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INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

BY

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QUESTION: Let me ask you about Congressman Udall's claim today about the fact that the Election Commission is slow in getting reformed. I know you blamed the Congress on this. What do you add to his complaint that you are the one who benefits the most, that it is not being reformed properly?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think whether it is good or bad for me is the basis upon which we ought to take a look at the situation. The Supreme Court on January 30 of this year said certain parts of the basic law were unconstitutional and they gave the Congress 30 days to correct it. If the Congress had taken five days and passed a very simple corrective provision, none of this problem would have arisen, but instead they loaded up the bill with a number of very complex controversial provisions which they have not agreed on yet themselves.

So my good friend, Mo Udall, wants to blame anything -- he ought to blame the Congress that has taken 90 days and yet has not answered the problem. They don't have a bill down on the desk at the Oval Office for me to sign, so Mo Udall ought to look at his 534 other Members of the House and Senate and say let's get the job done.

QUESTION: You talk about this controversy which has arisen because of Mr. Reagan's accusations that we are now number two militarily. What is the effect of that on negotiations for an arms agreement with the Soviet Union?

THE PRESIDENT: Probably if the Soviets believe it, it probably makes them negotiate a bit harder. Of course, I don't believe that allegation. I don't think the Soviet Union believes that charge either because they have good intelligence like we have good intelligence on their capability. So that neither the United States officials nor the Soviet Union think the United States is number two. We are roughly equivalent. We have certain weapons where we are ahead that we want and the Soviet Union may have more numbers in another weapon system for something else, but when you put the whole package together, we are roughly equivalent.

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QUESTION: I think the concern that has been expressed is that you could not afford to announce an agreement with the Russians during a time when you might be accused of being soft, of having given in because of the controversy, et cetera.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me say that if we could negotiate what I consider to be a good agreement from our point of view, it would make no difference to me whether it was in an election year or otherwise. I feel it is so important that we put a cap on the nuclear arms race and to put that cap as low as possible as long as it is equal, is in the national interest of this country and I would not be concerned personally whether it was good or bad from a political point of view because it is the national interest that concerns me more than anything.

QUESTION: Mr. Kissinger said today words to the effect that this being a political year that there were not new initiatives coming forward. Could you explain what he meant by that in reference to the arms agreement?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, since I have been President 20 months we had the one meeting in Vladivostok where there was a temporary agreement of 2400 launchers and 1320 MIRVs on each side. We had some other areas of disagreement and we have been negotiating for the last 16 months to try and resolve those differences. Initiatives are going back and forth, the Soviet Union to us and we to them, but we have not yet agreed on any of the remaining points that must be agreed before we co-sign an agreement.

QUESTION: Let me turn to this question of the Panama Canal. Mr. Reagan says we bought it, we paid for it, we should tell them we are going to keep it -- words to that effect. In the negotiations that are underway, are we offering at some date in the future to relinquish control over the Canal?

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THE PRESIDENT: Let me go back one step if I might. President Johnson initiated the negotiations. His successor carried them out. We are doing the same thing.

I think we first have to understand what we are trying to achieve. We are determined to maintain the control and the operation and the military defense of the Panama Canal for as long as it is economically justifiable as a waterway. That is the aim and objective. Whether it is 40 years more or 50 years more or 60 years more, whatever the time is, that is our objective.

We have not achieved the negotiated settlement yet, but let me point this out: These negotiations began because of the riots that took place there in 1965 where 24 people were killed -- four Americans, 20 Panamanians. If we followed my opponent's recommendations to break off negotiations, what would be the result?

In the first place, you would have a resumption of the riots, probably some bloodshed like we had 24 people killed in 1964-65. You would alienate every one of those South American countries -- 25 of them. You would alienate 309 million people in Latin America and, in order to protect the Canal against guerrilla warfare, we would have to send at least 10,000 and probably 20,000 more American GIs down there to protect it if we could protect it.

So Mr. Reagan's proposal is totally irresponsible. It would lead to bloodshed, it undoubtedly would alienate our neighbors to the South, and South America, and would require more American GIs in the Panama. I think it is an irresponsible approach.

I prefer what I think is the right one -- to negotiate to maintain the control and operation of that Canal and the defense of it, as long as it is an economically viable waterway.

QUESTION: Have we determined at what stage it becomes uneconomical? Is that part of the negotiation basis?

THE PRESIDENT: It is part of the negotiation as we see it as a very, very important function in our transportation system and, of course, as a part of the agreement, also. If we do give up the operation it would have to be maintained as an international waterway by the Panamanian Government or by some other combination of governments, so it is not going to be lost, under any circumstances, as an operational waterway if it is still economically viable.

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QUESTION: For Hoosiers addressing you, what should they consider the number one issue in this primary?

THE PRESIDENT: I would say that it is the record of this Administration, a record that has taken us out of the worst economic conditions in the last 40 years. I inherited an inflation rate of 12 to 14 percent. We have taken it down to under 3 percent for the last 4 months of this calendar year.

I took this economy that was about to go over the brink with the serious recession and we have now achieved the highest employment in the history of the United States. Unemployment is too high but we have worked it down and we have added 2,600,000 new jobs in this country in the last 12 months. It is an issue as to whether or not you should get rid of a President who has been successful in handling our economy so that we have less inflation, more employment and less unemployment, plus the international policy.

I believe that our foreign policy has been successful. We are at peace. This is the first time a President in the last 20 years, as I recall, could run for office again and say that his country was at peace. So that is the record for us in foreign policy.

Mr. Reagan has some different views, apparently. He has not had the experience of running the Federal Government, handling foreign policy or handling domestic policy. I think you know I am a great believer in the automobile industry, but I don't think 1976 is the year for the public to change their model -- the Ford model.

QUESTION: Let me ask you about some of the other criticisms, mainly the question of negotiating with Hanoi and the question of Lebanon. Let me ask you first about Lebanon.

Under what conditions, if any, would you send American troops into Lebanon?

THE PRESIDENT: We have no plans at all to send American troops into Lebanon, none whatsoever, but we did send over one of our top diplomats about three weeks ago and he has been very, very successful in working with the Syrians, with the Israelis, with the Lebanese, various factions.

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We have contributed very significantly to the calming down of the situation and we are working right now with all of the parties to try and get a cease-fire and, in addition, to get a central government back in Lebanon.

Now, under no circumstances do we contemplate sending American troops to Lebanon or any place in the Middle East.

QUESTION: Even if there were a UN resolution to the effect that there should be a peacekeeping force of some kind sent in?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think the United States should participate in a peacekeeping force in the Middle East. The minute you do that, you get the Russians in and I don't think you should have the United States or Russians there.

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I want to answer one question on Hanoi. This Government has no intention whatsoever of recognizing North Vietnam -- none. I don't know where Mr. Reagan got this so-called rumor or this so-called news story that we were. He must have pulled it out of the blue someplace because it has no credibility at all.

There has not been a serious discussion by me or the Secretary of State or anybody in authority in this Administration that we were going to recognize Hanoi.

We have been working with Members of Congress to try and find a way to get our MIAs back, but under no circumstances do we contemplate recognizing North Vietnam and it is a totally fallacious allegation and I think it is again a case of irresponsibility because nobody in this Administration has said we were going to recognize North Vietnam. I think it is very unfortunate.

QUESTION: Our time is up. I want to thank you very much for giving us this time and again, welcome.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here.

END (AT 10:15 P.M. EST)