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INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

BY

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11:35 A.M. EDT

QUESTION: We would like to start out by asking you, Mr. President, how you view your past year in office, and what do you think were the high points and the low points, good and bad?

THE PRESIDENT: I think obviously the first several months were the most difficult. We had some tough decisions to make in that period.

First, we had to handle the staff problem. Secondly, we had the problem of the Nixon pardon. We had almost immediately the problem of the economy -- primarily, at that time, inflation.

We had some upcoming international matters, not only the prospective meetings with Mr. Brezhnev, but also the problem of the Middle East, as well as trying to reassure our friends in Europe that we were going to continue our policies relating to NATO. All of these crowded in in a very short period of time and I think that they were the most difficult.

Gradually we sorted all of them out and came up with some answers and then we were able to plan ahead and meet some of the long-range problems. I think it has gotten progressively easier to handle even though the problems have been tough. We have the organization and we have had a little more time, so I think since the first of the year, despite the problems, it has been a much easier time.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you move so fast and keep such long hours that some critics wonder, do you get adequate time for thought and might you not be indeed endangering your health?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me answer the latter first, Frank. In all honesty, I have never felt better than I feel today, for a long, long period of time. I get more daily exercise. It is better regulated. It is easier to organize. My weight is down and my muscle tone is really the best it has been in a long time. So health-wise, I haven't felt better than I feel right today.

Now the question of do I have enough time to think about and analyze the problems. I make the time. That is the way I have always done it, except the problems are a little larger in their scope and complexity but with the good staff we have and the way we organize it and the time I spend, I do get enough time to read and make decisions and to handle the matters. Fortunately, my health is such that I can get five hours sleep a night and feel good.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you said yesterday that during your first year in office you have been restoring confidence in Government. At the same time you said, and I quote, "Not many people in public life are doing very well in the polls." I think you made reference to yourself, that the polls are rising but not high enough.

I wonder if there is any conflict in those two statements. The second statement indicates to me that you might feel the public is still disenchanted with Government after Watergate and the previous problems and still cast a wary eye at politicians despite your efforts this year.

THE PRESIDENT: The polls I have seen do show that Government generally is looked upon with some suspicion or lack of confidence. The Congress is down. The Congress, if my memory is accurate, is down pretty much at its low ebb right at the present time. There is a questioning of Government generally and I think that would probably include the top people in the Executive Branch.

However, bearing in mind the problems we have in the economy and have had, and bearing in mind the world situation, and the improvement that I think is going to take place in both areas, this will have, as I see it, an impetus to the restoration of public confidence at least in the Federal Government.

QUESTION: May I follow that one up with a related question? There is, sir, without being condescending, a wide agreement that there is on the Presidency a man of openness and honesty.

Isn't it rather an ironic commentary on the state of affairs in this country when people can say, "Thank heavens, at last we have an honest man as President."? What has that done to America's stature?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe that is a reflection of the basic American character. I feel that the American people as a whole are very open and basically very honest, very friendly and gregarious. It seems to me that those characteristics being so imbedded in the American people, they rather approve of a President who has those somewhat similar characteristics. They feel a certain rapport with someone that they feel has the same characteristics that they have.

I am not sure that is answering your question, but as I understood the question I think it is responsive.

QUESTION: I was wondering again, if I may follow up--you know the good happenings, the feelings that at last we have an honest President--if it didn't represent something lacking in American society in previous years.

THE PRESIDENT: I really don't see how you can compare -- if I understand the point you are making -- I really don't see it as the past relating to the present. I just feel comfortable that the American people have that feeling about me which I feel in a reciprocal way toward them.

I would hesitate to compare their previous characteristics with the previous characteristics of another Administration. I can only refer to my own feeling toward the American people and what they feel, as you expressed it, towards me.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you never discuss Watergate or you never seem to indicate in an interview that you understood what it was all about. Why is that, and why is it that at no point, from reading the newspapers every day, your daily encounters, your contacts with President Nixon, you never grasped what the whole motivation was until the last moment, and even then? I know you don't want to be a Monday morning quarterback, but I think it behooves a President to know what happened in the past.

THE PRESIDENT: I think, Helen, as I look in retrospect, obviously I know what happened. I don't understand why the people who were involved let it happen. That is the thing that really bothers me.

QUESTION: They not only let it happen, they made it happen.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that is true. I just don't understand that. That has been a real perplexity to me. It was so unnecessary, so nonessential that it just stuns me when I look back and see the things that took place.

QUESTION: Do you ever feel that you were personally betrayed as one of the spokesmen for the Party by Nixon himself in the sense that you were defending him and speaking out and so forth, and don't you feel that you were put on a spot?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I was put on a very difficult spot but I don't think I should go beyond that.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you never had regained the popularity standing that you had prior to the Nixon pardon. The Nixon pardon, however, looks better in retrospect. Do you think that it did indeed help put Watergate behind us?

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly do, Frank. Somebody either wrote or said -- they took the first two or three press conferences that I had and somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of the questions in those first two or three press conferences involved Watergate or involved related matters. Once the pardon was done and I said it was done, in the press conferences, if they are an indication of public interest, we just didn't have any more questions and we were acting on issues and problems that were fundamental to the country both at home and abroad, and the Nixon pardon, I think, at least took off my desk the nagging things that would have gone on and on and on.

So it did give me an opportunity, and the people working with me an opportunity to concentrate on those very, very tough problems we had both at home and abroad.

So I thought I was right then and I am more convinced I was right as we look back on it.

QUESTION: Could I change the subject to energy? Your whole energy policy is predicated on discouraging consumption by raising prices. Do you think with this rekindled fear of inflation that will make it all the more difficult now for you to win adoption of your energy policy?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't believe that the last two figures, one in the CPI and the other in the WPI are an indication of a resumption of the kind of inflation we had a year ago. As a matter of fact, if you take the last six months and put the figures on an annualized basis, including, of course, the last figure on the CPI -- it is a figure of 6.4, as I recall. That is too high but it is half of what it was a year ago.

Now, in the implementation of our energy program, if we can get Congress -- if we ever get Congress to pass it -- I don't think there will be any surge in inflation as a result of that. There will be some minimal higher prices, minimal, but they are not going to force a broad overall increase in the rate of inflation.

QUESTION: But with this veto, it seems like the whole thing is a new ball game. Have you got a lot of options other than veto or not veto?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, on that one issue I can either veto or sign it. If I veto it, I have a number of administrative and proposed legislative matters that I think will mitigate the allegations that have been made. Of course the study, the theoretical study made by the Library of Congress, doesn't really know what options I have or what actions I will take. Those options that are available give me an opportunity to come out with a different decision than what this theoretical study comes up with.

QUESTION: But it would rely on Congress. Congress would have to go along.

THE PRESIDENT: There are some administrative things that I can do, Frank, and as I say, these options will be thoroughly analyzed. I don't have the bill down here yet. It is coming when?

QUESTION: The 27th.

QUESTION: You keep saying "if," if you sign it?

THE PRESIDENT: I am still firm. What did I say -- 99 percent? That is pretty strong odds. But the point I am making is that the options that coincide with that give me a chance to mitigate some of the alleged inflationary threats.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I would like to discuss the Helsinki declaration within the context of domestic politics. I know you have explained the declaration you signed, the benefits you see in it, but I want to relate that to what I think has been an upsurge in anti-Soviet feeling in the last few weeks, sparked by the Solzhenitsyn visit and the criticisms of the European Security Declaration by the right wing of your own Party.

Despite your own justification for signing the declaration and in the light of a possible challenge to your nomination by the right wing, do you think this is going to be an issue, a major issue not in the election, sir, but in the campaign for nomination?

THE PRESIDENT: In my judgment the vast number of Americans who will study the European Security Conference documents, and what was done there and what was said there, will come to the conclusion that it was in the best interest of Europe, including Canada and the United States -- actually the world.

I think you can turn that point around. Supposing the United States did not go there. There would have been an empty seat. Thirty-four other nations would have signed documents that would have listed many, many good things and the United States would not have been a participant. Our absence would have been, in my view, a rebuff to our allies and it would not have permitted the President of the United States to continue the contacts with the peoples in many of the Eastern countries-- the Eastern European countries--and those contacts are important. And equally important, if not more so, is the solidarity of the Western Alliance. So when you look at what might have been if I had not gone, it would have been very bad for the United States. By going and by saying what I said, which I said very firmly, I think we have put the CSCE in the right context and have solidified the Western countries and have served notice on any other that any violation of the agreement will be construed as a very serious act on one country's or several countries' part.

QUESTION: Yes, but, granted that you can persuade the American people -- and I am sure you can -- your immediate problem, sir, is not the November election. It is the nomination.

Now, we saw what happened in 1964 when the delegates were out of tune with the people as was proved by the election results. So it is the nomination I am questioning you about, and I just wondered, will this encourage the right wing which is pondering now what to do -- will it embolden them? What about the delegate reaction?

THE PRESIDENT: The Republican Party is a broad spectrum party and the more conservative group makes up a part of that spectrum. But they are not the majority.

The majority of the Republican spectrum is in the middle. We have some on the left, as we have some on the right. So in the seeking of the nomination I believe that the middle and those to the left will support the actions that I took in going to Helsinki. I am not so sure that all of the people on the right will take the views of some on the right.

So I don't believe that what we did in Helsinki, believing as I do that it was a positive thing, that it will have any adverse impact on the nomination.

QUESTION: Mr. President, on the Middle East, in your interview yesterday you said that the possibility of confrontation between the U.S. and Soviets in the Middle East had increased, but you didn't say why.

And also, the second part of my question is, I am operating on the assumption that there is going to be U.S. monitoring if there is an interim agreement that has been written, and I don't know if you can confirm it, but do you think American personnel should be directly included into a possibility of a conflict in the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT: Helen, I don't think that you should assume any details of negotiation between Egypt and Israel. These are terms that they have to agree to.

QUESTION: But there is a U.S. --

THE PRESIDENT: I would not want to get into, one, the actual final agreements that they make or any participation, if any, that we have.

QUESTION: You are not denying it, though?

THE PRESIDENT: I am not talking about any of the terms.

QUESTION: Do you think the Americans are going to be involved? We would be interested in knowing before it is a fait accompli.

THE PRESIDENT: Whatever the terms are, Helen, whatever, I will certainly be frank and honest with the American people as to any involvement in the negotiating process or any subsequent involvement.

QUESTION: How about the question about the confrontation, and why is that in view of detente?

THE PRESIDENT: As you will recollect, in October of 1973 at the height of the war between the Israelis and Egypt, President Nixon did put the American forces on a degree of alert because of certain intelligence information we had that they -- the Soviet Union -- were taking some action involving their forces.

Now, detente was very helpful in cooling off that potential confrontation. What I tried to point out yesterday was that that sequence having taken place in 1973, it is possible that it would happen again if there was a conflict between Israel and any of the Arab states.

As you look at this volatility of that area, historically as well as in the present, you have to be cognizant of all of the contingencies and that inevitably is a contingency.

QUESTION: Back to politics, Mr. President, I think you are generally regarded as a middle-of-the-road conservative. Perhaps that is as good a label as any.

THE PRESIDENT: I like that label.

QUESTION: Your campaign organization seems to be staffed mainly by people who are to the right of you. Many commentators, meaning people who write, I guess, see you moving to the right to appease the Reagan forces. Is there some danger that you will be vacating the middle ground to the Democrats where presumably most of us live?

THE PRESIDENT: May I assure you we are not going to give up the middle ground. I don't really believe that all of my campaign people are in the right part of the spectrum. Certainly Dave Packard is not. Dave is a middle-of-the-roader by any definition.

We are just starting to build the campaign organization. I think they have 10 employees.

MR. NESSEN: They only had four the last I saw.

QUESTION: But it is weighted in terms of the four. Dean Burch is a Goldwater man.

THE PRESIDENT: I think Dean's subsequent service in the Government would put him pretty much in the middle, though, really. Then you can look at that advisory group -- Bobby Douglas came from the Vice President's staff. Johnny Byrnes -- I keep getting the transition group and the other group mixed up, but as I looked at that group I think it is fairly well balanced. The advisory group and certainly the transition group, which isn't in the political sphere at all, is pretty well balanced, as well.

The Republican candidate is -- I should say I, as a Republican candidate, am in the middle and we are going to stay in the middle.

QUESTION: Mr. President, a couple of questions on Vietnam, please.

THE PRESIDENT: I thought that was behind us.

QUESTION: They are philosophical in the context of this interview.

You said yesterday, "Past and current actions do not convince me we should recognize South Vietnam or North Vietnam."

If you are divorcing that from the situation in the United Nations, what actions do you have in mind? Vietnam seems very quiet and there doesn't seem to be much anti-American propaganda coming out of Saigon these days.

The second question is, sir: Have you received any intelligence reports of that bloodbath that you feared would occur after the take-over in April?

THE PRESIDENT: There was a great fear of a blood-bath in Vietnam, and I think that apprehension was legitimate because of the experience that took place -- when was it, Dien Bien Phu in 1954 -- when some half a million people fled from the north to the south and they told tales or stories of the kind of harsh action taken by the North Vietnamese Government.

So I think it was a legitimate concern and apprehension. From the reports we have gotten in South Vietnam, at least in the Saigon area, there doesn't seem to have been that, for which I am very thankful. But I must say that we don't get a lot of information as to what is taking place throughout the rest of the country, and I can only say I hope that our apprehension will not come true. We certainly don't want it to come true.

But let us turn to Cambodia. What we hear and what we have read about the action of the Khmer Rouge certainly confirms what many of us said would take place. Some of the treatment accorded to people trying to get out of the country, non-Cambodians -- those are horrible stories and I guess written by reliable news people.

So I am encouraged that what we forecast, and at least in Saigon, has not taken place, and I hope it doesn't, and I, of course, am shocked by what we hear from Cambodia.

QUESTION: And the first question, Mr. President, about the current actions that you mentioned yesterday which persuaded you that there is no reason to move towards North or South Vietnam.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, when you consider the complete violation of the Paris Accords by the North Vietnamese, it hardly is the atmosphere for the United States to undertake diplomatic relations with them and/or South Vietnam.

MR. NESSEN: We ought to take about two more minutes.

QUESTION: From the moment you stepped into this office you decided apparently to be President; you were bitten by the bug. What happened, and why do you want to be President, and why do you think you will be a good one?

THE PRESIDENT: I can't say from the moment I took office.

QUESTION: Jerry terHorst announced it almost within a week. Actually when did it happen?

THE PRESIDENT: I analyzed the situation and for me to have announced that I would be a lame duck President would have seriously undercut my capability to be a President during that two and a half years. That was one factor.

Secondly, I felt that with the opportunity to handle the problems domestically and internationally, I could build a record which would be in the best interests of the country. So it was a process that I went through and I am glad I made the decision. I am looking forward to the opportunity.

QUESTION: There were reports that you told Congressmen that you would not run if Mrs. Ford got sick; is that true?

THE PRESIDENT: Obviously, I talked with her about it and we came to the conclusion, one, that her health was sufficiently good that she could be a good teammate in the operation, and I think that judgment has been born out. I think her health today is better than it was on many occasions when I was the Minority Leader. So we don't foresee any health problems as far as she is concerned, except that she shouldn't try to keep up with the schedule that I keep up with sometimes.

MR. NESSEN: Nobody should.

THE PRESIDENT: But you know, she can handle it, and I think the way she handled it in Europe this time, when she got tired from the jet lag or tired from doing too many things, she just took a half a day off.

QUESTION: But is it a factor at all?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, bearing in mind the good condition of her health, it is not a factor.

QUESTION: All right, how about the opposite?

THE PRESIDENT: We don't speculate on those things, Helen.

QUESTION: But it is a factor?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, I don't anticipate that so I don't anticipate that being a factor.

QUESTION: Mr. President, Dave Broder wrote a column that said a lot of nice things about you last week, but he said you have yet to show us where you want to take us. Do you have a long-range agenda for the country?

THE PRESIDENT: Frank, that was a very nice column and he asked a very good question in the last paragraph or so. We are going to develop either an explanation of what we are doing and how it fits into a long-range program, or we will come up with some long-range focus and answers. We are in the process now of trying to respond to what I think was a good question.

QUESTION: Do you feel so far you have had to be too preoccupied with the minute-by-minute things like the economy and energy problems, to really focus in on the wild blue yonder?

THE PRESIDENT: To some extent yes, although the energy problem, Frank, is a long-range 10-year decade problem. I just wish we could get some progress on it. It has been a hard struggle.

QUESTION: We are all eager to know how you are going to decontrol and mitigate the effects.

THE PRESIDENT: You watch. We will handle it with skill and success.

QUESTION: What about bread and gasoline?

THE PRESIDENT: All you do, Helen, is postpone the answer.

QUESTION: You don't think bread prices or gasoline prices are going up?

THE PRESIDENT: I think there probably will be a minimum increase in gasoline prices. Didn't I see where some company took a pledge, a public pledge that over the next 12 months gasoline prices wouldn't go up more than two cents -- Union Oil in California? I think that is a statesman-like attitude, and I think that is the point of view that industry ought to take. I am pleased that they did it and I would hope others would.

QUESTION: Are you going to start jawboning on that?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I am just commenting on what they did.

QUESTION: Why don't you? You do it with everybody else -- the Congress.

THE PRESIDENT: I think they understand their role in this very difficult situation.

QUESTION: How about bread?

THE PRESIDENT: I can't quote the precise statistics that Earl Butz used on one show, one of the Sunday shows, but he pointed out very dramatically from what I read that any increase in grain prices will have a minimal impact on bread, and I think that is true. I happen to agree with Earl.

QUESTION: Mr. President, we thank you for your time and we enjoyed it very much.

THE PRESIDENT: We will do it again some time.

END (AT 12:10 P.M. EDT)