

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

November 20, 2000

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT BY RADIO FREE ASIA INTERNATIONAL

Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska

6:20 P.M. AST

THE PRESIDENT: Hello?

Q Yes. Good evening, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Good evening.

Q You must be very exhausted by now. (Laughter.) That is why we are so grateful for you to grant RFA your very first post-Vietnam interview.

My name is Nguyen Bich, or you can call me just Bich for short. And I am the director of the Vietnamese service at Radio Free Asia. And sitting by me in our studio is Dan Sutherland, who is vice president for programming.

So, Mr. President, my first question to you is, how do you feel? Do you feel you have accomplished your goal by this first trip ever made by a President of the United States to a reunified Vietnam?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think it was a very successful trip; first, because we were able to see and support the attempts that are being made there to recover the missing in action from the Vietnam conflict, and to continue our cooperation with the Vietnamese government in that regard.

We also gave them several hundred thousand pages of documents to help them identify the -- some 300,000 people still missing who are Vietnamese. Then, I think it was important because we contributed, I believe, to the continuing economic progress of the country which I think will lead to more openness. And, thirdly, I think it was important because I was able to speak on television to the country about the kind of future I hope we will share with Vietnam and the fact that I hope there will be more openness and more freedom in it. And I also had, finally, some very good discussions and some constructive disagreements with the leadership of Vietnam.

Q Your speech at Hanoi University certainly was very impressive. And so I think that made a really big impression on the country. As this was your first trip to Vietnam, could you give us a general impression of the country, at least what you saw of it, and of the people? Were they warm and welcoming?

THE PRESIDENT: They were very warm and very welcoming, and clearly interested in the trip. And the young people with whom I talked were clearly interested in having closer ties with America. So I felt very good about that.

I also was interested in all the changes that are occurring in the northern part of the country. I think there's clearly a lot of new investment going on in Hanoi, a lot of new businesses coming out, a lot of changes there that I think will tend to make the south and the north perhaps less different in terms of the

economic lives and maybe the political outlooks of the people at least in the cities. Now, the only village that I went to was the one where the search for the pilot was going on.

Q People say that in Vietnam, it is still some distance between the potential and realization. Do you get a feeling that the people are impatient for progress, especially among the young, or do you think as the government -- says that they are pretty satisfied with the present pace of things?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I would say that they understand that the country is doing better and they like that, but my impression is that they want to move forward as rapidly as they can. After all, 60 percent of the country now is under 30. And I think they have a keen awareness that they have to make a lot of changes in order to keep creating jobs. I think they need 1.4 million new jobs every year.

On the morning of my last day there, I had an amazing roundtable discussion with a number of young Vietnamese men and women who ranged in age from early twenties to mid thirties, and who did everything from working for Cargill, the big international grain company, to running the Vietnam office of Saatchi and Saatchi, which is a big London advertising agency -- excuse me.

Then there was one young man who had a job in the party and others who had other jobs. But what was interesting to me is, they were all thinking about the big questions -- you know, how much personal freedom is needed in life, what kinds of decisions should be made by the individual, and what kind of decisions should be made by families or villages or the nation, the government, and how much of the economy should be private and how much should be public.

The man who runs the city government in Ho Chi Minh City was quite proud of the fact that they had done a remarkable job of creating jobs in the private sector, that he had downsized the government, that poverty had been reduced by 70 percent and homelessness was reduced by 70 percent. So I think there are a lot of people there who have this feeling that if they go more to a private economy and they have more entrepreneurial spirit, that there will also be more personal freedom associated with it.

Q Yes. I understand that the First Lady also had some strong words to recommend human rights at her talk in the morning of Sunday.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. She met with a group of women there. It was something she tries to do in every country in the world she visits. She's been speaking about that, especially as human rights affect women and young girls, ever since she went to the Beijing Women's Conference several years ago.

Q That's wonderful. Now, what is your reading of the progress so far made about the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral trade agreements? Did you get any indication while you were there as to when the Vietnamese National Assembly might get to ratify that?

THE PRESIDENT: I think they will ratify it pretty soon. I think -- I had the feeling they want to make absolutely sure that we're going to ratify it. And they understand that the timing is not good for ratification now, but I think as soon as we ratify it, they will. And then I think that we told them that we would be spending a couple million dollars a year over the next three years to help ensure the rapid and thorough implementation of the agreement. And we told them that we would like to have a high-level meeting, at least annually, to plot a joint economic strategy for the future, and they agreed to that. So my instinct is that they do want to get the maximum benefits out of this trade agreement.

Q But, then, what would be your impression as to when the U.S. Congress might ratify that?

THE PRESIDENT: I think they will do it as soon as they have a chance, probably early next year. You know, I wish I could do it now, but I just don't know if it's practical. So I think that -- I don't think there is any shot that it won't be approved by the Congress; there is just too much support for it.

MR. SIEWERT: Last question, please.

Q -- being very diplomatic in handling the question of human rights, religious and other democratic freedoms in Vietnam. But Hanoi's sensitivity to this question is all too obvious. Did you make any headway in your talk with Secretary General Le Kha Phieu or Prime Minister Phan Van Khai on this front. Or, do you think the U.S. could work with Vietnam on this matter in a more open fashion

THE PRESIDENT: I had very open conversations with all of them, with the Prime Minister, with the Secretary General and the President. And what I believe is that once they realize that we're not trying to tell Vietnam how to run every aspect of their lives and that we feel that we're going to be in a friendly relation, we have to be honest about our disagreements and we have to say what we think human rights and religious rights and individual freedom have meant to our country.

I think we will be in a dialogue there, and I think that, plus the process of economic and social change which is going on in Vietnam will lead the country in a positive direction. That's what I believe. I think it will be very important for my successor to continue that dialogue. I don't think we can drop human rights or religious freedom from our concerns anywhere in the world.

Q Can we ask you just one last quick question

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q Did you have a chance to play your saxophone while you were there

THE PRESIDENT: No. (Laughter.) But I love the music. I did -- however, I heard a Vietnamese saxophone player at the entertainment after the State Dinner, and he was really, really good. All the musicians were great. I was very impressed by the musical performances that were done after the State Dinner.

Q You wouldn't allow us maybe just --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I think we have to wrap up. Sorry

THE PRESIDENT: We're in Alaska and we have to get back on the plane to go home. I'm sorry. Thank you.

Q Thank you, Mr. President

THE PRESIDENT: Goodbye.

END 6:29 P.M. AST