

*37th President of the United States: 1969 - 1974*

## **The President's News Conference**

March 04, 1969

### **THE PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO EUROPE**

THE PRESIDENT. [1.] Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, the purpose of this unusually long press conference is to report to the American people on my trip to Europe.

Because I realize that there will probably be a number of questions, some of which may require some rather lengthy answers, I am going to make my opening statement quite brief.

A word about the purpose and also the limitations of a trip like this: I believe all of us in this room have no illusions about the limits of personal diplomacy in settling great differences between nations. A smile or a handshake or an exchange of toasts or gifts or visits will not by themselves have effect where vital interests are concerned and where there are great differences.

On the other hand, I have learned that there is an intangible factor which does affect the relations between nations. I think it was perhaps best described by two of our visitors, those with whom I was talking. One was in the case of Prime Minister Wilson. He used the term mutual trust when he welcomed me. The other, President de Gaulle, when he came to the American Embassy, used the term confidence--trust.

When there is trust between men who are leaders of nations, there is a better chance to settle differences than when there is not trust. I think that one of the accomplishments of this trip is that we have established between the United States of America and the major nations of Europe--and, I trust, other nations of Europe as well---a new relationship of trust and confidence that did not exist before.

For example, as we look at the relations with France, they are different today than they were a week ago. Now, how different they are only time will tell. But that they are different and improved, I think, would be a fair assessment of that situation.

We can also say that, as a result of this trip, the United States has indicated its continuing support of the Alliance--the Atlantic Alliance--and that we have also indicated our support of the concept and ideal of European unity.

In addition, we have indicated that we recognize our limitations insofar as European unity is concerned. Americans cannot unify Europe. Europeans must do so. And we should not become involved in differences among Europeans in which our vital interests are not involved.

Finally, a word that I think all of the American people will be gratified to hear. Sometimes we become rather disillusioned with our aid programs around the world, and we look back on our relations with Europe, particularly, and wonder if it was really worth all that we did immediately after World War II, in terms of the Marshall Plan and other programs.

Anyone who saw Europe as I did in that period of devastation after World War II--when I visited all the countries, except Belgium at that time, that I visited on this trip--and then saw it today would realize that it was worth doing, because today a strong, prosperous, free Europe stands there, partly a result of our aid.

It could not have happened without our aid. It also, of course, could not have happened without their great efforts on their own behalf. And so, with that recognition, we now realize that this Alliance deserves our attention, should be the center of our concern, should not be taken for granted. It will not be. That will be a major objective of this administration.

Now, as we go to your questions, I will take questions not only on the European trip but any area of foreign policy, because on the trip I discussed with the leaders of Europe all areas of foreign policy, which was their desire and mine as well.

There will be only one ground rule. I know there will be great interest in what each of the leaders said to me and what I said to them. I will not divulge the content of these personal conversations because, if we are going to build confidence, we can't build confidence by breaking confidences.

We will go to the questions.

## QUESTIONS

### AN EAST-WEST SUMMIT MEETING

[2.] Q. Mr. President, we got the impression traveling with you that there was some relationship between your tour and a possible East-West summit at some future time. Could you relate the two?

THE PRESIDENT. Mr. Cormier [Frank Cormier, Associated Press], this tour was a condition precedent to an East-West summit at a later time. I have always indicated that before we had talks with those who have opposed us in the world, it was essential that we had clear understanding with our allies and friends.

I think at times in the past we have not had that kind of consultation. It was essential to have it on this trip. In every visit that I had I discussed East-West relations with the leaders involved--discussed not only what our plans were and what our policies might be but got their views and their advice as to what programs they thought we should handle in any bilateral discussions we had with the Soviet Union.

### RELATIONS WITH RED CHINA AND THE SOVIET UNION

[3.] Q. Mr. President, during the trip, and as recently as the conclusion of the trip Sunday night, you spoke of hoping that with greater unity with our allies, you would be able to develop new understanding with those who have opposed us on the other side of the world. To follow up on Mr. Cormier's question, of whom are you speaking, sir? We assume the Russians. Are you thinking, for instance, you may be able to reach a better understanding with Red China?

THE PRESIDENT. Looking further down the road, we could think in terms of a better understanding with Red China. But being very realistic, in view of Red China's breaking off the rather limited Warsaw talks that were planned, I do not think that we should hold out any great optimism for any breakthroughs in that direction at this time.

Certainly you are correct in assuming that in referring to those who have opposed us in the world, I was referring primarily to the Soviet Union and to the talks that the United States would be having with the Soviet Union in a number of areas.

Europeans, I found, were greatly concerned by what they called the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet condominium, in which, at the highest levels, the two superpowers would make decisions affecting their future without consulting them.

In fact, one statesman used the term "Yalta." He said: "We don't want another Yalta on the part of the United States and the Soviet Union." Now, whether his assessment was correct about Yalta or not is immaterial.

The point is that Europeans are highly sensitive about the United States and the Soviet Union making decisions that affect their future without their consultation. And that will not happen as a result of this trip.

#### THE SITUATION IN WEST BERLIN

[4.] Q. Mr. President, would you assess for us, sir, the situation in West Berlin on the eve of the election, how you see it? Do you think it has reached a crisis point?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, the situation in West Berlin at the moment seems to have leveled off. I haven't seen the latest reports. I will have to look at the morning papers to see whether my projection at this point is correct, because it has changed from hour to hour.

I believe that we have made our position quite clear to all the parties involved, as we should. We have made it clear to the West German Government, that if they went ahead with the election, we would support them in that decision, or if they decided that they could gain concessions that they considered significant which would lead them to changing the place for the elections, we would support them in that move.

It is their decision and we are not trying to affect it one way or another. They have a right to have the elections there if they want. Also, we have indicated to the Soviets--to the Soviet Ambassador, Mr. [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin--both Mr. Rogers and I have pointed out that any harassment in West Berlin could jeopardize the progress that we see possible in other areas.

I have reported previously in a press conference that I felt that the Soviet Union did not want to see the West Berlin situation become a cause or even a pretext for any move which would be in retrogression insofar as our bilateral relations are concerned.

At this moment, based on the conversations that I have had myself with various European leaders and also the conversation that I and others have had with the representatives of the Soviet Union, I believe that the Soviet Union does not want to have the situation in West Berlin heated up to the point that it would jeopardize some--what they consider to be--more important negotiations at the highest level with the United States. And because those negotiations, in effect, are in the wings, I think I could predict that the Soviet Union will use its influence to cool off the West Berlin situation, rather than to heat it up.

#### THE VATICAN

[5.] Q. Do you think, sir, that, from your talks with Pope Paul at the Vatican, there is any possibility that the United States might send an envoy to the Vatican as a permanent representative?

THE PRESIDENT. That possibility has been considered by the State Department and by me, because we have been concerned that we should have the very closest consultation and discussion with the Vatican. I found, for example, my conversation with Pope Paul extremely helpful. It was far ranging, and I received information and also counsel that I considered to be very important. I want that line of communication kept open. Whether we can have it kept open based on the present facilities that are available, I have not yet determined. The matter is still under study. But what is important is that the United States have with the Vatican close consultation on foreign policy matters in which the Vatican has a very great interest and very great influence.

#### THE COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE IN VIETNAM

[6.] Q. Mr. President, the Communist offensive in Vietnam has aroused speculation that your administration is being tested, particularly as to the understanding that was reached last November I, which led to the bombing halt. Would you give us your opinion of this, please?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, in speaking of the Communist offensive, I think it is important first to analyze what it is and what its purposes are, compare it with the offensive last year, and then see what that offensive means in terms of the violation of the understanding last October 31 or prior to October 31 at the time of the bombing halt.

When we look at the offensive, we find that in terms of the frequency of attacks it is approximately the same as the offensive of last year. In terms of intensity of attacks, it is less than that of last year. As far as the targets are concerned, it is primarily directed toward military targets, but there are also some very significant civilian targets. Now, as far as the purposes are concerned, we can only guess; but three have been suggested: that it might be directed against the Government of South Vietnam to break its morale and its back; that it might be directed against public opinion in the United States to put more pressure on the administration to move more in the direction of North Vietnam's position at the Paris peace talks; or that it might be directed toward a military victory of sorts, if a military victory of sorts could be accomplished in South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese against our forces there.

Now, this offensive has failed in all three of these areas. It has failed to achieve any significant military breakthrough. It has failed to break the back of the Government of South Vietnam. Far from that, as a matter of fact, in terms of the pacification program, 700,000 were displaced by the Tet offensive last year, and only 25,000 have been displaced by this one. As far as this offensive affecting the United States and its negotiating position in Paris, it could have exactly the opposite effect.

I think that, therefore, we must now analyze the offensive in terms of the understanding of October 31. Now, that understanding was to the effect that continued shelling of, or attacks on, the cities, the major cities of South Vietnam, would be inconsistent with talks toward peace which would be productive in Paris.

Now, we are examining this particular offensive, examining it very carefully, to see whether its magnitude is in violation of that understanding. Technically, it could be said that it is in violation. Whether we reach the conclusion that the violation is so significant that it requires action on our part is a decision we will be reaching very soon if those attacks continue at their present magnitude.

As you know, Secretary Laird is going to South Vietnam tomorrow, and I have asked him to look into the situation and to give me a report after he has been there.

One other factor should be mentioned: I do not want to discount by this analysis the seriousness of these attacks, because the American casualty rate, I note, has doubled during the period of these attacks. Therefore, it is necessary for the American President, in analyzing the attacks, to think not only of the understanding with regard to the attacks on the cities, but also of his obligation to defend American fighting men in Vietnam.

We have not moved in a precipitate fashion, but the fact that we have shown patience and forbearance should not be considered as a sign of weakness. We will not tolerate a continuation of a violation of an understanding. But more than that, we will not tolerate attacks which result in heavier casualties to our men at a time that we are honestly trying to seek peace at the conference table in Paris. An appropriate response to these attacks will be made if they continue.

#### THE ANTIBALLISTIC MISSILE SYSTEM

[7.] Q. Mr. President, can you tell me if you, after your consultations overseas, have any reservations or have found any reservations on whether we should deploy an ABM [antiballistic missile] system and whether you share any of the scientific reservations that have been expressed in this country?

THE PRESIDENT. The ABM system was not discussed in any detail in my conversations abroad. As far as the decision is concerned, there will be a meeting of the National Security Council tomorrow, which will be entirely devoted to an assessment of that system.

Then, during the balance of the week, I shall make some additional studies on my own involving the Defense Department and other experts whose opinions I value. I will make a decision and announce a decision on ABM at the first of next week.

#### THE PRESIDENT'S TRAVEL PLANS

[8.] Q. Mr. President, there have already been reports that you are already considering another trip abroad, maybe to Latin America or Israel. Would you tell us what your plans are?

THE PRESIDENT. I have no plans for any foreign travel at this time. I have noted that several other travelers have committed me to various trips abroad. I would like very much at an appropriate time to travel to Latin America again. I was there on a well-publicized trip with some of you in 1958. I was back there again on a less publicized one, but with a much more friendly welcome in 1967.

Such a trip, I think, would be valuable at a later time. But, as you know, Governor Rockefeller is going to Latin America to make an intensive study of our Alliance for Progress programs, a study which is vital because I think we need some changes in our Latin American policy.

#### THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

[9.] Q. Mr. President, can you tell us whether or not, as a result of your talks with President de Gaulle and other government leaders in Europe, you are now encouraged about prospects for maintaining peaceful conditions in the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT. One of the tangible results that came out of this trip was substantial progress on the Middle East. Now, what that progress will be and whether it reaches an eventual settlement--that is too early to predict.

But I know that when I met with you ladies and gentlemen of the press at an earlier time, the question was raised as to the four-power talks, and there were some who thought that I--this administration was dragging its feet on going into four-power talks.

Frankly, I do not believe the United States should go into any talks where the deck might be stacked against us. Now, as a result of the consultations that we had on this trip, the positions of our European friends--the British and the French--are now closer to ours than was the case before. We have a better understanding of their position; they have a better understanding of ours.

And also, we have had encouraging talks with the Soviet Ambassador. The Secretary of State and I have both talked with the Soviet Ambassador with regard to the Mideast. We will continue these bilateral consultations; and if they continue at their present rate of progress, it seems likely that there will be four-power discussions in the United Nations on the Mideast.

Now, I should indicate also the limitations of such discussions and what can come out of them. The four powers--the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France--cannot dictate a settlement in the Middle East. The time has passed in which great nations can dictate to small nations their future where their vital interests are involved. This kind of settlement that we are talking about, and the contribution that can be made to it, is limited in this respect.

The four powers can indicate those areas where they believe the parties directly involved in the Mideast could have profitable discussions. At the present time they are having no discussions at all.

Second--and this is even the more important part of it--from the four-power conference can come an absolute essential to any kind of peaceful settlement in the Mideast, and that is a major-power guarantee of the settlement, because we cannot expect the Nation of Israel or the other nations in the area who think their major interests might be involved--we cannot expect them to agree to a settlement unless they think there is a better chance that it will be guaranteed in the future than has been the case in the past.

On this score, then, we think we have made considerable progress during the past week. We are cautiously hopeful that we can make more progress and move to the four-power talks very soon.

#### U.S. RESPONSE TO ATTACKS IN VIETNAM

[10.] Q. Mr. President, have you considered an appropriate response if the attacks continue in South Vietnam? Would an appropriate response include resumption of the bombing in the North?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, Mr. Wilson [Richard L. Wilson, Des Moines Register and Tribune], that question is one that I have given thought to but it is one which I think should not be answered in this forum.

I believe that it is far more effective in international policy to use deeds, rather than words threatening deeds, in order to accomplish objectives.

I will only say in answer to that question that the United States has a number of options that we could exercise to respond. We have several contingency plans that can be put into effect.

I am considering all of those plans. We shall use whatever plan we consider is appropriate to the action on the other side. I will not indicate in advance, and I am not going to indicate publicly, and I am not going to threaten--I don't think that would be helpful--that we are going to start bombing the North or anything else.

I will only indicate that we will not tolerate a continuation of this kind of attack without some response that will be appropriate.

#### CONVERSATIONS WITH PRESIDENT DE GAULLE

[11.] Q. Mr. President, mindful of your ground rule against revealing contents of your conversations with leaders, I ask you this question: Did the atmosphere of mutual trust generated in your long conversations with General de Gaulle give you any fresh indication, any fresh hope that France could be helpful in the future of NATO, and/or France could be helpful in settling the war in Vietnam, either directly or indirectly?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, on the first point, General de Gaulle said publicly, as you will note, what he has said in the past, that he supported the Alliance. He has withdrawn France's forces from the military side of the Alliance but he supports the Alliance, and he in his conversations backed that up very vigorously.

With regard to whether or not there is a possibility that France could move back into NATO in its military complex, I would not hold out at this time any hope that that might happen.

I would hold out, however, some hope that as our conversations continue, we can find a number of areas for mutual cooperation and consultation on the military side as well as in other respects. I think that beyond that, it would not be appropriate to indicate what General de Gaulle's position is.

As far as Vietnam is concerned, we did discuss it and whether it was Vietnam, or whether it was the Mideast, or whether it was U.S. relations with other countries where the French might be helpful, I received from General de Gaulle very encouraging indications that they would like to be helpful where we thought they could be helpful.

I wouldn't go beyond that, but I was very encouraged with the General's attitude. It was one of helpfulness in every respect on all of the major issues.

#### THE NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION TREATY

[12.] Q. Mr. President, in your conversations with Chancellor Kiesinger, do you believe that you convinced him that his government's reservations against joining in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty were not valid, and that joining in the Treaty would be in West Germany's best interests?

THE PRESIDENT. I think it would be appropriate to say that the German Government has considerable difficulties with regard to ratification of the Treaty--difficulties which we need to understand even though we may not agree with their position.

Their attitude as far as we are concerned is quite well known. They know that I have sent the Treaty to the Senate, that the Senate will probably give its advice and consent and that we will ratify.

They know, too, my position: that it is not only in the interests of the United States but that I believe it is in the interests of all governments, including the West German Government, to ratify.

I did not put pressure on them, publicly or privately, and I will not put pressure on them, publicly or privately. But I believe, that since it is in their interests to ratify the Treaty, that after consideration without pressure the West German Government will at an appropriate time ratify the Treaty.

#### THE SOVIET UNION AND VIETNAM

[13.] Q. Mr. President, you said in the recent past that you thought the United States might put some pressure, or use the Soviet Union, or seek to enlist the Soviet Union's help in Vietnam. And I wonder whether, since you have become President, you have moved in that respect, trying to get them to alleviate the situation or help solve it?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, Mr. Lisagor [Peter Lisagor, Chicago Daily News], as you know, the Soviet Union is in a very delicate and sensitive position as far as Vietnam is concerned. I do not divulge any confidences from the Soviet Ambassador in indicating that that is the case. You ladies and gentlemen have written it and you are correct, because here you have Communist China aiding North Vietnam; you also have the Soviet Union aiding North Vietnam--each vying for power in the Communist world. And, therefore, what the Soviet Union does in the Vietnamese conflict is a very difficult decision for them as related to that objective--the objective of leadership of the Communist world.

On the other hand, it is well known that the Soviet Union was helpful in terms of getting the Paris peace talks started, that the Soviet Union was helpful in working out the arrangement for the shape of the table; and I think I could say that based on the conversations that the Secretary of State and I have had with the Soviet Ambassador, I believe at this time that the Soviet Union shares the concern of many other nations in the world about the extension of the war in Vietnam, its continuing. They recognize that if it continues over a long period of time, the possibility of escalation increases. And I believe the Soviet Union would like to use what influence it could appropriately to help bring the war to a conclusion. What it can do, however, is something that only the Soviet Union would be able to answer to, and it would probably have to answer privately, not publicly.

#### INTERNATIONAL TRADE

[14.] Q. Mr. President, can you tell us what international trade issues came up in your meetings in Europe. Also, specifically, sir, could you tell us whether you discussed the problems of textile and steel imports into this country?

THE PRESIDENT. All international trade issues came up, and I discussed the problem of textile and steel imports in all the countries involved. The Europeans are concerned about some of what they think are our restrictions in the trade area. For example, they talk about the "American selling price," and they talk about the "buy American" programs. I pointed out that many of our



congressional people, as well as American businessmen, were concerned about border taxes and other devices which we thought presented a problem.

I also pointed out in our conversations that there were 93 bills in the last session of the Senate alone which were introduced that would have called for quotas in the various products that you mentioned, and others as well, and that unless some voluntary restrictions or restraints were worked out, on textiles particularly, the pressure for legislative quotas would be immense.

I also indicated that I favored freer trade rather than restrictions on trade, but that it would be very difficult to resist that kind of pressure in the event that some action were not taken to deal with the problem.

A final note in this respect: As we look at the whole trade pattern, I think we have to realize that we cannot anticipate in the near future another big round of reductions of tariff barriers. We are going to do well if we can digest what we have on the plate. This is my view, and I found that was the view of our major European friends. I believe that we can make considerable progress in that area. Secretary Stans is going to Europe next month for the specific purpose of discussing trade problems with all of our European friends, with the hope that we can work out some of these differences.

#### SOVIET AID TO NORTH VIETNAM

[15.] Q. Mr. President, sir, I wonder if you think that the Soviets are anxious to bring the war to an end, or at least not prolong it? I wonder if you have asked them if they will cut off their supplies to Hanoi?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, we have had discussions, as I have already indicated, with the Soviet Ambassador. I do not think it would be appropriate, however, to disclose our discussions with him any more than it is appropriate to disclose our discussions with others that we have dealt with that are supposed to be confidential in nature. I am sure that the Soviet Union is keenly aware of the fact that we would be greatly gratified by anything that they could do that could pull some of the support away from the Government of North Vietnam. You could probably just guess as to what our conversations were, but I will not indicate what they were.

#### NEW APPROACHES TO VIETNAM CONFLICT

[16.] Q. Mr. President, Vice President Ky after meeting with you in Paris said you told him that you had new approaches to the war in Vietnam. Is that correct? And, if so, do you think it inappropriate to tell the American people about it at this time?

THE PRESIDENT. What I think Vice President Ky was referring to was new approaches not so much in the military field, but in terms of the diplomatic initiative. In our discussions with him, and also in our discussions with the American negotiating team, we discussed the approaches that might be made that would break the deadlock.

Now, with regard to the Paris negotiations, I think we can now say that we have neared the end of phase one, in which both parties have set out their positions in public forums. Those positions having been set out, we now come to phase two, in which we will have hard bargaining on the major points of difference. Our negotiating team has been given some instructions and will be given more with regard to a variety of approaches, approaches which, in some instances, will also be taken by the Government of South Vietnam.

One point, incidentally, that I was very encouraged by was that Vice President Ky, speaking for his delegation, was most cooperative in indicating his desire to attempt to find and explore new approaches at the conference table, rather than simply resign ourselves to a military decision.

#### AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND VIETNAM

[17.] Q. Mr. President, you mentioned earlier that the offensive against Saigon might have as its objective an adverse effect upon American public opinion. In light of the experiences of your predecessor, do you feel that you could keep American public opinion in line if this war were to go on for months and even years?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, I trust that I am not confronted with that problem, when you speak of years. Our objective is to get this war over as soon as we can on a basis that will not leave the seeds of another war there to plague us in the future. We have made, we think, some progress. We think that we are going to make some more.

As far as American public opinion is concerned, I think that the American people will support a President if they are told by the President why we are there, what our objectives are, what the costs will be, and what the consequences would be if we took another course of action. It will not be easy. The American people, I can say from having campaigned the country, are terribly frustrated about this war. They would welcome any initiative that they thought could appropriately bring it to an end on some responsible basis.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of a President to examine all of the options that we have, and then if he finds that the course he has to take is one that is not popular, he has to explain it to the American people and gain their support.

I think I can perhaps be somewhat effective in explaining why we are there and also in keeping the American people informed as negotiations go on. I intend to do so.

#### WITHDRAWAL OF AMERICAN TROOPS

[18.] Q. Mr. President, President Thieu of South Vietnam has spoken publicly, sir, of the possibility of his expectation of withdrawing up to about 50,000 American troops from South Vietnam this year.

Do you see this possibility of a stage-by-stage withdrawal as a practicality?

THE PRESIDENT. The possibility of withdrawing troops is something that we have, as you know, been considering for some time. There are no plans to withdraw any troops at this time or in the near future.

On the other hand, I have asked for a reexamination of our whole troop level in South Vietnam, and particularly a reexamination of the South Vietnamese effort and the training program of South Vietnamese forces. To the extent that South Vietnamese forces are able to take over a greater burden of the fighting and to the extent, too, that the level of the fighting may decrease, it may be possible to withdraw.

I do not, however, want to indicate at this time that we are going to withdraw 50,000 troops in the near future. I prefer to create the conditions, if we can, where withdrawal can take place and then announce it, rather than to hold up the promise and let people down when it doesn't happen.

## ISRAELI-ARAB NEGOTIATIONS

[19.] Q. Mr. President, on the basis of your conversations, can you foresee a condition under which the Israelis and the Arabs could sit at a negotiating table?

THE PRESIDENT. Not at this time, no. I think we have to recognize that we are far away from the time when the Arabs and the Israelis can sit at a negotiating table. But I believe that by the time we very carefully go down this road of bilateral consultations first, four-power consultations--and incidentally, we are going to consult with the Israelis when they come here-- Mr. Eban is going to be here--there will be, I am sure, consultations on the other side as well---I think when we complete our course of action and come up, if we can, with a four-power recommendation for proceeding, that then it might be possible to bring both sides to a conference table. That is our hope.

## DISCUSSIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION

[20.] Mr. Scali [John Scali, ABC News]

Q. Mr. President, we were told during the trip that at the appropriate moment you were prepared to begin negotiations with the Soviet Union on a broad front and that these negotiations would include not only disarmament but other, possibly political, areas. What problems do you see as ripe for discussion with the Soviets?

THE PRESIDENT. I should first indicate that talks already are going on with the Soviet Union in one sense. The discussions that the Secretary of State and I have had with Ambassador Dobrynin have been substantive and have been talks, in effect, with the Soviet Government, because he had consulted with his own government before he had his talk with me and with the Secretary of State.

The talks on the Mideast would be the first subject in which bilateral as well as multilateral discussions could take place.

The possibility, also, of discussions on strategic arms--this is a possibility for the future.

Let me indicate where it stands now. We have completed our discussions with some of our European friends. We will have more discussions with them as we get our own position developed. We are going forward with the analysis of the American position--of our strategic arms capabilities, of our conventional arms capabilities--so that when we have before us the decision as to whether we go into talks, we will know what our position will be.

Assuming that those studies go forward on schedule, and assuming that we make progress on some of these political areas, like the Mideast, then there is a possibility, a good possibility, that talks could go forward in that area.

I can see those as two areas, and there are others which could develop as well.

## THE SOVIET UNION AND THE MIDDLE EAST

[21.] Q. Mr. President, I believe you have said, although I couldn't give you the direct quote, but the general assumption is that the Soviet Union is interested in peace in the Middle East. But how can this be reconciled with the fact that they have very quickly rearmed and fully rearmed the Arabs?

What evidence do we have, what proof do we have, that the Soviet Union is in fact interested in peace in the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, the Soviet Union's policy in the Mideast and Vietnam--and your question is quite perceptive from that standpoint--is ambivalent.

On the one hand, in Vietnam, they are heating up the war. They furnish 80 percent to 85 percent of the sophisticated military equipment for the North Vietnamese forces. Without that assistance, North Vietnam would not have the capability to wage the major war they are against the United States.

In the Mideast, without what the Soviet Union has done in rearming Israel's neighbors, there would be no crisis there that would require our concern.

On the other hand, at the same time that the Soviet Union has gone forward in providing arms for potential belligerents--potential belligerents in the one area and actual belligerents in another--the Soviet Union recognizes that if these peripheral areas get out of control, the result could be a confrontation with the United States. And the Soviet Union does not want a confrontation with the United States, any more than we want one with them, because each of us knows what a confrontation would mean.

I think it is that overwhelming fact--the fact that if the situation in the Mideast and Vietnam is allowed to escalate, it is that fact that it might lead to a confrontation--that is giving the Soviet Union second thoughts, and leads me to, what I would say, the cautious conclusion at this point: that the Soviet Union will play, possibly, a peacemaking role in the Mideast and even possibly in Vietnam.

I say a cautious conclusion because I base this only on talks that have taken place up to this time. But we are going to explore that road all the way that we can, because, let's face it, without the Soviet Union's cooperation, the Mideast is going to continue to be a terribly dangerous area--if you continue to pour fuel on those fires of hatred that exist on the borders of Israel. And without the Soviet Union's cooperation it may be difficult to move as fast as we would like in settling the war in Vietnam.

#### U.S. RELATIONS WITH PERU

[22.] Q. Mr. President, you mentioned earlier the deeds rather than words in our international relations. In our relations with Peru and our problems there, is the United States prepared to take action should Peru not respond to our protests over the seizure of the oil company and the attacks on fishing vessels?

THE PRESIDENT. What Peru has done, as you know, in the seizure of our oil company is that under international law they have the right to expropriate a company but they also have the obligation to pay a fair amount for that expropriation.

It is the second point that is at issue, not the right to expropriate. Now if they do not take appropriate steps to provide for that payment, then under the law--the Hickenlooper amendment,<sup>1</sup> as you know--we will have to take appropriate action with regard to the sugar quota and also with regard to aid programs.

<sup>1</sup> For texts of amendments sponsored by Bourke B. Hickenlooper, Senator from Iowa 1945-1969 and former ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, see 77 Stat. 386 and 79 Stat. 1280.

I hope that it is not necessary because that would have a domino effect--if I can be permitted to use what is supposed to be an outworn term--a domino effect all over Latin America.

I feel, in my studies in recent days, that we are making some progress in attempting to get some steps taken by the Peruvian Government to deal with the expropriation matter in a fair way.<sup>2</sup> If they do so then we do not have to go down that road.

<sup>2</sup> The White House on March 11, 1969, announced that President Nixon had appointed John Irwin II, as a special emissary to Peru to explore with the Peruvian Government all factors that would lead to mutually agreeable resolution of differences. See the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (vol. 5, P. 395).

#### PRESIDENT DE GAULLE

[23.] Q. Mr. President, there are some people who think you were a little more fulsome in your praise of General de Gaulle than you were of the other European leaders. Were you conscious of that? Do you have any background you can give us on that?

THE PRESIDENT. I try to have a policy of evenhandedness. I suppose that is a bad word, too--well, it is in the Mideast. In any event, I have the highest regard for all of the leaders that I met. I tried to speak of General de Gaulle with the proper respect that an individual with my background should have speaking to one with his.

After all, of the leaders of Europe, whether we agree or disagree with him, he is the giant, not only in his physical size but in his background and his great influence.

He deserved, I think, the words that I spoke about him. But I can assure you that in speaking of Prime Minister Wilson, Dr. Kiesinger, President Saragat, and Prime Minister Rumor, I intended to speak of all of them with the same feeling, the same affection.

#### PROBLEMS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

[24.] Q. You demonstrated a great deal of interest, Mr. President, in young people in your discussions, both public and private, abroad. Do you feel that those discussions have given you a better understanding of young people abroad, and are their problems similar to the problems of young people in this country?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, the problems differ, of course, in the different countries. I think they are the same in one respect. The young people abroad, it seems, have somewhat the same problem as many young people here. They know what they are against, but they find difficulty in knowing what they are for. This is not unusual, because this is perhaps something that is common to young people generally. Except that when we look to the revolutions of the past, the revolutionary movements, usually there has been--whether we agreed with those movements or not--there was something, a philosophy, that the young people who supported the revolutions were for. All over Europe this seems to be the case--a young generation against the established institution, against the way the universities are run, and yet not having a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, a sense of idealism.

I feel that that is part of the problem here in the United States, and I think that much of the responsibility rests not on the young people for not knowing what they are for, but on older people for not giving them the vision and the sense of purpose and the idealism that they should have.

In talking--and I talked with every leader about this, every one--all of us are concerned about it. All of us feel that we must find for this great Western family of ours a new sense of purpose and idealism, one that young people will understand, that they can be for.

That is not a satisfactory answer, because I am not able to describe it yet, but, believe me, we are searching for it.

#### NEW U.S. COMMITMENTS

[25.] Q. Mr. President, there has been some concern in Congress about reports that a general in the Pentagon took the initiative in arranging for the United States to recognize a threat to Spain from North Africa. In your opinion, is this concern merited, and what is the policy of your administration about the carving out of new commitments to other countries by the United States?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, I think as far as commitments are concerned, the United States has a full plate. I first do not believe that we should make new commitments around the world unless our national interests are very vitally involved. Second, I do not believe we should become involved in the quarrels of nations in other parts of the world unless we are asked to become involved and unless also we are vitally involved. I referred earlier to even the quarrels and divisions in Western Europe. I stayed out of most of those up to this point and I intend to in the future.

As far as this report is concerned, with regard to the general on the Spanish bases, I have checked into it, and no commitment has been made. My view is that none should be made. We will, of course, analyze it at the time to see whether our national, vital interests might require me to reassess it.

#### PRESIDENT DE GAULLE ON AMERICAN INFLUENCE

[26.] Q. Mr. President, there were some interpretations some weeks ago about some of General de Gaulle's actions, as his wanting to have Western Europe free of American influence. Did he address himself to this in talking with you? Did you get any deeper understanding of this?

THE PRESIDENT. I think, Mr. Kaplow [Herbert Kaplow, NBC News], it would be not divulging a confidence to indicate that President de Gaulle completely disassociated his views, which he expressed in great detail to us, on the European Alliance and France's relation to it from any anti-American position.

He believes that Europe should have an independent position in its own right. And, frankly, I believe that, too. I think most Europeans believe that. I think the time when it served our interests to have the United States as the dominant partner in an alliance--that that time is gone. We will be dominant because of our immense nuclear power and also because of our economic wealth.

But on the other hand, the world will be a much safer place and, from our standpoint, a much healthier place economically, militarily, and politically, if there were a strong European

community to be a balance basically, a balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, rather than to have this polarization of forces in one part of the world or another.

Now, as far as President de Gaulle's position is concerned, as I understand it, he has talked very eloquently on his desire to have European unity and a separate European identity. He has disagreed, however, with the proposals that currently are supported by most of the other European countries. He believes that it could better be worked out, as he indicated publicly, and he also indicated to me privately, through the major powers reaching an understanding rather than having it done through basically a convention or caucus of all the powers of Europe.

#### CONDITIONS FOR SUMMIT TALKS

[27.] Q. Mr. President, some of us have been under the impression that you attached important preconditions to summit talks with the Soviets, specifically some prior evidence or showing on their part that they were doing something to improve conditions in either the Middle East or Vietnam. Have those impressions been false or has something happened to your own thinking in this area very recently?

THE PRESIDENT. No, I did not intend to leave the impression that we say to the Soviet Union that unless they do this we will not have talks that they want on strategic arms.

What I have, however, clearly indicated, is that I think their interests and ours would not be served by simply going down the road on strategic arms talks without, at the same time, making progress on resolving these political differences that could explode. Even assuming our strategic arms talks were successful, freezing arms at their present level, we could have a very devastating war. It is that point that I have been making.

I should also emphasize that I made this point to every European leader that I talked to, and every one of them--and I do not commit them to the position--every one of them understands the position, because the Europeans have a great sense of history. All of them recognize that most wars have come not from arms races, although sometimes arms races can produce a war, but they have come from political explosions.

Therefore, they want progress, for example, on Berlin; they want progress on the Mideast; they want progress on Vietnam; at the same time that they want progress on strategic arms talks.

So our attitude toward the Soviet is not a highhanded one of trying to tell them: "You do this or we won't talk." Our attitude is very conciliatory, and I must say that in our talks with the Soviet Ambassador, I think that they are thinking along this line now, too. If they are, we can make progress on several roads toward a mutual objective.

Frank Cormier, Associated Press: Thank you, Mr. President.

*Note: President Nixon's third news conference was held in the East Room at the White House at 9 p.m. on Tuesday, March 4, 1969. It was broadcast on radio and television.*

Richard Nixon, The President's News Conference Online by Gerhard Peters and John T.

Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/240867>