

Conversation 893-13

Conversation between
the President and Roger Shields
Manolo Sanchez enters during the conversation

The Oval Office
April 11, 1973
12:04-12:29 pm
23 minutes

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“_____” refers to unintelligible portions

[Entire portion declassified national security withdrawal]

CONVERSATION 893-13

UNK: "Mr. President, Dr. Roger Shields."

RN: "How are you?"

UNK: "Mr. President, thank you."

[Background unintelligible conversation]

RN: "You've been very busy, haven't you?"

RS: "Very busy indeed, but it's been the best kind of, ah, activity."

RN: "I think we'll sit over here where we'll take _____."

RS: "Thank you."

RN: "Well, I thought that it be useful to get a little firsthand report from you on some of the matters _____ some of the people I've seen _____ [camera clicking] But I thought _____ demand for _____ briefing _____ very, very high _____ of what you'd call an _____ universal _____ and, ah, I, I already sent messages to, you know, the

Secretary of Defense and others, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and to express my own admiration of what could be done but I want you to tell all the people on your team it's, uh, really , you've done a tremendous job."

RS: "Uh, Mr. President, I'd _____."

RN: "Of course you've had, let me say, though, it's like, it's like a producer putting on a great play or a great movie, you have, you have, a hell of a bunch of stars in this one. It's an all-star cast, ah..."

RS: "Ah, right down..."

RN: "Even the bit players..."

RS: "Right down the line, the importance of that, I think, could be seen in contrasting this operation with 600 people, nine foreign nationals; the 600 people who came through the system with the release of the three we had last October, ah..."

RN: "Oh those-----"

RS: "We just went through, ah, this one..."

RN: "You mean-----"

RS: " _____was much easier, that's correct, with the peaceniks, with, with, Cora Weiss and that group. This, this, uh, was much better because we didn't have to deal with those people and these men were just great. And all the people involved in this operation, ah, considered it to be a labor of love, and we had time to work it, ah, beforehand, we had it planned with them the best thinking that we could find, finally put into, every man knew his, uh, job and did it well."

RN: "What is your feeling, ah, right now, looking in the future, of course, about the, ah, the, ah, very difficult, ah, readjustment period that these fellows have to go through? They come back, they're all elated, they're heros, and so forth, and then, they'll always be deeply respected, but, of course, _____. I personally hope that most people stay in the service, if I, I read reports to that effect but that's where they belong. On the other hand, in the service, they, ah, the service should recognize that if they do stay in the service, they are tremendous assets and they shouldn't have jackass senior officers treating them, ah, you know_____in a very pretentious way. These people should be recruiters, they should be speaking on the college campuses, particularly there.

MS: _____.

RS: Oh, no, no thank you.

RN: And, ah, they should be, uh, writing, ah after all, ah, the need for strong national defense,

the need for respect in national defense and so forth. I'd have them sold and sold all over the place and, ah, these guys are superstars. They thought deeply about themselves and about this country. Ah, I just think it would be a terrible mistake if they were brought back into the service and, _____ history _____. Don't let them do that. That _____ would be very foolish. I mean, you can't, oh, I know the service line is, well, you gotta treat the Admiral's son just like, ah, the son of the enlisted man. That's crap. You, uh, I assure you, that, _____. On the other hand, if the Admiral's son has a certain mystique, he's got to go up. And he's got his head straight, he's got experience that, ah, people their same grade don't have. And they've got, ah, I don't mean by that, they'll all become Chairman of the Chiefs, but they must be used in an effective way, if they want to be."

RS: "I believe they do, Mr. President, and, I, I think that we have the services thinking in this direction. I think that in a case of this would be the two promotions to General in the Air Force and the two to Admiral, all of which are very well deserved. And the fact that the services have offered these men regular commissions in cases where they..."

RN: "I'm not really so much concerned about their ranks, but, that isn't important. But I'm concerned about their duties, what they're assigned to do. You and I know that being in the service in the peacetime is a very, very, at best it's a labor of love. And, ah, doggone it, these fellows, these fellows, I don't mean by that, that every time the local Rotary club wants some star or speaker, that you put these guys [serve them up]. But there are things they can do. They, I mean, there are whole new indoctrination programs and all that stuff. I'm just trying to, uh, uh,

but I do hope you give a lot of thought to that. In their duties, these fellows, these fellows must not feel that after years of being imprisoned that they don't have something that's fulfilling. They must not feel frustrated, they must not feel, oh God, see what I mean?"

RS: "Yes I do"

RN: "It's tough, it's tough because everybody, everybody's got to feel that his job is worthwhile. But these guys particularly, have the most important, they, they're gonna have a time, I know how these things go. You have the elation, the great moment, and then there is a terrible letdown, they're going to have it. They'll watch them carefully, ah, obviously the psychiatric problems that are common, there'll be divorces and so forth, oh, far less than in the average, but, in the country and the rest. But all these things in particular, let's do everything we can to follow it up and to guide them, and to, uh, of course get them to stand on their feet. Of course, they themselves will provide the leadership for it. These guys are strong men."

RS: "They're, ah, men of tremendous, ah, ah, tremendous, ah, inner strength. They have had a [cough] when they were in captivity and they have shown that sense of, of leadership, ah, a sense of responsibility, not, not to let, let the sacrifices that they made stand, ah, for naught. Now, but to continue to work and they want to do that; they know they are men with a mission. And they, they look at our country, they see some things, ah, some changes that they became prisoners that they don't, ah...."

RN: "Particularly approve of."

RS: "Particularly approve of, and they're determined to do something about this. They have indicated, ah, a desire to continue their education. Some of them are going to be assigned to the National War College and..."

RN: "Great."

RS: "...and _____ service schools."

RN: "Great."

RS: "And, ah, they're, they're being counseled right now, and I'll go pass your message on to the sources."

RN: "Because of the uses of the men and their counselor they, ah, the, ah, because obviously, they're, they're idealistic, they inspire leadership, ah, inspire, ah, you know, these guys can then inspire a great deal. They know why they were in the service, they know, ah, they know that it's worthwhile, they know how important it is to maintain strength in respect to all that sort of thing. And, ah, believe me, ah, we, we mustn't risk the opportunity, not just to_____."

RS: "Mr. President, I, I..."

RN: "_____."

RS: "It's particularly important because the euphoria doesn't last forever and then, ah, they have to go back and they have to do the job and I, ah, we can't let the, the fervent, uh, feelings that these men have, that there are things for them to do, ah, be dissipated. I, I think that we, we do have to acknowledge that we have men here with, who've been _____ in the fire and have experiences that none of us are ever going to have. And we've got to, to use them correctly and I, I think that especially with regard to the, the public contact when they can expound their message to the people of this country. I think its had a great effect already."

RN: "Oh..."

RS: "And people..."

RN: "Enormous."

RS: "People tell me..."

RN: "Enormous, yeah."

RS: "People, people were beginning to doubt their patriotism and it just wasn't a thing to say and now they're coming out and saying it because these men came out without _____."

RN: "That's right"

RS: "And men who've suffered as so few people have."

RN: "_____ pitiful_____ left wing_____ and media group of people that are all saying that its all been fixed and staged. My God, isn't that something?"

RS: "Now, Griffin Bell answered that far better than..."

RN: "_____ people couldn't be brainwashed in seven years in prison. I mean, how can they brainwash us in a two hour flight? Hah. Never, never, never..."

RS: "Those men are not, ah, the men to be brainwashed. They're very frank, they're forthright, and I, I go back as you did, ah, in your speech to the nation ah, ah, a week or so ago to, to Captain _____'s comment: I never thought..."

RN: "Right."

RS: "...that anyone would question my motives in saying God bless America."

RN: "Yeah, yeah, right."

RS: "Now, I flew back on that flight from Hanoi..."

RN: "_____."

RS: "_____Captain Denton. Ah, I was there, I, ah, sat down with Captain Denton. You were concerned at the time about, we knew that there were, ah, some problems, a few problems with regard to misconduct."

RN: "Sure."

RS: "And you wanted to be sure that was channeled through, ah, the right, ah, the right, ah, conduit. Ah, the Captain said 'what should, ah, what should I say?' And I suggested that, ah, he not talk about casualty information because we don't want a family to learn a loved one..."

RN: "Yeah, yeah"

RS: "...died over the, over the radio or television, but otherwise the way he, ah he felt. And, ah, he wrote down some words and he got on the PA, ah system of the aircraft and talked to the men and said 'I now represent you and here is what I, I plan on saying. Is this an adequate expression of your feelings?' And they all gave those thumbs up."

RN: "Great"

RS: "Now, Mr. President, I wish you could have been in Hanoi when that first group, all the groups were great, but to be there when that first bus came around the corner, to see those men, ah, I, I could have flown back to Clark without use of the airplane. It was the greatest point of my life."

RN: "But what, but what, how did, tell me about it."

RS: "Well we had, ah, gone into the terminal basically to talk to the North Vietnamese about the procedures that they wanted to use. And they were, ah, very cordial and their procedures were, I, I think, nominally acceptable to us. They said the men were around the corner in a room and we'll, ah, release them as soon as we agree on the procedures. And, ah, we said, well, let's, let's get on with it, the men are anxious to go back. And I suggested that our flight surgeon might want to go over and talk to men we knew were in the sick and wounded room and see about any problems they might have. And the North Vietnamese colonel said 'well, we don't want you to disturb them because a lot of them are sleeping. This was half an hour before they were...'"

RN: "Yeah"

RS: "...were, ah, given to us. Well, then we went outside and, ah, they had a table where our team chief who was an Air Force Colonel sat down with them and initialed the roster of men being released. They came around the corner of the terminal in buses, ah, camouflage buses, all colors. They looked like circus buses. And I, ah, had been watching for them and I saw them

coming, three buses in that, that first group and, ah, and I walked over that way. Some of the North Vietnamese guards tried to push me back but I, I towered over them and saw the men and I gave the thumbs up..."

RN: "_____."

RS: "Yes sir, yes Mr. President I..."

RN: "You were in civilian clothes?"

RS: "Yes _____."

RN: "You are a civilian but you did..."

RS: "Yeah, no, I, I was in, in civilian clothes. And, ah,..."

RN: "Right."

RS: "...much as I am right now..."

RN: "Right, ah, what did you do?"

RS: "I just looked at them and I smiled and they broke out and grinned and stuck their, ah, thumbs up signal outside. And ah, I said, 'you'll be with us in just a few minutes.' And that C-141 was just about forty yards away with the American flag on the tail. And the first man out, ah, off the bus, was the senior officer for that bus. He was a Navy commander named Vogt and he was on crutches; had a bad injury to his leg and, ah, leg atrophied. And, ah, as soon as they all got off that bus, ah, he said 'form up' and those men, ah, stood in line there tall and proud and very dignified and, ah, and they said 'what should we do' and I said 'I, I, think, ah, you're supposed to go through this little gate here on this side of the square and out this side and then you're out.' And they marched through there and they didn't look to the right or to the left, but, ah, just, ah, heads, ah, heads held high. And as soon as Commander Vogt, the first one, went through the other side, he threw down his crutches and he threw his arms around me and, ah, _____he said 'I'm home.' And I said 'you sure are,' and it was great. Ah, just, ah, threw it away, ah, I, ah, walked him onto the ramp of that airplane and ah..."

RN: "Boy, that..."

RS: "It was, it was just, it was unbelievable and you could see that, you could see the dignity of those men_____aboard the aircraft as we closed that tailgate. He said 'we wanted to come out in honor.' He said 'we succeeded,' and I said 'you succeeded.' And that's what they wanted more than anything."

RN: "Yeah, yeah, you know_____a slogan in their camp of, ah, ah, ah, it said 'Return with

Honor' _____ we would like to, ah, return with honor _____."

RS: "Well they expressed their support to you, Mr. President. Galen Kramer, an Air Force Captain, on the bus had, ah, a sign taped on his, ah, on his jacket. I guess Galen Kramer was the one who pulled the little flag out that said 'God bless...'"

RN: "He did"

RS: "America and President Nixon' and, ah, one of the other men had taped on his jacket 'God Bless President Nixon.' They knew of, of your efforts, of the country's efforts and, ah, they were proud. They felt that they were ready to serve twenty more years there if needed..."

RN: "Right."

RS: "Those men knew what we have been trying to do."

RN: "You, ah, incidentally, you, you are working on the MIA, talking to our _____."

RS: "That's correct."

RN: "To the extent you can."

RS: "That's correct"

RN: "The, ah, the main thing there, of course, is to just, _____be known that these bastards probably aren't going to come out with anything. Ah, we have got to make an enormous effort in the public relations sense as well as what we do, ah as I'm sure you know."

RS: "We understand..."

RN: "And the constant, ah, I mean letters to the MIA, don't, of course, raise their hopes. Don't do anything else but, you know, why don't you say, ah, in the contacts you've had with them that I personally had said we're not going to, going to follow this through in our relations with North Vietnamese; that we're going to insist on scrupulous adherence to the agreement. What they're supposed to do in cooperating with us, that I consider it of highest importance to see that if we, ah, that, that, that, that ah, we go to every effort possible, is made on the MIA. Everything, everything is done, leaving no stone unturned, believe me, nothing, absolutely nothing. There's, I can think of those families that have waited so long, always hoping, and, of course, always wondering, you know, when they get this first list, well, maybe, maybe somebody's alive. I, let's, I think the main thing is certainty. Ah, and I am in a [weak???] mood on that to say, look, it's over now, it's over, we can't find them, but if those that, that, let's continue our search but without you see, that is a delicate thing. They've got to figure we are doing everything we can to be sure that we have found everybody. But on the other hand, we must not destroy the certainty that they have. It is better of them to be certain, the man is gone, than it is to be uncertain and to

continue to have _____overlooked. So, you have, but I, but I want you, you and your colleagues, you can, you can base this _____ say that I personally_____on this one; follow up, follow up okay?"

RS: "Mr. President, I, I promise you we will do that..."

RN: "I know that."

RS: "...the families need that assurance. And I will be very pleased to be able to say that you told me that..."

RN: "What you might do is that, ah, what I would like you, I've written to all the MIA families. I prepared _____nice little letter out to them. But, I would like for you, after our conversation today, write another to all of them and say you were in the President's office and you were reporting on some of the POW thing and that the President brought up the MIA thing and said we, we, we, of course, you know, will carry out our obligations to the POWs and those who returned but we have an equal obligation to the missing in action, ah, to, to, doing everything we possibly can, leaving no stone unturned, to uh, to uh, see uh, the return of, anybody else can be found, ah, more remains...But, anyway, you know how to do it."

RS: "Mr. President, I will, I will----"

RN: " _____it's good for them to get, it's good for them to get more than one letter. In other words, to get one from me and that's it; you write _____you're still working on it. Ah, but be sure you put in my name. Ah, use your judgement; it's not okay _____ raise hopes or something but the President is, said, he does not consider this job done, he does not consider the peace, ah, won until we get an absolute, complete, satisfactory account of all MIAs and that I, I consider that the highest priority. You could just get the line_____."

RS: "Mr. President, they'll be very pleased to hear that"

RN: " _____date line the letter_____."

RS: "They, they will have, I will send that letter out and, uh, have that, ah, done this afternoon and in the mail tomorrow..."

RN: "Well sure, anytime."

RS: "They, they understand that. They have a great deal of confidence now because they know that the men who were there did return."

RN: "And they know too, that we didn't cave. In other words, that at the time that we could have made a deal, ah, as some of our opponents are suggesting, that is make a deal, you know, and, ah, get out and go pray for the North Vietnamese will release them. We didn't. Frankly,

that is what the December bombing was about, among many other things."

RS: "The men themselves, though, know that as I know they told you they..."

RN: "The minute we started dropping those things, I mean, we had the, the North Vietnamese had reneged on the agreement, they had attached conditions with regard to return of POWs, they had attached conditions on the return of civilians themselves. We said no conditions. That's why we had to bomb. One of the major reasons we had to bomb. And it worked."

RS: "The men are, uh, their most eloquent testimony."

RN: "I know."

RS: "And they, ah, they, ah, as you know, you, you, you've talked with them but they understand that commitment and I will pass that on to the, the families of the missing. We, we do have two missing for every man who did come home."

RN: "Right."

RS: "We're in frequent contact with them and they will be extremely pleased to, to know, they do know of your concern. That this will..."

RN: " _____."

RS: " _____ a chance to re-emphasize..."

RN: " _____you're_____. How, how long have you been with the Defense Department_____?"

RS: "About two and a half years now, Mr. President."

RN: "Where did you come from originally?"

RS: "I came here from the University of Texas."

RN: "You're from Texas?"

RS: "I'm _____."

RN: "You're not_____I was going to say, you, you, you_____ a Texas accent, though. What part of Florida?"

RS: "Gainesville."

RN: "Oh, did you go to the University there?"

RS: "I graduated from the University of Florida."

RN: "Oh you did, oh."

RS: "And the University of Virginia, graduate work."

RN: "Did graduate work at the University of Virginia. Where did you get your, did you get your Ph.D. at Texas?"

RS: "University of Virginia."

RN: "Ah"

RS: "I'm on the faculty in Texas."

RN: "Oh you were teaching."

RS: "I, I'm theoretically on leave of absence from the University of Texas now."

RN: "On leave, right."

RS: "That's correct. They, they_____."

RN: "And then you came into the Defense Department there. How old are you now?"

RS: "Thirty-three. Just turned thirty-three."

RN: "You're lucky, you're young, you've got one of the great experiences in public_____."

RS: "I think the greatest."

RN: "I was thirty three, when...I was elected to Congress when I was thirty-two; at thirty-three I started the investigation on the Hiss case. But you had better _____."

RS: "Mr. President, the greatest experience sometimes I, I, I feel that, that should have been the capstone of my, ah, my time and if I could retire now_____."

RN: "You're starting at the high level..."

RS: "_____."

RN: You'll never have anything to equal it emotionally. In other words, but the main thing that, ah, apart from the personal factors, what they have done, for the morale of this country, for the

sense of patriotism, this sense of direction, this is what is important. The country needed it desperately. They couldn't, we couldn't end this war on the basis, well, ho-hum, dear God, 50,000 died for nothing. These guys come back and say it was worth it _____ stay five more years without getting home and _____ important, terribly important, to have them back _____ very, very important."

RS: "We know those men were going to be great and we knew that the things we did with homecoming and with the missing would probably be one of the, one of the concluding acts of this conflict. And we wanted to be sure that we gave those men what they deserved and, and try to do something for the country. We knew that they were great and we didn't want, ah, anything to mar the..."

RN: "What did you teach? History?"

RS: "Economics"

RN: "Yeah, _____. How the hell did you get into this _____?"

RS: "Surprising, I came in originally to, ah, work on the economics of Vietnamization."

RN: "Oh"

RS: "_____ so concerned about and ah..."

RN: "Oh yeah, oh yeah_____that figures, that figures. Right."

RS: "I became involved in that but, ah, very quickly, I became involved in the prisoner and missing work."

RN: "Well, follow up. That's all. You go all that way to get all of that behind us_____you know what I mean."

RS: "We, we will."

DRAFT SECRET DRAFT