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INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
BY
JOSEPH BENTI

THE SENATOR HOTEL
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

2:15 P.M. PDT

MR. BENTI: When I started the process to get this interview with you about three months ago, it was for an idea that I had for a new program, or a new part of a program called "At Ease," and I thought it would be nice if our viewers could meet people, starting with the President, the Governor, and people who are familiar and talk to them, hear them talked to about things they are not normally asked.

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

MR. BENTI: After a 19-hour day yesterday and another grueling day today -- and your biological clock getting buffeted back and forth Coast to Coast -- how in the world do you get at ease?

THE PRESIDENT: It is a developed characteristic, I think, Joe. You know, the pressures, you learn to live with them and pace yourself and sleep hard when you get a chance to sleep. It is a matter of conditioning, mentally as well as physically.

MR. BENTI: I am told you don't sleep a full eight hour day.

THE PRESIDENT: It is a matter of mental and physical conditioning. All my life I have gotten between four and six hours of sleep a night. I fall asleep quickly, I sleep well and I think it is a matter of habit. I always used to say when I was young -- and I think this gave me the guidance -- I wasted time either eating or sleeping, so I like to keep moving.

MR. BENTI: We know about the pool and the swimming, how important that is. Do you have another regimen of exercise beyond that?

THE PRESIDENT: I get up in the morning about 5:15. I spend about 20 minutes riding a stationary bicycle. I do about ten minutes of weight lifting for my old bad football knees, so I can ski and golf and play tennis. I do a few push-ups, and then I try to swim, now that we have a pool, somewhere between a quarter and a half a mile a day.

MR. BENTI: When you are physically in gear, how do you get yourself mentally in gear with the tremendous flood of information that must be coming in each day?

THE PRESIDENT: You would be surprised. You can do a lot of thinking while you are swimming, and you can do some thinking while you are riding that bicycle. But, I also have a knack -- if that is the right word -- of moving from physical exercise to mental pressure.

Again, it is a matter of conditioning, organization in my day and schedule.

MR. BENTI: You were talking about Secretary Kissinger apparently thriving on the conflict between the diplomats. He comes back rested or apparently in good spirits. Do you have the same kind of energy drive that comes out of the combat of ideas?

THE PRESIDENT: As a matter of fact, in that respect, I think Henry Kissinger and I are quite similar. The tension seems to stimulate a challenge mentally and physically, and yet it doesn't drain me, and I don't see any evidence of it draining on him.

It is a matter of understanding that you have to be ready and when the challenge is over, then you can relax quickly and get ready for the next round.

MR. BENTI: It is incomprehensible, I think, to most of us with the kind of pressures of your office and the things you have to worry about that you can truly relax. Is it so easy to just turn off the Middle East in your mind and go about pleasure seeking?

THE PRESIDENT: You have to. I can spend an hour on the Middle East, looking at reports, talking to Henry Kissinger. But, when that hour is over, we have the energy problem, or we have some other major issue that has to have gainful attention.

You can't be thinking about the last hour if you are concentrating on the problems of the current period. It is a matter of compartmentalizing, I think, your day. That is the only way I know to organize and to meet the problems that every President has had.

They aren't a limited number, and they aren't all in the same area. You can go from foreign policy to domestic policy, and you have to have that capability of total concentration on one for the hour or two and then moving into the next.

MR. BENTI: In your personal life, when you are not worrying about those things and you are able to turn them off, do you have the same kind of problems we do? Do you worry about money? Do you worry about retirement, things like that? Does that ever come into your conversation with Mrs. Ford?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me phrase it this way: Of course, I worry about our family problems. We have four children. We tried to bring them up right, and you don't do that unless you have contact with them, unless you are thinking about their day-to-day operations and their long-range future.

We have family discussions with them, individually and collectively. Yes, we do worry about our personal finances. I look over her family checkbook, and she asks me a few questions about my checkbook for the family.

MR. BENTI: Do you keep a checkbook?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes.

MR. BENTI: You don't delegate that to somebody else?

THE PRESIDENT: I do delegate it a bit more now than I used to, but I sign most of the checks. Although it is interesting, speaking of checks, I don't know how many, but a few checks that we have written to people who have done services for us, painting our house or something else or even a charitable contribution, all of a sudden we found they weren't being cashed.

So, we checked up on them and people wrote back and said they had had them framed and they weren't going to cash them. What we have tried to do in every case was to now send them a check with my secretary signing so there is no permanent identification.

MR. BENTI: The questions I am asking you are considered by most people to be personal, and the wife of Henry Jackson yesterday said that she considered the questions that Mrs. Ford was asked on that CBS program to be, in her words, "rude and outrageous," and that she would not have answered them.

Do you, as you now look back on that incident, think that perhaps the press pries too much in some areas?

THE PRESIDENT: I have never had that experience, personally.

MR. BENTI: I am thinking of Mrs. Ford, particularly.

THE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't want to pass judgment on whether the questions were too personal or otherwise. I felt that Betty responded to the questions in her own characteristic way, which is to be frank, to be candid. I think some of the news stories that came out, instead of carrying the full text of her response, took excerpts that seemed to distort the full impact of what she was trying to say.

I was very proud of her. I watched it. Knowing her as intimately as I do, she was expressing her deep concern for her children. She was indicating her own personal views on some matters. I was very proud of her.

MR. BENTI: Do you worry about the morality of young Americans? Does it bother you what we read about and hear about, and that line of questioning which indicates some change in our moral tone?

THE PRESIDENT: There is a different attitude on many problems, different at least from the attitude that seemed to prevail when I was younger. Of course, that was quite a few years ago. But, on the other hand, we with four children between the ages of 25 and 18, we have had to deal with the overall approach at the present time.

I am not the best person to pass judgment in any specific area. I happen to think that America is a moral Nation and that our people, the American people, have a high degree of morality that they live by and work by. There are some variations.

MR. BENTI: It is not something you are losing any sleep over.

THE PRESIDENT: I have a lot of faith in the morality of the American people.

MR. BENTI: The office of the Presidency, those of us who remember you when you were in the Congress, and I am sure you yourself never thought some day you would be President --

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly didn't.

MR. BENTI: It was not an objective you had. Now that you are and knowing what you can recall from the days in Congress when you were in much closer touch with the people, are you walled off in any way? Do you have that feeling that so many critics of the Presidency, the modern Presidency, have noted, that the President is removed, isolated, does not get out and know what the people are thinking?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't believe so, particularly since my office in the White House operates much differently than most other Presidential offices.

I have a broad staff. We have a specific assignment of responsibility. I have day-to-day contact with eight or nine of my top people.

I see them frequently. They have the obligation to me to speak up if they have something to say, whether they think I agree with it or not. I solicit different views among my staff. So, I don't feel walled off as long as they perform what I think is their obligation.

I do get out to see people. I travel a good bit, like coming to California, like having gone to the State of Washington, and Oregon.

MR. BENTI: Do you really get a sense on those trips, though, of what it is people are thinking, average people?

THE PRESIDENT: I do.

MR. BENTI: How?

THE PRESIDENT: In the first place, for example, in Washington we had either the ninth or tenth White House Conference. There were approximately 800 people there from all walks of life in the City of Seattle, from the State of Washington, from Idaho and Alaska, and this was a good give and take.

We had a question and answer period, and I think I answered some 20 questions covering a wide, wide range of subject matters, and I meet with other groups as I travel from city to city.

It might surprise you that when I do shake hands with people along the street or when I shake hands with people in a hotel, or any other place, you get a sense, or you get a feeling as you shake hands or somebody says something to you, there is a communication that does have an impact on my thinking.

MR. BENTI: But do you get close to the issues, what it is they are thinking about, the mood?

THE PRESIDENT: We certainly do at the White House Conferences.

MR. BENTI: You know the office carries with it such imposing -- like waiting here for you, I began to get nervous and then you come in and everybody rises.

THE PRESIDENT: You shouldn't.

MR. BENTI: I think it is partly the press' fault over the years. We have magnified the office so greatly.

THE PRESIDENT: I think the office of the Presidency is a very important one.

MR. BENTI: Perhaps I should say we have magnified the people who have held the office.

THE PRESIDENT: I trust that I will never succumb to that magnification because I think a President, if he wants to do his job well, has to be a part of the people and he has to have the American people feel that they are a part of him.

That is why I do travel. That is why I do like to shake hands and talk to people. That is why I do like to attend these White House Conferences, because it does provide a method of communication on a two-way street, which I think is vital.

MR. BENTI: I don't know if anybody has ever done this to you before. You were told in advance one of the things we tried and since we talked about the average person, we sent a crew, two camera crews out the other day in Los Angeles and we said, "Now, look for average people, if you can find them, and say to them, Benti is going to talk to Mr. Ford. If you had that opportunity, what would you ask the President?"

We got some very interesting, repetitive questions in some cases.

THE PRESIDENT: I think that is a great idea.

MR. BENTI: Let's try it. Then if it works, maybe you will like it and perhaps use it in your campaign, but I don't know.

For example, there is a man named Robert Soles. He is a construction worker, a Chicano. He says, "How is he going to fix the economy and the construction business?"

THE PRESIDENT: He has asked a tough question.

MR. BENTI: That is right.

THE PRESIDENT: The construction business, for a variety of reasons, has been hit as hard, if not harder, than any other business in the country.

First, we have to restore confidence in the American people that we aren't going to have increasing inflation. We have to have a restored confidence in the American people that our economic basis is not going to pot.

The restoration of confidence is the number one thing. And, of course, that relates to results. We are getting results in the battle against inflation. We are making some headway in adding to the employment rolls. In fact, today, Friday, September 5, we got some, I think, encouraging news in employment figures. We had an additional 275,000 people added in this last month to employment figures showing that over the last six months employment has gone up almost a million and a half.

Once you get a restoration of confidence, you are going to get people buying houses, you are going to get businessmen investing in additional plant facilities, you are going to find people buying automobiles, and that has an impact on the economy as a whole.

I believe that is the way to build a sound economy, and if you build a sound economy, the construction segment of our economy will bound upward, like others will.

MR. BENTI: In these kinds of interviews, and the questions, everybody fixes on the President as though he can solve all these problems, so I have a beautiful question for you from a young lady named Andrea Dresser. She is a shop clerk in Los Angeles. She wants to know what kinds of music do you like?

THE PRESIDENT: My favorite musical -- and I will probably get criticized for picking one over another -- is "Oklahoma." I just think that is a great musical. I like the setting and I like the music.

I do like musical comedy. I like to go to the opera, but I must confess I am not expert on it. I like music, even though I don't play anything. It does give me some rejuvenation and the kind of music exemplified by "Oklahoma," that is the kind of music I like.

MR. BENTI: I bet you can't imagine what was the most asked question, and it had to do with what is going to be the price of gasoline.

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think the price of gasoline, even with decontrol, is going to rise significantly. I don't believe some of these expert analyses that have been made by people who haven't studied the total picture and don't understand all the alternatives.

My best guess is that in the next six months, we could have -- may not have -- a gasoline price increase of 2 to 3 cents a gallon.

MR. BENTI: You don't see it going up over \$1.00, \$1.25, \$1.50?

THE PRESIDENT: I think those are ridiculous forecasts. I don't think they have any justification. There is one unknown factor, which we don't control; that is, what the OPEC nations, the Arab nations, are going to do about their proposed September price increase.

But, that brings up something that we have to recognize, and I will say this very categorically, if the Congress had approved my energy program that I recommended in January of this year, the likelihood of an Arab oil price increase would be less and less.

But, the inaction of the Congress -- Congress has done nothing to approve an energy program. The inaction of the Congress is almost an open invitation to the Arab nations to increase their crude oil prices.

Now we are working hard to persuade the OPEC nations not to increase prices. Maybe we will be successful, but that is an unknown factor.

MR. BENTI: The question that Leroy Nickleberry has is when is he going to get a tax break? Is that a Congressional problem?

THE PRESIDENT: You tell Leroy that I did recommend to the Congress in January that they pass a personal income tax reduction, and I also urged the Congress to give another reduction in taxes to compensate for any increase in energy costs.

Now, the Congress did pass a tax reduction bill following generally what I proposed. They made it for one year.

The big question now is whether we should recommend, whether the Congress should extend that tax reduction for another year or make it permanent. It is a bit premature as to whether or not that should be done and on the other hand, sometime within the next month or so, we will make a recommendation.

I just hesitate at this point to make any categorical comment.

MR. BENTI: There was an elderly woman from New York who happened to be in Los Angeles. She is retired. Her name is Dorothy Verity, and she said, "What is he going to do about hunger in America?"

THE PRESIDENT: We are doing a great deal in America about helping people less well off than the average citizen. We have a wide variety of programs. Of course, you start with Social Security. You have then, in addition, welfare payments.

We now have a \$6 billion food stamp program. We have Medicare and Medicaid. All of these contribute to the economic sustenance of people who are either aged or not well off economically. There is no reason in America today for anybody to be hungry because there are Federal programs, welfare, et cetera, that will take care of that immediate problem.

What we want to do is make the economy strong so that instead of people depending on welfare, they can apply for and get a job in the private sector.

MR. BENTI: As you were answering that question, I heard all of these bureaucratic agencies of the Federal Government come into play and I thought to myself, going back again in your political history, the contradictions of Gerald Ford, conservative, versus President Ford, who now represents the Nation.

Have you moderated your sense of what the Nation must do compared to what you thought it should do when you were a Congressman?

THE PRESIDENT: I represented roughly 550,000 people in the old district that I was privileged to represent and it did have certain political, philosophical views and it was my obligation, representing them for 25 years, to reflect their views.

On the other hand, it is also true that a President has to represent 214 million people in 50 States. I suspect that in my determinations in the broader sense inevitably take into consideration a broader philosophical view, a more diverse political attitude of more people.

On the other hand, what we have tried to do is not approach any problem on a conservative or liberal viewpoint. My whole approach in the job as President is to solve the problem, whether it is in foreign policy, whether it is in domestic policy. We have to look at problems from a practical point of view and solve them whether it has a label of liberal or conservative.

MR. BENTI: I mentioned contradictions. That does help explain something that mystifies me, and I know it mystifies a great number of people.

We are going to spend billions of dollars in the Middle East to try and insure a peace there, and at the same time we have the largest city in the country teetering every day on the brink of bankruptcy. And an infusion of billions of those dollars, most Americans would simplistically probably say, that would solve New York's problems, why are we spending it in the Middle East? Why is the President making that decision? How do you explain that?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me take the Middle East first. This country, for 25 or 26 years, has had a foreign aid program where we made available economic and military assistance to a number of countries around the world, including Israel. As a matter of fact, we have been making economic aid available to Israel on the magnitude of \$300 million or \$400 million for a number of years. And following the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Egypt, Israel and Syria, the Federal Government gave to Israel over \$3 billion to help take care of a war.

Henry Kissinger and myself, working together, think it is a good investment to make U.S. Government funds available to Israel and to Egypt to preserve the peace. The emphasis that we take is peace, not rehabilitation from a war.

And I can assure you that if we hadn't taken the leadership and helped to negotiate this extremely critical problem between Egypt and Israel, I am confident in a relatively short period of time you would have had another war in the Middle East. So what economic and military assistance we are giving is aimed at sustaining a peace, and I think that is a good investment.

Now let's turn to the problem of New York City, and I understand people who may connect the two. They are different problems.

In the case of New York City, for the last 10 or 11 years they have consistently lived beyond their means. They have borrowed more and more money to meet their local needs, regardless of what they were, and they haven't kept the books very well.

MR. BENTI: So they are going to have to solve their own problems?

THE PRESIDENT: So basically New York City will have to tighten its belt, make up for the poor management that existed for too long a time and find the solution internally.

Now let me say that the Federal Government doesn't avoid New York City. We have a great many Federal programs that pour a lot of money into New York City, but despite that Federal help over the last five or ten years -- it is massive -- they have still been mismanaged, and they still have a problem.

I am sympathetic, I understand their difficulties, but basically **New** York City is going to be forced to straighten out its own problems.

MR. BENTI: I have so many questions but I am just about out of film.

Will Ronald Reagan fit on a ticket with President Ford?

THE PRESIDENT: Ron Reagan is a very good friend of mine.

MR. BENTI: Would you run with him?

THE PRESIDENT: I will let the Convention make that decision.

MR. BENTI: I am down to 20 seconds.

THE PRESIDENT: It is nice to be with you, Joe.

MR. BENTI: Mr. President, I appreciate this and I am awfully sorry I didn't have an hour of film because I think you would have sat for it.

THE PRESIDENT: It is nice to be on the program and I thank you for your courtesy and excellent questions.

MR. BENTI: Thank you. It is a pleasure.

END (AT 2:43 P.M. EDT)