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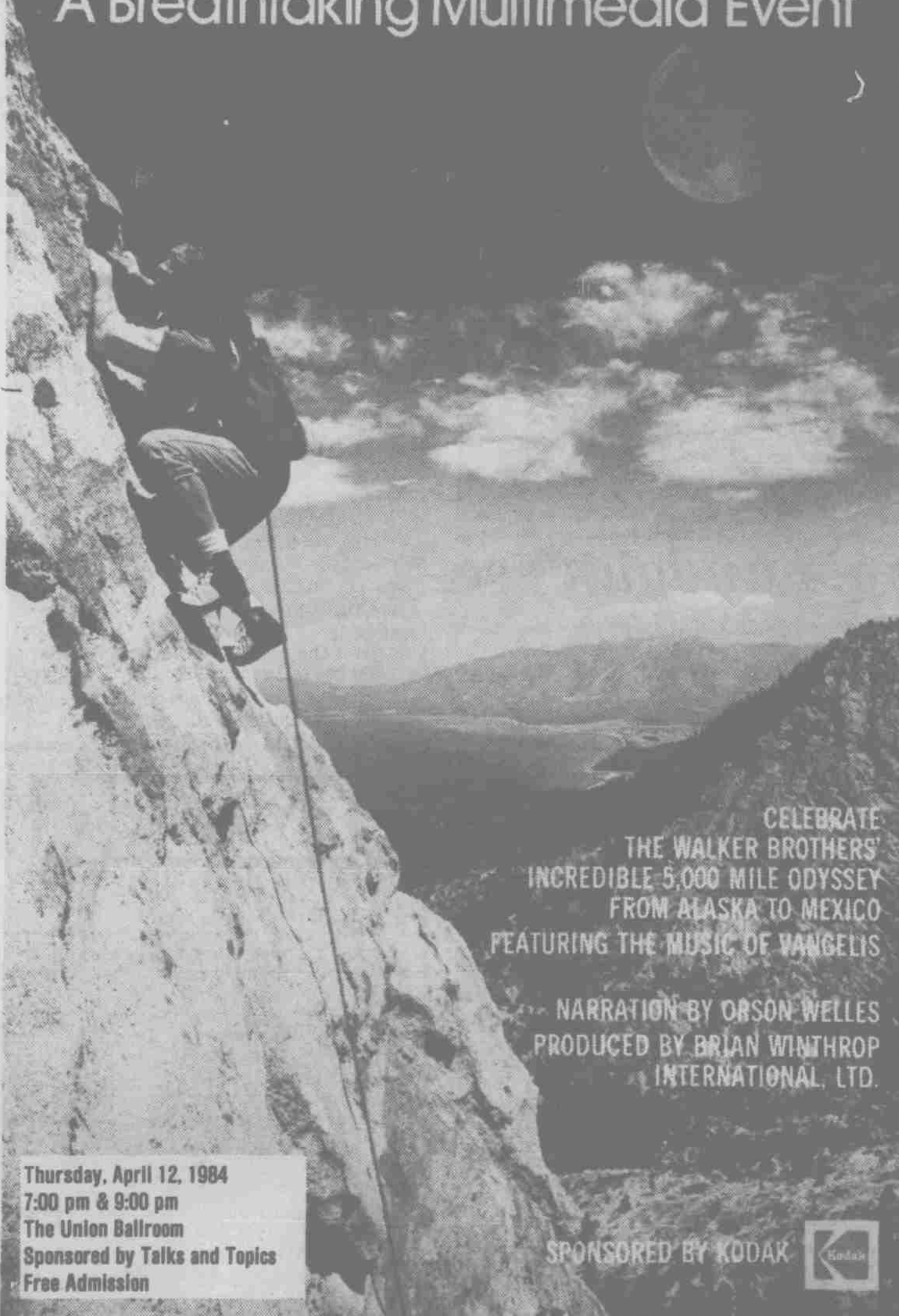
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Off The Wire

National and international news
from the Reuter News Report

U.S. diplomat ordered to leave Afghanistan

MOSCOW — A diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, has been accused of spying and ordered to leave the country within 48 hours, the Soviet news agency Tass reported Wednesday. In a short dispatch from Kabul, it said Third Secretary Richard S. Vandiver had been declared "persona non grata for espionage, collecting of information and actions against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan."

A Reagan administration official denied the spy charges in Washington later Wednesday.

"We're puzzled and concerned about this action," a State Department official said. "There is no substance whatever to these charges." The State Department official in Washington, who did not want to be named, said Vandiver would leave Kabul as ordered.

Chernenko elected president

MOSCOW — Communist Party chief Konstantin Chernenko Wednesday was elected state president, consolidating his national authority and putting him on an equal footing with Ronald Reagan and other foreign heads of state.

Chernenko, 72, was unanimously voted chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (parliament), which carries the title of president, at a new session of the legislature. The office, a mainly ceremonial one, had been vacant since the death of Yuri Andropov two months ago.

Mining of harbor denied by official

WASHINGTON — Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam Wednesday asserted a U.S. right to mine Nicaraguan harbors as an "act of collective security" but refused to acknowledge the CIA and taken such action. Dam declined in a public House Foreign Affairs Committee session to acknowledge what government officials have privately confirmed: The Central Intelligence Agency has directed Nicaraguan anti-government rebels in the mining. He also refused to say whether the operation had ceased.

But Delaware Democrat Joseph Biden, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told Reuters earlier, "There won't be any more mining."

Astronauts complete 'service call'

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Two astronauts Wednesday carried out with unexpected speed and ease the first "service call" in space, replacing two components of a disabled satellite. George Nelson and James Van Hoften worked for six hours in the open cargo hole of the shuttle Challenger to change two electronic boxes which failed on the sun-observing satellite shortly after it was launched more than three years ago.

The satellite, Solar Max, was successfully hauled into Challenger's hold Tuesday after several earlier attempts to retrieve it had failed.

China still shelling, Vietnamese say

BANGKOK, Thailand — The Vietnam News Agency said Wednesday China continued to shell its northern border region for three days after Chinese troops entered Vietnamese territory and attacked two hill positions. The Vietnam News Agency, monitored in Bangkok, said China fired thousands of artillery and mortar rounds at the provinces of Quang Ninh, Lang Son, Cao Bank and Ha Tuyen April 7-9.

Six civilians were wounded and many homes, rice fields and orchards damaged, it said.

Peking officials said Tuesday 43 Vietnamese had been killed between April 2 and 7 in border clashes.

EPA chief responds to charges

WASHINGTON — Environmental Protection Agency chief William Ruckelshaus Wednesday responded to Democratic charges that some EPA officials are in the pockets of industry by saying: "Give me the names and I'll can them."

Ruckelshaus, who came back to clean up the agency he had founded after it became the arena of a number of administrative scandals, said he felt good about the job he had done in helping the agency stabilize itself again.

Ruckelshaus has dismissed or transferred about 25 to EPA officials since taking over last year, but Democratic presidential hopefuls Walter Mondale and Gary Hart have charged some officials are still in collusion with industry.