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SPECIAL REPORT

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TRANSCRIPT OF A NEWS CONFERENCE BY PRESIDENT NIXON  
WHITE HOUSE, MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1969

(President Nixon) Won't you be seated. Mr. Smith.

(Question) Mr. President, do you see any signs of the Vietnam war cooling off?

(The President) Well, looking over the long period, yes -- As far as recent weeks are concerned, since my speech of November 3, no significant change. When we compare the situation with regard to infiltration and casualties this year with last year, there is a great difference.

Looking to the future, if that situation continues, I believe that we can see that the Vietnam war will come to a conclusion regardless of what happens at the bargaining table. It will come to a conclusion as a result of the plan that we have instituted on which we are embarked for replacing American troops with Vietnamese forces.

Mr. Cornell.

(Question) In your opinion, was what happened at My Lai a massacre, an alleged massacre, or what was it? And what do you think can be done to prevent things like that?

If it was a massacre, do you think it was justifiable on military or other grounds?

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AMERICAN EMBASSY - TOKYO

(The President) Well, trying to answer all of those questions and sorting it out, I would start first with this statement: What appears was certainly a massacre, under no circumstances was it justified.

One of the goals we are fighting for in Vietnam is to keep the people from South Vietnam from having imposed upon them a government which has atrocity against civilians as one of its policies.

We cannot ever condone or use atrocities against civilians in order to accomplish that goal.

Now when you use the word "alleged" that is only proper in terms of the individuals involved. Under our system a man is not guilty until proved to be so. There are several individuals involved here who will be tried by military courts. Consequently, we should say "alleged" as far as they are concerned until they are proved guilty.

As far as this kind of activity is concerned, I believe that it is an isolated incident. Certainly within this Administration we are doing everything possible to find out whether it was isolated and so far our investigation indicates that it was.

As far as the future is concerned, I would only add this one point: Looking at the other side of the coin, we have 1,200,000 Americans who have been in Vietnam. 40,000 of them have given their lives. Virtually all of them had helped the people of Vietnam in one way or another. The Marines alone this year have built over 250,000 churches, pagodas and temples for the people of Vietnam.

Our soldiers in Vietnam and sailors and airmen this year alone contributed three-quarters of a million dollars to help the people of South Vietnam.

Now this record of generosity, of decency, must not be allowed to be smeared and slurred because of this kind of an incident. That is why I am going to do everything I possibly can to see that all of the facts in this incident are brought to light and that those who are charged, if they are found guilty, are punished. Because if it is isolated, it is against our policy and we shall see to it that what these men did, if they did it, does not smear the decent men that have gone to Vietnam, in my opinion, in a very important cause.

(Question) Vice President Agnew, in recent weeks, has made two speeches in which he has criticized the news media, broadcasting in particular. What, if anything, in those speeches is there with which you disagree?

(The President) Before this audience?

The Vice President does not clear his speeches with me, just as I did not clear my speeches with President Eisenhower. However, I believe that the Vice President rendered a public service in talking in a very dignified and courageous way about a problem that many Americans are concerned about; that is, the coverage by news media, and particularly the television news media, of public figures.

Let me be quite precise. He did not advocate censorship. On the contrary, he advocated that there should be free expression. He did not oppose bias. On the contrary, he recognized, as I do, that there should be opinion.

Let me say on that score that I don't want a bunch of intellectual eunuchs, either writing the news or talking about the news. I like excitement in the news, whether it is on television or whether it is in the columns.

He did say, and perhaps this point should be well taken, that television stations might well follow the practice of newspapers, of separating news from opinion. When opinion is expressed, label it so, but don't mix the opinion in with reporting of the news.

It seems to me these were useful suggestions. Perhaps the networks disagreed with the criticisms. But I would suggest that they should be just as dignified and just as reasonable in answering the criticisms as he was in making them.

Mr. Bailey.

(Question) Sir, if the final version of the tax reform bill now pending in Congress includes the Senate adopted \$800 exemption provision and the 15 percent Social Security increase, can you sign it?

(The President) No.

Mr. Theis?

(Question) May I go back to Mr. Cornell's question to ask in the light of the My Lai incident, would you prefer a civilian commission, something other than a military inquiry in this case?

(The President) Mr. Theis, I do not believe that a civilian commission at this time would be useful. I believe that the matter now is in the judicial process, and that a civilian commission might be, and very properly could be, used by the defendant's attorneys as having prejudiced their rights.

Now, if it should happen that the judicial process, as set up by the military under the new law passed by Congress, does not prove to be adequate in bringing this incident completely before the public, as it should be brought before the public, then I would consider a commission, but not at this time.

(Question) Mr. President, today Secretary of Defense Laird is reported to have said that you would be expected to announce a further troop cutback from Vietnam later this month, probably below 40,000 men. Also, today, Senator George Aiken is reported as having said that you have already withdrawn or ordered withdrawn another 9,000 that were not announced.

Could you give us your thinking on the prospects and the substance of both of those reports?

(The President) As I indicated in my speech on television on November 3, the reports from Vietnam with regard to infiltration, with regard to casualties, and with regard to the training of South Vietnamese, indicate more progress on all fronts than we had anticipated when we started our troop scheduled withdrawal in June.

There will be a troop cut with a replacement by South Vietnamese later this month, I would say within the next two to three weeks. As far as the number is concerned, the number is still under consideration. It will depend on the events and our analysis of the events between now and the time I make the announcement.

(Question) Sir, there are two flagrant instances of intimidation and harassment and threats against Pentagon personnel who may have divulged information to Congress and to the public about cost overruns and mismanagements and irregular industrial alliances.

These two instances are related because some of the same people are involved. I refer, one, to the Gestapo-like interrogation of Pentagon personnel to see who leaked information to Sarah McClendon for news stories. This involves Barry Shillito and Edward Sheridan.

I also refer to the firing of A. Ernest Fitzgerald whose divulgement of cost overruns saved the American people \$2 billion. His greatest critics were Dr. Robert Moot and Barry Shillito.

Can you do something about this, please, sir?

(The President) Miss McClendon, I better, after the way you put this question.

(Question) Mr. President, last week the White House Conference on Food and Nutrition strongly recommended approval of a bill which has passed the Senate to reform the Food Stamp program that was blocked in the House and another bill which would reform the school lunch program which has passed the House, but is blocked in the Senate.

Your Administration is reported to be lobbying against both bills. Will you follow the recommendations of your White House Conference, and what course of action will you take?

(The President) I favor the approach that our Administration has put before the Congress as being the more responsible approach on both scores. I will, of course, consider the recommendations of the White House Conference, which will be made to me at my request within approximately 30 days.

There is another recommendation by the White House Conference which I, unfortunately, cannot give really sympathetic consideration to, and that is the one recommending a \$5,400 minimum for a family of four in America. That would cost approximately \$70 billion to \$80 billion in taxes, or \$70 billion to \$80 billion in increased prices. I do not say that to discredit the conference.

I simply say that all of us in this country want to end hunger in the United States. All of us want the poor to have a minimum floor, and that minimum to be as high as possible.

All of us, for example, want Social Security to be higher. But when I consider all of these matters, I have to think also of this fact: the fact that I, as President, am the one who has the primary responsibility for the cost of living in this country.

Referring a moment ago to the tax question, it would be very easy for me to sign a bill which reduces taxes. But if I sign the kind of a bill which the Senate is about to pass, I would be reducing taxes for some of the American people and raising the prices for all the American people.

I will not do that.

(Question) How fair do you think news media have been in reporting on you and on Vice President Agnew and on your Administration generally?

(The President) Generally, I think the news media has been fair. I have no complaints about, certainly, the extent of the coverage that I have received.

I also will have no complaints just so long as the news media allows, as it does tonight, an opportunity for me to be heard directly by the people and then the television commentators to follow me. I will take my chances.

Miss Thomas?

(Question) Do you think that the wife of the Attorney General, like the Vice President, has rendered a public service by her statements on protest movements and on their political activities?

(The President) Well, now, Miss Thomas, I decided when this Administration came to Washington that I would take the responsibility for answering for my own personal family and for my Cabinet family, but that each Cabinet member would answer for his family. So I will leave that question to the Attorney General.

Mr. Semple?

(Question) To broaden that a little bit, on November 3 you called for support for your policies in Vietnam. You since received a response that some of your aides feel is gratifying.

My question is, however, have you not with the help of Vice President Agnew, and I am referring to some of his recent speeches, purchased the support at the cost of alienating a sizeable segment of the American public and risking polarization of the country?

(The President) Mr. Semple, one of the problems of leadership is to take a position. I like to be liked, I don't like to say things that everybody doesn't agree with.

When peace marchers come to Washington it would be very easy to say that I agree with them and I will do what they want. But a President has to do what he considers to be right, right for the people, right, for example, in pursuing a just peace and not just peace for our time, for a little time.

I believe that I pursued that path. I do not believe that that is a disservice to the public interest, because I believe that sometimes it is necessary to draw the line clearly, not to have enmity against those who disagree, but to make it clear that there can be no compromise where such great issues as self-determination and freedom and a just peace are involved.

(Question) Will you assess for us how you see now the prospects of a special session of Congress during the Christmas holidays?

(The President) Well, I have had some conversations with some of the members of the House and Senate since I indicated to the Republican leaders that I might call that session.

I would say the jury is still out. The House is moving much more speedily, the Senate has begun to move more speedily. If the present Congress continues at this rate, it may be that we can all have some vacation after Christmas. But if they do not pass the appropriation bills as I indicated, I will have to call a special session as much as I would not want to do so.

(Question) The United States today asked for a postponement in the SALT talks, the strategic arms talks. Can you tell us why and assess the talks for us, please?

(The President) Well, the postponement does not have any long-range significance. It is only for the purpose of developing positions in a proper way. As far as the progress is concerned, I would say it is encouraging. I say that somewhat cautiously, because I would not want to leave out the hope that we would have an agreement within a matter of weeks or even months.

But it is encouraging because both sides are presenting positions in a very serious way and are not trying to make propaganda out of their positions. Both sides, I believe, therefore, want a limitation on strategic arms. As long as this is the case, there is a chance for an agreement.

Now, it is going to take some time, because what is involved here, as distinguished from the Test Ban, as distinguished from the Nonproliferation Treaty, both of which were important, but which were basically peripheral issues, here you have the basic security of the United States of America and the Soviet Union involved. Therefore, both must bargain hard. But I believe the progress to date has been good. The prospects are better than I anticipated they would be when the talks began.

(Question) Mr. President, as the Vietnamization process moves along, are there any circumstances, such as, perhaps, a series of defeats by the South Vietnamese Army, that might lead you to want to reverse the process of troop withdrawals and increase our troops in Vietnam?

(The President) I do not anticipate that at this time, I want to make it, of course, clear, that we do not anticipate that there will not be troubles. The enemy still has the capability of launching some offensive actions. Not, certainly, the capability that it had a year ago. It is much less because their infiltration has been less. But the present prognosis that I think I can make is this: that we can go forward with our troop withdrawal program and that any action that the enemy takes, either against us or the South Vietnamese can be contained within that program.

Mr. Horner.

(Question) Mr. President, is there any truth in the reports that have been rather persistent for the last couple of weeks that we paid Thailand something like a billion dollars for their cooperation in Vietnam?

In that connection, where do our allies, like Thailand, South Korea, and their troops fit into our withdrawal program?

(The President) Well, first, with regard to the second part of the question, both Thailand and South Korea have no intention, at least none that has been indicated to us, of withdrawing forces at the time that we are withdrawing ours, because we have a much greater commitment there than they have.

Second, with regard to the billion dollars that allegedly has been paid to Thailand, the amount is, of course, far less than that. But quite candidly, yes, the United States is subsidizing the Thai troops. We also are subsidizing the South Korean troops. We are doing exactly what we did in Western Europe immediately after World War II when we subsidized virtually all of Western Europe due to the fact that they could not maintain forces themselves for their own defense.

These are newly developing countries. They are unable to maintain their forces for their own defense. Therefore, we think that subsidy is correct. I can only say this, it seems to me it makes a great deal of sense. The Thais are in Vietnam as volunteers, and if they are willing to go there as volunteers, I would much rather pay out some money to have them there than to have American men fighting there in their place.

(Question) Since Ambassador Lodge resigned, you have not named a successor as chief negotiator. Is this in effect downgrading the Paris talks, because they have been non-productive?

(The President) No. Mr. Habib is a very confident career diplomat, and he will be able to discuss anything that is brought up seriously by the other side. We are simply waiting for a serious proposal.

(Question) Considering how things have gone in Paris, how do you now rate the chances of a negotiated settlement of the war?

(The President) Not good. Quite candidly, I would like to say that they were good, but looking at the present situation, the enemy's line continues to be hard.

Their proposals are quite frivolous, as the ones by the VC today, and I do not anticipate any progress on the negotiating front at this time. But I put in this one condition: As our program for Vietnamization continues to work, and as it becomes apparent, as I believe it increasingly will, that it will succeed, I think the pressures for the enemy then to negotiate a settlement will greatly increase, because once we are out and the South Vietnamese are there, they will have a much harder individual to negotiate with than they had when we were there.

(Question) Before the Supreme Court ordered immediate school integration, you said you preferred a middle road policy, that is between segregation forever and instant integration.

What is your policy now?

(The President) To carry out what the Supreme Court has laid down. I believe in carrying out the law even though I may have disagreed as I did in this instance with the decree that the Supreme Court eventually came down with. But we will carry out the law.

(Question) A question on your broad philosophy on the tax problem that we are all struggling with. You have often pointed out that this is a very rich country and there are some people who argue that the American people can tax themselves whenever they want to and when they are prepared to make the sacrifice in order to provide the very substantial sums that are necessary for the very big problems at home, the cities, getting their housing program rolling and so forth, and that we might very well do it now and get on with the job because the end of the Vietnam war apparently is not going to release very substantial amounts of fresh funds.

Could you comment on this rather hair-shirted approach to the tax program?

(The President) It is a very complicated but very fundamental question. I would put it briefly in answer in this way: approximately 35 to 37 percent of the total income of the United States goes to taxes, that is in Federal, State and local taxes. I believe that amount is high enough.

I believe that when a nation takes a substantially larger portion of the national income than that for taxes, that then that nation loses its character as a free, private enterprise economy and turns over and becomes primarily a state-controlled and oriented economy.

Therefore, while I believe that the United States can afford what it needs to do in many fields, including the environment and others that I will be touching upon in the State of the Union, I do not want to see a substantial increase in the tax burden as a percentage of our gross national income.

Mr. Lisagor.

(Question) Mr. President, getting back to the Congress for a moment, House Democratic Leader Carl Albert today said that the Administration spokesmen have issued misleading statements about the Congress in an effort to undermine public confidence in it. He went on to say, and I quote him as saying it is the fault of the Administration for delays, obfuscations and confusion and lack of leadership on the part of the Administration.

Would you care to comment?

(The President) Well, that sounds like a pretty good political statement by Mr. Albert. I can understand why he is the Majority Leader and might find it necessary to make that statement. However, I think he knows, as all of you know, for six months we have had a major crime control package before the Congress with no action. For months we have had other programs in a number of fields there without action.

This Congress has the worst record in terms of appropriations bills of any Congress in history.

Now let me say I am a defender of the Congress, and, having said all of this, I am a defender of Carl Albert. I like him and I want to continue to work with him and I don't want to answer that question any further at this point.

All right.

(Question) I have two related questions, sir. Why have you only had three full-dress news conferences in six months? And what is your reaction to the general philosophy among some of us in the press that the press is not doing its job, if it doesn't hold the Administration, any administration, to account without, shall we say, coziness?

(The President) Well, I don't think I have had any problem with regard to the press holding me to account in my political lifetime. I think if I could paraphrase Winston Churchill's statement made in 1914, I have always derived a great deal of benefit from criticism and I have never known when I was short of it.

Now as far as the press conferences are concerned, I try to have press conference when I think there is a public interest -- not just a press interest or my interest, but the public interest in having them -- and also to use various devices. As you know, I have had conferences in my office. I had a conference in Guam. I have also made three major television addresses in prime time.

If I considered that the press and the public needs more information than I am giving through press conferences, I will have more. I welcome the opportunity to have them. I am not afraid of them -- just as the press is not afraid of me.

(Question) Mr. President, will our Vietnam involvement be reduced in your Administration to the point where it will command no more public attention than, say, Korea does now?

(The President) That is certainly our goal and I think we are well on the way to achievement of that goal. We have a plan for the reduction of American forces in Vietnam, for removing all combat forces from Vietnam, regardless of what happens in the negotiations.

That plan is going forward. As I will report to the Nation, when I announce the troop withdrawal two or three weeks from now, I believe that developments since my November 3 speech have been on schedule.

(Question) Mr. President, what limits do you put on what the people of the United States ought to know about the war that is going on in Laos, and the American involvement in it?

(The President) The public interest. As far as I am concerned, the people of the United States are entitled to know everything that they possibly can with regard to any involvement of the United States abroad.

As you know, and in answer to a question I think Mr. Potter asked at the last press conference, I pointed out what were the facts. There are no American combat troops in Laos. Our involvement in Laos is solely due to the request of Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist Prime Minister, who was set up there in Laos as a result of the Laos negotiation and accords that were arranged by Governor Harriman during the Kennedy Administration.

We are attempting to uphold those accords and we are doing that despite the fact that North Vietnam has 50,000 troops in Laos. We are also, as I have publicly indicated and as you know, interdicting the Ho Chi Minh trail as it runs through Laos. Beyond that, I don't think the public interest would be served by any further discussion.

All right.

(Question) Mr. President, Budget Director Mayo said recently that uncontrolled Federal spending is likely to push the fiscal '71 budget beyond the \$200 billion mark and that the eventual elimination of the surtax could produce a deficit that year. I have two questions: Do you foresee the possibility of a deficit in '71, and, if that is the prospect, will you recommend continuing the surtax beyond June 30?

(The President) The answer to the second question is that I do not intend to recommend the continuation of the surtax beyond June 30.

With regard to the first part of the question, only by use of the Presidential veto and by impounding funds are we going to be able to avoid the kind of a situation that Director Mayo has described. But I can assure you that I intend to use all the powers of the Presidency to stop the rise in the cost of living, including the veto.

(Question) Mr. President, the enemy's infiltration has been up recently in Vietnam.

Could you give us your assessment of this, specifically whether you think he is replacing losses, or building up for an offensive, and what significance could this fact have in terms of your own plans for troop reduction?

(The President) It has great significance because, as I have pointed out, enemy infiltration, the fact that it was down, is one of the reasons that we have been able to go forward with our own troop withdrawal programs.

However, I have been analyzing these reports week by week. The figures that we got two weeks ago seem to have been inflated. The inflation rate is not as great as we thought then. It is higher than it was a few months ago. It is still lower than it was a year ago.

We do not consider the infiltration significant enough to change our troop withdrawal plans. Now, something may occur in the next two to three weeks that may give me a different view on that, but at this time that would be my observation.

(Question) Mr. President, a move is under way in the House, and it is supported by the Republican Leadership to change the structure of the anti-poverty program, to give the Governors a veto over programs in their States. What is your position on that?

(The President) I support the Director of OEO. He has asked for a two-year extension. He has pledged to reform the OEO, and I think he should be given the chance to reform it.

I hope he is able to work out with the Leadership in the House, most of whom are Republicans in this instance, who want the changes, and some Democrats, and be able to work out some kind of accommodation with them. But, of course, I support my Director that I have appointed.

(Question) Getting back to the polarization question, Mr. President, your Administration has been charged with the failure to reach the young people, both those who protest and march and those who don't.

Have you any specific plans for reaching the young people of this country?

(The President) I think you reach the young people more by talking to them as adults than talking to them as young people. I like to treat them as adults. I like to talk to them.

I was rather encouraged by the number of letters and calls I received with regard to my Vietnam speech from young people. They didn't all agree. But at least they had listened, they had paid attention. I know a way not to reach them, and that is to try to pick number one as far as the football teams are concerned.

(The Press) Thank you, Mr. President.

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Note to Editors:

Page 2, paragraph 6. In referring to the Marine building program, the President used the phrase "250,000 churches, pagodas and temples."

The White House later said the figure should have been 250.

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