

Bush voices new troop cuts

State of Union speech centers on Europe

By Terence Hunt
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush, acclaiming the "revolution of '89" in Eastern Europe, proposed a sharp new cut in U.S. and Soviet combat forces Wednesday night and told a joint meeting of Congress that "the time is right to move forward" in Europe.

In his first State of the Union address, Bush also announced plans to withdraw — "well before the end of February" — the last 3,000 troops from a force of 14,000 sent to Panama to oust Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Democrats and Republicans alike, assembled in joint session of Congress to hear the president, stood in ovation when Bush said, "One year ago, the people of Panama lived in fear, under the thumb of a dictator. Today, democracy is restored, Panama is free."

Hours before he delivered his address, Bush telephoned Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev to advise him of his proposal to cut U.S. and Soviet forces in Central Europe to 195,000 on each side. Later Bush characterized Gorbachev as "receptive" and willing to consider the proposal.

The cuts would be nowhere near equal since the Soviets have a huge advantage in European military force. The United States has 305,000 troops in Europe, compared to 565,000 Soviet forces.

Last May, Bush proposed a 275,000-troop ceiling and he had said he would not seek deeper cuts until U.S.-Soviet negotiators had finalized that agreement. Wednesday, the administration said it wanted parallel discussions on the deeper cuts. Why the shift? A senior U.S. official said, "Events (in Europe) were running ahead of the negotiations."

The European troop offer was the surprising — and popular — centerpiece of a speech in which Bush also proposed lofty goals for American schools and prodded lawmakers to approve his

plans for a capital gains tax cut and bills dealing with clean air, child care, crime and drugs.

In reaction, House Speaker Thomas S. Foley embraced the troop reduction plan but said Democrats would offer a domestic agenda of their own.

With ambassadors from across the world in attendance, Bush said, "With communism crumbling, our aim must be to ensure democracy's advance ... We are in a period of great transition, great hope, yet great uncertainty."

Bush said, "The events of the year just ended — the revolution of '89 — have been a chain reaction, change so striking that it marks the beginning of a new era in the world's affairs."

"Think back," Bush asked Congress and his national broadcast audience, "to the world we knew as 1989 began." In the year since, Communist governments gave way in Poland, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. In such locations, Bush said, "the idea called America is alive."

On his return to the White House, Bush was asked by reporters how Gorbachev reacted.

"I can't characterize it, but I can just simply say that he was receptive, but I don't know whether he's supportive or not. I just told him about it and so we have to wait," Bush said. "You can't — something as complicated as that and serious, obviously they need to consider it. So that's about all. But it was a friendly and I think productive conversation."

In his speech, Bush said: "We recognize that the Soviet military threat in Europe is diminishing but we see little change in Soviet strategic modernization. ... But the time is right to move forward on a conventional arms-control agreement to move us to more appropriate levels of military forces in Europe."

His troop cutback proposal won immediate praise from Congress. Sen. Sam Nunn, Democrat-

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