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By FRANCES LEWINE

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CANTON, Ohio AP - President Nixon says America's chances for an era of peace are better than at any time in the century, and has urged Americans to keep their country "No. 1 in the world."

The President made the remarks Friday night at a pro football dinner, the first stop on a two-day Midwestern swing that takes him today to Centerville, in southern Iowa, for the dedication of the \$26.5 million Rathbun Dam and world's largest man-made reservoir.

Addressing the football dinner, Nixon declared that this is not the time for Americans to rest on their laurels and to let other nations that are competing with us pass us by. That we cannot let happen...

In the spirit of American football at its best," the President said, "let's always try to be No. 1 . . . let's be for our team, let's be for our country."

The dinner was held as part of a celebration marking the enshrinement of seven football greats in the Professional Football Hall of Fame here. They include the late coach Vince Lombardi, whom Nixon hailed as "very great."

The President drew resounding applause from a civic center dinner audience of 800 when he proclaimed he was in favor of "being for one team, all the way . . . I think it is great, too, for Americans to be for America, all the way."

A bench-warmer himself in college days, Nixon came up with his own candidate for the Hall of Fame. Talking about Gene Brito of the Washington Redskins and Los Angeles Rams, Nixon noted that Brito is not in the Hall of Fame here but said he should be.

As a defensive end, he was the best," the President declared.

A chief deputy sheriff of Stark County estimated that a total of 35,000 to 40,000 turned out at the Akron-Canton airport, along the freeways, downtown streets and at the Hall of Fame, where Nixon toured amid the mementoes and exhibits of gridiron greats.

After the dam dedication today, Nixon had planned to go to California to make an off-the-record speech to 1,700 guests at the exclusive Bohemian Club Grove near San Francisco. But the visit was canceled at the last minute.

The White House said Nixon feared his remarks would be ferreted out by reporters and he did not want to break a century-old tradition of the club that all speeches there be off the record.

Instead, he was expected to return to the Washington area today, probably going for the rest of the weekend to his retreat at Camp David, Md.

While canceling one appearance, Nixon added another stop to his schedule. He made a breakfast appointment at the home of influential publisher John S. Knight, president and editor of the Akron Beacon-Journal, and editorial chairman of Knight Newspapers, Inc.

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