

July 23 / Administration of George Bush, 1992

## Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on the Escape of Pablo Escobar

July 23, 1992

Pablo Escobar escaped from prison when Colombian authorities attempted to move him to a more secure facility. This is unfortunate at a time when President Gaviria was trying to control the prison and put an end to Escobar's criminal activities. Escobar and his ilk represent a threat to law-abiding, civilized societies throughout the hemisphere, and they must be brought to justice.

This incident underlines the difficulties

legitimate governments have in halting drug trafficking and placing drug traffickers before the bar of justice. We have strongly supported President Gaviria and the people of Colombia in their valiant fight against these violent international criminal organizations. We will continue that support and cooperation, especially to strengthen the Colombian judicial system.

## Remarks to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia in Arlington, Virginia

July 24, 1992

*The President.* Thank you all. Well, Sue, thank you very much. And Ann, glad to be back with you and this organization. To the members of the board, my respects; to the family, friends.

Let me first start off by saluting two former NSC hands, Bud McFarland and Dick Childress over here who have worked very hard on all of this, and also the chairman emeritus, George Brooks.

Let me begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak again to what has got to be one of the bravest and most dedicated groups of Americans in this country.

We live in a marvelous time, a time of tremendous opportunity. We've seen the end of the cold war and the collapse of imperial communism and a new birth of freedom from Moscow to Managua. America's courage, America's vision, America's values have indeed changed the world. And yes, the cold war may be over, but the noble cause that took your fathers, your sons, and your husbands away from home is with us still. Our work must not end and will not end until you have answers about your loved ones.

Over the past 20 years, the National League of Families has seen the issue of

your missing swept up in international or domestic politics, manipulated by foreign governments, exploited by con men, sensationalized by the media. All that time, you never lost sight of what you were looking for: good faith, an honest effort to resolve your uncertainty, to find answers to the agonizing question that you live with every day.

Sometimes you may have wondered whether your Government had forgotten you. When President Reagan and I took office in '81, we made your ordeal our top priority. We knew that with all the uncertainties you live with, the one thing you should be sure of is that your Government really cares.

You're talking to a person that was shot down himself in combat. Fortunately, I wasn't taken prisoner, but I was shot down in combat. I understand a little bit what that means. I understand what it means. And so we set out to meet with you to ask your advice.

When we took office, no policy-level negotiations with Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia had been held for several years. Despite the fears of some that negotiating with Vietnam implied recognition, despite the fears of others that the POW-MIA issue was a cold

war fantasy, we took your advice and entered into high-level negotiations.

When we took office, some saw this issue as a matter between this Nation and Vietnam, not part of the broader relations between the U.S. and the Soviets, China, and our friends in Asia, the ASEAN countries. We took your advice and urged our friends as well as our adversaries to help us find the answers.

Let me add that I am gratified to hear the ASEAN ambassadors are here today. I salute them over there. They are cooperating with us. Their countries deserve great credit for their understanding, for their help, and for their fellowship with you, the families.

Most important of all, when we took office, we came up against a string of official statements—

[At this point, audience members interrupted the President's remarks.]

*The President.* Here, would you come over a minute? Is that the—

*Audience member.* This is symptomatic of the issue, President. This is our 23d meeting. Gosh darn it, why can't you—[inaudible]—and negotiate. The Vietnamese have everything we want. We have everything they want.

*Moderator.* Excuse me, do the majority of the families here want to hear the President? The majority of them would like to hear the President.

[At this point, audience members again interrupted.]

*Moderator.* We are so embarrassed.

*The President.* It's an election year.

*Moderator.* That's no excuse.

*Audience members.* We won't budge! Tell the truth! We won't budge! Tell the truth!

*Moderator.* I think it might be very important—if those who wish to hear the President will simply ask others to sit down, possibly we can hear what the President wants to say. And maybe if the media will stop taking pictures of the minority, they'll go away.

[At this point, league officers made efforts to restore order in the audience.]

*The President.* What's happening?

*Audience member.* We want you to continue your—[applause]

*The President.* Where were we? [Laughter]

*Audience member.* Down in front!

*The President.* Yes, let's get these guys down in front, that's right.

No, no, no, this is very emotional, understandably emotional. The thing that I would say to you, however, as a veteran and one who still wears my Navy wings from time to time, is I hope you understand how I feel about patriotism, about service to my country. And I will put my record up against anybody here.

[At this point, audience members again interrupted the President's remarks.]

*Moderator.* Sit down!

*The President.* And I just—would you please be quiet and let me finish. Would you please shut up and sit down.

I would say this: To suggest that a Commander in Chief that led this country into its most successful recent effort would condone for one single day the personal knowledge of a person held against his will, whether it's here or anyplace else, is simply totally unfair.

Now, to say I understand the agony that I've reheard here today is true. I do. But I do not like the suggestion that any American anywhere would know of a live American being held somewhere against his will, whether it's here or the allegation being over in the other part of the world. Iran, the suggestion was made that we left people being prisoner in Iran so to win an election. Now, what kind of an allegation is that to make against a patriot? What kind to make against—it is not.

So I would simply say to you: I care about it. We are trying, and we're going to continue to try. And I understand the divisions here. I understand the divisions we hear in these hearings. I understand the agony that people feel. But I would also like to ask that you understand where I'm coming from on this issue. I think most of you do. I'm going to continue to try.

We talked about Presidential commissions and congressional committees indicating that they felt Vietnam had done all it could,

and once again, we took your advice. We refused to accept the fact that the book was closed. It's no secret to any of you that for many years now, significant lobbying has taken place in opposition to this policy. Some of it comes from those same voices we've heard since the seventies, people who want us to pretend Vietnam never happened. Some comes from people who seek to smooth over sticking points that stand in the way of commercial opportunities. Others say, "Look, the war is over. Let's move on." And that is something we can and will never say.

Now, for us, the POW-MIA issue is not a sticking point, not some bad dream we shake off, not a footnote from a forgotten time we can simply ignore. The POW-MIA issue is something entirely different, something more. This I want you to understand: It is a question of justice, of oaths sworn, of commitments kept, and a nation's test of its own worth measured in the life of one, lone individual. This we know: The wounds won't heal, the American family will not be whole, as I said earlier, so long as the brave men remain missing.

In my Inaugural Address as President, I did say that good will begets good will. In the spirit of that statement, we developed a detailed road map for Vietnam, a road map that addresses our objectives as well as that Government's desire in terms of diplomatic and economic relations with the United States. Let me be very clear: Without further positive movement on the POW's and MIA's, we cannot and will not continue to move forward with Hanoi.

Now, the other side of this is, where they have moved, we've responded. When the Government of Vietnam pledged greater cooperation, including field operations, we greatly increased our manpower, even opened a permanent office in Hanoi. While we've seen an unprecedented level of joint investigations, these activities have not provided the concrete results that we seek. Make no mistake, we want to continue and expand our joint efforts. And I'll never accept joint activities as a substitute for real results. Your long years of uncertainty must end, and I am pledged to end them in any way I can.

Now as a measure of simple human de-

gency, I call on the Government of Vietnam again to repatriate all recovered and readily recoverable remains. I call on the Government of Vietnam to act without delay. I can say in return the United States stands ready to move forward on the road map that we've laid out.

My message is the same to the other nations of Indochina. In Laos, our joint field operations have produced definitive answers, but the process remains painfully slow and cumbersome. We recognize the reality that most of our men unaccounted for in Laos were lost in areas under Vietnamese control. Our relations with Laos have grown from wary distrust in those early eighties to a broader, more open relationship. We cannot let this momentum wane. I address the Lao leaders when I say our relationship can grow further and will, if and when they provide the cooperation we now seek.

Our years of trying to seek cooperation from Cambodia and the Soviets were not rewarded until just recently. The U.N.-sponsored settlement plan in Cambodia, the historic changes in the lands that used to be the Soviet Union have opened the way for unprecedented access. We will push hard to translate this access into answers.

I know you've lived through hopes and then hopes dashed before. Unfortunately, and it breaks my heart to see this happen, we have seen false reporting. I think we would all agree there have been some scam operations that divert manpower and sap our resources. I simply cannot fathom the cruelty of those who would exploit that issue for personal gain.

Nevertheless, we are determined not to allow such incidents to discourage us. We're going to continue to pursue and openly receive information from all sources and continue to treat each report, every report, as the breakthrough that just might end the ordeal of one single American family.

I think our efforts have produced some results. For 241 families, the uncertainty has ended. For others, too many others, the questions linger. Every day now, it seems, the news purports to unearth some great new revelation of fact, facts that you've known for 20 years and facts we've shared

with you for a decade.

Well, the key fact is one we all agree on: There are Americans who did not return home at the end of hostilities and Americans last known to be alive. Accounting for these men remains this highest priority. Although there's not proof that any Americans are now alive, in the absence of firm answers, our assumption will always be: Let facts direct our policy, and let hope be our guide.

So the policy remains: full disclosure, full disclosure of all relevant information to families. And we're going to continue to cooperate fully with congressional committees to ensure the access they must have to perform their oversight role.

But there are some things we're not going to do, however loud the critics may complain. We will not publicly release any information that would jeopardize ongoing intelligence or negotiating efforts to account for your missing loved ones.

Let the critics complain. We have got to get this job done. As President, I take it to be an article of faith, a solemn covenant with those who serve this country: The United States will make every possible effort always, take every possible action to account for those taken prisoner or missing in action. Our aim remains the fullest possible accounting for POW's and MIA's and nothing less. And I want you to know that comes to you with conviction.

Let me just say something about this gentleman sitting here. Tell me your name again—Jeff. I can't pretend to know the grief that you carry in your heart. My experience in combat was a little different. My wingman was shot down the first—disappeared the first mission I was on. We had maybe something like 7 out of our squadron of 15 killed.

I understand what combat is, but because of the way Barbara and I feel about our family, I can't try to say that I understand the grief that you carry with you every day,

the anguish of uncertainty. So I don't want to try to put myself with everybody here who has suffered for a long time on an equal plane in that sense. That's not what I'm trying to do.

But I can remember that day that I mentioned to you 50 years ago, when I was a scared kid, 20 years old, I think, floating around just a couple of miles off a Japanese-held island. I remember the uncertainty at that moment. I can remember, when I wasn't wondering if anyone would find me at all, my worry was, who's going to find me.

So what I'm trying to say is I can identify with those who served, and I can identify with their sacrifice. I can identify as a father who lost a child with the family implications, but again I'm not trying to put myself on the same plane with those who have suffered a lot.

But what I want to tell you is: I mean what I tell you, in terms of priority. I know there's doubt here, and I know people are saying, as this gentleman said right from the heart, "Go over there and bring them back." Do you think if I knew of one single person and where he is and how it was, that I wouldn't do that? Of course, I'd do that.

So all I'm asking, all I'm here to say is I am the President, and I am the Commander in Chief. Some of you believe it and some of you may not, but we are going to get this job done, and we are going to account for every single person who is missing. I'm going to keep on it. I don't care how long it takes.

Thank you very, very much. Thank you.

*Note: The President spoke at 9:35 a.m. at the Stouffer Concourse Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Sue Scott, chairman of the board, and Ann Mills Griffiths, executive director, National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, who served as moderators.*