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Mondale and the message: delivered

JAMES WIEGHART

BONN—Since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949, it has been regarded as the bulwark against Soviet expansionism in Europe and the front line of the defense of the United States from possible attack by Russia.

There have been alarms and excursions between the East and West since then, particularly over the free status of West Berlin, which is a Western outpost deep inside Communist East Germany, but West Berlin has survived blockades, harassment and even the hideous Berlin Wall, and NATO has served its function of preserving the peace.

However, in recent years there has been increasing concern among Western military experts that NATO's defensive forces were in danger of being outmatched by a steady military buildup in the Communist counterpart organization, the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact.

Vice President Mondale, in effect, underlined that concern in his speech to the NATO Council in Brussels on Monday when he acknowledged the continuing Soviet military buildup and said: "The growth of Soviet military power makes us keenly aware of the need for the NATO alliance to modernize and im-

prove its defenses." Mondale went on to pledge that, despite President Carter's determination to cut the size of the U.S. defense budget, there would be no cutback in funds allocated to NATO and, in fact, Carter was willing to increase American expenditures for NATO's defense if appropriate increases were also made by those member nations who could afford to do so, particularly West Germany and Norway.

In numbers alone, NATO's military vulnerability is obvious. In central Europe, the Warsaw Pact can field about 950,000 troops, about 150,000 more than NATO. The Communist forces have about twice as many tanks, most of them of better quality than those of the West, and they have an advantage in tactical air power, about 2,900 planes to 2,300 for NATO.

Some Western liberals discount such measurements, pointing out with some justification that they are not comparable on the ground that the Soviets will never be able to count on the loyalty of the East European forces. They point out that Soviet troops had to be used to put down rebellions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But this argument is weakened by the fact that Russian ground forces make up about half of the Warsaw Pact troop strength, and the Soviets, with ground forces twice the size of the U.S. and deployed much closer to the scene, can quickly be put into action.

Also, NATO too is afflicted with its share of internal problems. Both France and Greece have pulled their troops out of NATO and even though both coor-

dinate their military activities closely with NATO, the separation has weakened the military alliance. An even more serious potential problem is the possibility that Communist parties will win coalition roles in the governments of Italy and France in the next few years.

Perhaps the internal stresses and strains in both military alliances are simply signs that it is finally time, after 30 years of cold war confrontation, for the United States and the Soviet Union to pull their troops back to their own countries and let the Europeans take care of their own defenses. This, of course, would represent a happy ending to a long and expensive story of keeping the peace in post-World War II Europe. But the Russians have shown little inclination to pull back, and there is no evidence that they would follow suit if the United States unilaterally withdrew its forces from NATO.

It appears, then, that a pullback will have to be done gradually and in unison. This is precisely the goal of the mutual and balanced force reductions talks that have sputtered along without much progress for some time now. For such negotiations to succeed, there has to be some incentive for the Soviets to agree to begin withdrawing forces. A general weakening of NATO forces or the unilateral withdrawal of American troops would be counterproductive to the goal of mutual withdrawal. That, in essence, was Mondale's message to the NATO Council, and one of the primary reasons he was dispatched to Europe by Carter only three days after the new administration took office was to deliver that message.

The new Alaskan oil rush

A reservoir to rival the pipeline boom?

JACK ANDERSON
and LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON—High above America's last untouched wilderness in Alaska, oil company planes are flying reconnaissance missions in search of a vast new reservoir of hidden oil.

Oil already has been spotted seeping out of the ground in small pools, according to our sources, on the windswept tracts of the Arctic Wildlife Range. The oil companies believe there may be as much additional oil underneath the range as already has been tapped for the Alaskan pipeline. The high-flying geologists are focusing on a massive, dome-shaped structure underground, which may be hiding a great pool of valuable oil. Environmental groups, meanwhile, have also been alerted and are preparing for an epic battle to save the wilderness area from development. They want to protect the caribou herds, giant polar bears and flocks of wildfowl that make their home on the wildlife range.

Meanwhile, the oil companies are quietly pressuring the Interior Department, our sources say, to open up the wildlife range for exploratory drilling. For the moment, the oil giants have run into a wall. Our sources say the Interior Department has refused to consider any leasing of the arctic range because it may be designated as a wilderness area. The decision is now up to Cecil Andrus, the new Interior secretary, who was a champion of environmentalists as governor of Idaho.

Nuclear danger

In past columns, we have reported that terrorists are trying to get their hands on American nuclear weapons. Yet the nation's nuclear stockpiles are dangerously vulnerable, government investigators believe, with sloppy security that could be breached by determined extremists.

Federal officials have concentrated on safeguarding plutonium, which can be used to make nuclear bombs. But there is another element, called neptunium, which can also be used to make nuclear weapons. Unlike plutonium and uranium, however, neptunium is not subject to tough federal security measures. Incredibly, the dangerous element has been left off the federal list of "special nuclear materials."

We have obtained an unpublished study which warns of the dangers of neptunium. It was conducted by Dr. Marvin Resnikoff, a Buffalo nuclear physicist who works for the New York Public Interest Research Group. It appears likely that (neptunium) has

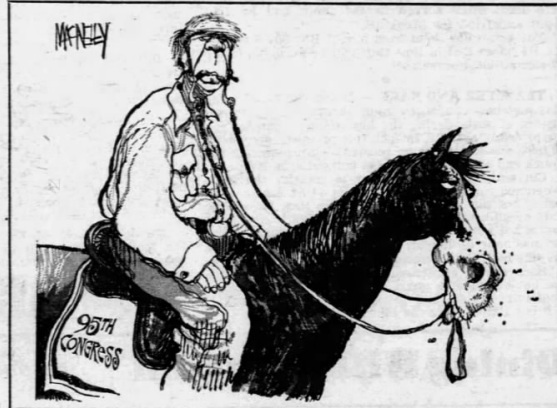
strategic importance for nuclear explosives, either as the core or as the reflector of a nuclear device," the study warns. "However, neptunium is not classified as a strategic material, and therefore does not have the customary safeguards and criticality standards."

The Nuclear Regulator Commission doesn't dispute these conclusions. But an NRC spokesman said the commission is not worried because there isn't enough neptunium in private hands to make a nuclear bomb. Scientists estimate it would take over 100 pounds of the material to produce an explosion. But Resnikoff warns that private nuclear reactors have the capability to produce much more neptunium, which would then be vulnerable to theft by terrorists. The element is now used commercially in the production of pacemakers and satellites.

Panama propaganda

The U.S. embassy in Panama may be getting ready to prepare the residents of the Canal Zone for a transfer of sovereignty to Panama. At least an internal report recommends that the State Department wage a propaganda campaign to sell a new treaty to the embattled residents.

We recently cited classified State



Department cables which reported that the economy in Panama is "foundering" as a result of internal mismanagement. To divert the people's attention from their growing economic problems, Panama's military dictator, Omar Torrijos, is expected to begin clamor-

ing more loudly for sovereignty over the Panama Canal. President Carter, who wants to sign a new treaty in the explosive Canal zone, will find himself walking a diplomatic tightrope between Panamanian demands and U.S. expectations.

In pity city, a kid who has his dreams

WILLIAM REEL

YOU'VE HEARD of the silly season. Well, what we're going through right now—we've been going through it for years, actually—is the self-pity season. Anyone with a good persecution complex is assured of space in the media. Media types love to display their alleged humanitarianism by doling out pity.

But feeling sorry for "the oppressed" is only one side of the coin. The pundits, in the classic way of demagogues, need a villain. This year, you may have noticed, the villain is the bankers. Last year, you will recall, the villain was the landlords. The pundits duly explained to you that landlords were to blame for the fact that tenants urinated in the elevators. That was your lesson for 1976. The pundits hope you learned it well.

Lately, the pundits have been putting all their concentration and intuition to work, and do you know what they learned? Brace yourself. They learned that bankers are in business to get rich by lending money at high interest. A banker, they found out, is a shylock in a Brooks Brothers suit.

The rest of the world has always known this, of course. The pundits just discovered it. They are suitably outraged. Indignation is running at fever pitch.

It is not a bit surprising that Stanley Steingut, the hustler's hustler, the lulu czar, the no-show solon, is squawking the loudest about the awful, horrible banks. Shrewd Stanley knows he can con his way to a good press with this nonsense. Media suckers will fall for anything. If Stanley were to set a precedent and say something sensible, such as that

the politicians are to blame for the fiscal crisis because they borrowed money they knew they could never repay, the pundits would ignore him.

All this foolishness would be amusing, except . . . except that it is poisonous. Poor people are told, in effect, "The bankers and landlords are out to get you, so who could blame you if you became a bum? Drink wine, take dope, be a slob. It isn't your fault."

Fortunately, not all poor people buy this line. Many know that New York is still the land of opportunity. Josh Morgan, for instance, Josh is tall, slim, handsome, black. He is bright, affable, industrious. Josh just turned 18. He came here 10 years ago from his native Panama City. He is one of seven kids. His father abandoned the family back in Panama. Josh lives with his grandparents on 123d St.

Josh gets up at 7 a.m. every morning and takes the train to Haaren High School on W. 59th St., where he is a top student, class president and editor of the school paper. After classes, he subways to Empire Cleaners on Lower Second Ave., where he works 3½ hours bagging clothes. He got the job in October by walking down Second Ave. and going into one store after another until someone hired him. Josh goes home after work and studies, then goes back downtown, either to Catch a Rising Star on First Ave. or to Improvisation on W. 44th St. These night clubs showcase young comics. Josh does a funny routine. The sophisticated crowd at Catch a Rising Star dug his act the other night. Josh hopes to work his way through college, preferably Columbia, doing comedy.

Josh nearly went bad a few years ago. He was hanging out with losers. But he turned himself around. "I had to cut off people who were detrimental to my dreams," he explains. The smartest man in town? And he's only 18.