

THE PRESIDENT'S NEWS CONFERENCE OF
DECEMBER 27, 1968

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LR Johnson * * *

So with unemployment down, with revenues up, with a balanced budget, with our boys home from Cambodia, our men home from the *Pueblo*, the Apollo coming in as it has, as I told you this morning, Mr. Vance says he believes we can get going in substantive talks after his return there, and we are just praying that can be true. The one thing that mars all of our hopes and wishes this Christmas is that our men are away out there protecting us.

But the casualty rates are down. We are just hoping that we can have some progress in Paris. If we can do that, we would just almost throw our hats in the air.

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THE PARIS PEACE TALKS

Q. Mr. President, did Mr. Vance give you anything in the way of specifics on why he thought we would now move into a substantive part of the Paris talks?

THE PRESIDENT. He expressed the hope that when he got back, progress could be made.

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EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS WITH VIETCONG

Q. Mr. President, do we have any reason to believe that the Vietcong offer to exchange prisoners had any substance to it?

THE PRESIDENT. I don't think I would want to comment on that kind of a question.

PARIS PEACE TALKS

Q. Mr. President, in terms of Mr. Vance's hope for progress in Paris, can you give us any specifics, sir, on what progress has been made?

THE PRESIDENT. Not any more than what I said to Helen.

Q. Pardon me, sir?

THE PRESIDENT. Not any more than what I said to Helen.

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THE PRESIDENT'S GOALS UNTIL JANUARY 20

Q. Sir, I wanted to ask you if you had any particular goal between now and January 20th that you would like to achieve, something that you feel would be summing up your 5 years.

THE PRESIDENT. I have a lot of them, Helen, but I don't know that we will do any of them. I think we don't want to ask too much. A lot of good things have come in a few days.

The one thing that would make us all happier than anything else is to have a truce in Vietnam and to have substantial progress toward peace, and make progress on substantive matters, to cut out all of this dillydallying-- talking about where you sit at the tables, who comes in first, who speaks first, and all that.

But I think the thing that nearly every American wants more than anything else is to have our boys home. We just had the best Christmas I think we nearly ever had. Everyone was gay, healthy, happy, prosperous. But you just couldn't look at either one of these little babies without knowing that their daddy was gone. As a matter of fact, we talked to them at Da Nang the other night. Pat had slipped off up there Christmas and spent a day with Chuck. He had to be out at 4 o'clock. We heard their voice on the phone and had to make the baby cry a little so her daddy could hear her voice. The little boy got stubborn and didn't want to talk, but I tickled him some and let his daddy hear his voice.

These are just two of 550,000. Those other men have babies, too, at home. It would just be paradise if we could end that thing. But we must end it with honor.

As Mrs. Johnson has said so often, if we have to defend what we believe in, and we have to carry out our promises, and some men are going to have to be there, we are glad ours are there with them, although I will tell you it is pretty hard for every woman to kind of understand it. I imagine it is so even for the little boy. He goes up and hears his daddy's voice played back to him on tape and kisses his picture. Things of that kind wring your heart. Peace—that is what all of us want more than anything else.

Advances in space are wonderful. Great movements forward in education and health, that is good. Making this a more beautiful land, all we have done in conservation, we are thankful for that.

But what really counts is whether we can keep people from dying, whether we can get our men home. Just running out is not going to do it, because we have found out, as Mr. Chamberlain did, and a good many times in our history, that unless things are settled honorably, they are not settled. You may pay more dearly later on if you appease.

So, that is what we would like to see. That is what we are working hard for. I talked to Secretary Rogers about it, and a great deal to Mr. Vance about it. Governor Harriman is doing everything he can. But we are not the only ones involved. We just have to hope and pray and do the best we can, right up until the bell rings, which we are all going to do.

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FLIERS HELD IN NORTH VIETNAM

Q. One final question: Is there any hope by the end of the year that we might see some of the fliers released from North Vietnam?

THE PRESIDENT. I can't make any prediction of that now.