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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary
(Geneva, Switzerland)

For Immediate Release

November 17, 1985

INTERVIEW OF
NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR ROBERT C. MCFARLANE
ON
NBC "MEET THE PRESS"
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

4:45 P.M. Local Time

Q Welcome back to "Meet The Press," Mr. McFarlane.

MR. MCFARLANE: Nice to be here, Marvin.

Q Earlier today, you expressed optimism -- and I just want to find out exactly what that expression was aimed at -- at certain issues of a bilateral nature between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I want to be sure that we understand. You're talking about the strong -- what? -- probability, likelihood of a cultural exchange agreement?

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Q But you were talking about bilateral relations, so I just want to clear up the specific issues.

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Q All three of those agreements?

MR. MCFARLANE: If we try hard, I think so.

Q And you are trying hard. And the Russians?

MR. MCFARLANE: -- and the Secretary of State, all of us are trying hard.

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Q Mr. McFarlane, there's a continuing flap over Secretary of Defense Weinberger's letter that appeared in both The Washington Post and The New York Times in which he advised the President not to extend the SALT II Treaty beyond December 31st of this year and he talked about the ABM Treaty, not to make any changes in that that would restrict American work on SDI or Star Wars.

When a senior administration official was asked if this was an attempt to sabotage the summit, he responded, "Sure, it was," as I understand it. Were you that senior administration official? There's been a lot of speculation about that.

MR. MCFARLANE: There's been a lot of inappropriate emphasis and comment on it, I think, Tom. I'm afraid that it's typical of you all that you become preoccupied with what is a very transitory issue and miss in the process the historical significance of this meeting.

The letter -- the report was requested by the President. It is part of many elements that will go into his decision on our policy with regard to the SALT II Treaty and, most importantly, will be his own reaction, I think, to the discussions that he has here in Geneva with General Secretary Gorbachev.

Q But with all due respect, sir, if, in fact, a senior administration official says that it was an attempt to sabotage the summit by the Defense Secretary of the United States, in a letter that appears in public without the President's knowledge beforehand, that's not just us making something of it. That represents, it seems to me, very serious conflict within the administration.

MR. MCFARLANE: There is absolutely zero conflict on the commitment of the President and every one of his advisors to deep reductions and offensive nuclear weapons, to making progress in the resolution of regional disputes, to expanding cooperation in bilateral areas, and as making our case on human rights issues.

We're here as a team, and there is no one who doesn't feel very strongly in support of the President's position on every one of those issues.

Q Mr. McFarlane, let me take you to the substance of the negotiations here. Two questions. One is, are they negotiations in the real sense of the word or are we doing something at this summit -- the Americans and the Soviets -- that hasn't been done at summits before?

MR. MCFARLANE: I think we are. If the President is able to persuade Mr. Gorbachev of the deep conviction with which he believes right now there is the opportunity for setting a course for stable, peaceful discourse on all of the various disagreements we have, that this can be a different kind of summit. It really is 40 years in the making, where we've adopted policies for dealing with the Soviet Union that have been based on assumptions that haven't proven out.

Now, on the basis of that history and realism, the President's convinced we can make progress. And he's right.

Q Is eight hours at the summit enough to do that?

MR. MCFARLANE: Eight hours can enable the two leaders to exchange views on fundamentals and to begin to chart a framework, a process that must surely continue beyond this meeting. But, yes, it is a very important opportunity to make a beginning. It's not an end, it's a beginning.

Q It doesn't really sound like a negotiation on specific points.

MR. MCFARLANE: I don't think it will be --

Q Dotting the "I"s and crossing the "T"s -- you don't see that?

MR. MCFARLANE: No, I don't think that's what summits are for.

Q An awful lot of other summits have been just for that. You, yourself, participated as an aide to Henry Kissinger back in 1972, working on a summit that produced an agreement a day, almost like an apple a day. So summits have been known to do that.

MR. MCFARLANE: Well, I think that summits may again do that. But given the enormous change underway in the Soviet Union in the past four years, it's unrealistic to expect that they would have been ready for that kind of thing. And they haven't been. Only now do you see the General Secretary really able to focus at all on foreign affairs. We welcome that. But it is a beginning.

Q Mr. McFarlane, I want to address the possibility that the President and General Secretary Gorbachev may even talk past each other. The Secretary of State, you, at that meeting with Gorbachev about ten days or so ago in Moscow were surprised that Gorbachev placed so much emphasis on the importance of the military industrial complex in the United States; surprised by what seemed to you to be rather simplistic views of the United States. How can the President of the United States, in the eight hours that John was referring to a moment ago, turn around in the kind of historic way that you're looking forward to now the views of a man, raised in the Soviet system, believing deeply in communism? How is that even possible, remotely so?

MR. MCFARLANE: That's a very good point, Marvin. And the -- that's really at the core of President Reagan's different approach, and that is to acknowledge that there are very profound differences and that these will not change. However, that's not to say that there isn't a way, acknowledging the differences, to talk to each other about solving them where they hold the potential for violence and confrontation, whether it's in Afghanistan, Southern Africa, Indochina, or on arms control.

So, yes, let's acknowledge the differences, and that is different from ten years ago, where we used to have the rather naive notion that they were changing, that their goals were different, that they were no longer expansionists.

Q The President has had some strong things to say about the Soviet Union in the past. He's had the support of the American people. He's won two very large elections in this country as the President of the United States when he has said on the campaign trail and while in office that he believes that communism is in its final days, that it will be relegated to the ash heap of history, that he believes that the Soviet system is the focus of evil in the world.

Has he, A, modified his views at all; and if that is thrown back at him by Gorbachev in this meeting, how will he respond to that?

MR. MCFARLANE: Well, Tom, the President has also always acknowledged that the Soviet Union has great military power and the ability to expand by power military subversion if it chooses. Now, he believes that acknowledging those differences, but at the same time, recognizing that we intend to maintain the strength ourselves to defend against that effort and to also say there are areas where we can cooperate to mutual benefit is not incompatible with what he said before.

President Reagan's concern is that this competition,

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which we welcome, be a peaceful one. And we can do that.

Q Mr. McFarlane, let me try a couple of ideas on you. On this program earlier this morning, Helmut Schmidt of West Germany and Sam Nunn of Georgia both said that they thought one useful thing would be for the Soviets and the Americans to agree on a common interpretation of language in the ABM Treaty -- what does it actually mean. Do you see anything like that coming out of this summit or anything like that being set in train because of this summit?

MR. MCFARLANE: Well, I think that an important outcome of this meeting could be agreement to sit down and begin seriously to talk about the relationship between offense and defense and how we can move away from such exclusive reliance on offense and toward a greater reliance upon non-nuclear defensive systems.

Q Could you do that under the aegis of the ABM Treaty

MR. MCFARLANE: Yes, of course --

Q -- or would you have to have separate negotiations?

MR. MCFARLANE: No, the ABM Treaty establishes a framework within which all of our programs are being carried out --

Q Then is the United States willing to discuss with the Soviet Union the language and terminology of the ABM Treaty, specifically?

MR. MCFARLANE: The United States has always been willing to talk about what the ABM Treaty authorizes. The Soviet Union has taken a much more expansive view of what it authorizes from its inception in their own ratification process. You're familiar, John, with Marshal Grechko's statements, that it provides no limitations, whatsoever, upon research and experimentation of systems that can deal with ballistic missile defense.

Q I guess what I'm asking -- Marvin, just one last question -- is there a possibility of a working group or something like that -- two countries getting together on the language of the ABM Treaty so that they could come out of it a year from now, say, with an agreed interpretation on what it means?

MR. MCFARLANE: Well, John, well before that, we have to get Soviet serious engagement upon what is the proper relationship between offense and defense. After all, they are the ones who have expanded this enormous interest in strategic defense many, many years ago. We do see. and President Reagan believes strongly, that defense can provide a way to avoid this ever-spiraling expansion of nuclear weapons. And that's what he hopes to persuade the General Secretary of here.

Q Mr. McFarlane, at this summit, is the President prepared to say to Gorbachev, yes, the United States is ready to extend the life of the SALT II Treaty?

MR. MCFARLANE: The President, in setting our current policy last June, stated that future policy would be based upon Soviet compliance, upon their building programs, upon the pace and quality of how they negotiate in Geneva, and I think, obviously, on the outcome of these sessions. And until all of that is behind us and he's absorbed it, it's premature to judge that.

Q Okay, premature, perhaps. But here's the Defense Secretary laying out in his letter the strongest arguments for not going along with an extension of SALT II and, in effect, for abrogating the ABM Treaty. That is his view, I understand that. It is now a public view. Do you feel that if the President were to continue with SALT II that Weinberger could remain in that Cabinet?

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MR. MCFARLANE: But I think you are. What the Secretary said was that there have been violations and --

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MR. MCFARLANE: All of these possibilities are premised upon Soviet compliance. Now, that is undeniable. With regard to the ABM Treaty, in no sense did he say we should abrogate that treaty. So you're misinterpreting what Secretary Weinberger said.

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So let's get busy getting rid of the real, clear and present danger and move toward a non-nuclear substitute.

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