

WXPost

MAR 7 1974

Transcript of President's Press Conference

Following is a transcript of President Nixon's televised press conference last night:

President Nixon: Two brief announcements before going to your questions. First I want to congratulate on radio and television Ms. Helen Thomas for being selected as the White House bureau chief for UPI. As I understand it, Ms. Thomas, this is the first time in history that a woman has been selected for that high post. We congratulate you.

Second, I also want to congratulate the members of the Senate who voted to sustain the veto of the energy bill. We're not necessarily associating you with that Ms. Thomas. In voting to sustain the President's veto, the members of the Senate vetoed longer gas lines and vetoed nationwide rationing.

What we must now do is to move forward on the various measures that I have proposed that will accomplish the goal that this bill mistakenly was aimed to accomplish, and that is to get down the price of gasoline. And that can only be done by increasing the supplies of gasoline and other types of energy.

That's why I have pressed that the Congress will move expeditiously on the proposals that I have made: for deregulation of natural gas; for doing something with regard to those measures in the field and in the environment which restrict the production of coal which could greatly alleviate the energy crisis to the extent it is still a crisis; to go forward also on the Elk Hills production and exploration for oil in that federal area and in the longer sense to go forward with the various proposals that we have made for organization in the energy field which will allow us to develop our nuclear power, new sources of energy and to achieve the goal we all want to achieve of independence for the United States for energy by at least and preferably before the year 1980. I believe the way to get the price of gasoline down is to produce more, and these measures, which the Congress has had before it for a number of months, should be acted upon in order to accomplish that goal. Mr. Cormier, since Ms. Thomas has already been mentioned, you get the first question.

Q. Well, Mr. President, your lawyer announced today that you will turn over to the House Judiciary Committee all of the materials that you made available to the special prosecutor. I'm wondering, sir, what about other materials that the committee might want to see that the prosecutor didn't see?

A. Well, Mr. Cormier, that matter has been under discussion, as you probably know, between Mr. St. Clair White House counsel, and Mr. Doar, the counsel for the committee. And Mr. St. Clair has made, I think, a very forthcoming offer. He has indicated that we will respond to any written interrogatories under oath that the committee may have on matters that they do not think are covered adequately by the materials that have been submitted to Mr. Jaworski.

And in addition he has indicated that in the event that that is not satisfactory, in order to bring the matter to a complete and we hope early conclusion, that the President will be glad to meet with members of the committee, perhaps the chairman and the ranking minority member of the committee, at the White House to answer any further questions under oath that they may have.

As far as other materials are concerned, those matters will continue to be under discussion between White House counsel and Mr. Doar. It is the goal for all of us, I think, the goal of the committee — I think it would be theirs, it certainly is mine—to get a prompt conclusion to this matter as soon as possible, and, I would say further that as far as the materials we have turned over, they include not only the famous subpoenaed tapes, which were turned over to Mr. Jaworski, but they include in addition to that 11 additional tapes, a total of 19 tapes, over 700 documents and enough material that Mr. Jaworski was able to say that he knew all and that the grand jury had all the information that it needed in order to bring to a conclusion its Watergate investigation. Ms. Thomas.

Q. Certainly. Mr. Haldeman your former top aide in the White House has been charged with perjury because he testified that you said it would be wrong to pay hush money to silence the Watergate defendants, and last August you said that was accurate. Can you and will you provide proof that you did, indeed, say it would be wrong.

A. Well, Ms. Thomas, it would be improper, as of course you know, for me to comment on the substance of any charges of indictment that have been made against any of the defendants in this matter. However, it is proper for me to comment on what I said and what I did on the 21st of March, which is the date in question. On that occasion, Mr. Dean asked to see me and when he came into the office, soon after his arrival, he said that he wanted to tell me some things that he had not told me about the Watergate matter.

And for the first time on March 21 he told me that payments had been made to defendants for the purpose of keeping them quiet, not simply for their defense. If it had been simply for their defense, that would have been proper, I understand. But if it was for the purpose of keeping them quiet, you describe it as hush money, that of course would have been an obstruction of justice.

I examined at great length, we examined all of the options at great length during our discussion. And we considered them on a tentative basis, every option, as to what the defendants would do as to who in the White House might be involved and other information that up to that time had not been disclosed to me by Mr. Dean.

Then we came to what I considered to be the bottom line. I pointed out that raising the money, paying the money, was something that could be done. But I pointed out that that was linked to clemency; that no individual is simply going to stay in jail because people are taking care of his family or his counsel, as the case might be, and that unless a promise of clemency was made that the objective of so-called

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hush money would not be achieved. I am paraphrasing what was a relatively long conversation.

I then said that to pay clemency was wrong. In fact I think I can quote it directly. I said, "It is wrong," that's for sure. Mr. Haldeman was present when I said that. Mr. Dean was present. Both agreed with my conclusion.

Now, when individuals read the entire transcript of the 21st meeting or hear the entire tape where we discussed all these options, they may reach different interpretations. But I know what I meant and I know also what I did. I meant that the whole transaction was wrong. The transaction for the purpose of keeping this whole matter covered up. That was what I, that I, directed that Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Ehrlichman, Mr. Dean and Mr. Mitchell, who was then in New York, meet in Washington, that evening if possible — it turned out that they could not meet until the next day — so that we could find what would be the best way to get the whole story out.

Also, I also know what I did with regard to clemency and with regard to the payment of money. I never at any time authorized clemency for any of the defendants. I never at any time authorized the payment of money to any of the defendants. And after we had met on the 22d, I sent Mr. Dean to Camp David to write a full report of everything that he knew. That report was not forthcoming and consequently, on the 30th of August (March), a week later, I directed Mr. Ehrlichman to conduct an independent investigation, which he did conduct and presented to me on the 14th of April.

And also, on the 30th, on that same day Mr. Ziegler announced this to the press corps after I had issued the dictation, I directed that all members of the White House staff who were called by the grand jury should appear before the grand jury and testify fully with regard to any knowledge whatever they had, with regard to their involvement if they were involved, or anybody else's involvement. In other words, the policy was one of full disclosure and that was the decision that was made at the conclusion of the meeting.

Q. Without regard to past events or —or anything like that, would you now consider granting clemency to any former assistant who might ultimately be convicted?

A. The matter of clemency, Mr. Theis, is something that can only be granted and only be considered on an individual basis depending upon the circumstances involved. I can only say that under no circumstances has any defendant or potential defendant been offered clemency and none will be offered clemency. That would be improper and I will not engage in that activity.

Q. Some economists are warning that consumers are becoming so disenchanted with inflation that they may reduce their spending drastically later this year—until the consumer revolt. Do you share this fear and what encouragement do you have for consumers in this time of the worst inflation of 25 years?

A. First with regard to the inflation, as I pointed out just a week ago in a press conference, there are two major factors that have caused it. In fact, they have been responsible for two-thirds of the inflation. One is energy, increased prices for energy, and the second is food.

Now the back of the energy crisis has been broken. As we go toward the end of the year I would say toward the middle of the year we will see the prices of energy being kept in check and we trust even moving downward.

As far as food is concerned, if the Department of Agriculture's reports are accurate, and if the weather holds



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Mr. Nixon's closing line to Sarah McClendon leaves reporters laughing.

up properly, we will have a record food crop, particularly a record wheat crop, and that will tend to bring the price upsurge in food under control. And so as far as the future is concerned for inflation, while it is still a very sticky problem and will remain so for some time, we see the problem being much less difficult as the year goes on than it is at the present time. Now the other point that I should make is that when you talk about the consumer revolt, that of course relates, I suppose, to the economy in general. I saw a report as you may have this afternoon from the University of Pennsylvania, where they indicated they thought we were either in or headed for a recession. I state again, based on my consultation with my own economic advisers and also consultation with people outside the government, the best advice I can get, that there will not be a recession in 1974.

I think that progress we will make on the energy front, progress that we're going to make on the food front, and also the continued strength in other areas of the economy will mean that in the last half of the year we'll see an upward turn in the economy.

I believe, in other words, that we are not going to see a situation where we have rising prices as well as rising unemployment, which of course would mean a recession. That, of course, is a projection that I give based not simply on my knowledge but based on all of the facts that I'm able to get from the economists who should know something about it.

Q. I'd like to ask two questions if I may. One is, you surprised a lot of us by calling a second news conference within eight days. And I'm wondering if that's the start of a new policy. Secondly, I'd like to ask this question: It has always been the custom that foreign money from foreign citizens is permitted to be accepted and spent in American political campaigns at all levels. And in your campaign in '72 I think at least \$150,000 came in from foreign citizens. Do you think that is right, and if not, will your campaign financing reform bill include a prohibition of that kind of money?

A. Well, as a matter of fact I think Mr. Harlow, on a, shall we say, leak basis, has already indicated some of the answers to the second part of the question. And the leaks in this case are correct. All contributions from foreign sources are prohibited under the campaign reform that we have recommended. And going further, I think

you might be interested in knowing some of the other items that are actually going to be in the reform package.

One is that all cash contributions are prohibited if they are above \$50. All contributions in cases of presidential campaigns will be limited to \$15,000 per person per candidate. In the case of congressional and senatorial campaigns, \$3,000.

One of the points that we have ruled out, and incidentally I am only—I'm not touching on some unfair campaign practices and other items that are very interesting in the proposal because I want you to be able to write something

The United States will use its influence just as strongly as we can with both parties to get a disengagement on the Syrian front as quickly as possible, which is just and equitable to both sides. We believe that the progress, the motion I should describe that is taking place on the diplomatic front, will inevitably have a constructive effect on the oil producing companies insofar as their decision on the embargo. But I'm going to leave that decision to them because indicating what they will do might lead them to do otherwise.

Q: Mr. President, you said earlier, if my notes are correct, that on March 21 Mr. Dean told you for the first time that payments were made to defendants to keep them quiet and that you considered a number of options. Did you not consider the option of blowing the whistle, of turning that information over to the authorities immediately and on reflection now do you think you should have?

A: As a matter of fact, among the options we considered was getting out a full report, a report that he would write. Among the options we considered the next day and we started to consider that day was to have everybody testify before the Ervin committee and waive executive privilege, which was, of course, an action which Attorney General Mitchell recommended.

Yes, the option of a full disclosure at that time by everybody concerned was one that was considered. The difficulty that I had was that for months these matters had not been brought to my attention. I had not been informed of the payments to the defendants. I had not been informed with regard to the alleged cover-up. I had not been informed about the possible involvement of some White House aides.

I felt it was my responsibility to conduct my own investigation with all of the assistance I could get from those who could provide information before moving to what would be a proper way of getting this story out to the country.

At all times it had been my goal to have a complete disclosure of this whole situation because, as you know, I have said there can be no cloud over the White House. I want that cloud removed. That is one of the reasons we have cooperated as we have with the special prosecutor. We will also cooperate with the Rodino committee. The facts will come out.

Q: Mr. President, I have a follow-up on that question right there, on the March 21st meeting.

You have referred to your own personal desire to have complete disclosure and you have also mentioned here this evening that anybody who heard the tape of that March 21st meeting, or different people hearing that tape, or reading the transcript might get different impressions.

Have you ever considered the option of making that tape and transcript public so that the American people can read it and hear it and make their own judgment on what happened at that meeting?

A: Yes, I have. We have a problem

there, however, in that that tape, as well as others, as was, I think, probably implied at least in the hearing today, affects the rights of the defendants and also the possibilities of the prosecution, and under the circumstances, of course, we must be, to a certain extent, guided by that.

I think eventually the entire tape will be made available, and as far as I am concerned, when any individual who is looking at it objectively, not only hears it or reads what the transcript is, but also sees what was done after that particular conversation took place, will conclude, first, that the President had no knowledge before the 21st, which Mr. Dean himself said when he came into the meeting; second, that the President never authorized clemency, in fact, rejected it on several occasions in that meeting; and third, that the President never authorized the payment of money to the defendants for the purpose of hushing them up.

Q: Mr. President, you have spoken tonight of your willingness to take questions under oath in the White House from the senior Democratic and Republican Members of the House Judiciary Committee. Would you consider, as an aid to rebuilding public confidence in your leadership and in speeding up the procedure, in taking questions in a public forum from the entire House Judiciary Committee?

A: This is a matter which I am leaving to Mr. St. Clair and Mr. Doar to work out as to what proper procedure could be developed. What I want is one that will get the facts, get them quickly, and one that will not delay the proceedings, but Mr. Doar and Mr. St. Clair are discussing the matter and I will defer any response until they have completed their discussions.

Q: Mr. President, is Mr. Wilson, the attorney for Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, working with the White House or with you in concert in any way, and secondly, you have said that when others hear the tape of the 21st, they may well reach a different interpretation than the one you have presented tonight. Why is that?

A: Well, first, Mr. Wilson, of course, is not working with the White House, and neither are the attorneys for any of the other defendants. His only contact with the White House is one that would be perfectly proper in terms of information that a defendant or potential defendant would be entitled to.

As far as interpretations of tapes, not only this one, but others are concerned, any individual who wants to can take anyone's statement and interpret it any way he wants.

What I say is that I know what I said, I know what I meant, I know what I did, and I think that any fair minded person will reach the same conclusion that I have repeated here several times tonight.

Q: Mr. President, you met this week with the leaders of the Appropriations Committee, partly in regard to the defense budget, and later Senator McClellan said he would favor slashing \$3 billion from that budget, which as you know is nearly \$90 billion higher than in wartime.

Would you tell us if you think that is a dangerous cut and if so, why?

A: Senator McClellan told me that he wanted to cut the budget \$3 billion and he is a watchdog of the treasury, and, incidentally, so is Congressman Mahon. They both indicated they wanted to cut the budget. However, neither of them indicated that they wanted to take the muscle out of defense.

I would say the primary part of our discussion was with regard to the necessity for having the defense budget where it was. I also pointed out to them, because Senator McClellan was particularly interested in this, that we were negotiating at this time for a mutual balanced reduction of forces in Europe. I said in order to accomplish that we had to maintain our forces at the present level in order to get a reduction on the other side, rather than to do it unilaterally.

I believe, finally, that Senator McClellan and Chairman Mahon will be responsible and the cuts, if they are made, will be ones that will not weaken the United States.

Q: Mr. President, just to follow up an earlier question about Watergate and the indictments, I was wondering if you figured out, Sir, why the payment of \$75,000 in alleged hush money occurred the same day you said you disapproved of the practice? I am talking about the March 21st conversation.

A: I have no information as to when a payment was made, to what you have referred. All I have information on is as to my own actions and my own directions, and my actions and directions were clear and very precise. I did not authorize payments and I did not have knowledge of payments to which you have referred.

Q: Mr. President, can I ask you—

A: Mr. Lisagor isn't with a wire service, but he always has a question.

Q: —some legal scholars, including Senator Ervin, have said that the truth will never be fully established unless all witnesses subject themselves, or submit to cross-examination. Are there circumstances under which you would submit to cross-examination if it would serve to clear up this Watergate affair?

A: Well first, Mr. Lisagor, I will do nothing to weaken the office of the presidency. To submit to cross-examination under circumstances that would, in effect, put the President in the box when he was not indicted, in effect, by the House of Representatives—where he would be in the box if he went to the Senate—I think would be improper. However, as far as I am concerned, as I have indicated, I will have written interrogatories and I will be willing to meet with the ranking members of the Judiciary Committee, both of whom I understand are very good lawyers and very good cross-examiners, to take any questions that they may have if they have any at the conclusion of their own investigation.

The Press: Thank you, Mr. President.