

U.S. turns down Soviet leader's call to halt nuclear weapons tests

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Reagan administration, citing national security concerns, has rejected a proposal by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to stop testing nuclear weapons.

Gorbachev coupled the proposal in a letter to President Reagan with an offer to permit American observers to visit Soviet test sites, a U.S. official said Thursday.

But the White House, while not referring to the letter, rejected such a link — at least for now. The rejection could prompt the Soviets to end the freeze they imposed on their own tests last July. It is due to expire Jan. 1.

At the same time, though, the administration welcomed the idea of exchanging test observers — long a U.S. goal — and left the door open to another Gorbachev proposal to

resume negotiations on a treaty to outlaw all nuclear explosions.

Test-ban talks adjourned five years ago, toward the end of the Carter administration, and never were reopened.

"The U.S. has learned through experience that moratoria cannot be counted on to lead to the enhanced security desired," said Larry Speakes, the presidential spokesman, of Gorbachev's call for a joint freeze.

He said the Soviets broke a testing moratorium in 1961 with some 40 atmospheric explosions over a period of several weeks.

"U.S. testing is required to ensure the continued credibility and effectiveness of our deterrent, and to ensure the reliability and safety of the U.S. arsenal," Speakes said.

However, the president's spokesman said

the issue was "quite separate" from agreeing on ways to monitor observance of test-ban agreements. Two were reached in 1974 and 1975, limiting all U.S. and Soviet underground nuclear explosions to 150 kilotons or less.

President Reagan invited Gorbachev last July to send Soviet inspectors to witness a U.S. test at the Nevada test site. "The U.S. would, of course, welcome Soviet willingness to agree to reciprocal visits," Speakes said.

But the U.S. official who divulged the Gorbachev letter to The Associated Press said the Soviet leader's offer to admit American observers was conditioned on U.S. acceptance of a nuclear test freeze.

Still, the offer could be significant in light

of traditional Soviet reluctance to allow Americans at Soviet military sites. Gorbachev's letter appeared to represent an effort to give lagging arms control negotiations a shot in the arm in the aftermath of his summit meeting with Reagan.

A U.S. nuclear test, due to be conducted Thursday, was postponed, but there was no indication the action was related to the Soviet proposal.

The official said he did not know what the president's formal response would be to Gorbachev. Charles Redman, a State Department spokesman, said the two sides had engaged in "confidential exchanges," but he refused to say anything regarding the letter.

In offering to open Soviet testing sites,

Gorbachev suggested Reagan agree to accept a proposal by the leaders of six countries to permit the installation of seismic and other monitoring devices on their own territories.

The six are Argentina, Greece, India, Mexico, Sweden and Tanzania. The idea would be to expand the potential for verification of U.S. and Soviet compliance with a testing freeze.

Greece, India and Sweden are relatively close to the Soviet Union, while Mexico borders the United States.

If there were still "ambiguities" afterward, Gorbachev said, American inspectors could go to Soviet test sites to see for themselves. He asked for a reciprocal right to send Soviet inspectors here.

Burger opposes convention on Constitution

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chief Justice Warren E. Burger says he opposes a constitutional convention — not because, as many contend, it would wreak havoc on the document — but because it would be "a grand waste of time."

In a question-and-answer session at the National Press Club on Thursday, Burger shrugged off criticism that the convention, approved so far by 32 of the required 34 states, could abridge rights guaranteed by the founding fathers.

"I don't think it would pose a threat," he said. But, he added, "It would be a grand waste of time."

Burger said he favored making any changes in the Constitution by adopting amendments one at a time through ratification by three-fourths of the states.

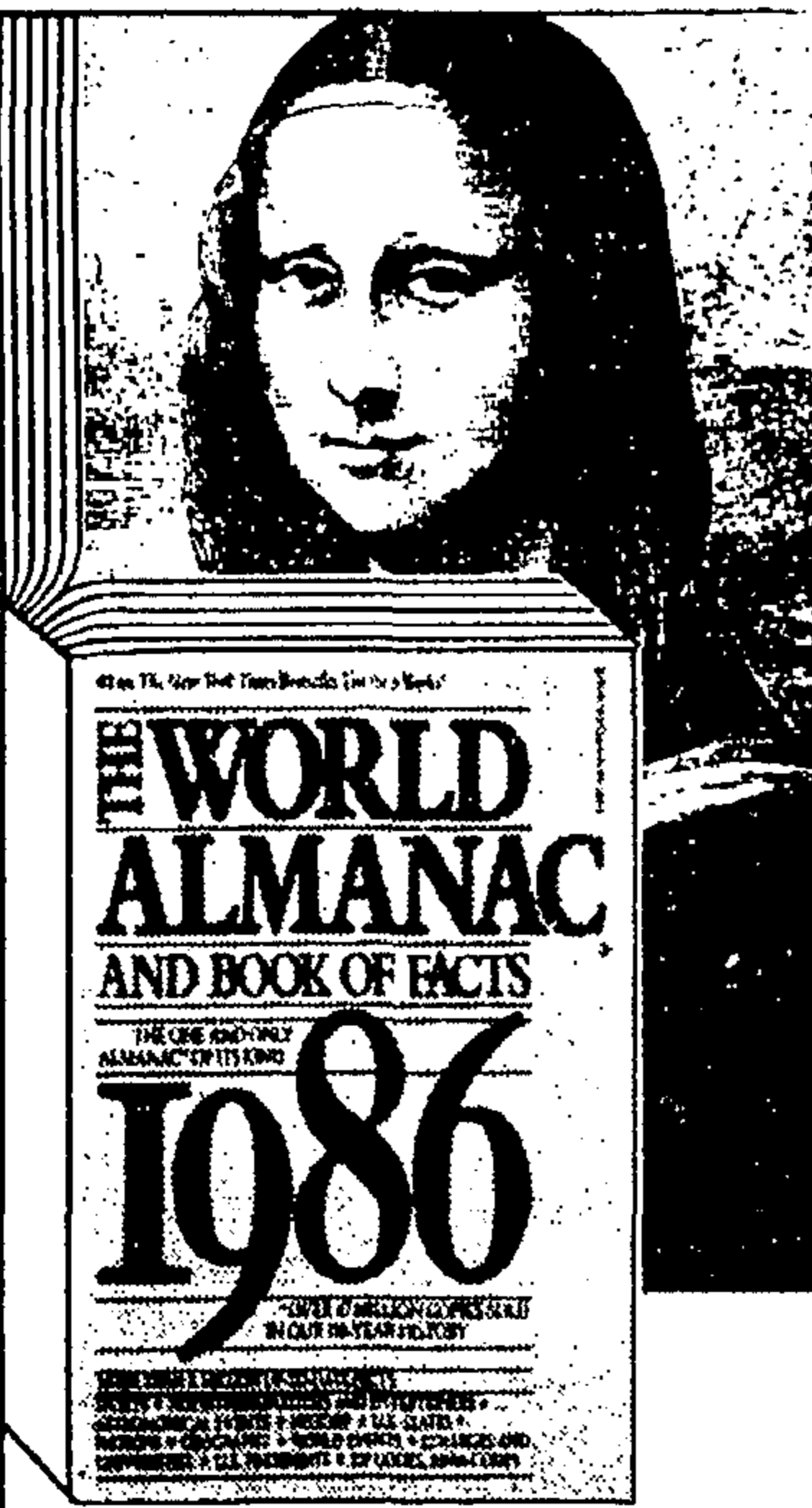
"If you see a problem, identify it and do something about it," he said, noting that a renewed effort is planned to adopt the Equal Rights Amendment to outlaw discrimination based on sex.

On another matter, Burger defended a decision to bar the public from meetings of the presidential commission he heads that is making plans to celebrate the Constitution's 200th anniversary in 1987.

The chief justice said it would take "three times as long" for each meeting of the bicentennial commission if the public were allowed to attend.

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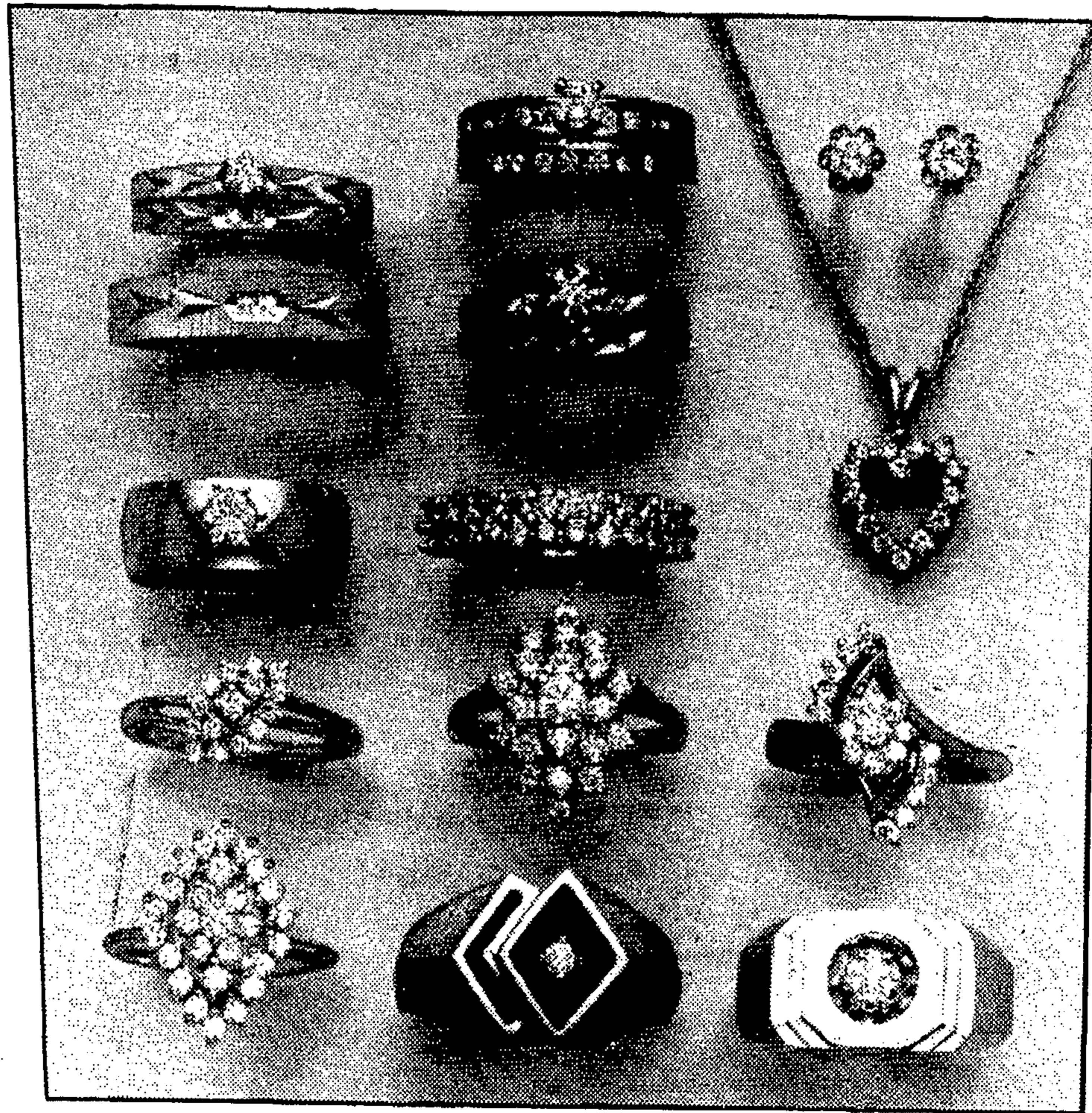
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