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Excerpts From Interview With Nixon

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 19—The following are excerpts from a transcript provided by David Frost of the televised portions of his interview with former President Richard M. Nixon about the war in Southeast Asia and its domestic consequences:

FROST: Mr. President, America's involvement in Vietnam was regarded by many as a disaster that was splitting American society at home in a very grievous way for what seemed to many an obscure or even a mistaken reason. How did it look to you though?

NIXON: Well, it looked to me, first that the reason for our being in Vietnam had perhaps not been adequately understood by the American people. I thought first, that Kennedy and Johnson were right in going in Vietnam. I was very critical of the way the war had been conducted. I thought they could have done, particularly President Johnson, because, of course, he had the major responsibility. We were in deeper by the time he was President.

Massive Cost to Stay There

Q. But, wasn't staying there, I mean that was also at a massive cost, wasn't it? In billions of dollars; in 138,000 South Vietnamese killed; half a million Cambodians; half a million North Vietnamese, and so on.

A. It was worth it in terms of the period in which I had the responsibility. Let me be quite candid about it. The most popular position to take on Vietnam, if I was simply playing to the votes and playing to the popular opinion in the world, was to bug out and blame it on Johnson and Kennedy. I know, and I didn't do it. Now, the most popular position for me to take now is to say the whole venture in Vietnam, all . . . Everything that we did was a waste of men, that it . . . That it . . . It showed the United States at its worst. It cost us a great deal of money. We were morally wrong to be there . . . Go there in the first place. Morally wrong to continue it as long as we did, and it wasn't worth it.

And, I could say that. And, many perhaps of those, and it's probably a majority of our viewers who agree with that, might applaud even some of my critics, many of whom I have and many of whom I've earned . . . But, I'm not going to say it. I'm not going to say it because I don't believe it. I don't believe that this was a war that . . . That I can tote up the advantages and disadvantages and say overwhelmingly, this is a war that had to be fought and that we had a successful outcome. I can't say that because it was a very complex situation. It was complex at the beginning. It was difficult throughout. I know it was, I know what Johnson went through and how he agonized over the war.

Soviet Union Influence Questioned

Q. Did the Russians not try and influence the North Vietnamese? Or, were the North Vietnamese genuinely independent of the Russians?

A. Well, the Russians told us that they couldn't influence them. We didn't take that at face value. We couldn't. After all, they could have influenced them by cutting down on the flow of arms to them, and their words, therefore, had a very hollow ring.

Q. And then, on April the 30th, you stunned the public by announcing this armed incursion into Cambodia.

And everybody that we've talked to has said that, or claimed that they know of people, or they advised against the military effectiveness of this particular . . . People at the Pentagon say, they didn't think this would be effective. People at the N.S.C. said, they

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About Domestic Effects

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of Indochina War

said they didn't think it would be effective. People at the C.I.A. said they had a report proving it wouldn't be effective.

'As far as being no more Mr. Nice Guy, I would not claim that, I never received that particular description before. I tried to be what I am.'

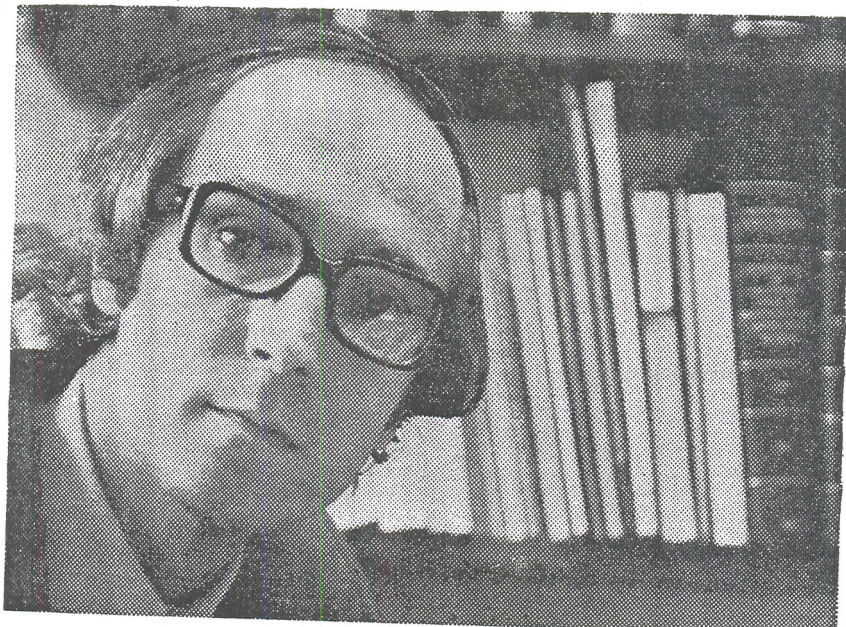
tive, and so on. I wonder on whose advice you decided to do it?

A. Well, first, let's answer the question of whether they were right. They were totally wrong. As a result of that sanctuary movement, we picked up, apart from the casualties inflicted on the enemy, and they were . . . They were substantial: but, there were 22,000 rifles; there were 15 million rounds of ammunition, a whole year's supply; 150,000 rockets and mortars, 14 months' supply; rice, other equipment and the rest. And, as a result of that operation, our casualties went down; we were able to continue and eventually to step up our withdrawal program from Vietnam. It was one of the most effective operations of the war.

Q. You mentioned the list of achievements of that particular armed incursion. I presumed that you'd agree that really, the one thing that you'd been hoping for, that . . . it was discovered, didn't exist, as the thing you said the attack was directed against, the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam, which sort of made it sound like a sort of Doctor No's Palace, or a Bamboo Pentagon somewhere in Cambodia. We were to discover that there was no such place as that.

A. That's correct. As a matter of fact, our intelligence, C.I.A. intelligence, was not at its best in that area. This is not said in terms of criticism of men trying to do a good job under difficult circumstances, but they just didn't have a way to find it out. I mean, like the coup, the Lon Nol coup. We had no advance notice whatever of that. We didn't know anything about it.

The C.I.A. apparently had agents, we assumed that they . . . either . . . They may not have had agents, but they must have had some informants, and as far as the intelligence in this case



The New York Times

Tom Huston, whose plan for covert war on dissidents was approved by Mr. Nixon
"Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal!"

is concerned, it was not particularly adequate.

Q. Whose advice did you act on? Or did you act alone?

A. Oh, I didn't act alone. I acted on the advice of my National Security Counsel adviser, Dr. Kissinger, who of course, strongly supported it. Because the decision basically was triggered by this fact. You pointed out that on April 20th, that was the date of that optimistic speech you refer to. . .

Q. Yes, it was.

A. On April 20th, I announced a withdrawal of 150,000 more men from Vietnam. And, on that date, announced that Vietnamization was proceeding faster than we'd expected, our casualties had been, instead of 300 a week, they were down to less than 150. Things were moving quite well, we thought.

Between April 20th and April 30th, the North Vietnamese launched a massive offensive. A massive offensive; I meant, in terms of . . . Launched a massive build-up, I should say. A build-up which all of our intelligence detected. A build-up in the sanctuary area, and in that period of time we had then to make the decision as to whether or not we could take the attack that was to follow.

Q. Yes, the only thing that they could find between April the 20th and April the 30th, was that you'd seen "Patton" twice, so they thought that might be the reason. A. Yes, yes.

Q. Did that have an influence on you?

A. Well, I've seen the "Sound of Music" twice, and it hasn't made me a writer either. Patton's an interesting movie, I recommend it, curiously enough, not so much for what it tells about Patton, but in a sense it's like Tolstoy's "War and Peace," or any Tolstoin novel—"War and Peace," "Anna Karenina." The war part of the Patton movie didn't particularly interest me. The character sketch was fascinating. And as far as that was concerned, it had no effect whatever on my decisions.

Q. On the subject of Cambodia, let me put a philosophical thought to you, which I put to you particularly in a sense as a Quaker. In the sense that a lot of the philosophical studies that I've read of Cambodia and this little nation that started, perhaps 6,000 members of the Khmer Rouge and a population of seven million, in neutrality, or flawed neutrality. That, nevertheless, with that flawed neutrality, was somehow surviving in the midst of a holocaust. And, the concatenation of events that the Administration were involved in: starting with the bombing; the armed incursion; the driving of people, the North Vietnamese and others, back across Cambodia; the continued bombing and twice the tonnage we

dropped on North Vietnam.

That all of this embroiled this little country in a holocaust that started with this flawed neutrality, and it ended up at the end of this whole saga with, you know, more than a half a million dead. There were more dead later, when the Khmer Rouge took over. But, this bringing them up into the holocaust created the Khmer Rouge and destroyed a country that might otherwise have survived, and that we, therefore . . . Do you have, in a Quaker sense, on your conscience, the destruction of this rather pitiful country?

A. If I could accept your assumption, yes. But, I cannot accept your assumption. I don't accept it because I know the facts. I think I know the facts at least. I do know that without United States assistance, that instead of having a situation as we have it today, in which Cambodia is not neutral, in which Cambodia is one of the most ruthless, cruel, vicious, Communist dictatorships in the world. 500,000, according to The New York Times, not a particularly, one to find such atrocities in such areas as Cambodia, 500,000 dead, a million and a half off to relocation centers, the country is in pitiful shape.

But, for five years, from 1970 'til 1975, Cambodia enjoyed, for whatever we may call it, or at least had, 'enjoyed' is not the best word, had what you call a flawed neutrality. But, as far as that neutrality was concerned, yes, during that five-year period, lives were lost, but on the other hand, they, as far as this savage, cruel, a virtual extermination of a people that has taken place, of a class of people, since the Communists took over, they avoided that, and that was worth something.

Let us understand that in this war, it was never the policy of the United States to bomb civilian installations. If we had had that policy we could have ended the war in a very, certainly a tragic way, but ended it much, much sooner. The cost of Cambodia, which I'm sure you will want to get into, was very much at home, very high at home in terms of what happened at Kent State, the campuses and all the rest, the feeling that we had done something immoral, and all the rest.

Although, as far as the American people were concerned, Gallup reported within a week afterwards, before the Kent State thing, of course, came off, that, it had about 65 percent support. And, as far as Cambodia is concerned, as Laos is concerned, I know I feel strongly about this, and I know many disagree, but, I say it again, I only regret that I didn't act stronger sooner.

(NIXON, sound over film, from his Inaugural Address): "In these difficult years, America has suffered a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that

promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another; until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices."

"Those who carry a peace sign in one hand and throw a bomb or a brick with the other are the super hypocrites of our time. For too long, we have appeased aggression here at home, and as with all appeasement, the result has been more aggression and more violence. The time has come to draw the line. The time has come for the great silent majority of Americans of all ages, of every political persuasion, to stand up and be counted against appeasement

of the rock-throwers and the obscenity-shouters in America."

"Mr. Nice Guy"

Q. Now, where in between those two dates did you, would you put the Damocles moment? When you realized that all hope of speaking quietly and bringing everybody together, was, was hopeless, and that, in fact, you had a war on your hands at home as well? When was the moment when, in effect, you said, 'O.K., no more Mr. Nice Guy.?'

A. Well, as far as being no more Mr. Nice Guy. I would not claim that, I never received that particular description before. I tried to be what I am, and that is: I do the job that has to be done and I do it as fairly as I can, and if it requires being firm, I'm firm.

Now, when you say, 'When was the time that I became convinced that we had to take, what I would say a firmer line with demonstrations. I would say that after having met Thieu at Midway and started the process of withdrawal; after having made a speech in May, North Vietnamese, and, also to the Vietcong, ah, for a peace settlement; and to negotiate on some reasonable terms; when in spite of those efforts and our efforts to bring the war to a peaceful conclusion as quickly as possible, there continued to be a rising,

ah, tide, not just of quickly as possible, ah, there continued to be a rising tide, not just of dissent, peaceful dissent, that's one thing. But, dissent coupled with violence, and advocacy of violence, then I had to make a choice.

I had to make a choice: Are we going to allow this group to first, where they were violent — violence prone, to endanger the lives of others within; but, second, even more important, are we going to allow our potential enemies, those that we were negotiating with in Paris, gain the impression that they represent a majority? In other words, are we going to have a situation where this war would be lost in Washington as the French lost, in 1954 in Paris, rather than in Dien Bien Phu?

When Decision Was Made

Q. And so when did you make that decision, that you had to speak back; that you had to rally your own support?

A. I reached the conclusion after receiving reports from Kissinger on his first secret negotiations; after getting reports from the negotiations in Paris; after seeing the developments within this country; after reading, for example, in magazines and so forth, and so on, that statements by various people; that, having broken Johnson, that, the dissenters, many of them were now out to break Nixon.

Q. Right. And that you saw those divisions, and that you realized that the war would continue with dissent; continue with a divided America; and, that also wherever you could in other policies, you tried to build that group that were your support, play to them politically, to increase your majority in '72, and that the result was that an America that was already divided, you divided even more on a principle of, that the only way is to divide and rule.

A. You can make that charge, and I don't say that in any personal sense. You can make it, and you should, because a lot of your constituency in the media do think that. But, they're wrong. In my view, I had a responsibility which was, above everything else, to bring that war to the earliest possible conclusion, and I did it. And we got it finished, and we got it finished on what I would say again was an honorable basis and a peace that lasted for at least two, over two years.

The second point was that in the meantime I had to deal with the problem of dissent at home. Now, the reason. . . . Another thing, point, that has to be made: Without having enough support at home, the enemy, in my opinion, would never have negotiated in Paris, as they did.

The Huston Plan

FROST: The wave of dissent, occasionally violent, which followed in the wake of the Cambodian incursion prompted President Nixon to demand better intelligence about the people who were opposing him. To this end, the Deputy White House Counsel, Tom



Antiwar demonstrators massed outside the White House in April of 1972

United Press International

"For too long we have appeased aggression here at home and, as with all appeasement, the result has been more aggression and more violence. The time has come to draw the line."

Huston, arranged a series of meetings with representatives of the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and other police and intelligence agencies.

These meetings produced a plan, the

Huston Plan, which advocated the systematic use of wiretappings, burglaries, or so-called black bag jobs, mail openings and infiltration against antiwar groups and others. Some of these activities, as Huston emphasized to Nixon, were clearly illegal. Nevertheless, the President approved the plan. Five days later, after opposition from J. Edgar Hoover, the plan was withdrawn, but the President's approval was later to be listed in the Articles of Impeachment as an alleged abuse of Presidential power.

Q. So what in a sense, you're saying is that there are certain situations, and the Huston Plan or that part of it was one of them, where the President can decide that it's in the best interests of the nation or something, and do something illegal.

A. Well, when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal.

Q. By definition.

A. Exactly. Exactly. If the President, for example, approves something because of the national security, or in this case because of a threat to internal peace and order of significant magnitude, then the President's decision in that instance is one that enables those who carry it out, to carry it out without violating a law. Otherwise they're in an impossible position.

Q. So, that in other words, really you were saying in that answer, really, between the burglary and murder, again, there's no subtle way to say that there was murder of a dissenter in this country because I don't know any evidence to that effect at all. But, the

point is: just the dividing line, is that in fact, the dividing line is the President's judgment?

A. Yes, and the dividing line and, just so that one does not get the impression, that a President can run amok in this country and get away with it, we have to have in mind that a President has to come up before the electorate. We also have to have in mind, that a President has to get appropriations from the Congress. We have to have in mind, for example, that as far as the C.I.A.'s covert operations are concerned, as far as the F.B.I.'s covert operations are concerned, through the years, they have been disclosed on a very, very limited basis to trusted members of Congress. I don't know whether it can be done today or not.

Plumbers' Activities

Q. What about the activities of the Plumbers in the area of South Vietnam; in the area of investigating whether there was a democratic involvement actually in the murder of Diem, and then Hunt forging cables to that effect, because there weren't cables on the State Department files that actually indicated that. Would Hunt have been going further than your instructions in forging cables?

A. Well, let's leave out the morality, because we can talk all day here what about my motive is and what my intent is, and you can question it and you should, and our viewers can question it and they should, about me or anybody else. And I must say that there . . . I've done some stupid things, as I've already indicated in the . . . particularly in the handling of what was a pipsqueak Watergate thing, and I did the big things rather well.

But, I'm not so stupid, ever, to have suggested. "Take a cable and forget it." My God, look at the number of people that have had access to it. Look at the number of people who would have been able to have come up and said, "Look, this has happened."

Why, it's the most stupid thing I ever heard of; and also Chuck Colson, when he was asked about this, said that the President knew absolutely zero about it. And, I guess the proof of the pudding is that Life magazine, to their

'I was one of the casualties, or maybe the last casualty, in Vietnam. If so, I'm glad I'm the last one.'

credit, never printed the story. Thank God they didn't.

Q. Now, we have this situation where we have the, the Plumbers dealing with, as you say, with leaks, or with people who are considered to be dangerous to the Administration in one way or another, et cetera, and doing these various activities that we've been mentioning.

Also at the same time, there were enemies lists circulating, and conversations about the use of the I.R.S. and all of that, also moving against opponents of the Administration.

And in the September the 15th tape, for instance, Haldeman says that Dean's moving ruthlessly on the investigation and the McGovern people, and working the thing through the I.R.S., and Schultz has been a bit difficult and you say, "I don't want George Schultz to ever raise the question because it'd put me in the position of having to throw him out of the office. He didn't get to be Secretary of the Treasury because he had nice blue eyes. It was a God damned favor to get him

that job." And so on.

And then you talk about using the I.R.S. and you say, "I want the most comprehensive notes on all of those who've tried to do us in because they didn't have to do it; they're asking for it; they're gonna get it."

A. Well, let me say this: They were more successful, they may have been, but let me say, what was put out; what we're talking about here is this: that, they shouldn't have gone into this, yes. I have never seen, let me say this, and, except for Eisenhower, I think I'm the only President in recent times . . . I have never seen anybody else's tax return except my own.

Q. But, as we look at the overall picture and those things about the comprehensive notes "on those who've tried to do us in" and all of that, and, talking in that same conversation about Edward Bennett Williams, and Halde- man says, "That's the guy we've got to ruin." And, you say, "Yes, I think we're going to fix the S.O.B., ah, be-

lieve me we're going to." And, so on. Isn't there in that whole conversa- tion . . .

A. A paranoid attitude?

Q. Yes.

A. Yeah, I know. I understand that and it gets back to the statement that I made, rather an emotional statement the day I left office and I said, "Don't hate other people because hatred de- stroys yourself." Yeah, I, I want to say here, that I, I have a temper, I control it publicly rather well. Ah, sometimes privately I blow off some steam, but also as I've indicated, if, and this is very hard for people to be- lieve, but I think you can believe it after our session a few hours ago. My weakness is perhaps, where personal factors are concerned.

Never Invited to White House

Now, let's, let's take the Kennedys now. Did you know that in eight years after Mrs. Nixon and I had served in Washington for eight years, Vice Presi- dent, I was Vice President. She was my wife; we were never invited to the White House, to a dinner or to a lunch. I remember Rose Mary Woods, my sec- retary, who made up the invitation lists, went out of her mind when I put Hubert Humphrey on the list for White House dinners.

When I put, for example, invited Jackie Kennedy and her two children to come up for a private dinner without any publicity so that they could see where their father had, where they'd grown up and all the rest; when Mrs. Nixon had Rose Kennedy over, ah, O.K., that takes care of that. What I'm trying to tell you that this whole busi- ness of, "Am I paranoid about hating people and trying to do them in?" And the answer is: at times yes. I get angry at people, but in human terms as far as I'm concerned, I believe that an indi- vidual must never let hatred rule him.

I, Dolores Hope, Bob Hope's wonder- ful wife, once said something to me when we first came to California after the resignation, she said, "Remember, Dick," she said, "one person who loves you is worth 10 who hate you." And so, there's a love-hate complex in all of us, and I just hope that when they tote 'em all up before you go to St. Peter's or the other way down, that maybe the ledger's going to come out reasonably well in that respect.

Q. Pulling some of our discussions together, as it were; speaking of the Presidency and in an interrogatory filed with the Church Committee, you stated, quote, "It's quite obvious that there are certain inherently govern- ment activities, which, if undertaken by the sovereign in protection of the interests of the nation's security are lawful, but which if undertaken by private persons, are not."

What, at root, did you have in mind there?

A. Well, what I, at root I had in mind I think was perhaps much better stated by Lincoln during the War be- tween the States. Lincoln said, and I think I can remember the quote almost exactly, he said, "Actions which other- wise would be unconstitutional, could become lawful if undertaken for the purpose of preserving the Constitution and the Nation."

Now that's the kind of action I'm referring to. Of course in Lincoln's case it was the survival of the Union in war time, it's the defense of the nation and, who knows, perhaps the survival of the nation.

Q. But there was no comparison, was there, between the situation you faced and the situation Lincoln faced, for in- stance?

A. This nation was torn apart in an ideological way by the war in Vietnam, as much as the Civil War tore apart the nation when Lincoln was President. Now it's true that we didn't have the North and South—

Q. But when you said, as you said when we were talking about the Hus- ton Plan, you know, "If the President orders it, that makes it legal," as it were: Is the President in that sense—is there anything in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights that suggests the President is that far of a sovereign, that far above the law?

A. No, there isn't. There's nothing specific that the Constitution contem- plates in that respect. I haven't read every word, every jot and every tittle, but I do know this: that it has been, however, argued that as far as a Presi- dent is concerned, that in war time, a President does have certain extraor- dinary powers which would make acts that would otherwise be unlawful, law- ful if undertaken for the purpose of preserving the nation and the Constitu- tion, which is essential for the rights we're all talking about.

'The Last American Casualty?'

Q. Looking back, if the Vietnam War had not gone on throughout your Presi- dency, there would probably have been less, much less, domestic discord; the unifying policies that you adopted at the beginning might not have led to an atmosphere of polarization, and many of the so-called abuses of power might never have occurred or come to light—or been necessary. In that sense, someone has said, I wonder if you agree, in that sense perhaps you were the last American casualty of the Viet- nam War?

A. A case could be made for that, yes. There isn't any question but that, in the conduct of the war, I made enemies who were, from an ideological standpoint, virtually, well, paranoid, I guess.

Oh, the major newspaper publisher told Henry Kissinger one night right after the peace settlement, "I hate the son's-a-bitch's gut."

And naturally this is right after, coming right after the time that we had been able to have the peace settle- ment. This is an indication of how deep those passions ran, because that kind of attitude developed over a period of years.

I mean, my political career goes over many, many years, but the actions I took with great reluctance, but recog- nizing I had to do what was right, the actions that I took in Vietnam: one, to try to win an honorable peace abroad; and two, to keep the peace at home, because keeping the peace at home and keeping support for the war was essential in order to get the enemy to negotiate. And that was, of course, not easy to do in view of the dissent and so forth that we had.

And so it could be said that I was—if I—that I was one of the casualties, or maybe the last casualty, in Vietnam. If so, I'm glad I'm the last one.