

The President's News Conference With President Ramiro De Leon of Guatemala *November 30, 1993*

President Clinton. Good morning. This morning it was my great honor to welcome seven outstanding Central American leaders to the White House: President Cristiani of El Salvador, President Endara of Panama, President Callejas of Honduras, President Calderon of Costa Rica, President Chamorro of Nicaragua, President De Leon of Guatemala, and Prime Minister Esquivel of Belize.

These leaders have made an historic contribution to our hemisphere by helping to build democracy and peace in a region that until very recently was riven by civil strife. I'm grateful that they were able to break away from the Miami conference on the Caribbean, which they are attending with leaders from the private sector, from throughout the Caribbean Basin, to discuss ways to advance regional prosperity.

President De Leon has struggled heroically on behalf of democracy and human rights in Guatemala. And he's just achieved an important political accord that will bring more accountable government to his nation. President Cristiani played a central role in ending El Salvador's civil war and has been critical to the success of the peace accords. President Chamorro has worked hard to bring reconciliation and democracy to Nicaragua. I want to acknowledge President Callejas for his leadership in consolidating democracy in Honduras and President Calderon for advancing Costa Rica's traditions of social justice and the rule of law. President Endara has safeguarded Panama's return to democracy. And Prime Minister Esquivel has earned praise for his government's sound economic policies and his own personal integrity.

For years, few regions of our world endured more suffering than Central America. But today, few regions are better poised to reap the benefits of the end of the cold war. This is the first time in the 20th century that all of these nations have come here to the White House to meet the President of the United States, every one of them being headed by democratically elected leaders. It is an historic and very important moment.

The people of Central America are clearly dedicated to the harvest of reconstruction and

renewal. They're healing divided societies, reviving stalled economies, and working toward closer integration among themselves and their other neighbors. My message today to these distinguished leaders and to the millions whom they represent is simple: The United States will be there as your partner to help. We will not make the mistake of abandoning this region when its dramatic recovery is not yet complete. We will remain engaged to help Central America attain peace, consolidate democracy, protect human rights, and achieve sustainable development. Our Nation has a direct stake in Central America's stability and prosperity. The United States exports \$6 billion in goods to these countries, supporting over 100,000 American jobs.

Today we discussed steps that Central America's nations can take to strengthen our economic ties, including further trade liberalization and better protection of worker rights, intellectual property, and the environment. We also discussed the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which all of these leaders strongly supported. The Vice President is leaving this afternoon for Mexico where he will deliver a major address on American engagement in Latin America. This morning we agreed that NAFTA's historic passage can serve as a catalyst for the expansion of free trade to other market democracies throughout the hemisphere, something I have long supported. And we shared concerns about NAFTA's potential short-term effects on the flow of trade and investment to Central America. I pledged that my administration will work with Congress and Central American governments to design affirmative strategies to stimulate regional trade.

As our economic relationship evolves, so must the nature of the United States support for economic development in Central America. We will continue bilateral aid programs. At the same time, the region's rising creditworthiness has allowed international financial institutions to increase their role, and we strongly support that. We will work to develop a new, more mature economic partnership with Central America based on trade expansion, multilateral support for economic reforms, and better coordination

of bilateral and multilateral aid programs.

These leaders today have told us that they seek to work together to become a model region for sustainable development. And we are prepared to work with them in that enterprise. I can think of no more important common endeavor.

With the elections of the last several years, democracy has taken root in Central America's rugged terrain. Now the challenge facing this region is to build democratic institutions that endure, that are honest, that are responsive, that are effective. We are prepared to work closely with Central America to promote reform in the judiciary, the civil service, education, and health care. Good governance will advance our mutual objectives to bolster democracy, promote social opportunity, and clear the path for freer trade.

Just a few years ago, this morning's meeting would have been literally unthinkable. Now, in the midst of this great progress, it would be unthinkable for us not to meet. The prosperity and security of this hemisphere which we share depends more than ever on our continued cooperation.

It is now my honor to introduce President De Leon, who will also speak for his fellow Central American leaders.

Mr. President.

President De Leon. Thank you very much. Good morning. At this time of great and transcendental changes in the world order, in Central America, in the United States, and especially in our reciprocal relations, today we just had a Presidential meeting which we consider not only a very pleasant one but an extremely constructive one. We were able to exchange with President Clinton, whom we would like to thank for his invitation, our points of view on issues and problems of great importance having to do with our bilateral relationship as well as recent events in Central America on the one hand and in the United States on the other hand.

I would like to summarize what we have discussed as follows. As far as democracy and governance, first of all we underscored the efforts made in our region for the consolidation of pluralistic and participatory systems, giving special priority to respect for individual, civil, and political human rights, which has allowed great progress in the recent years in the solution of the great conflicts we have.

We showed that we Central American countries continue to work to achieve true

participatory democracy involving growth with social justice and without confrontation and that solidarity and dialog are essential principles to which we are giving priority as the underpinnings of the strengthening of our democracies.

As to economic and social development and the fight against poverty, on these points we said to President Clinton that the magnitude of the problem of poverty in our countries is of great importance. It is a problem which will have to be solved with political will and solidarity. The fight against poverty, we said, is not just a matter of supporting social welfare investment, but it is a matter of supporting productive investment through private investment, supporting the productive sector, and supporting the insertion of our economies into the world market. We have to fight the scourge of poverty through consistent management of our economic and our social policies. We told the President that we are emerging with great difficulty and with degrees of difference from one country to the other, emerging from a deep and prolonged recession which punished those least able to defend themselves especially, badly. I am talking here about the poorest of the poor.

As far as economic adjustment is concerned, with great optimism we said to the President that we Central Americans are now looking toward the future with a positive vision. We are transforming antiquated schemes. And now the societies realize that they have to assume costs but in an attitude of solidarity in order to achieve peace, development, democracy, and especially the respect for human rights, both individual and economic, social and cultural rights.

We emphasize that governments must become more efficient as administrators and public servants, allowing the state to act where it must and generate conditions so that the private sector can act in a more decentralized and participatory manner. Regarding self-effort and external assistance, we discussed how happy we Central Americans are to be making our own efforts and advancing toward positive results, a demonstration of which is the recent signing of the protocol to the Treaty of Central American Economic Integration. At the same time though, we recalled that these internal efforts must be supported as they have been by external cooperation. And here the support offered by the United States has had, has, and will continue to have great importance. We also said

to President Clinton that we feel that this particular historic moment is the very worst one to be cutting back on cooperation, external cooperation. It is the best time to maintain it and increase it, convinced that democracy is more than the simple and mere holding of regular elections.

Finally, on the NAFTA and the Caribbean Basin Initiative, the Central American Presidents said in this Presidential summit meeting, that our bilateral agenda with the United States is going to be very strongly influenced not only by the changes in Central America but also by the historic decision of Canada, the United States, and Mexico to form an expanded free trade area. We said that we applaud this decision, which marks a fundamental and positive change in inter-American relations, and that we feel that this does constitute a creative answer to the emerging international reordering. We also considered, we said, that NAFTA implies the need for the Central American region to redouble its efforts and to become stronger so that we can expand to serve more competitive markets.

We made two proposals to President Clinton. First of all, we expressed to him our great interest in initiating consultations to incorporate the Central American countries into the North American Free Trade Agreement and, at the same time, that the real possibilities be considered to make the CBI benefits be equal to the NAFTA benefits. We said that we felt that this should be done within the framework of respect for the environment. And we had a very favorable response to our suggestion that Central America should become a model area of sustainable development in the environmental framework. We have taken the political decision to suggest this, and President Clinton has decided to give this idea his backing.

We also said that we would be very appreciative for any support and backing that the U.S. Government could give to the negotiations within the framework of the Uruguay round to expand liberalization of world trade for products of interest to us. We are grateful for the efforts that the United States has made to increase our access to the European Common Market, and we are hoping that there will be a negotiated solution with the EC.

Finally, and given the welcome and the interest which was so emphatically shown by President Clinton to the regional proposals we made,

the Presidents of the Central American region wish to repeat here our satisfaction at the fruitfulness and constructive nature of this meeting. And we have decided to set up a high-level commission among us to follow up the process of incorporation of Central America into the North American Free Trade Agreement. This constitutes a very important way to combat poverty in Central America and thus achieve peace and consolidate democracy and development with social equity for the entire Central American isthmus.

Thank you.

Nicaragua and El Salvador

Q. Could you discuss the loosening aid to Nicaragua? And also did you discuss the emergence of death squads in El Salvador?

President Clinton. We discussed the aid to Nicaragua issue very briefly. I have decided just in the last couple of days to approve the release of the aid from FY '93 because of the significant progress made in Nicaragua in asserting civilian control over the military and in trying to resolve some American property claims and on a number of other issues there. So I feel good about that.

With regard to El Salvador, what we basically discussed was the continuation of the democratic process and the upcoming elections and the hope that the recent violence there would not in any way interrupt that. And I feel comfortable that they are proceeding along that path.

What I'd like to do is to try to alternate questions and take a question from people representing Central American press and then go back to the American press and go back and forth, if I could.

Yes, in the back.

Central America and NAFTA

Q. Mr. President, as the President of Guatemala has said Central American countries are interested in having that parity with NAFTA because they feel that they are going to start feeling the impact of NAFTA in about 5 years. What was your response? Are you willing to give them that parity?

President Clinton. Let me say specifically what we talked—we talked about two different issues. One is the question of involving Central America in the process that produced NAFTA, that is, an expansion of a free trade area to the rest of Latin America. That's something, as

I think all of you know, I have long been interested in and have talked about it when I was running for President. And I told him that I had asked Ambassador Kantor to basically, when we conclude our GATT efforts—we're pre-occupied, as you know, with the GATT agreement now—after we conclude our GATT agreements and if NAFTA goes through with the proclamation of Canada which has to be done by the first of the year, shortly after the first of the year, to begin a study and come up with a recommendation to me about how to proceed with reference to the rest of Latin America in the free trade process.

Now secondly, the other issue we discussed was a narrower one, and that is, how can we make sure that the NAFTA agreement, as it begins to be implemented, does not hurt the Caribbean countries who are in the Caribbean Basin Initiative? That is, neither Mexico nor the United States and certainly not Canada ever intended for there to be a transfer of investment from the Caribbean to Mexico, just a simple shift. That would defeat the whole purpose of what we're trying to do here in growing the area. So we are looking into now what we can do on a shorter term basis to just make sure that doesn't happen. As I said, that was never any part of Mexico's strategy or interest, never any part of the United States. So I think we'll have a more near-term recommendation on that regard.

Salman Rushdie

Q. Mr. President, many Muslims, including some who support the United States, are upset about your meeting with author Salman Rushdie. Was there any advice from the State Department or others that there were risks involved in this meeting? And do you think that it might undercut support for the Middle East peace process?

President Clinton. To be frank, there was some division among our people about whether I should see Mr. Rushdie when he was here. He met with Mr. Lake, and then I was over in the Old Executive Office Building, and Mr. Lake brought him over there so I could see him and shake hands with him. We visited probably for a couple of minutes. And there was some—because our view of the first amendment and free speech is different from that held by many Muslims throughout the world, including many who are our friends. I understand that.

I did it to make the point not that I agree with the attacks on Islam in the book that Mr. Rushdie wrote but that in our country and in the countries who respect freedom of speech, freedom of speech includes especially the willingness to respect without threatening the life of or the rights of people who write things that we do not agree with. Indeed, for a Westerner, I have tried for more than 20 years now to study and have an appreciation of Islam. And I respect the religion, and I respect the culture enormously. So I mean no disrespect to the people who have that religious faith. But I do think it's important that here in the United States we reaffirm our commitment to protect the physical well-being and the right to speak of those with whom we may intensely disagree. That's what our Constitution does. So I hope that I will not be misunderstood. I believe I made the right decision.

Yes, ma'am.

Aid to Central America

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned that one of the programs will include multilateral aid to Central America. However, the AID budget has been substantially cut and will continue to be cut in the future. What has been your commitment in this regard to the nations of Central America?

President Clinton. First of all, let's discuss that. The AID budget was cut in the last budget cycle. And we are basically in a 5-year period now where we've committed not to increase Federal discretionary spending even for inflation. So there will be a cut of all spending relative to inflation, which means if we want to increase one area of our spending, we have to cut something else proportionately. And I'm going now into a series of meetings—I had my first one yesterday—on next year's budget, which will require us to make some difficult decisions.

What I said to the leaders was I would do my best to maintain some level of bilateral assistance but that the United States would try to make sure that the multilateral aid offset whatever cuts we had in bilateral assistance, number one, and number two, that I would do my best to strengthen the economic relationship between the United States and these nations in the hope that increasing trade and investment would do far more than bilateral aid ever could anyway to strengthen the long-term

economic well-being of the two nations.

Thank you very much.

Trade, Development, and Democracy

[At this point, a question was asked in Spanish, and a translation was not provided.]

President De Leon. As I said, in addition to being a very pleasant meeting, it was an extremely fruitful one. Our proposals were welcomed very forthrightly by the U.S. side. And we had the hope, because of the interest that President Clinton showed in our presentations, that we would be able to do something concrete on two areas in particular: one, in connection with a free trade expansion to Central America, and secondly, that we could get the same benefits as NAFTA for the CBI countries.

In addition to that, we had the suggestion which was accepted vis-a-vis the environmental pilot projects. We think that it would be wonderful if that pilot project for sustainable development should be carried forward in Central America. This would be great not just for Central America but for the entire world.

For President Clinton regarding democratization of the region and with respect for human rights to achieve greater cooperation with the United States Government, I would say that we ourselves, we the Central American countries, we are giving signals of this advance and progress, difficult in some cases, fragile in others, but we are going toward true democracy. We have the case of El Salvador, Honduras, Panama; democracy has come later in some cases, sooner in others. I never mention Costa Rica when we talk about this, because Costa Rica has always been a democracy and an example for the entire world and the case of Belize, which has also been a democracy.

Guatemala has had the worst problems, and 5 months ago we had another break of our institutional and constitutional order. But we showed the world that we have begun to mature in our society. In Guatemala we've begun to learn what the democratic society is and means. This has been done incredibly peacefully, and I say "incredibly" because of the antecedents in our country. And we have been able to get out of a political crisis, which was very difficult, between the three branches of Government, with an agreement which was the best one possible for our people, because the constitutional changes for the first time have taken place without a coup d'etat. The interruption of the constitutional mandate of the Congress and the supreme court is going to be corrected by the purest expression of democracy, that is, a popular election. Therefore, I gave the example of Guatemala, excuse me for that, but I think our problems are the worst. And I think that the rest of the region also has given signs of consolidating the democratic system.

So there was no conditionality; quite the opposite. What we had was total backing of a proposal and a desire for the United States to continue helping us consolidate our democracies, fragile in some cases, more consolidated in other cases, but continue to work for the sake of consolidating peace.

President Clinton. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 36th news conference began at 11:22 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Anthony Lake, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. President De Leon spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Remarks on Signing Handgun Control Legislation

November 30, 1993

Thank you very much, Sarah and Jim and General Reno, Mr. Vice President, Mrs. Musick. Thank you for your wonderful remarks.

There were two Members of Congress who inadvertently were not introduced. I want to recognize them because they've played a major role in this: one of our Democratic leaders in

the House, Steny Hoyer, and Senator Herb Kohl from Wisconsin, who also sponsored the bill to make it illegal for minors to possess handguns, and I thank you for that, sir.

Senator Metzenbaum, Congressman Schumer, Senator Mitchell; and others who gave birth to this great effort; to all the law enforcement rep-