

Pierre Salinger (1987)

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Salinger: Americans fail to understand European concerns

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Pierre Salinger assailed American policy makers for basing their actions on misperceptions of the interests of our allies when he spoke in Bailey Hall on Nov. 12 as the Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels World Affairs Fellow.

As a prime case in point, Salinger cited President Reagan's near-agreement with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at their meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland. The European impression of that event is that "Reykjavik is a much greater Reagan disaster than Irangate," he said, explaining, "The fact that the president of the United States would come so close to a gigantic arms agreement without having consulted for one minute with his European allies terrified European leaders.

"Since the end of World War II, the defense of Europe has depended on the United States," said Salinger, a former White House press secretary who is now the chief foreign correspondent for ABC News and who recently returned to the United States after nearly two decades of covering European news from Paris. "It is our military power that is at the center of the Atlantic Alliance, which has always depended on the perception that the United States is ready to defend Europe – and there is a growing perception in Europe today that the United States is not ready to defend Europe."

Pershing missiles were Europe's idea

If efforts to reduce the federal deficit give rise to proposals that U.S. troops be brought home from the European continent, "Taking out those troops would be devastating for the alliance: In my opinion it would be the end of the Atlantic Alliance, Salinger said. He added that such a withdrawal would not save money, because the cost of keeping U.S. forces in Europe is being subsidized by West Germany and others.

Salinger pointed out that, although many Americans and Europeans believe that the U.S. imposed the deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles on Europe five years ago, "the idea of deploying those missile: in Europe was a European idea" to counter the emplacement of Soviet missiles of similar range.

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Despite mass demonstrations against the missiles in several European countries, voters elected governments supporting, the missile deployment in the three affected European countries, showing public support for the policy. And unlike West Germany, where "there are more nuclear missiles per square mile than any other country in the world," there were no demonstrations in France. There "the finger on the trigger is that of a man the French elected themselves as their president."

Zero option was political ploy

Salinger, who left for Moscow after his Cornell appearance for stories previewing the Dec. 7 summit conference, noted that "we're about to sign an agreement to take the missiles out." He recalled that the proposal to eliminate the missiles on both sides did not, as widely believed, come initially from Gorbachev.

"The zero option was proposed by Ronald Reagan and his secretary of state,

Alexander Haig, soon after they came to power," Salinger recalled. But he continued, "Let's be honest about it: It was clearly a political ploy at that time. They wanted to calm anti-nuclear movements" and they were absolutely confident the Soviets would never accept the proposal. European leaders shared the American view.

"The fact that Reagan came so close to an agreement at Reykjavik sent a message into the brain of a not-unintelligent man named Mikhail Gorbachev," Salinger said. "He understood that there was an interest in arriving at a nuclear settlement, and therefore he put on the table his acceptance of the zero option. And the trap was closed."

Salinger said he talked to "one of the most important leaders in Europe" shortly after that" who said: "It is a totally unacceptable proposal, but it's impossible to refuse!"

"Most European experts on defense consider this accord highly dangerous for Europe because they believe it is a very important step toward cutting the umbilical cord between U.S. defense and Western European defense," Salinger noted. Whether the perception is accurate or not, whether the agreement is worthwhile overall or not, Salinger described European fears of Soviet superiority in conventional forces.

Need to defend the dollar

On economic issues, the United States has been similarly heedless of European perceptions, Salinger said. On a Sunday a month ago, Treasury Secretary James Baker told a television interviewer the United States no longer wanted to stop the dollar from further descent.

The next morning, he went on, "The dollar went through the floor. The Tokyo stock market went through the floor," as did the stock markets in London, Paris and Frankfurt. "And the New York stock market went through the floor," following the others, not leading them.

"And we continue to have this absolutely mindless view of the international economic situation which causes high administration officials to say that it doesn't make any difference how far the dollar goes down," Salinger asserted.

"But in Europe and in Japan, the feeling is that if you are not going to defend your national currency, you're a weak economic power."

He said that the United States lost respect by promising at three successive economic summit conferences to reduce its budget deficits, but doing nothing until the stock market finally crashed.

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As the world's largest debtor, the United States has made itself a bargain bazaar for foreigners, Salinger noted. They now own one-third to one-half the commercial real estate in several major downtown areas.

"These perceptions of economic weakness are affecting our ability as a world leader as a leader of the Atlantic Alliance," he said.

Learn to forget hostages

Salinger recalled the American perception of Europeans as untrustworthy allies when European nations temporized on the problem of terrorism. "Just at the time the Europeans understood that you couldn't deal with terrorists, what happened?" he asked. "They discovered the United States was doing it," dealing with the *Iranians*.

Both Europe and America were unrealistic, Salinger insisted. Admitting that his view might sound "inhuman," he said, "When somebody is taken hostage, a country must forget him, or her."

The author of a prize-winning television documentary and a book on the Iran hostage crisis, Salinger asserted that if the United States had refused to negotiate with Iran, "The hostages would have become valueless. By negotiating, by giving them arms, we convince those people who take hostages that hostages have a value."

Earlier in the day, speaking to Professor John Weiss' class in modern European studies, Salinger reviewed the successful strategy by which French President Mitterrand sharply reduced the influence of his country's communist party by switching votes to the Socialists.

He also described France as more than the home of gastronomy, as a high technology society that produced the world's fastest train, saturated its homes with computers to replace telephone directories and devised the "smart card" that does much more than a credit card.

At a reception at the end of the day, Salinger surprised his hosts by sitting down at the piano in the A.D. White House and playing Bach's Prelude No.1.