Q. Mr. President, could we speak, for a moment, about your travel plans. One, on your forthcoming trip to Italy and Germany, do you plan to visit Berlin? And second, do you intend to make a trip to South America later in the year?

THE PRESIDENT. I would hope that when I go to Germany that I would go to Berlin. I have no plans for any trip to Latin America this year. Though we have an agreement to visit Brazil, that trip has been postponed and no final date has yet been set.

[4.] Q. Mr. President, the TFX contract is causing a lot of controversy on Capitol Hill. Senator Symington told the Senate today that the investigation was affecting military morale and ought to be wound up quickly. How do you feel about it?

THE PRESIDENT. I see nothing wrong with the Congress looking at these matters. My judgment is that the decision reached by Secretary McNamara was the right one, sound one, and any fair and objective hearing will bring that out. Mr. McNamara chose the plane he chose because he felt it most efficient, because he thought it would do the job and because he thought it would save the Government hundreds of millions of dollars. Everything I have read about the TFX and seen about it confirms my impression that Mr. McNamara was right. We have a very good, effective Secretary of Defense with a great deal of courage, who is willing to make hard decisions, and who doesn't mind when they are made that a good many people don't like it.

This contract involves a large amount of money and naturally some people would prefer it to go another place than the place which the Secretary chose. I think the Secretary did the right thing and I think this investigation will bring that out, and I have no objection to anyone looking at the contract as long as they feel that a useful function is served.

Q. Do you think the hearing that has been held has been fair and objective?

THE PRESIDENT. I would think that I'm confident that we all know a lot more about the TFX than we did before, and that's a good thing. And my judgment is that the more this hearing goes on, the more convinced people are finally that Secretary McNamara is a very effective Secretary of Defense and that we're lucky to have him.

[5.] Q. Mr. President, the United States has long had a deep interest in South Korea and its independence and democracy. Last weekend there was an announcement by the military government of a bid to continue its power for 4 more years rather than turn affairs back to a civilian government after an election. Would you give us your views on that?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, as you know, the situation has been changing in South Korea very greatly in the last few days, and it's in some position of flux, so I don't think that it would be possible to make any final statement today.

We are continuing to maintain very close contact with what's going on there. We are anxious for stability in the area. We regard South Korea, of course, as an important interest in the security of Asia and therefore we are continuing to follow very closely the present discussions about the return of democratic government in South Korea. But as the situation is still not hardened, I don't think that anything I would say on it would be helpful, at least this week.

[6.] Q. Mr. President, is there anything to the reports that Postmaster General Day will be replaced before the next year's election campaign?

THE PRESIDENT. No. No.

[7.] Q. Mr. President, there were some reports in San Jose that the Central American Presidents wanted to take stronger action or decide upon stronger measures against Cuba than you were. I wonder if you could clarify whether that was the case or not.

THE PRESIDENT. No, no proposal came in any of the meetings that I had with the Presidents. As you know, one of the conclusions reached at San Jose was to take effective measures, by the countries involved, and also to ask the other countries of Latin America to take effective measures to stem the flow of arms and particularly of men who move by subterranean means, frequently, without passports,

from one country or another in Latin America, to Cuba, are trained and then come back for subversive activity. We are going to take effective means to attempt to control that traffic. There was no proposal.

I think they are quite aware that we have taken every conceivable action to isolate Cuba, that that's our ambition as long as Cuba maintains an association with the bloc, the Communists, and is used as a Communist military base.

I don't think that the Presidents of Latin America thought that further action, invasion, or blockade at this time would be fruitful. At least none of them made that proposal to me. And as you know, the burden of such an action would fall on the United States, and I think they're quite aware that the United States would have to carry out the action. We have responsibilities all through the world. You've just mentioned South Korea and Berlin, as an example of two areas where we have vital commitments, so that I think the Presidents of Central America are well aware that the United States is as anxious as they are to prevent the flow of communism in this hemisphere and that we are taking every action that we believe to be responsible and effective to achieve that end.

They also recognize that one of the most effective ways is to meet conditions in their own countries, to make sure that communism doesn't get a grip because of the failure of the economies. In one of the countries that we visited, 400 out of 1,000 children do not attend any school. We cannot expect stable, democratic societies to develop in an atmosphere where half of the population is illiterate.

Now, that's the kind of problem which has traditionally affected and infected Central America. The governments are attempting to meet these problems. We are attempting to help them through the Alliance for Progress. We believe that this is the most important step we can take now, combined with the actions we are presently taking against Cuba, which are well known.

[8.] Q. Mr. President, concerning effective action in another area, the Olympic games, some time ago you expressed concern that the amateur groups were bickering to such an extent that the U.S. might not be able to field a qualified team in the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Has that question been settled to your satisfaction? ¹ And two, will the United States grant the usual Federal money to aid in the effort to get the Olympic games to the United States and to Detroit specifically for the first time since 1932, in 1968?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, in the first place, as you know, General MacArthur did the arbitration, and did it most effectively; therefore, we feel that problem is going to be solved, in the question of accrediting amateur athletes.

¹ See 1962 volume, this series, Item 546 [2]. See also Item 7, above.

Secondly, on the question of where the 1968 Olympics will be, that's a matter for the Olympics Committee. If there is a chance to get it to the United States, we will strongly support it, and if Detroit is chosen, I would certainly be wholly in favor of the United States doing everything it could to make it a success. I'm a strong believer in the Olympic games, and I hope the United States has a strong amateur team representing this country, because this is a vigorous society, and we would like to demonstrate it.²

² On September 16, 1963, the President approved a joint resolution "favoring the holding of the Olympic games in America in 1968" (Public Law 88-124, 77 Stat. 156). The International Olympic Committee later announced that Mexico City had been selected as the site for 1968.

[9.] Q. Mr. President, you have been warning with repeated frequency lately about the possible dangers of a recession. Some of your supporters, both in and out of the administration, are expressing concern that your main thrust against it, namely, a large tax cut, may not get through this session. If that should happen to be the case or if you got an inadequate tax cut, do you have another alternative against recession?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, in the first place we don't believe that there will be a recession this year. The most recent economic indicators seem to me to be more encouraging than the ones that we had in

January when we stated that the chances were against a recession in 1963. But we also live with history, and we realize the rhythm of the 1958, and 1960, two recessions, and we don't want to duplicate that.

Now, our tax cut is predicated on the assumption of a \$10 billion tax cut over a period of 18 months, which combined with the budget we had we felt combined thrust to the economy and also a degree of fiscal responsibility. If you are suggesting that I would look with equanimity upon the failure of Congress to act this year on a tax cut, that would be wholly wrong.

If we get through this year in good condition economically, we come into 1964. We know, as I said, something about the rhythm of the business cycle. We had two recessions in 2 years in the end of the fifties.

So I would think that merely because our prospects look good in 1963, I would think that that is all the more pressing for us to take action in time. Now, if we don't take action in time, and we move into a recession, we have to take a good deal more action than we would have if we had taken it before the recession came upon us, and we have to take action to put people to work. We already have too high a rate of unemployment, and if we get into a recession, it would go much higher than that.

So that I would think that everything, most of all common prudence, indicates and dictates that we get a tax cut this year which, combined with the expenditure level we have in the Government, we believe represents the best combination. So I would be very concerned if we did not get it this year.

Q. What I really meant, sir, was what do you plan to do if you don't get the tax cut?

THE PRESIDENT. I plan to get the tax cut.

[10.] Q. Mr. President, are you aware of any international significance to the meeting between Pope John and Mr. Adzhubei, Khrushchev's son-in-law?

THE PRESIDENT. No, some historic interest, but not any underlying international significance. As you know, Mr. Adzhubei stated when he got through that there was no coexistence between the ideologies of Pope John and Mr. Khrushchev, and that has been my view for a long time. But I think that what Pope John is interested in, of course, is seeing--and I think other religious leaders are interested in preventing a nuclear war. So that he believes, I think probably, that communication is one of the means by which we can achieve that objective.

[11.] Q. Mr. President, would you now give us a report on the exploratory talks on the NATO nuclear force, and what you see as the prospects for that force?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes, I'm going to see Mr. Merchant¹ tomorrow. I understand he is encouraged by his trip. He is going back again in April. We are hopeful that it may be worked out. As I have said before, this is a proposal that we are making to the Europeans to meet a need which they've suggested. This is not a proposal which we feel essential to the security of the United States. It is a proposal which we have advanced to meet the security needs of Western Europe. So Mr. Merchant will travel again to the countries, the NATO countries, that he did not visit. Now we ought to know by May whether we are going to be able to make some progress.

¹ Livingston T. Merchant, Special Representative for Multilateral Force Negotiations.

In any case, by the Ottawa meeting¹ we should have made some progress on multinational nuclear forces, and we should have a clearer idea on whether we are going to carry through on multilateral nuclear forces.

¹ NATO Ministerial Council meeting in Ottawa, May 22-24.

[12.] Q. Mr. President, sometime in 1963, the Soviets are scheduled to launch two spacecraft and perform a rendezvous and a docking and the men are supposed to change ships. Now I am told if this happens it puts them in a position of being able to mount a nuclear weapon in space, and if that

happens, what would be the American response? Would we try to do likewise? Or would we try to shoot it down?

THE PRESIDENT. These are all presumptions that I wouldn't be able to comment on. The United States is making, as you know, a major effort in space and will continue to do so. We are expending an enormous sum of money to make sure that the Soviet Union does not dominate space. We will continue to do it. And we will continue to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent any action against the United States.

The fact of the matter is the Soviet Union today with a nuclear weapon can reach the United States with a missile. So that I would have to know in more precise detail than you have described the exact nature of our threat before I suggested what our counter action would be.

[13.] Q. Mr. President, Radio Moscow said today that the Cuban exiles who say they shot up a Russian ship and an army camp on Monday, that these men were hirelings of the United States and that they were carrying out secret American orders. What have you to say to this?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, as you know, our best information is that they did not come from the United States. We have already indicated that we do not feel that these kinds of raids serve a useful purpose. It seems to me in some ways they strengthen the Russian position in Cuba and the Communist control of Cuba and justify repressive measures within Cuba which might otherwise not be regarded as essential. So that we have not supported this and these men do not have a connection with the United States Government. I think a raid which goes in and out does indicate the frustrations of Cuban exiles who want to get back home and who want to strike some blow, but I don't think that it increases the chances of freeing Cuba.

[14.] Q. Mr. President, I believe the British Commonwealth-U.S. military survey team is back from India and has made its report to you. And I wonder what your views are now, sir, regarding India's military needs now that the spring is upon the country and the snows have melted and presumably the Chinese menace can be looked at more realistically?

THE PRESIDENT. We haven't completed the report or our consultation with the British as a result of the report.

[15.] Q. Mr. President, the trade of our Western European allies, the four principal ones, reportedly has quadrupled in the last 8 years in trade with the Soviet Union. Is this alarming to the administration and, if so, are any effective measures being taken to curtail it?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, we have attempted, in NATO, to maintain the Co-Com list which is a list of those materials which are shipped from the free world to the Communist world which would help them strategically and would help them in the event of War.

There is pressure always to dilute this list, and a good many of these countries depend upon trade and they want to trade with the Soviet Union. We have kept our trade, as you know, to a minimum, particularly because the Soviet Union does not show a great desire to trade in consumer items but instead wants heavy industrial items which could be important strategically.

We strongly believe in supporting the Co-Com list and we would continue to do so. There are pressures against it. But so far there has been general observance by NATO.

[16.] Q. Mr. President, as you know, the Cleveland-New York newspapers have been out of operation for almost 4 months now. After your last rather strong statement on the situation¹ there was an improvement, but now it has lapsed back again. Is there any comment that you care to make on this?

THE PRESIDENT. No, there seems to be some hope that in the next few days that there will be an acceptance of the offer that Mayor Wagner made in the New York case which I thought was a very fair offer. I understand that the head of the printers is attempting to use his influence as well as the influence of others in attempting to have the printers accept it.

¹See Item 35 [11].

That also leaves the Cleveland strike which has gone on for a longer time than the New York strike. I hope we can get that one adjusted, too, because that city also needs its papers. I am hopeful that if New York moves in the next few days that Cleveland will also.

[17.] Q. Mr. President, the House Un-American Activities Committee has been trying since last October to get some information from the Justice Department and the State Department about traveling United States citizens who are going in and out of Cuba by way of Mexico. They don't seem to be able to get any information on this, but some of these citizens come back and advertise lectures on the advantages of Castro's Cuba.

I am wondering how we can expect offer countries to restrict this type of travel, as you say we plan to do in Nicaragua, I believe

THE PRESIDENT. No, in Costa Rica.

Q. Well--I am wondering how we can expect other countries to stem this travel if we don't try to stem it by enforcing the McCarran-Walter Act?

THE PRESIDENT. I would think the Justice Department would be delighted to give any information. We have taken action, as you know, against some people who have gone to Cuba without a permit, or without permission of the United States Government. There has been some criticism, as a matter of fact, of an action we took against a newspaperman. We would attempt to and I would be delighted--I would ask, if it has not already done so, and I would be surprised if it has not already done so--I would be very surprised if the Justice Department has not made available all the information that the congressional committee requested. But if they have not done so, I will be sure to instruct them to do so.

Q. Mr. President, at the Costa Rica meeting the Declaration of Central America ¹ carries a rather intriguing phrase. It is that: "Cuba will soon join the family of free nations." I wondered if there is anything that you gentlemen know about that that you could tell us that we don't know.

THE PRESIDENT. No, I think the strong conviction is that the people of Latin America want to be free, they don't want to live under a tyranny, and that Cuba will be free. That is the conviction of the people of Central America and Latin America. And that's the conviction of the people of the United States.

¹Printed in the Department of State Bulletin (vol. 48, p. 515).

[18.] Q. Mr. President, the Civil Rights Commission for months has been trying to hold a hearing in Mississippi. Do you feel that this hearing should be delayed any longer?

THE PRESIDENT. No, that is a judgment the Civil Rights Commission should--any time, any hearing that they feel advances the cause or meets their responsibility which has been entrusted to them by the law, then they should go ahead and hold it.

[19.] Q. Mr. President, the TFX fighter plane controversy has drawn more attention to Senator Case's criticism of those politicians who in recent campaigns have urged the public to elect candidates on the grounds that they can bring more big defense contracts into those particular States, the implication being that they could use political influence to do this. Now, do you feel that this sort of a proposition to the public builds confidence that these big defense contracts are being let fairly?

THE PRESIDENT. I think the contracts are being let fairly. But of course, there's great competition, and it's no wonder because thousands of people, jobs are involved. The fact of the matter is defense contracts have been concentrated in two or three States, really, in space contracts, because those States have had the historical experience and also because they have a concentrated engineering and educational infrastructure which puts them in a successful position.

For example, a good percentage of the contracts traditionally in space have gone to the State of California, and in defense, because the great defense plants--for all the reasons, really, since the end of World War II. So Senators and Congressmen who are concerned about unemployment among their citizens, who are concerned about the flow of tax dollars, will continue to press. But the fact of the matter is that we have a Secretary of Defense who's making very honest judgments in these matters, and I know from personal experience that some Senators and Congressmen who recently visited Secretary McNamara, asking to present plans from being turned down, who happen to be members of my own party, and indeed, even more closely related, have been rejected by the Secretary of Defense.

Q. Mr. President, if I may follow that up, Senator Case has proposed that a watchdog committee be created to look into these

THE PRESIDENT. To watch the Congressmen and Senators? Well, that will be fine if they feel they should be watched!

[20.] Q. Mr. President, after all of the years of failure in attempting to reach a nuclear test ban agreement at Geneva, and in view of the current stalemate at the Geneva conference, do you still really have any hope of arriving at a nuclear test ban agreement?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, my hopes are somewhat dimmed, but nevertheless, I still hope. The fact of the matter is that the Soviet Union did accept in September a position which it had denied over the past 2 years or so, of inspection. Now, what we are disagreeing about are the number of inspections, but at least the principle of inspection is accepted. Now, the reason why we keep moving and working on this question, taking up a good deal of energy and effort, is because personally **I am haunted by the feeling that by 1970, unless we are successful, there may be 10 nuclear powers instead of 4, and by 1975, 15 or 20.**

With all of the history of war, and the human race's history unfortunately has been a good deal more war than peace, with nuclear weapons distributed all through the world, and available, and the strong reluctance of any people to accept defeat, **I see the possibility in the 1970's of the President of the United States having to face a world in which 15 or 20 or 25 nations may have these weapons. I regard that as the greatest possible danger and hazard.**

Now, I am not even talking about the contamination of the atmosphere which would come when all of these nations begin testing, but as you know, every test does affect generations which are still away from us. So I think that when we are now talking, the Soviet Union and the United States, whether we will have seven or three, we've come this far, and I think that we ought to stay at it. So I am not disturbed at all by those who attack every effort we make to get a nuclear test ban.

The fact of the matter is that when the treaty is signed, if it ever is signed, and I hope it is, it must go to the Senate and it must be approved by two-thirds of the Senate. Therefore, it seems to me great protection to all of us. Now, the other point I want to make is that we test and test and test, and you finally get weapons which are increasingly sophisticated. But the fact of the matter is that somebody may test 10 or 15 times and get a weapon which is not nearly as good as these megaton weapons, but nevertheless, they are two or three times what the weapon was which destroyed Hiroshima, or Nagasaki, and that was dreadful enough.

So I think that we have a good deal to gain if we get a test agreement, and so we are going to keep at it. Now, Members of Congress, who may object to that will have their chance to vote "aye" or "nay" if we are successful in a treaty and we present it to the Senate. In the meantime, we are going to stay at it.

[21.] Q. Mr. President, many, if not most, of the witnesses before the Ways and Means Committee and the members of the Joint Economic Committee say that your tax program is too little and too slow. Would you accept an immediate tax cut at the figure they are now using, around \$6 billion or \$8 billion, at once?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes, but the only thing is they also then come out against the essential governmental programs. I have seen very few people who have said that they would support what I regard as essential programs, national security, domestic security, and all the rest, and a tax cut of the kind of figures you are talking about. What you are asking us to do is to choose between these programs, which involve, as I have said, the national security in many cases, or domestic welfare. They are asking us to choose between those programs and the tax cut. I think the best combination is the present figure that we have reached of our expenditure level plus the tax cut.

Now, if economic conditions warrant a speedup and the Congress believes it, I would accept that. But I don't think we ought to be under any misapprehension that when they talk about a speedy tax cut they are also talking about a decline in defense expenditures as well as space expenditures, as well as domestic. For example, a bill which I think is vital to this country, which is a bill to provide for building medical schools so we will have at least the same number of doctors in proportion to our population 10 years from now as we do today, is held up now in the Rules Committee seven to seven. I think that bill is very important, not so much for today, but 5 years from now, 10 years from now. It has the support of the doctors. We need doctors in this country. We don't have enough. They are reluctant to vote that out. It is tied seven to seven. I want this tax cut to stimulate the economy, but I also think we ought to have enough doctors. So I think the combination we've got is the best one.

[22.] Q. Mr. President, there have been some published suggestions that you have amended the Monroe Doctrine in your statements made at Costa Rica. Would you care to comment?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I have not heard that suggested and it isn't so. We did not amend the Monroe Doctrine in Costa Rica.

Q. Mr. President, at Costa Rica you agreed to support a number of projects for regional developments, but no figures, dollar figures, were mentioned in connection with any of them. Would you care to explain why we did not agree?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes, because these countries are putting together an integrated economic plan, and they are then going to present it under the procedures of the Alliance for Progress at Punta del Este, to the Nine Wise Men, so called, who will then approve the plan. When the plan is approved, it will then be submitted to us, and we will, if it meets the conditions of self-help, reform, economic growth, and the rest, we will support it. What we have indicated to them is if their plan is sound, if they are making the necessary commitments themselves, the tax revenue, agrarian reform, and all the rest, and if it meets the approval of the Nine Wise Men, who are Latin Americans and North Americans, then we will support the plan. But I think we can decide what that figure of support will be better when we have seen the plan and gotten the approval. But we did not want to leave them in any doubt that they will have, and I think they should, our wholehearted support when the time comes. Anyone, as I have said, who has seen these countries and knows how much they want to do well, how vital they are, must feel that we should be of some help. We can't be satisfied to have the hard conditions of life which so many of them face. So we are going to support them, if the Congress agrees, but we first have to see the details of their plan.

[23.] Q. Mr. President, in regard to the TFX contract, would you describe your personal role, specifically? Did you make any suggestions as to who should get the contract?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I did not. No. This was completely the Defense Department.

Q. Mr. President, do you share the view of some officials in the Pentagon that members of the McClellan committee, particularly those up for reelection next year, may have been politically motivated in attacking the award to General Dynamics?

THE PRESIDENT. As I said, when a contract goes to one State, then the company may involve or the Senators may involve or the Congressmen want it to go to another. I would not get into that question, because I do not think that is the important point. I assume that the McClellan committee, on which I once served, will render a fair judgment.

Number 2, I am confident of the TFX contract because I am confident of Secretary McNamara. Therefore, as I've said, this hearing can go on as long as they feel it serves a useful result, and whatever the motivations may be--and I wouldn't attempt to explore them--I have confidence in the committee and the members involved.

[24.] Q. Mr. President, how do you explain the undue reluctance, it seems to me, in the large segment of Congress to support your domestic programs such as the support for medical schools, the youth service corps, and many of the other programs that you have advanced in order to help segments of our population?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, the fact of the matter is the hospital plan came out of the committee and it came to the Rules Committee. In the Rules Committee, one of the members who supported the plan was sick, and so it came up for a vote. The five Republicans on the committee voted no. Judge Smith and Colmer, of Virginia and Mississippi, voted no. The seven Democrats voted yes. Mr. Madden was sick, so the bill is tied seven to seven. I hope he gets well. I hope he has an opportunity to vote on it again, and then maybe we will have some hospitals.

Reporter: Thank you, Mr. President.

NOTE: President Kennedy's fifty-second news conference was held in the State Department Auditorium at 6 o'clock on Thursday evening, March 21, 1963.