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INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

BY

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MARRIOTT INN  
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MR. GALLAGHER: Mr. President, Governor Reagan has closed the delegate gap considerably with yesterday's primary win in Texas. What is your personal reaction to your loss there, and are you worried now about Reagan catching up with you before the GOP primary?

THE PRESIDENT: Harry, naturally I was disappointed but I think in retrospect we can point out the following: Number one, there was a tremendous cross-over of Democrats coming into the Republican primary. Number two, there was a certain apathy among some of the Republicans who felt that I was going to win and they didn't get out and vote.

I would say that we have got to, in the remaining primaries, point out the fact that when I became President we had 12 or more percent inflation. We have cut it 75 percent. We were on the brink of an economic recession. We are out of it and we are moving very successfully. We have restored credibility in Government, integrity and honesty in the White House.

I think we have a good program to sell. We intend to do it. I believe that in the coming up primaries we will do well enough to go to the Convention and have enough delegates to win.

MR. GALLAGHER: As long as we are talking about economics, Mr. Reagan, in a conversation I had with him yesterday, said although you have gotten some short-term gains here in the country, he feels down the line, in 1977 or 1978 the country is once again going to be plunged into a depression and perhaps with greater inflation than we have had in the past.

THE PRESIDENT: That is good campaign rhetoric, Harry, but if you look at the success we have had in the economy, we have got the highest employment we have ever had in the United States -- 86,700,000. We have added 2,600,000 jobs in the last 12 months. We have cut the rate of inflation by 75 percent. Those are all solid indicators of not only coming out of a recession but continued prosperity.

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I wonder what economists Governor Reagan is talking to. They must be not very sound and very accurate, because 95 percent of the economists believe that we are on a good road to prosperity in this country.

MR. GALLAGHER: Then, if you are elected, you do not see serious economic problems two or three years from now?

THE PRESIDENT: Not at all. I think the way we have handled the economy is such that we are going to get inflation down even lower, and it is under 3 percent now, and we are going to have continued increases in employment and continued decreases in unemployment.

MR. GALLAGHER: Now, on the question of national defense, Governor Reagan says we are now number two militarily. You maintain the country is still the strongest in the world.

If we are the strongest country, why, then, this massive military defense bill you have proposed -- the highest in the country's history?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I am very proud of the fact that last year I submitted the largest defense appropriation bill in the history of the United States, and again this year I have. I feel we have to reverse the trend that the Congress has forced on my predecessors, by cutting about \$50 billion out of previous defense appropriation bills.

I wanted to get our ballistic missile nuclear capability moving ahead as fast as we want it to move. To improve the readiness of our conventional forces, you constantly have to modernize, update, whether it is in strategic forces or conventional forces, and I strongly feel that the way to keep the peace is through strength, and the investment in a defense appropriation bill is the best insurance for peace.

MR. GALLAGHER: All right. You have withdrawn from the use of the word "detente" and you have adopted a new term -- "peace through strength" -- in our dealings with the Russians. How serious do you think the Russian threat is to us right now?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think it is a serious threat simply because we are very, very strong militarily. You don't see the Soviet Union, whether it is in Europe, or anyplace else, really challenging the United States.

MR. GALLAGHER: What about, then, Italy?

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THE PRESIDENT: That is not a place where the Soviet Union is challenging us militarily. The Communist Party in Italy is getting its strength from the people in Italy, but there is no Soviet military challenge to NATO, to Italy or to any Western European country.

MR. GALLAGHER: Do you think, then, basically, the European Communist Parties differ radically from Soviet Russia?

THE PRESIDENT: Harry, I think it would be very tragic and we would certainly have to take a real hard look at the NATO setup if a Communist-dominated Government took over in Italy or any other country.

MR. GALLAGHER: What would we do in a situation like that?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't want to pre-judge it right now, but I think our NATO allies ought to know that the concepts of NATO would be jeopardized to a considerable degree if one or more NATO countries became under the domination of an Italian Communist Party or any other Communist Party. So we want them to know right now that our relationship in NATO would have to be very seriously reassessed.

MR. GALLAGHER: The question of personalities in power--after talking to some of your aides here--I know that right down the corridor there are teleprinters that can get you back to the White House, that within hailing distances there are people here who could provide you with today's war codes, for example.

If Ronald Reagan were elected President, do you think he would be as judicious in his views of American power or do you think he might be inclined to use it impetuously without sufficient reason?

THE PRESIDENT: I can only go by his words, Harry. I think some of his campaign rhetoric would lead me--and I think a lot of Americans would think he might be very rash in how he uses his power if he were to become President.

For example, in the case of the Panama Canal, he has made some very strong statements: "We bought it, we paid for it," and all this and that. I am sure you are up-to-date on what Senator Goldwater had to say today about Governor Reagan's views on the Panama Canal.

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I have with me here Senator Goldwater's interview on Meet the Press. Senator Goldwater was asked the question, and I read it, "On the Panama Canal, who is right on that? Whose position do you, Senator Goldwater, support? Ford or Reagan?"

Senator Goldwater said, and I quote verbatim, "I have to support Ford's position on it and I think Reagan would, too, if he knew more about it."

The point I am trying to make is that, unfortunately, Governor Reagan has taken many, too many symplistic statements and indicating in one way or another that he might take rash action.

MR. GALLAGHER: Do you think he would, if elected President?

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly would hope not, but I can only go by his campaign rhetoric and that could lead you to that conclusion.

MR. GALLAGHER: Mr. President, let me ask you a question I haven't heard asked of you before; that is, why did you refuse to meet with Alexander Solzhenitsyn? He is supposed to speak for millions of oppressed inside Russia, one of the foremost authors in the world right now.

Were you upset over the relationship that we might have with the Soviets if you talked to the author?

THE PRESIDENT: Not at all, Harry. As a matter of fact, it was a mixup in my staff, very unfortunate. After we sorted it out, I have indicated to Mr. Solzhenitsyn that I would be glad to meet him, and we have invited him to come to the White House. It was just one of those staff mixups that cannot be excused, and we tried to rectify it by indicating to Mr. Solzhenitsyn that I would be glad to meet him in the White House.

MR. GALLAGHER: All right, sir. We only have a few minutes left here. Let me get some brief, personal observations of you on potential contenders in the Democratic Party.

What do you think of Hubert Humphrey?

THE PRESIDENT: He is a very dear friend of mine. I don't agree with his political philosophy. A contest between Ford and Humphrey would be a good contest. He is a liberal and I am a moderate-to-conservative, but he is a good guy and I still think he might get the nomination.

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MR. GALLAGHER: How about Governor Brown of California?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know him very well, so I am really not qualified to pass judgment on him.

MR. GALLAGHER: What about Jimmy Carter?

THE PRESIDENT: I only know him casually. I don't know much about his views on many, many matters because my Democratic friends who are running for the Presidency tell me, or they say publicly, that Jimmy Carter's views are all over the lot or he hasn't made up his mind on one issue or another. If he is the nominee, we will certainly pin him down.

MR. GALLAGHER: Whom would you prefer to face?

THE PRESIDENT: I really have no favorite, so to speak. I will let the Democrats make that decision, Harry.

MR. GALLAGHER: Mr. Reagan told me yesterday that he would get rid of Henry Kissinger if he is elected. What about Admiral Zumwalt's statement that Mr. Kissinger believes that America is on an inevitable decline now and Russia will become the preponderant power in the world?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it is fair to say Admiral Zumwalt was the Chief of Naval Operations and I assume he was a participant in whatever happened to the Navy in the period he was talking about. So he was partially responsible, if it was true, but I don't happen to think it was true.

MR. GALLAGHER: Mr. President, thank you very much for talking with us. It is nice to have you here in Fort Wayne.

THE PRESIDENT: It was nice being here, Harry. Thank you.

END (AT 9:39 P.M. EST)