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THE PRESIDENT'S NEWS CONFERENCE OF FEBRUARY 17, 1971<sup>1</sup> (EXCERPTS)

The PRESIDENT. We'll make this on the record today.  
The mike is for the purpose of a transcription which will be available, I think, rather soon after we complete the conference because it will be run simultaneously by the stenographers.  
Any question which you want to ask?

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Q. Mr. President, the next logical step in Southeast Asia would seem to be South Vietnamese forces moving into the southern part of North Vietnam for the same reasons that they moved into the Laotian panhandle.

Would our policy rule out support for this type of move, air support for it? The PRESIDENT. Well, I won't speculate on what South Vietnam may decide to do with regard to a possible incursion into North Vietnam in order to defend their national security. However, I will restate our policy. I stated that policy on November 3d [1969] and have restated it at least nine different times publicly since that time.

I stated then that at a time we are withdrawing our forces that if I found that the enemy was stepping up its activity through infiltration in a way that would threaten our remaining forces that I would take strong action to deal with the new situation.

On December 10 [1970], as you recall, I reiterated that statement and said that this action would include the use of airpower against the infiltration routes, military complex supply depots.

That is our policy, the policy of the President taking action if he finds that the North Vietnamese are undertaking actions which threaten our remaining forces in South Vietnam.

Q. Mr. President, under that guide, is there any limit to what we might do to protect our forces in South Vietnam?

The PRESIDENT. We have indicated several limits. For example, we are not going to use ground forces in Laos. We are not going to use advisers in Laos with the South Vietnamese forces. We are not going to use ground forces in Cambodia or advisers in Cambodia as we have previously indicated and we have no intention, of course, of using ground forces in North Vietnam. Those are limitations.

Q. I had reference to our use of airpower.

<sup>1</sup> Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, Feb. 22, 1971, pp. 236-242.

The PRESIDENT. I'm not going to place any limitation upon the use of airpower except, of course, to rule out a rather ridiculous suggestion that is made from time to time—I think the latest by Hans Morgenthau—that our airpower might include the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

As you know, Mr. Lisagor, this has been speculated on for a period of 5 years and I have said for a period of 5 years that this is not an area where the use of nuclear weapons, in any form, is either needed or would be wise.

As far as our airpower is concerned, it will be directed against—and I ought to be as precise as I was on December 10—against those military activities which I determine are directed against and thereby threaten our remaining forces in South Vietnam.

Q. Mr. President, could you discuss with us your evaluation of the possibility of Communist China entering this situation now that it's expanded into Laos or if the South Vietnamese go into North Vietnam?

The PRESIDENT. Let me refer to the situation as it presently exists rather than the hypothesis of whether the South Vietnamese might go into North Vietnam.

As far as the actions in southern Laos are concerned, they present no threat to Communist China and should not be interpreted by the Communist Chinese as being a threat against them.

As you know, the Communist Chinese have been operating in northern Laos for some time. But this action is not directed against Communist China. It is directed against the North Vietnamese who are pointed toward South Vietnam and toward Cambodia.

Consequently, I do not believe that the Communist Chinese have any reason to interpret this as a threat against them or any reason therefore to react to it.

Q. Mr. President, it is reported in both the South Vietnamese and, I think, in our statement the operation will be limited in time and scope. Can you define those terms?

The PRESIDENT. By time, the operation will be limited to the time that is necessary to accomplish the objective. The objective is not to occupy any part of Laos. The South Vietnamese are not there to stay. They are there to disrupt the enemy's lines of communication, their supply lines, their infiltration routes, and then to get out.

Once that is accomplished, if it is accomplished early, they will get out. If it takes a longer time, they will stay in.

There is also another limitation in terms of time. And that is the weather. In the latter part of April or the early part of May, the rains come. And they would have to get out then because then the North Vietnamese also would pose no threat.

In terms of area, space, it is limited to the specific area that you see on the maps here, in terms of cutting across the trails—and it is more than one trail, there are three or four trails—the trails that are the supply lines on which the North Vietnamese operate.

#### NORTH VIETNAM

Q. Mr. President, may I ask a question, if I could get back to Vietnam for just one moment? There has been quite a bit of speculation about the possibility of the North Vietnamese coming down through the DMZ.

Would this scrap any obligations that you may have under the bombing ban in the North and would you be in a position then of having to retaliate for any crossing of the DMZ?

The PRESIDENT. My action in case that happened—and I do not believe it will happen—but my action will be guided by the same principles that I have laid down before. I would use the power of the United States, and particularly its power in the air, to the extent that I consider it necessary to protect our remaining forces in South Vietnam.

We have a considerable number of forces, as you know, on the DMZ. The blocking forces along Route 9, before you get to the border of Laos, are primarily American. I will not allow those forces to be endangered by a massive North Vietnamese incursion, if one should be undertaken. I think the very fact that the North Vietnamese know that I intend to take strong action to deal with that incursion means that they are not going to take it. If they do, I can assure you that—I don't want to assure you, I simply want to have the record clear that I would not be bound, of course, by any so-called understandings which they have already violated at the time of the bombing halt.

## DECISIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Q. Could I clear up what I think is an important point on Laos? You suggested that the Saigon regime is making the decisions as to what it will do in its own interest, particularly in reference to crossing the DMZ.

Most Americans believe that the decision to go into Laos was made in Washington and decisions like crossing the DMZ would have, necessarily, to be made here as well because of the use of American airpower.

Could you straighten out for us where the line is between the decisions that the Saigon regime will make and that this Government will make?

The PRESIDENT. Any decision, Mr. Lisagor, that called for American participation would have to be approved in Washington. The decision with regard to Laos was one that was approved in Washington.

I approved the operation and I approved the decision to use American airpower. The operation itself was jointly developed, primarily by the South Vietnamese, but with, of course, very close cooperation and consultation with General Abrams and his staff.

But wherever American participation to any extent is required, you can be sure that that decision will be made here.

Now, when you put it in terms of what would happen in the event the South Vietnamese went into North Vietnam, I am not going to speculate on what they will or will not do. I will only say that any American participation has to be approved here.

If South Vietnam's decision with regard to what they do would depend upon American cooperation, then, of course, it could not be undertaken without our approval.

REPORTER. Thank you, Mr. President.

## UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE 1970's: BUILDING FOR PEACE

(President Nixon's report to Congress, Feb. 25, 1971<sup>1</sup> (excerpts))

. . . There has been one guiding principle, one irreducible objective, for both our negotiations and Vietnamization. I stated it on May 14, 1969 and consistently since: "We seek the opportunity for the South Vietnamese people to determine their own political future without outside interference."

In our search for a negotiated solution we have stretched our positions towards those of the other side. But we have not agreed to their demand that we impose a political future on the South Vietnamese at the conference table.

In Vietnamization we have withdrawn our forces as rapidly as the South Vietnamese could compensate for our presence. But we have not withdrawn them so as to allow the North Vietnamese to impose a political future on the battlefield.

. . . We thus moved to define more precisely the political solution we envisaged. On April 20, 1970, I set forth the principles that we think should govern a fair political settlement in South Vietnam:

—A political solution must reflect the will of the South Vietnamese people and allow them to determine their future without outside interference.

—A fair political solution should reflect the existing relationship of political forces within South Vietnam.

—We will abide by the outcome of the political process agreed upon.

. . . The other side's constant response has been to demand that we unconditionally withdraw all U.S. forces and replace the leaders of the Republic of Vietnam with a coalition government. Their position is unacceptable to us on several counts.

First, the substance of their demands. They say nothing about what they will do about North Vietnamese forces, when we believe the South Vietnamese should be free of all outside intervention. They ask us to impose a future on South Vietnam, when we believe the people should choose that future.

Secondly, their view of the negotiating process. The Communists pose their demands as *preconditions* to negotiations. If we were to pay this price there would be nothing left to negotiate.

Thirdly, the incompatibility of their demands. Even if we were to agree to their first demand and pull out unilaterally, we would have absolutely no in-

<sup>1</sup> Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, Mar. 1, 1971, pp. 323-334.