

PRESS CONFERENCE NO. 37

of the
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

11:50 A.M. EDT
September 30, 1976
Thursday

In the Oval Office
At the White House
Washington, D.C.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you are well aware of all the stories of allegations concerning your Grand Rapids past and the campaign financing, I know, and that the records allegedly have been subpoenaed by a Special Prosecutor. So, this must be very disturbing, and I suppose you want it cleared up before the election.

I know you believe the Judiciary Committee covered it all, but can you say categorically that there has never been any misuse of your campaign funds when you ran for Congress?

THE PRESIDENT: First, let me say very emphatically that I strongly believe in the Special Prosecutor concept. I support it; the Administration supports the continuation of a Special Prosecutor. I was pleased when the Senate passed a version that included such a provision. I am disappointed that the House apparently is not going to do it.

I should add that I have full confidence in the integrity of Mr. Ruff in his responsibilities as the Special Prosecutor.

Number two, I also believe in the full integrity of the Department of Justice, and I am certain that they will do whatever they are required to under their responsibilities.

Let me add that nobody on my staff has any authority whatsoever to contact either the Special Prosecutor or the Department of Justice to in any way hinder or impede whatever investigations are going on.

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(OVER)

What I know about the Kent County situation I have picked up in reading the newspapers or seeing on television and radio what has been reported.

I, therefore, am not familiar with the precise charges, whatever they may be. But, I can say with complete confidence that I am certain that when the investigation is completed, that I will be free of any allegations such as I have read about.

I would add this final comment: There is a saying that is prevalent in the law that "justice delayed is justice denied." I am certain that the people responsible for any investigation will live up to the high standards required in the Canon of Ethics for the legal profession, which does require that in any such investigations that they be full, complete and concluded as readily as possible.

QUESTION: Well, you don't know for certain whether there are charges or whether you are the target, or do you?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

QUESTION: Doesn't your curiosity--even if you made public the fact that you were going to ask, I don't think that would be undue pressure, would it?

THE PRESIDENT: We are trying to be so circumspect, so that we are not under any circumstances accused of any improprieties, that I have told members of my staff that under no circumstances should they make contact with either the Special Prosecutor or the Department of Justice.

QUESTION: Mr. President, don't you have the right under the current law to ask if you are the target of the Special Prosecutor's investigation and, if that is the case, why don't you want to know that, at least?

THE PRESIDENT: I can't tell you whether under the law I can or can't. But, even if we do have that right, I think an inquiry by me or somebody on my staff would undoubtedly be misconstrued, and I just don't want any such allegations being made by anybody.

QUESTION: Mr. President, could you clear up a matter that has been pending for some time and was referred to in this investigation--or at least it was referred to in a newspaper article the other day--that when you were in the House you used to go down here to the Seaman's Institute, 22nd Street or somewhere, like a lot of other House Members did of both parties, and read a little speech that they gave you to read at noon luncheons and then they would give you a nice little check, maybe they would give you an extra \$1,000 or \$500 because you were Majority Leader? I am sure this was probably done by a lot of other Congressmen, but was that true?

THE PRESIDENT: Any time I make a speech, Sarah, I solicit from members of my staff--I did up in the House, and I asked any organization that I was speaking to to give me ideas on what they thought would be appropriate comments in speaking to that organization.

In the case of the meetings that you speak of, it was before the Joint Maritime Labor Organization -- that is not the right term -- but it is a combination of all the labor organizations that are involved in the maritime industry.

Yes, I asked them for suggestions as to what they thought would be appropriate for discussion before their group and they, along with the Executive Branch of the Government that had jurisdiction over shipbuilding or any aspects of the maritime industry--I also got recommendations from them, and this combination of ideas for a speech, people on my staff put together in a speech. But they were not the ones who wrote the speech that you are speaking of.

They submitted what they thought would be appropriate and we took their ideas with the suggestions from the staff committees on the House and Senate side, the Executive Department people, the labor organizations, from the maritime industry overall, and that combination of information went into whatever speeches I made. I think that is a very appropriate way to handle it.

QUESTION: Did they give you a check for this, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes, and those checks were fully reported on my income tax returns. They were reported to any other authority that required it and all of that matter was looked into by the House and Senate committees at the time of my Vice Presidential hearing.

QUESTION: But if they had matters pending before Congress, did you think it was right to take that money when they had matters pending before the Congress?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I was deeply interested in the new legislation that was before the House and the Senate to expand and upgrade our maritime industry. That was a group that likewise felt that way, and I think it was proper.

QUESTION: Mr. President, in your golf outings or social occasions, or other occasions with Rod Markley of Ford Motor Company or U.S. Steel, did you discuss Government business with them either when you were a Member of the House, or Vice President, or President?

THE PRESIDENT: Not to my best recollection.

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QUESTION: You never discussed business?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

QUESTION: Mr. President, do you think in the headlines that have run for about the last 10 days and the fact that some of these potential allegations have not been resolved, that there has been any damaging effect on your campaign, or would there be if "justice delayed" means there is no resolution of this before November 2?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it is vitally important that any aspects of either one of these matters be fully resolved as quickly as possible. I have no way of knowing what the impact is politically.

QUESTION: Mr. President, one of the issues raised is whether any of this campaign money was actually ever diverted to your personal use. Would you like to say flatly whether that was so or not?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know whether that is an allegation that is being investigated by the Special Prosecutor's Office, but I can say that there was never money given to me by the Kent County Republican Committee. The Kent County Republican Committee may have done some advertising on behalf of my candidacy or the candidacy of other Republican candidates running for public office. That is their function.

They, for example, always the last week or so would have a full-page ad with the Gubernatorial candidate, the Senatorial candidate, the Congressional candidates, plus some State legislative officers, and so I suppose they spent their money on that, which is a perfectly proper function of the Kent County Republican Finance Committee and county organizations. No money ever went to me personally.

QUESTION: Mr. President, does the timing of the Special Prosecutor's investigation seem strange to you, or do you question the motivation?

THE PRESIDENT: I would not under any circumstances question the motivation or the timing.

QUESTION: Mr. President, are you holding this press conference because Jimmy Carter has accused you of keeping silent on these matters?

THE PRESIDENT: Not at all.

QUESTION: Mr. President, your staff says they are having some trouble getting records of all these various golfing trips and what-not. Have you ever asked Mr. Whyte if he has records?

THE PRESIDENT: It is my understanding Mr. Whyte issued a two- or three-page statement a week or 10 days ago which outlined the circumstances of the three trips up to Pine Valley and the two down to Disneyland. I understand he issued that.

QUESTION: I mean records of what it cost and who paid and that sort of thing.

THE PRESIDENT: I have no access to their records. They will have to answer that.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you said it is vitally important the matter be resolved as soon as possible. Is it your wish it be resolved before the election? It is vitally important so the voters can see the full story, or the true story.

THE PRESIDENT: It is more important to me personally that it be cleared up because I am very proud of my record of personal integrity and I think that is more important than any impact it might have on the election.

QUESTION: Mr. President, may I just ask you this question: Those Marine unions, the Seafarers and Marine Engineers, supported you down through the years. Then you vetoed the bill that they wanted. I forget the name of it, but I am sure you recall it. After that they shifted over to Jimmy Carter. Do you have any feeling that maybe somebody in the Carter camp may have made some allegation to the Special Prosecutor and that is what triggered this, or is there a political motivation in there somewhere?

THE PRESIDENT: Bob, I wouldn't make any allegations of that kind. I don't think, since I don't know -- I don't think I ought to make any comment.

QUESTION: Obviously the Special Prosecutor wouldn't open an investigation, I would think, on just the basis of rumors. Somebody had to make an allegation there.

THE PRESIDENT: What impresses me the most is a statement by a former Special Prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, who has said, as I understand it, publicly, that before he left the office of Special Prosecutor he looked into such matters and he came to the conclusion that there was no reason for action.

Now, that in no way challenges the right or the integrity of Mr. Ruff, but where any such charges came from, I would have no idea.

QUESTION: Let me just make one follow-up. If I understand it, Mr. Jaworski said he had investigated the Seafarers Union, and I think that was in relation to a \$100,000 contribution they made to Richard Nixon. As far as I know, he never said he looked into MEBA -- the Marine Engineers. Do you know in fact whether or not he did?

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THE PRESIDENT: No, I can't be that precise.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you said that you instructed that your staff shouldn't make any contacts to the Attorney General or to the Prosecutor. Have there been any contacts made by any of these agencies to you so that you have any information at all either that this is going to be resolved quickly or any information at all?

THE PRESIDENT: I have no information whatsoever.

QUESTION: Mr. President, do you have any information from people back in your old home district, the Fifth District, that may have contacted you, presumably old friends of yours?

THE PRESIDENT: I read the Grand Rapids Press, which is a good newspaper, and I read stories concerning this and quotations from people who were former county chairmen or presently county chairmen, so I know what they said. But, they haven't talked extensively about the investigation. I guess they felt that they had testified or made comments to whoever was investigating it, and they didn't really say very much.

QUESTION: But you haven't talked to any of them personally?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

QUESTION: Mr. President, a number of Pentagon military officers have received disciplinary reprimands for accepting freebies, free weekends of hunting expeditions. If you think there is nothing improper about a Congressman accepting free golfing weekend, what distinction is there?

THE PRESIDENT: The House passed a resolution sometime in 1968, as I understand it, which says nothing of significance or substance should be received. I do not feel that there was any impropriety on my part or any violation of that regulation.

I am an avid golfer. Most of you know it. I enjoy the company of people while I am playing golf. Every person that has been involved in these allegations I have reciprocated with as far as they coming either to my golf club or coming to our home.

There has been, I would say, substantial reciprocity. Whatever the circumstances of our getting together, it has been in a proper way and in no way a violation, in my judgment, of any rule or ethical standard. These are close personal friends and have been for many years, and I have never accepted -- or I don't believe they have tendered -- any such things on the basis of seeking any special privilege or anything that was improper.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, on June 15, before the Southern Baptist Convention, you condemned very strongly what you call "situation ethics" and I was wondering why this golfing vacation wasn't really "situation ethics," when at that time you said the American people, particularly our young people, cannot be expected to take pride or even participate in a system of Government that is defiled and dishonored, whether in the White House or the halls of Congress.

My question is, do you feel that in view of what the White House has admitted you can adjust your own standards here?

THE PRESIDENT: I have said that I don't consider these infrequent weekends a violation of either the rules of the House or any ethical standards.

I explained that these were longstanding personal relationships, where there has been virtual reciprocity -- and I wouldn't have accepted if there had been any thought in my mind that it was improper or a violation of any code of ethics.

QUESTION: Isn't that "situation ethics" though?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think so.

QUESTION: Mr. President, to follow up on Fran Lewine's question earlier, she asked you if any of the funds had been diverted to personal use, and your answer was, sir, you had never received any funds from Kent County.

Are we to understand that as a "no", that you have never used any of these funds for personal use?

THE PRESIDENT: From the Kent County Republican Committee?

QUESTION: From any campaign?

THE PRESIDENT: I will say any campaign funds for personal use.

QUESTION: Do you find these stories personally painful, someone questioning your integrity?

THE PRESIDENT: It naturally has some impact when I know that all of these things have been investigated by some 400 FBI agents and 5 to 6 Internal Revenue agents with my income taxes going back to 8 or 9 years, when I know I have been given a clean bill of health, not only by the FBI but the Internal Revenue Service, by Senate and House committees, an overwhelming vote in the House and Senate.

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When I look at the investigation that was made of my personal life, the financial circumstances, probably more than anybody else in the history of this country, I know that there is no problem. So, I guess to some extent one is bothered a bit, but as long as my conscience is clear I have no real problem.

QUESTION: You brought up the matter of the income tax. It is proper, isn't it, if in case a person receives a gift of an airplane ticket or something of that sort, it has to be listed on their income tax as a gift, or does reciprocity cover that when you buy a ticket later?

THE PRESIDENT: I am not familiar with the details of that, but the IRS went into all of these matters. They have closed out my income tax returns for back 8 or 9 years. They had people go into these with minute detail so I --

QUESTION: What I am asking is, actually I am asking for your legal advice.

THE PRESIDENT: I am not here to give you any legal advice.

QUESTION: Mr. President, is this longstanding personal relationship, personal and friendship though it may be based on -- is nevertheless valuable to United States Steel and to the Ford Motor Company, much as the employers of other people who are friends of yours -- for example, John Byrnes, who represents a great many interests in this town on tax reform and -- perhaps coincidentally, perhaps you believe this -- your position is about like his on tax reform?

I asked you earlier whether you had discussed business during these social outings. Rod Markley said you and he discussed the Clean Air Act. I wonder, do you not see that it is to their benefit for you to have this personal relationship?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me modify what I said a moment before. In a casual way, of course we might informally talk about certain matters, but I happen to feel that they were not asking me and I was not asking them. The times I have played with Rod have been at Burning Tree where we are both members and both pay our own way. John Byrnes, I played golf with him because he is a friend of 28-plus years. I don't see anything improper at all.

MORE

QUESTION: Do you feel you can separate their business as lobbyists and their representation of their corporations as your personal friend?

THE PRESIDENT: As a matter of fact, some of their comments could be helpful in what the status is.

QUESTION: Mr. President, since that seems to be the issue that Carter is raising, though, he seems to be raising the old buddy system issue and saying, in fact, you can't.

What can you say to counter that? How can you?

THE PRESIDENT: Maybe he can't, but I can.

QUESTION: Mr. President, may I ask you, you now are aware that some of these expenses were actually paid by the companies and not by your friends. But you were paying, when you had them to your home, you were paying yourself, the taxpayers were not taking care of this. So, these companies in effect were financing some of this.

What is your thinking about why they wanted to do this, why they were willing to entertain you on these weekends?

THE PRESIDENT: I think you would have to ask the people who offered the invitation. These are personal friends, and I don't ask in advance why you want to pay my green fees. I think that is a matter for them on the basis of their own integrity.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you have been through one debate. Have you got any thoughts on the second one as to a change in format, or anything you would like to do differently?

THE PRESIDENT: We are very satisfied with the format that was used in the first debate. I thought it went very well.

QUESTION: Mr. President, you look more worried than I have seen you in a long time.

THE PRESIDENT: Worried?

QUESTION: Yes. You haven't smiled in a long time. You look troubled, and I have known you for ten years. Does this bother you? Is this something that is going to hurt you badly in the campaign?

MORE

Page 10

THE PRESIDENT: I answered a moment ago I am more concerned about my personal reputation. But, I am not unhappy. I am just worried about getting over to the signing ceremony for one of these bill signings.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 12:13 P.M. CDT)