

7725311



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

S/S

October 4, 1977

To: The Secretary

From: PA - Hodding Carter III

(70)

Press Comment on the Panama Canal Treaties

A review of nation-wide press comment in several hundred papers since announcement of the draft Panama Canal Treaties reveals:

1. The trend in editorial comment has moved away from outright opposition to any treaty. But, there are very widespread concerns about the details of the proposed treaties and the atmosphere in which they were negotiated.

These concerns are most persuasively stated by those who have not firmly committed themselves. In order of frequency they are:

- A. Abhorrence for "threats of violence," which are seen as having been the major impetus for negotiations and the major argument for ratification.
- B. Resentment of an "apologetic attitude" for what is seen as a great U.S. achievement that benefitted Panama.
- C. Belief that the financial arrangements with Panama--including those outside the treaties--are excessive or foolish: "Not only are we giving them the Canal, we're paying them to take it."
- D. Questions about the ability of the treaties to preserve U.S. access to the Canal and the U.S. right to defend it.

2. Overwhelmingly, the press wants a full--and unemotional--debate about ratification.

Newspapers that are not firmly committed are particularly critical of perceived attempts--by both the Administration and treaty opponents--to "rush to judgment." The signing ceremony was widely perceived as an attempt to pressure the Senate toward ratification and was criticized by a number of commentators, including those who support the treaties.

3. There is widespread perception that failure to gain ratification will damage President Carter's ability to gain Congressional approval for other foreign, and domestic, policies. However, this is rarely used as an argument for ratification.

4. Unanimously, the press believes the public is, for the present, firmly opposed to the treaties.

The press view of the current public mood comes from its reading of national and local public opinion polls, man-in-the-street interviews, and the volume of anti-treaty letters being received by newspapers. Pro-treaty commentators believe this opposition can be altered by a fairly lengthy "education" campaign led by the President. Anti-treaty commentators think the Administration is attempting to thwart the clear will of the people.

Some commentators, particularly those leaning toward opposition, decry statements about the need for "education" as a slur on the intelligence of the public. This view is increasingly appearing in public correspondence addressed to the White House and the Department.

5. Endorsement of the treaties by noted conservatives is apparently persuasive with a certain segment of the press. Columnist William F. Buckley's support and columnist James Kilpatrick's neutrality have been widely quoted. Their attitudes have, apparently, persuaded a number of newspapers at least to keep an open mind.

6. To date, White House briefings of state delegations have produced highly favorable news stories on treaty provisions and, in some instances, shifts from editorial opposition either to support or neutrality.

JAC
Drafted: JACollinge:bds
10/3/77 x23165