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THE WHITE HOUSE

INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

BY

BOB ABERNETHY

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KNBC-TV

CENTURY PLAZA HOTEL

8:57 A.M. PDT

QUESTION: Good evening and welcome. I am Bob Abernethy, KNBC News. To question the President are KNBC news reporters Jess Marlow and Warren Olney.

Mr. President, welcome.

A prominent California Republican said the other day that he thinks it would be healthy for the Republican Party if Ronald Reagan were to try to get the GOP nomination for the Presidency. Do you agree with that?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't see any serious problems in that regard. I have always thought that competition in the political arena was healthy for the candidates and for the Party. I certainly feel that former Governor Reagan and myself are close enough personal friends that we can have any competition without having a divisive impact on the Party. So competition being good for candidates and the Party, I think, under our system, I see no serious harm in that regard.

QUESTION: More and more people are saying they think it is inevitable that Governor Reagan will run. Do you share that view?

THE PRESIDENT. I really should not pass judgment on what he will or won't do, so since that is a judgment on his part, I think we ought to wait and see.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you suggest the competition would be healthy. Indeed are we not seeing some of that competition right now with your concentrated schedule in California?

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THE PRESIDENT: My efforts here, as part of the responsibility as President that I have to talk to groups in the education field, the labor field and other areas and I also feel it is a part of my responsibility on this trip to help the party per se, to help get the party strengthened in the responsibility it has for organization as well as fund raising. There is nothing in this trip that relates to my candidacy as such.

QUESTION: Mr. President, is there any question in your mind that if you went head-to-head in the primary in New Hampshire, Florida and other places, that you could beat him?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't like to forecast what I will do in the political race, I am confident the policies we have for the country, the policies that we are trying to implement domestically and foreign policy-wise put us in a pretty good position against any competition within and without the party.

QUESTION: In the event Governor Reagan should defeat you in New Hampshire and Florida, how serious a blow would that be to your efforts to get the nomination?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't speculate about defeat, I look at it affirmatively that we will do well in any of the primaries, whether New Hampshire, Florida or otherwise, just as I feel the policies we are trying to implement for the country will be favorable and, therefore, we don't analyze what will happen if we don't do well.

QUESTION: How do you see the result of the Senatorial race in New Hampshire? A lot of people will say it was a rebuke to your policies.

THE PRESIDENT: I don't feel it was necessarily. The opposition was extremely well-organized up there. They got out roughly 30,000 more votes for Durkin than they got in 1974 in November. Strangely enough, Louis Wyman got about three or four thousand more votes than he got in November, so it was really an organizational effort rather than the ideology of the Administration being repudiated.

QUESTION: Both you and Governor Reagan campaigned there, though. That is about as heavy an artillery as your party could have brought in.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, and I got a very favorable response from the people of New Hampshire, for which I am very grateful. I don't think that response, or the result really entered into that election as such and the technical adviser to the Democratic Party, Dick Scanlon, discounted any impact on a national level from that particular election.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, one more Reagan question. Your friend, indeed your host for part of this weekend, the U.N. Ambassador to Belgium, has said he doesn't think Ronald Reagan is qualified to be President. What do you think? Is he qualified?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think I ought to pass judgment on that. He was a very good Governor for the State of California, and I don't think I should enter into those discussions.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you expressed confidence that your policies would get you past any primary competition, indeed in the general election, too, and you particularly noted foreign policy.

I would like to ask you a couple of questions about foreign policy, particularly about the recent Middle East agreements.

First of all, is there an agreement to supply Pershing missiles to Israel?

THE PRESIDENT: The documents carefully spell out that we will study with Israel their request for Pershing missiles. It is carefully phrased, and it goes only to the commitment to study the need and necessity for Pershing missiles for Israel.

QUESTION: Senator Howard Baker said here yesterday he believes -- and he emphasized it is only his belief -- that Israel has nuclear weapons now. Could you comment on that?

THE PRESIDENT: I do not know categorically whether they do or do not. Therefore, I don't think I should speculate.

QUESTION: Another missile question. The Hawk missile for Jordan, did you insist that we be assured that those could only be used defensively?

THE PRESIDENT: Certainly, the intent is that those Hawk missiles should be used for defense purposes. It is important for Jordan to have that defensive capability and the intent -- and I think the agreement itself -- is aimed at that direction.

QUESTION: Did Jordan regard it as an insult that we suggested it only be defensive? Is that the only business that was made public?

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THE PRESIDENT: It is a very technical dispute, and it is my opinion that those differences have been resolved -- and I think constructively so -- for the Middle East as a whole.

QUESTION: Mr. President, another concern regarding the Middle East is those 200 American civilians who may go into the Sinai, concern that they may become targets or hostages and that may cause us to make a larger movement of men.

Can you promise that if 200 civilians are sent to the Sinai now more Americans will not have to go in the future?

THE PRESIDENT: There is certainly no intention that that technical contribution be enlarged. I see no reason why it should. As a matter of fact, it is fully understood by the parties that it will not be enlarged.

To compare that to the situation in Vietnam is not an accurate comparison. In Vietnam, there were two parties at war, and the American initial contribution back in 1961 was at the request of one party and in opposition to the other party.

In this case, both Israel and Egypt requested our contribution, so it is a totally different situation and there is no intent on our part to enlarge it. There is no request by either party to enlarge it. So, I see no possibility of that happening.

QUESTION: Supposing there was some kind of an attack on those people by the Palestinian Liberation Organization? What would this country's response be?

THE PRESIDENT: Of course, our effort would be to bring those American technicians out of the area in case of any forecast of trouble arising in the area. They are there, will be there, in the U.N. buffer zone along with the 7,000 or 8,000 U.N. forces, and I think they are thoroughly protected.

I think it is an area, in my opinion, at least, that it is safe for those Americans. I think it is well to point out that we have now, I think it is, 15 or 20 Americans there with the U.N. forces at the present time.

So, this is a very technical contribution in a protected area, the U.N. buffer zone. So, I don't think that problem is going to arise.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, the Congressional Budget Office reported this week if the Federal Government would increase the deficit by another \$25 billion, would put a million people back to work who wouldn't otherwise be put back to work, by the end of 1977, with a very tiny increase in inflation. If that is true, why don't you do it?

THE PRESIDENT: An extra \$25 billion to a \$61 billion deficit would have serious ramifications.

QUESTION: Is that study wrong, that Congressional Budget Office study wrong?

THE PRESIDENT: I respectfully disagree. I think there is a better way of approaching the problem. Of course, their recommendations came out prior to the announcement on Friday that we have made very significant progress in the battle against inflation, and I think it is important to point out that in the last eight months the cost of living has gone up 4.8 percent on an annual basis compared to a figure for the previous comparable period of an inflation rate of 8.3 or 8.4, so the Congressional Budget recommendation for a \$25 billion increase in the deficit, taking it up to \$85 or \$86 billion is the wrong approach, predicated on the facts that were revealed by the Department of Labor on Friday.

QUESTION: The Governor of California, among others, thinks that the growing costs of energy and raw materials, demands from the poor nations for more of what we have, all this means that our days of significant economic growth are over.

Do you agree?

THE PRESIDENT: I am an optimist, and I respectfully disagree with the Governor that we should predicate our future on a less well-off society than we have had in the past. We will have certain periods of time where we will pay more for energy or there will be some energy scarcity, but it doesn't mean that the United States should expect a period of dismal progress.

I think the United States, if we adopt the right policy, can expect continued growth in a substantial and constructive way. If we approach it from the pessimistic point of view, I think we are adopting the wrong attitude.

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QUESTION: You say if we adopt the right policies. Does that suggest that we have not yet adopted it?

THE PRESIDENT: Let's take the energy problem. If the Congress doesn't act for a constructive approach to the energy problem, yes, we will have difficulty. We have been prodding the Congress, pushing the Congress, cooperating with the Congress, and yet they have done literally nothing.

Fortunately, we may be coming out of it on the right side, even if the Congress doesn't do something, but I would rather do it on a phased decontrol basis rather than an abrupt end of controls.

QUESTION: Congressman Roybal said yesterday that he did not think you had cooperated sufficiently or compromised, I think is the way he put it.

THE PRESIDENT: Let me just cite some figures that I did yesterday in Oklahoma. Since January, when I submitted a program, an energy program, I have personally consulted with 51 out of 100 United States Senators. I personally consulted with 305 or 310 of the 435 Members of the House of Representatives.

I have recommended two phased decontrol programs. They have rejected both of them. I have gone more than halfway, and I regret -- and I think it is unfortunate -- that the Congress has not responded.

I still think that there is a chance they could at least do something, but if they don't do something, then I think we also are in a position where we will come out of it in good shape.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, in times past and in times of national problems, other Presidents have called on the American people to serve the country in various ways. It seems to me a lot of people are willing, even eager, to do the same thing now but they aren't sure exactly how. What would you like to ask the American people to do?

THE PRESIDENT: I am not pessimistic at all that the American people will not respond. As a matter of fact, as I travel around the country I find the American people are eager to cooperate. They can do it in a number of ways. The first is to impress upon their representatives in the Congress, Senators and Congressmen, that we have to move ahead, whether it is in energy, or the economy, or national security. I note a slight change in the attitude of the Congress because I think the American people are having an impact.

QUESTION: Indeed that is what you are trying to do.

THE PRESIDENT. That is exactly what we are trying to do and I note some slight improvements in the attitude of the Congress in trying to cooperate with me and I certainly am going to bend over backwards, and I think I have in that area.

QUESTION: During the past week we have heard that the intelligence apparatus in this country deliberately defied the press, the people and the Congress about the size of the enemy during the TET offensive in the Vietnam War. What do you think about those remarks that were made and how do you feel as a former member of Congress about having been intentionally defied?

THE PRESIDENT: If it is a fact, and I think the committee ought to get others to testify who might have a different view.

QUESTION: Are you making an independent effort to find out if it is right?

THE PRESIDENT: That is one person's testimony, a former employee. To get a balanced appraisal, I honestly think the committee ought to call other witnesses. And that brings up a basic decision that I have made. Under no circumstances will we in the Executive Branch hold back any more that might involve a criminal activity or a mistake that was made. As a matter of fact, I have ordered the people who have the immediate jurisdiction to make any and all information available. I think it is important that the record be laid out with this exception, we should not in the process of making this information available reveal sources of intelligence information either by individuals or by mechanical means.

Yes, if people made mistakes, the public ought to know about it. Yes, if there is any criminal activity involved, that ought to be made available and action ought to be taken. But I do not think we should just throw open our intelligence sources. That is a serious problem.

QUESTION: Mr. President, public confidence is established in people and in institutions, we are told public confidence was established in you by your firm handling of the Mayaguez affair. I think we can suggest in recent days public confidence has been re-established in the FBI by the capture of Patty Hearst. What is it going to take to re-establish public confidence in the Central Intelligence Agency, or are they such a secret agency they can never boast about their victories?

THE PRESIDENT: I think your last comment is one of the problems. The committee investigations in the House and Senate, if conducted properly, can, I believe, illustrate that mistakes were made but overall some great accomplishments were achieved. I have the benefit of the Rockefeller Commission recommendations and the Murphy Commission recommendations and in a relatively short period of time I will make some administrative decisions that will improve the working operations of the intelligence community, including the CIA, and I will propose to the Congress some legislative recommendations which will likewise, in my opinion, improve our intelligence gathering communities. But you are never going to have the intelligence community where it will have the opportunity to brag about its accomplishments because it is so important that we not involve sources and, therefore, they have a tough PR problem.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you have said that State courts in their effort to integrate the schools have ignored less drastic alternatives than busing. What specifically do you mean -- which less drastic alternatives?

THE PRESIDENT: The Congress in 1974 approved what was labeled the Esch Amendment, laid out six or seven specific guidelines for the courts to follow. The last of the recommendation to achieve what the courts should do was busing -- court ordered forced busing to achieve racial integration. Those steps, and I was in the Congress part of that time and I signed the bill that became law, those steps include a magnetschool, utilization of the neighborhood school concept, the improvements of facilities, et cetera. I hope that in the future, as some course in the past, recent past, will utilize those guidelines rather than plunging into court ordered forced busing as the only option for the settlement of the segregation problem in the school.

QUESTION: The whole option to busing tends to get confused with racism and there are a lot of racial epithets and what not being thrown about on the protest line. Do you have anything to say about that? You are opposed to busing but how do you make the distinction?

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THE PRESIDENT: I don't think opposition to busing really has any relationship to racism on the part of most people. I think the best illustration, one of the rising young columnists in the country, Bill Raspberry, a black, has been most forceful and most constructive, I think, in opposing the court approach in many cases.

I have been opposed to busing as a means of achieving quality education from its inception. My record in the Congress in voting for civil rights legislation is a good one, so I believe that the real issue is quality education. It can be achieved better for disadvantaged people, minorities, by other means.

I have sought, through the support of the Esch amendment, through adequate funding, to help Boston and other communities where this problem exists, to upgrade their school system rather than to have this very controversial approach of forced busing.

QUESTION: Do you think it will be an issue in next year's campaign?

THE PRESIDENT: I hope it won't.

QUESTION: Mr. President, during your visit here, have you made any plans to telephone or visit former President Nixon?

THE PRESIDENT: I haven't made any specific plan, no.

QUESTION: Do you intend to?

THE PRESIDENT: I may.

QUESTION: Do you see any role for him in national life in the future?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that is a judgment he has to make, and I really can't tell you whether he will or he won't, but that is a personal judgment on his part.

QUESTION: You say you may contact him. What is it that you want to say to him?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, he is an old friend, and I have known him and worked with him in the past. What has happened in the past, or recent past, I don't think should destroy a personal friendship.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, there has been a minority report from your amnesty panel being very critical of Charles Goodell saying that he misinterpreted and he violated the spirit of the amnesty program in granting amnesty or seeking amnesty for felons. Would you comment on that?

THE PRESIDENT: That was a very controversial area, as I am sure you recognize.

QUESTION: Mr. President, our time is almost up.

THE PRESIDENT: I felt I had to do something, and I can understand, with the strong people on that board, that there might be controversy.

QUESTION: Mr. President, gentlemen, I am sorry, our time is now up.

Our warm thanks to the President of the United States for joining us here in Los Angeles. NewsConference will be back next Saturday at the same time when our guest will be Senator Howard Baker, Republican of Tennessee.

I am Bob Abernethy, KNBC News, with Jess Marlow and Warren Olney.

END (AT 9:28 A.M. PDT)