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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF REMARKS BETWEEN
THE PRESIDENT,
VICE PRESIDENT NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER,
AND
GOVERNOR JOHN B. CONNALLY

THE BRIEFING ROOM

5:25 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: The Vice President and Governor Connally and myself have agreed to come out here to indicate the context of the meeting. You had an opportunity to see and to question Governor Reagan. The four of us met because I felt that it would be highly desirable for the four of us to sit and try to see what could be done to make certain that we have a viable two-party system in this country. We think it is absolutely essential for the political health of the United States that there be competition in the political arena and the best way to do it is through a strong Republican Party competing against the Democrats.

We really decided three things: Number one, that we would continue to meet and we tentatively agreed to meet the first week in January. We agreed that there should be formed a coordinating committee type of organization similar to the one that was put together in 1965 following the 1964 election. We agreed that there were five or six potential Republican National Committee chairmen that were all experienced, that all had assets and opportunity. We would not pick or choose as a group any one of the individuals. That was the responsibility of the Republican National Committee.

So with those observations, the Vice President, Governor Connally and myself will be glad to respond to any questions.

Q Mr. President, is Governor Connally one of those five or six who you think is on the list to be national chairman?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the Governor ought to respond to that.

GOVERNOR CONNALLY. I think I made it abundantly clear as I tried to do the other day at the meeting of the Republican Governors that I am really not available. I don't foresee any circumstances under which I would be.

Q Governor, we got exactly the opposite impression from what you said the other day. We thought you were available.

MORE

GOVERNOR CONNALLY: Sarah, I can't interpret for you. I tried to say that I have never been a candidate. As I recall what I said then, I said I have never been a candidate, I am not now a candidate, I never will be a candidate. There have to be two conditions precedent before I would even seriously think about it. That would be that I would have to be publicly endorsed by the President, by the Vice President, by Governor Rockefeller and that I would be asked to take it on the basis of not taking it as a full time job which flies in the face of the rules that now exist. I thought that in itself was a sufficient answer to indicate that I laid down two conditions, neither of which probably would be met. But I want to make it stronger today to be sure there is not any misunderstanding that I do not foresee any circumstances under which I would be available.

Q Mr. President, what do you think of Mrs. Smith's description of Governor Reagan as being part of the far right?

THE PRESIDENT: It is my understanding that Governor Reagan answered that question and I would let his words speak for themselves.

Q Mr. President, could you tell us who the five or six qualified chairmen are that you all have agreed on, one, and, two, would you and the Vice President endorse Governor Connally for chairman as he has given that as a qualification?

THE PRESIDENT: First, let me say I would hesitate to list those individuals. The names have been bandied around, but I don't think we should say here today that this is the only particular group. There may be another candidate or two that might appear. And, therefore, if I mentioned five, it would be unfair to those that might emerge in the future.

Q Mr. President, what role do you see for yourself in party affairs after January 20th with particular reference to the coordinating committee you speak of?

THE PRESIDENT: I certainly intend to be involved in Republican politics. I would hope to be a member of the coordinating committee. I think it worked in 1965 and 1966 and I am confident that it can be a very effective organization in 1977 and in 1978.

Q Mr. President, do you see any problems of ideological differences afterwards in attempting party unity?

THE PRESIDENT: One of the major purposes of this gathering was to achieve party unity, recognizing that in some areas each of us may have a difference from the other. But I think the Republican tent is big enough and broad enough to encompass the four individuals who met here this afternoon. I was impressed with the degree of unity that was expressed by each of us to one another. We recognize those differences, but we have a common objective, a strong two-party system and I think it will be healthy and beneficial to the country.

Q Mr. President, is it possible that perhaps what the Republican Party needs is a lot of new broad and fresh faces, none of which were in that room?

THE PRESIDENT: We are not king makers, Wally. We are simply deeply concerned about a political system where you have competition and we are not excluding anybody from the Republican ranks who are there now or anybody who wants to join the Republican Party. So we have to start someplace. This seemed like a very logical place for me to use whatever influence I have to get the ball rolling for what we have to do between now and 1978 and 1980.

Q Could we go back to the second part of my question, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: I thought you had forgotten it.
(Laughter)

Q About whether you and the Vice President --

GOVERNOR CONNALLY. Let me inject here that I think this is not a germane question at this point, because I said earlier in the day in Chicago that I made a stronger statement, it is not a Shermanese statement, but it nevertheless is a stronger statement that I see. I can see no circumstances under which I would be available.

Q Mr. President, did you agree among yourselves that if the RNC selects one of these five or six individuals that you spoke of today that that selection would have the unanimous support of all of you?

THE PRESIDENT: I think there was a consensus that the names we discussed would be acceptable. I also believe that we might have an individual preference, but none of those would be unacceptable.

Q Mr. President, you mentioned that this group would meet again. Did the four of you see yourselves as kind of a council of elders of the Republican Party?

THE PRESIDENT: I won't use those words, Phil, because we don't think of ourselves as elders. I think we have a lot of life left in our political bones and we will be using a little influence from time to time. But it was a practical way to get leaders in the party together and to represent geographically and otherwise the Republican Party. We will work with others, but we don't intend to be king makers, if that is what you mean by elders.

Q Mr. President, what would you envision that the four of you would do at this next meeting and where would that be and do you have any idea what you would be talking about?

THE PRESIDENT: I think we will be talking about the prospective national chairman because the Republican National Committee meets January 14th and 15th, but we will also perhaps be finalizing some recommendations to the new national chairman as to the format or the organization of this committee that I mentioned earlier.

Q Do you want to be the Chairman of this committee?

THE PRESIDENT: I would not want to preempt any position at the present time. I want to be a participant.

Q Mr. President, when you look at the November 2 results ---

THE PRESIDENT: I have looked at them. (Laughter)

Q The greatest deficiency that your Party showed was among black and minority voters. Did that come up today and do any of the three gentlemen including the Vice President have any suggested remedies about how to bring black people into your party where it seems you just got skunked on November 2nd?

THE PRESIDENT: We hope to broaden the base of the party and there is every reason in the world why members of the black community in the United States ought to support the Republican Party because we offer them jobs, whereas the opposition in effect offers them welfare. I think that is an attractive appeal that the Republican Party would have to the black community because they are interested in jobs rather than welfare. But this is a personal observation.

Q Mr. Vice President, Newsweek Magazine reported among other things that the President was not very fond of the President-elect. Are you? How do you feel about that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I love this country and I will do anything I can to help the President-Elect and the Vice President-elect to carry out their responsibilities.

Q Mr. Vice President, do you share or do you have the hope of serving on this coordinating committee as the President does?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I served on the last one. I am interested in seeing the Party have the broadest possible base, appeal for the broadest national support and I think that committee needs to have that kind of representation. If I can add something, I am delighted. If not, I will just like to see the committee function effectively.

THE PRESIDENT: Let me answer the question. I think that it would be constructive to have all four of the group that met this afternoon on the committee, but they would not necessarily numerically dominate the group because if you go back to the format of 1965, there were roughly as I recall 30 members.

So I think the four of us could contribute to the work of the committee, but I don't think we should numerically be in the majority.

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Q Mr. President, why doesn't the Republican Party have a broader base than it does? The 18 percent figure must be terribly alarming to you.

THE PRESIDENT: Wally, I think you can turn it around. We got 48-plus percent of the vote. So we must have had some appeal beyond the 18 percent who were registered Republicans. We came awfully close. So we do have a relatively broad base and we ought to make sure that that 48-plus percent will follow the Republican Party in the elections in 1978.

Q How can you do that?

THE PRESIDENT: By the kind of program and the kind of campaign we ran in 1976.

Q Mr. President, could you spell out in any detail at all what it is you envision this coordinating committee actually doing and how many members it might have?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it is premature to get into specifics there. If you use the format and the record of the coordinating committee in 1965, it covered issues, it covered programs. I think the best way for you to envision what might be a part of the contemplated one is to go back and read the history of the one in 1965 and 1966.

Q Mr. President, will you run for office again?

THE PRESIDENT: Sarah, do you want me to? (Laughter)

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 5:37 P.M. EDT)