

PRESS CONFERENCE NO. 12

of the

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

12:01 P.M. PDT
April 3, 1975
Thursday

In the Silver Room
At the San Diego Convention
and Performing Arts Center
San Diego, California

THE PRESIDENT: Will you please sit down.

At the outset, let me express my appreciation to Mayor Pete Wilson and the fine people of San Diego for the very warm welcome.

I also am delighted to see one or more of my former colleagues in the Congress here. It is always nice to see them and all others who may be here. Good morning.

I have a short opening statement.

We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught. The United States has been doing -- and will continue to do -- its utmost to assist these people.

I have directed that all available Naval ships to stand off Indochina, to do whatever is necessary to assist. We have appealed to the United Nations to use its moral influence to permit these innocent people to leave, and we call on North Vietnam to permit the movement of refugees to the area of their choice.

While I have been in California, I have been spending many hours on the refugee problem and our humanitarian efforts. I have directed that money from a \$2 million special foreign aid children's fund be made available to fly 2000 South Vietnamese orphans to the United States as soon as possible.

I have also directed American officials in Saigon to act immediately to cut red tape and other bureaucratic obstacles preventing these children from coming to the United States.

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(OVER)

I have directed that C-5A aircraft and other aircraft especially equipped to care for these orphans during the flight be sent to Saigon. I expect these flights to begin within the next 36 to 48 hours. These orphans will be flown to Travis Air Force Base in California, and other bases on the West Coast, and cared for in those locations.

These 2000 Vietnamese orphans are all in the process of being adopted by American families. This is the least we can do, and we will do much, much more.

The first question is from Mr. George Dissinger of the San Diego Tribune.

QUESTION: Mr. President, are you ready to accept Communist takeover of South Vietnam and Cambodia?

THE PRESIDENT: I would hope that that would not take place in either case. My whole Congressional life in recent years was aimed at avoiding it. My complete efforts as President of the United States were aimed at avoiding that.

I am an optimist, despite the sad and tragic events that we see unfolding. I will do my utmost in the future -- as I have in the past -- to avoid that result.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I understand you are soon going to ask Congress for new authority to extend humanitarian aid in Southeast Asia. I wondered if you stand by your request, though, for more military aid for South Vietnam?

THE PRESIDENT: We do intend to ask for more humanitarian aid. I should point out that the Administration's request for \$135 million for humanitarian aid in South Vietnam was unfortunately reduced to \$55 million by Congressional action. Obviously, we will ask for more; the precise amount we have not yet determined.

We will continue to push for the \$300 million that we have asked for and Congress had authorized for military assistance to South Vietnam, and the possibility exists that we may ask for more.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, how and why did the U.S. miscalculate the intentions of the will of the South Vietnamese to resist?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't believe that we miscalculated the will of the South Vietnamese to carry on their fight for their own freedom.

There were several situations that developed that I think got beyond the control of the Vietnamese people. The unilateral military decision to withdraw created a chaotic situation in Vietnam that appears to have brought about tremendous disorganization.

I believe that the will of the South Vietnamese people to fight for their freedom is best evidenced by the fact that they are fleeing from the North Vietnamese, and that clearly is an indication they don't want to live under the kind of government that exists in North Vietnam.

The will of the South Vietnamese people, I think, still exists. They want freedom under a different kind of government than has existed in North Vietnam. The problem is how to organize that will under the traumatic experiences of the present.

QUESTION: Unilateral decision by whom?

THE PRESIDENT: It was a unilateral decision by President Thieu to order a withdrawal from the broad, exposed areas that were under the control of the South Vietnamese military.

QUESTION: Mr. President, what is your response to the South Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington's statement that we had not lived up to the Paris peace accords and that the Communists are safer allies?

THE PRESIDENT: I won't comment on his statement. I will say this: That the North Vietnamese repeatedly and in massive efforts violated the Paris peace accords. They sent North Vietnamese regular forces into South Vietnam in massive numbers -- I think around 150,000 to 175,000 -- well-trained North Vietnamese regular forces, in violation of the Paris peace accords, moved into South Vietnam.

We have objected to that violation. I still believe that the United States, in this case and in other cases, is a reliable ally and although I am saddened by the events that we have read about and seen, it is a tragedy unbelievable in its ramifications.

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I must say that I am frustrated by the action of the Congress in not responding to some of the requests for both economic, humanitarian and military assistance in South Vietnam. And I am frustrated by the limitations that were placed on the Chief Executive over the last two years.

But let me add very strongly, I am convinced that this country is going to continue its leadership. We will stand by our allies and I specifically warn any adversaries they should not, under any circumstances, feel that the tragedy of Vietnam is an indication that the American people have lost their will or their desire to stand up for freedom any place in the world.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, can you explain why President Thieu, with our close military ties as allies, did not tell you what he was going to do in terms of the retreat?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the only answer to that can come from President Thieu.

QUESTION: Mr. Ford, recently you said the fall of Cambodia could threaten the national security of this country. Considering the probable fall of South Vietnam to Communist forces, do you feel that will threaten our national security, and if so, how?

THE PRESIDENT: At the moment, I do not anticipate the fall of South Vietnam, and I greatly respect and admire the tremendous fight that the government and the people of Cambodia are putting up against the insurgents who are trying to take over Cambodia.

I believe that in any case where the United States does not live up to its moral or treaty obligations, it can't help but have an adverse impact on other allies we have around the world. We read in European papers to the effect that Western Europe ought to have some questions.

Let me say to our Western European allies, we are going to stand behind our commitments to NATO, and we are going to stand behind our commitments to other allies around the world.

But, there has to be in the minds of some people, a feeling that maybe the tragedy of Indochina might affect our relations with their country. I repeat, the United States is going to continue its leadership and stand by its allies.

QUESTION: Are you, in fact, a believer of the domino theory of, if Southeast Asia falls, then perhaps some of the other countries in the Pacific are next?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe there is a great deal of credibility to the domino theory. I hope it does not happen. I hope that other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand, the Philippines, don't misread the will of the American people and the leadership of this country to believing that we are going to abandon our position in Southeast Asia.

We are not, but I do know from the things I read and the messages that I hear, that some of them do get uneasy. I hope and trust they believe me when I say we are going to stand by our allies.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, as you are well aware, there are about 7000 Americans still in Saigon. They are in danger not only from Communist attack, but from South Vietnamese reprisals. There are reports that the South Vietnamese are in a bad temper toward Americans.

Do you feel that under the War Powers Act and also under the limitations voted by Congress in 1973 on combat by Americans in Indochina, that you could send troops in to protect those Americans, and would you, if it came to that?

THE PRESIDENT: I can assure you that I will abide totally with the War Powers Act that was enacted by the Congress several years ago. At the same time, I likewise assure you that we have contingency plans to meet all problems involving evacuation, if that should become necessary. At this point, I do not believe that I should answer specifically how those contingency plans might be carried out.

QUESTION: Sir, you don't want to talk specifically. Can you tell us, however, if you do believe that you do have the authority to send in troops? You are not saying, I understand, whether you would, but do you have the authority?

THE PRESIDENT: It is my interpretation of that legislation that a President has certain limited authority to protect American lives. And to that extent, I will use that law.

QUESTION: Mr. President, despite your statement here this morning about war orphans, there apparently is a lot of red tape in Washington. A San Diego man who is trying to get four Vietnamese children out of that country has received hundreds of calls from people all over the Western United States wanting to help, even adopt children, but despite this outpouring of compassion by the American people, all he gets in Washington is, "No way."

There is nothing that can be done. Why is he running into this problem, if we are trying to help?

THE PRESIDENT: Having had some experience in the past with the Federal bureaucracy, when we had a similar problem involving Korean orphans, I understand the frustration and the problem.

But, I am assured that all bureaucratic red tape is being eliminated to the maximum degree and that we will make a total effort, as I indicated in my opening statement, to see to it that South Vietnamese war orphans are brought to the United States.

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QUESTION: Do you think something can be done before it is too late for many of them?

THE PRESIDENT: I can only say we will do what has to be done, what can be done, as a practical matter. I cannot guarantee that every single South Vietnamese war orphan will get here, but I can assure you that we intend to do everything possible in that humanitarian effort.

QUESTION: Mr. President, the Gallup Poll shows a very healthy majority of the American people, 60 percent of the American people, are more concerned about the high cost of living than they are about any other issue including the recession and international developments.

I would like to ask you, in view of that, if Congress does not respond to your repeated appeals to hold down spending and not exceed a level that would produce a deficit of \$60 billion. If they don't do that, and government borrowing increases to cover the deficit, do you have any plans, is there anything you plan to do beyond just these appeals to Congress to prevent a resurgence of inflation?

THE PRESIDENT: As I clearly indicated last Saturday night when I approved the Tax Reduction Act, I have drawn the line on additional Federal spending. That is as far as we dare go.

If we go beyond that, we amplify the potentialities for a resurgence of double-digit inflation. I intend to appeal to the Congress to hold the lid and I intend to appeal to the American people to get their Members of Congress -- Senators and Congressmen -- to stop coming to the White House with one spending bill after another.

In addition, I am asking the Congress to enact a provision that would make applicable for fiscal year 1976 the Budget Control Act that was enacted last year by the Congress.

Under the present law, the Budget Control Act, which forces the Congress to set a ceiling, does not actually come into effect until fiscal year 1977. It seems to me in the crisis that we face today, that the Congress ought to amend the Budget Control Act and make it applicable to fiscal year 1976 so they will impose on themselves, individual Members of Congress -- House and Senate -- a spending limitation.

Now, they are going through sort of a practice session on it. I wish they would abandon the practice session and get down to the ball game, and they, themselves, set a spending limit at the level that I indicated.

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QUESTION: What I am asking you, Mr. President, is if you have any strings to your bow other than these Congressional strings? In other words, what I am asking you is, do you plan any executive action to try to curb a resurgence or prevent a resurgence of inflation?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the executive actions will be directives to the various departments of the government to limit their spending even within the appropriated amounts that Congress has made available.

We are expecting every department to spend as little as possible to carry out their programs or their mandates, and this includes holding the line on Federal personnel; it includes the limitations on spending for anything that cannot be justified. Under the law, that is the maximum that I can do in an executive capacity.

QUESTION: Mr. President, if it would alleviate the refugee problem in South Vietnam and bring about something of a temporary ~~cease-fire~~ would you urge President Thieu to resign?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't believe that it is my prerogative to tell the head of state elected by the people to leave office. I don't believe whether it is one head of state or another makes any difference in our efforts to help in the humanitarian program.

We are going to carry it on, I hope, with a full cooperation of the South Vietnamese government, and I don't think it is appropriate for me to ask him, under these circumstances, to resign. I don't think his resignation would have any significance on our humanitarian efforts.

QUESTION: In that regard, are there any plans underway by the U.S. government to accept large numbers of Vietnamese refugees in this country other than the 2,000 orphans that you have talked about?

THE PRESIDENT: Under existing law, action by the Attorney General can permit refugees who are fleeing problems in their own country to come to the United States. This authority was used after World War II. This authority was used after the Hungarian invasion by the Soviet Union.

This authority has been used on a number of other occasions. I can assure you that that authority is being examined and if it will be helpful, I certainly will approve it.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, what is your judgment now on when you expect the recession to end and recovery to begin? Is it the third quarter of this year, or will it be later?

THE PRESIDENT: Our best judgment is that the recession will turn around during the third quarter of this calendar year. We are already seeing some significant changes in the statistics that give us more certainty that the recession will end and that economic recovery will begin in the third quarter of this calendar year.

QUESTION: Could you tell us what those signs are, please, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. The latest report shows that there has been an increase in the ordering of manufactured goods. The first time I think in six months that there has been an increase rather than a decrease.

Interest rates are dropping. More money for borrowers is being made available. The inflation is receding or at least the rate of inflation is receding. As of the last report, it would annualize at about 7.2 percent, contrasted with a 12 or 13 percent rate of inflation in 1974.

When you add up all these various economic indicators, it does show that the recession is receding and that economic conditions will get better in the third quarter of 1975.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, in line with the spending question, last year when you campaigned in California, you asked voters to help defeat the big spenders in Congress and, if they happened to be Republicans, well, so be it.

Do you plan to use the same philosophy in campaigning next year, and to the extent you will openly campaign against Republicans whose philosophies or policies may contradict yours? If so, how does this sit with your statement that the Republican Party is broad enough for all views?

THE PRESIDENT: I expect to be campaigning very hard for my own re-election, or election, in 1976. I will, of course, urge that voters in every state support those candidates who believe as I do, that we have got to hold a line on and restrain excessive Federal spending.

My enthusiasm for an individual candidate will, of course, depend upon his strong support for my policy of fiscal restraint, but I am not going to pass judgment today on individuals, whether in one party or another.

QUESTION: Does this mean then that there is a possibility that during that campaign you could come out openly in support of a Democrat as opposed to a Republican?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe in the need for the country to have individual Members of the House and Senate who believe that these massive Federal spending programs are bad for America.

I certainly will look with favor on anyone who believes as I do, that we cannot spend ourself into prosperity. A tax cut approach is a far better way, and that massive spending programs are not good for America.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you now head an Administration which came to power on a strong law and order platform, but the crime rate since 1969 has done nothing but go up and the statistics include crimes at the highest levels of government.

My question is, whether you think it would be fair for the Democrats to charge that this Administration is soft on crime, or at least is incapable of dealing with the problem?

THE PRESIDENT: Unfortunately, for the country the crime rate has been increasing for the last ten or 15 years, whether it was under a Democratic administration, under President Kennedy or President Johnson, or, except for, I think, one year under the former President, the crime rate has been going up. I don't think it is a partisan issue.

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It is my judgment that we have to maximize our efforts--the Federal Government, state government and local units of government--to try and have proper enforcement of the law, which includes the prosecution of people who violate the law.

I can only assure you that to the extent that the Federal Government can do something about it, we -- this Administration -- will do it. The facts of life are that most law enforcement is the local responsibility.

Through the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, the Federal Government has been spending for the last several years around \$800 million to help local units of government, state units of government in the upgrading of their law enforcement capability, helping police departments, helping sheriff's departments, helping the courts, and will continue to do it.

But, the principal responsibility rests at the local level.

QUESTION: Will you be able to spend any more money, under your proposition that the line has to be drawn somewhere, on fighting the crime problem?

THE PRESIDENT: I think in the budget I submitted, there is ample money for a Federal effort to carry out the Federal role in the area of law enforcement.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you spoke a few minutes ago about being frustrated by the limitation of the War Powers Act. If it were not forbidden now, would you like to send American planes and Naval forces and possibly ground forces into Vietnam to try to turn the situation around?

THE PRESIDENT: I have said that there are no plans whatsoever for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. On the other hand, I think history does prove that if a Chief Executive has a potential to, it, to some extent, is a deterrent against aggressors.

QUESTION: So, that is your frustration, because you do not have that power to at least threaten the possibility?

THE PRESIDENT: I did not use the word "threat." I said the potential for power, I think, over the years has indicated that that potential is a deterrent against aggression by one country against another.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, in view of the possible primary entries by Governor Reagan and perhaps Governor ~~Thomson~~ of New Hampshire, would you be good enough to discuss your own timetable?

When will you set up your committee, specifically, and can you also tell us, do you plan to enter any primaries yourself, or through a stand-in candidate?

THE PRESIDENT: We have not defined our precise timetable, nor our precise plans for the pre-convention campaign. We are in the process of putting together our timetable and our plans. I have said repeatedly that I intend to be a candidate, but I have made no categorical announcement to that effect. But, the matter is not being neglected.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, in light of current concerns regarding the assassination of President Kennedy and the recent showings of the Zapruder films, do you still have the same confidence in the finding of the Warren Commission that you had as a Member of that Commission?

THE PRESIDENT: I think you have to read very carefully what the Warren Commission said. And I, as a member of the Warren Commission, helped to participate in the drafting of the language. We said that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin. We said that the Commission had found no evidence of a conspiracy, foreign or domestic.

Those words were very carefully drafted. And so far, I have seen no evidence that would dispute the conclusions to which we came.

We were most careful because in 1963 and 1964, when we most carefully analyzed all the evidence available, there was none of the involvement of anybody or anybody as a group, in the assassination.

It is my understanding that the Rockefeller Commission may, if the facts seem to justify it, take a look at it, at the problem, and I suspect that the House and Senate committees that are currently investigating CIA history may do the same.

But the Commission was right when it made its determination and it was accurate, at least to this point -- I want to re-emphasize that -- as to the evidence that we saw.

QUESTION: Mr. President, some people are saying this week that despite all our massive aid in Vietnam and all the lives that were lost there, that the whole thing has come to nothing.

Now, how do you feel about this, and do you think there is any lesson to be learned in what has been happening over there?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe that the program of the previous four or five Presidents -- President Kennedy, President Johnson, President Nixon, and myself -- were aimed at the -- in the right direction, that we should help those people who are willing to fight for freedom for themselves.

That was a sound policy. Unfortunately, events that were beyond our control as a country have made it appear that that policy was wrong. I still believe that policy was right if the United States had carried it out as we promised to do at the time of the Paris peace accords where we promised, with the signing of the Paris peace accords, that we would make military hardware available to the South Vietnamese government on a replacement, one-for-one basis. Unfortunately, we did not carry out that promise.

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QUESTION: Are you blaming Congress for this, then?

THE PRESIDENT: I am not assessing blame on anyone. The facts are that in fiscal year 1974, there was a substantial reduction made by the Congress in the amount of military equipment requested for South Vietnam.

In fiscal year 1975, the current fiscal year, the Administration asked for \$1 billion 400 million in military assistance for South Vietnam. Congress put a ceiling of \$1 billion on it and actually appropriated only \$700 million.

Those are the facts. I think it is up to the American people to pass judgment on who was at fault or where the blame may rest. That is a current judgment.

I think historians, in the future, will write who was to blame in this tragic situation. But the American people ought to know the facts and the facts are as I have indicated.

I think it is a great tragedy, what we are seeing in Vietnam today. I think it could have been avoided. But I am not going to point a finger. The American people will make that judgment. I think it is more important for me and the American people and the Congress, in the weeks and months ahead, to do what we can to work together to meet the problems of the future.

That is what I intend to do, and I will go more than half way with the Congress in seeking to achieve that result. I think we have the capability in America. I think we have the will to overcome what appears to be a disaster in Southeast Asia. To the extent that I can, I hope to give that leadership.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, regardless of what caused it, it seems apparent that for the first time in our Nation's history, the enemy is about to win a war where Americans fought and died. Do you think those 55,000 lives were wasted?

THE PRESIDENT: I do not think they were wasted, providing the United States had carried out the solemn commitments that were made in Paris. At the time American fighting was stopped in South Vietnam, at a time when the agreement provided that all of our troops should be withdrawn, that all of our POW's should be returned, if we had carried out the commitments that were made at that time, the tragic sacrifices that were made by many -- those who were killed, those who were wounded -- would not have been in vain.

When I see us not carrying through, then it raises a quite different question.

QUESTION: Is that a yes, then, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: I still think there is an opportunity to salvage the situation in Vietnam, and if we salvage it, giving the South Vietnamese an opportunity to fight for their freedom, which I think they are anxious to do, if given an honest opportunity, then there was not a sacrifice that was inappropriate or unwise.

QUESTION: Good afternoon, Mr. President.

In a speech you are going to deliver here in San Diego this afternoon, you warn against the fatalism, despair and the prophets of doom. Yet, as I look back over the past eight months or a year -- and I don't mean to suggest that these are in any way your responsibility or fault -- I have a laundry list which cites Portugal as having a leftist government raising serious questions about its future in NATO.

Greece and Turkey are at each other's throats, threatening the Southern flanks of that alliance. We are familiar that Secretary Kissinger's mission failed in his peace talks with Egypt, and Israel, and we don't need to rehash the situation in Cambodia and South Vietnam.

That being the case, sir, how can you say that the world outlook -- and particularly as you address it in your speech next week on the state of the world -- is anything but bleak for the United States when many of the minuses which I cited are actually plusses for the Soviets?

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THE PRESIDENT: The speech that I am giving to Congress and to the American people next week will deal with many of the problems that you have raised. I think we do face a crisis. But I am optimistic that if the Congress joins with me, and the American people support the Congress and me, as President, we can overcome those difficulties.

We can play a constructive role in Portugal; not interfering with their internal decisions, but Portugal is an important ally in Western Europe. We can find ways to solve the problem in Cyprus and hopefully keep both Greece and Turkey strong and viable members of NATO.

We can, despite the difficulties that transpired in the Middle East in the last several weeks, find a way to keep a peace movement moving in that very volatile area.

It may mean -- and probably does -- that we will have to take the problem to Geneva. I would have preferred it otherwise, but the facts are that if Congress and the American people and the President work together -- as I expect they will -- then in my judgment, those disappointments can become plusses.

QUESTION: But, sir, can you cite any specific reasons for the optimism you express?

THE PRESIDENT: The historical character of the American people, that is the main ingredient that in my judgment, will take America from the disappointments of the present to the optimism of the future.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, very much.

END (AT 12:45 P.M. PDT)