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WASHINGTON, May 24 — Following are excerpts from the remarks of President Nixon at a reception today for returned prisoners of war:

Gentlemen, as you can imagine during my term as President of the United States and also before that as Vice President, and in other offices, I have spoken to many distinguished audiences. I can say to you today that this is the most distinguished group I have ever addressed and I have never before been prouder than I am at this moment to address this group.

I say that not simply because you are here and because the whole nation shares those views, as you know, some of you, I am sure, who have traveled around this nation since you have returned home, but I say it because I feel very deeply at this moment, when we have a culmination of the program which finally has all of you returned to the United States, that this is one of those critical moments in history that can change the world, and we need your help.

'We Need You'

We do not talk to you today, and I do not talk to you today simply in terms of thanking you as I do for what you have gone through for your country, but I think all of you would prefer to think of what you can do now, how more you can serve. We need you, the nation needs you. I want to tell you why.

The year 1972 saw remarkable progress, as you know. The year 1972, moving into 1973, in January, saw the return of all Americans from Vietnam, all of our combat forces, the return of all of our prisoners of war, the end of the American involvement in Vietnam, a peace agreement, which, if adhered to, will mean peace for Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

That was one accomplishment. That is the one that most people talk about. They say, "Thank God that war is over. Thank God we have got peace."

But in a broader sense, other events took place that will have even more meaning to the world and to peace than your return and the end of the war in Vietnam.

China, for example. That initiative, which was undertaken in early 1972, began in '71, the negotiations has finally started communication between the leaders of the People's Republic of China and the leaders of the United States of America.

Oh, it doesn't mean they aren't still Communists and that we are not still people who love freedom, but it does mean that instead of having hanging over us,

looking down the road, 10, 15, 20 years from now, a possible confrontation with a nation of the most able people in the world, armed with nuclear weapons equal to our own, instead of having that, there is a chance, a very good chance now, that we will have negotiations with them rather than confrontation, and that is the key to peace in the Pacific.

And then the second development was the meetings with the Soviet leaders. This did not happen just over a period of 1972. We worked for the whole four years. But it culminated in the summit in Moscow. You perhaps heard something about it since your return.

But looking at that summit agreement, a great deal of emphasis can be placed on the aspects of trade, and our cooperation in space and other areas which are important, but the most significant development, undoubtedly, was the first step, and a very important step, in limiting the arms race in the nuclear field.

We have, therefore, an agreement with the Soviet Union on defense nuclear weapons, where we are both limited, and we are moving now toward getting a limitation in the offensive field.

But, on the other hand, when we talk now about national defense, let me tell you what the challenge is—and you can help in this respect—and what the danger is, a mortal danger that we face insofar as reduction of our defenses is concerned.

Defense Budget Reduced

First, our defense budget has been reduced. With a new volunteer armed force, considering the increased costs and the like, we find that it is approximately a third reduction of what it was in 1968.

But second, we must also look at this situation: When they say, "Now that we have made all this progress in 1972 towards peace, let's reduce our defenses regardless of what the other side does," what you are doing, in effect, is advocating changing a game plan that has worked.

Let me put it this way: We wouldn't have ended the war in Vietnam with honor, we wouldn't have had the initiative with China, and we would not have had, without question, the arms control and other agreements with the Soviet Union, had the United States not been strong and respected.

Strength without respect is meaningless. That was another reason why this war had to be ended on an honorable basis, because otherwise we would have lost respect, not only of our allies and the neutrals, but also of our po-

tential adversaries in the world.

But when we see what has happened then, we find that the Soviet Union, at the present time, is preparing to come to the United States for a return summit visit in just a few weeks. We are going to have some very intensive negotiations. They are even more important than the negotiations we had last year, although those were the first, and therefore, the most newsworthy, because they will move in arms control and other fields of enormous importance to the future of the world.

But gentlemen, let me tell you, in the event that the President of the United States goes into meetings with the Soviet Leaders with the Congress of the United States having unilaterally cut our defenses, then all hope for an arms control agreement is completely destroyed. Because when you really get down to it in the field of international diplomacy—and this is true of all fields in life—you can't get something from anybody else unless you have something to give.

Nuclear Danger

So what I am saying to you is this: I am for limitation of armaments, and I know every one of you is. I am for, certainly in the nuclear field, doing everything that we can to reduce that danger that is hanging over the world today.

But I also know that it is vitally important that in this field of limitation of armaments that we remember that the United States of America is not a threat to the peace of the world.

I have traveled in most of the countries of the world. I have been to the Communist countries and to the free countries. I have yet to talk to a world leader who believes that the United States of America threatens his peace or his freedom. A strong United States is a force for peace; a weak United States means that the peace will be threatened.

Balance of Power

And so that is why I say at this point, not that we want to be strong in order to dominate anybody else. That period is long gone, if it ever did exist in our own minds. But what we need to recognize is that we now have a balance in the world. We must maintain that balance, and that is why, let us keep our defenses up.

Oh, take the fat off, wherever we possibly can, but keep them up and be sure in negotiations we go down only if the other side goes down, and if we do that, then we contribute to the peace of the world in which

we are all so very much interested.

One other subject that is somewhat sensitive that I will touch upon only briefly, that I would like to ask for your support on, is with regard to the security of the kind of negotiations that we have.

I want to be quite blunt. Had we not had secrecy, had we not had secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese, had we not had secret negotiations prior to the Soviet summit, had we not had secret negotiations over a period of time with the Chinese leaders, let me say quite bluntly, there would have been no China initiative, there would have been no limitation of arms for the Soviet Union and no summit, and had we not had that kind of security, and that kind of secrecy that allowed for the kind of exchange that is essential, you men would still be in Hanoi rather than Washington today.

And let me say, I think it is time in this country to quit making national heroes out of those who steal secrets and publish them in the newspapers.

A Need for Secrecy

Because, gentlemen, you see, in order to continue these great initiatives for peace, we must have confidentiality, we must have secret communications. It isn't that we are trying to keep anything from the American people that the American people should know. It isn't that we are trying to keep something from the press that the press should print. But it is that what we are trying to do is to accomplish our goal, make a deal. And when we are dealing with potential adversaries, those negotiations must have the highest degree of confidentiality.

And I can assure you that in my term of office as President in the first four years, and also in this second four years, I am going to meet my responsibility to protect the national security of the United States of America insofar as our secrets are concerned.

And by our secrets, what I am saying here is not that we are concerned about every little dribble here and there, but what I am concerned about is the highest classified documents in our national security council files, in the State Department, in the Defense Department, which if they get out, for example, in our arms control negotiations with the Soviets, would let them know our position before we ever got to the table. They don't tell us theirs. They have no problem keeping the secrets.

I don't want, and you don't

a Gathering of Former Prisoners of War

want, their system and that kind of control, but I say it is time for a new sense of responsibility in this country and a new sense of dedication of everybody in the bureaucracy that if a document is classified, keep it classified.

Now, gentlemen, I turn to the challenge for the future. I have talked about the need for strength if we are going to have a mutual reduction of armaments in the world, and therefore, of the threat to peace in the world. I have talked about the need for national security where our highly classified documents are concerned, so we can continue these enormously important initiatives for peace.

I now want to talk about why the United States, after all that it has done for the world in World War II, after the billions that it has poured out since World War II, its sacrifices in Korea, its sacrifices in Vietnam, why we the American people, have to continue to carry this load.

As I said earlier, believe me, as President, what a relief it would be to say, "Now that we have peace in Vietnam, we have a new relationship with China and Russia, we can simply turn away from the problems of the world and turn to the problems at home."

I can assure you, gentleman, that if we were to follow that course, we would find very soon that we would be living in a terribly dangerous world. The world is safer today than it was four and one-half years ago. It can be more safe in the years ahead. But that will only happen provided we follow the course that I have tried to lay out to you here today.

Continued World Role

As I look to that future, therefore, it is vitally important that the United States continue to play the world role.

Let's look at just this century. We don't need to go back any further than that. I can imagine some of you in those long hours of captivity were thinking back over several centuries. In any event, looking back just over this century, World War I, the United States could stand aside. After all, there was Britain, there was France, two great powers who thought as we did about the world, and they could carry the load. And then we came in toward the end in World War II. The United States, for a time, could stand aside because Britain was still strong, and France at the beginning had some strength, but eventually we had to come in.

But today, look at the world. Among the free nations of the world there is no one else, not the Japanese,

as you well know, even though they have the economic strength, they do not have the military strength, and cannot be allowed to acquire it under their Constitution; and not one nation in Europe, by itself, or Europe collectively, has the strength to be the peacemaker in the world.

So it is all right here. It is in America. It is in that Oval Office, whoever is there, and it is there for the foreseeable future. In other words, the United States must maintain its strength in order to play a role between the great powers of the world and among the great powers of the world of reducing the danger of war, because our ideals and our goals—subject as they can be to much criticism as far as tactics are concerned in the world scene—our ideals and our goals are for a world of peace.

Goals and Ideals

Our ideals and our goals are for a world in which we reduce the burden of arms, and therefore, it is vitally important that this nation that has that kind of ideals and that kind of goals maintains its strength so that we can play that role.

But maintaining the strength alone is not enough. It must be respected. And that means that we must continue to have a policy which commands respect throughout the world. We must continue to insist on adherence to agreements that are made. We must continue to let the world know that while we have no aggressive intentions any place in the world, we will stand by our treaty commitments wherever they are in the world.

That, you see, is the language of peace rather than the language of bugging out of the world and turning to what people wistfully might think to be a Fortress America. But let me tell you, Fortress American might have been before World War II a concept that was viable. Today it is ridiculous. We cannot be apart from the world, not when weapons that can destroy us are 30 minutes away.

P. O. W. Support Solicited

And so we must play this role, and rather than playing it in terms of whining about it and complaining about it, let us do it proudly, because what greater mission could a people have than to say that in these years—the 70's—of 1971-2-3-4-5 and 6, when we reach our 200th birthday, the United States of America played a great role in the world and made the world safer not only for ourselves but for everybody in the world. That is the stake, that is the challenge we must meet.

Today then, I ask for your support, obviously, for a strong national defense. That is like the preacher talking to the choir. But I know as for as you are concerned, you will stay in our armed forces. We need you.

But also, beyond that, I ask for your support in helping to develop the national spirit, the faith that we need in order to meet our responsibilities in the world. You have already contributed enormously to that by your statements on your return, by what you have said, what you have done, and I am sure you can contribute more to it in the future.

But the young people of America need to hear the truth. They will believe you. They will believe you because you have suffered so much for this country and have proved that you will do anything that you can to do what is best for America, not just for yourselves.

Because, at this particular point, America is the richest

country in the world: Militarily, it is the strongest, and will always have that potential because of its wealth. The only question is whether we face up to our world responsibilities, whether we have the faith, the patriotism, the willingness to lead in this critical period.

Gentlemen, by what you did and what you said on your return, you have helped turn this country around. You have helped reestablish faith where there was doubt before. And for what you have done by your faith, you have built up America's faith. This nation and the world will always be in your debt.

Those first four years in the office were not easy ones for me in the international front, fighting for an adequate defense budget, fighting for a responsible foreign policy, but looking toward the balance of the second four years, let me say I feel better, because out in this room, I think I have some allies, and I will appreciate your help.