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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF TOASTS  
BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT  
AND  
LEE KUAN YEW  
PRIME MINISTER OF SINGAPORE

THE STATE DINING ROOM

10:01 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: We are here this evening to welcome to Washington the very distinguished Prime Minister and Mrs. Lee of Singapore, and we are delighted to have both of you here, Mr. Prime Minister, and Mrs. Lee.

Regrettably, I have not yet had the opportunity, Mr. Prime Minister, to visit Singapore and, unfortunately, until this morning, I had never had the opportunity to get acquainted with you and to exchange views with you. But obviously, because of your reputation and your country's reputation, I have known both of you.

I must say that the reputation of both the country and yourself is carried very far throughout the world. In its brief existence, Mr. Prime Minister, a decade of independence, Singapore has compiled a tremendous reputation and record of accomplishment.

Asian traditions have blended in this case very successfully with modern technology to produce a prosperous and a very progressive society without sacrificing a distinctive cultural heritage.

Singapore has built for itself a position of great respect and influence in Southeast Asia and throughout the rest of the world, and I have noticed that in my many contacts with other leaders in the Commonwealth, as well as elsewhere.

As the principal architect of this success, the Prime Minister has become widely known, not only for what Singapore has accomplished under his leadership, but also for his very broad grasp of international relationships.

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Over the last decade, he has achieved a very special status among world leaders for his very thoughtful and his articulate interpretations of world events. He is a man of vision whose views are very relevant to world issues and whose advice is widely sought.

When the Prime Minister speaks, we all listen most carefully, for good and sufficient reasons, and we come away from those experiences far wiser.

I am especially pleased that we have an opportunity to exchange views with the Prime Minister at this time. We have had a tragedy in Indochina. It is affecting all of the countries in Southeast Asia, as well as all of us who are deeply concerned for the future of Southeast Asia and for the cause of freedom.

It has made the problems of Southeast Asia more difficult, but let me say without reservation, we are determined to deal affirmatively with those problems, and we will deal with them.

The Prime Minister's visit gives us the benefit of his experience and his wisdom in assessing the current situation in that part of the world. It also gives me the opportunity to assure him that our commitments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, if I might add, are honored and will be honored, and that our concern for the security and for the welfare of free nations in Southeast Asia is undiminished.

Mr. Prime Minister, and Mrs. Lee, it is a great pleasure for Mrs. Ford and myself to have you here with us this evening and at last to have an opportunity to have an acquaintanceship and a fine evening with you.

Both Mrs. Ford and I have looked forward to this for some time.

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you now to raise your glasses and join with me in offering a toast to the Prime Minister of Singapore and to Mrs. Lee.

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PRIME MINISTER LEE: Mr. President, Mrs. Ford, ladies and gentlemen:

It is two years since I was here as a guest on a similar occasion -- a guest of your predecessor. For America, our friends and allies, the world has been somewhat diminished since then.

In the first years after the end of World War II, the great events were the Cold War, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin blockade, the Korean War. In each one of these trials of will and strength, America and her allies in Western Europe, and later Japan, came out strong and united.

But the dramatic turn of events of the last two years -- the war in the Middle East in October, 1973 followed by an oil embargo, a four-fold increase in oil prices, the partitioning of Cyprus in June, 1974, and more recently, the loss of Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge and the capture of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese army -- have weakened America and her allies.

Economic recession and increased unemployment, on top of the crisis of confidence of a Watergate and other related issues, bequeathed a host of problems on your great office. They have become the more difficult to resolve because of bitterness and animosities within America and between America and her allies over past policies and worse, over suspected future courses of action.

Then, as the United States was near distraction as a result of these problems, the North Vietnamese who had been well-supplied in the meantime by arms from her allies, struck with suddenness and boldness and brought off a great political coup routing the South Vietnamese army.

They had judged the mood of America correctly. They got away with it. These events have grave implications for the rest of Asia, and I make bold to suggest subsequently for the rest of the world.

I hope you would not think it inappropriate of me to express more than just sympathy or even sorrow that so many Americans were killed and maimed and so much resources expended by successive Democratic and Republican administrations to reach this result. It was an unmitigated disaster. It was not inevitable that this should have been so, especially in this catastrophic manner, nor that the problems would now end just with the Communist control of Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos, and of their allegiance to competing Communist centers of power.

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Now, much will depend upon your Administration getting problems back into perspective. An economically weakened America, with recession dampening the economies of Western Europe and Japan leading to falling commodity prices for the developing world—other than the oil producers--was threatening to further weaken other non-Communist governments the world over.

Now, it looks as if the worst may be over. It may take some time and no little effort to sort out the complex problems of the Middle East, to remove the threat of a sudden cut in supplies, in oil, at reasonable prices.

Next comes the restoration of confidence in the capacity of the United States to act in unison in a crisis. No better service can be done to non-Communist governments the world over than to restore confidence that the American Government can and will act swiftly and in tandem between the Administration and Congress in any case of open aggression, and where you have a treaty obligation, to do so.

If the President and Congress can speak in one voice on basic issues of foreign policy, and in clear and unmistakable terms, then friends and allies will know where they stand, and others will not be able to pretend to misunderstand when crossing the line from insurgency into open aggression. Then, the world will see less adventurism.

When confusion reigns, it is more often because men's minds are confused rather than that the situation is confused. I found considerable clarity of exposition on future policies, both here and in our discussions this morning, and in most of my discussions on Capitol Hill.

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There was no congruence of attitudes and policies. But, I believe there is or should be enough common ground on major issues. If this common ground can form the foundation of a coherent, consistent policy between now and the next Presidential elections, there would be great relief around the world.

Like the rest of the world, we in Asia have to get our people reconciled to slower rates of growth now that the cost of energy has nearly quintupled. But growth, however slow, compared to what it used to be, would be of immense help in keeping the world peaceful and stable.

Only then will great matters be accorded the priorities they deserve and men's minds will be less confused. One such confusion is that since Vietnam and Cambodia were not America's to lose in the first place, then nothing has been lost.

It is this apologetic explaining away of a grave setback that worries many of America's friends. Since we do not belong to you, then you have lost nothing anyway, if we are lost.

I am happy to tell you, Mr. President, that my immediate neighbors and I have not been lost. (Laughter)

Indeed, we have every intention to coordinate our actions and policies to insure that we will never be lost. It is a euphemism for a takeover, often by force. It will help if Americans, particularly those in the mass media, do not find this strange.

Mr. President, I have expounded this last week in Jamaica, as a consequence of which my friend, the British Foreign Secretary, Jim Callaghan said it made him melancholy, and I went back and quoted a Chinese metaphor, saying in 4000 years of variegated living, sometimes in prosperous -- often in less prosperous -- circumstances, and the same language, polished and repolished over some 3000-plus years, one can usually find something apt.

It runs thus: Saiwung Chima -- Saiwung is a name of a man who lived in the Sung Dynasty -- he had many horses. One day he lost one. Who knows what tragedy he felt. The great chairman may not.

I don't know whether this is ideologically purist in its approach, but it has a philosophical explanation for fortune and misfortune. The horse was a loss, a great loss. The horse came back and brought another horse -- Profit. (Laughter)

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His son rode the horse and was thrown off and broke his leg. Great pity. War came and the young men were conscripted, but his son, having broke his leg, missed the conscription. (Laughter) Unlike his many other contemporaries, he survived, but with a broken leg, mended. (Laughter)

It is as much to console my friend Jim Callaghan as it is to give me that degree of solace and sometimes objectivity. Who knows, two years ago it was a different world. Two years from hence could be better, could be worse, but I do not believe in Marxist, Leninist predetermination.

I have been able to spend a delightful evening beside your wife, Mr. President. I read of you, and it was as I found it, that you were open, direct, easy to get along with, but with decided views.

I did not know, however, that you had a gracious wife who made me feel completely at home, and I enjoyed my evening.

So, ladies and gentlemen, if you would join me in wishing the President and Mrs. Ford good health, good fortune, long life.

END (AT 10:24 P.M. EDT)