

I S S U E S A N D A N S W E R S

SUNDAY, JUNE 15, 1969

GUEST:

SENATOR EVERETT MCKINLEY DIRKSEN (R. ILL.)

INTERVIEWED BY:

Sam Donaldson - ABC News Correspondent

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J MR. LAWRENCE: Senator Dirksen, about 15 months ago
candidate Nixon on the New Hampshire Primary campaign trail
said that he could end the war in Vietnam and win the peace
in Asia. Has President Nixon ever indicated to you how or
when?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: No, Bill, as a matter of fact, he has
not. That is, in any specific detail. But he had a general
forecast that somehow -- first of all, you had to make progress
at the Paris negotiations, and in the second place, you had to
have an understanding with the leaders in Vietnam, meaning

South Vietnam.

Now, in pursuing that, he has Lodge over in Paris at the present time, and while that has been going rather slowly, I think some progress has been made.

In addition, of course, his meeting with President Thieu in Midway Island added up, I believe, to some real progress because he discovered that Thieu was quite flexible for one thing, he was knowledgeable, he understood pretty well what had to be done, and those factors taken together with the kind of counsel that he got from General Abrams, was enough to suggest that perhaps we could for the first time start bringing live bodies back in the number of 25,000 and to do it as quickly as possible.

1 MR. LAWRENCE: Senator, towards the end, though not at the
2 beginning of the Korean war, the Republicans used to call that
3 Truman's war. Now, I noticed the other day that the New York
4 Times called this one "Nixon's war." Is that fair?

5 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, are they ever fair under these
6 circumstances? I suppose I denominated the Korean struggle as
7 Truman's war. But I point out this essential difference: You
8 forget that Truman ordered the troops in, as I recall, on
9 a Sunday afternoon. He conferred with no one. He took
10 advantage of a little gap in the United States operation and
11 ordered the troops to Korea, and titled it a police action.

12 Now this is a different undertaking. Behind this you have
13 got three Administrations. The Administration of President
14 Kennedy, that of President Johnson, and before that, President
15 Eisenhower, and now you have President Nixon. So this is an
16 inherited position, this is a legacy that he has gotten from
17 his forebears, so to speak, and he is undertaking to do the best
18 he can with a rather solid problem.

19 MR. DONALDSON: Senator Dirksen, 25,000 men to be withdrawn
20 shortly, and many hints that that will be followed by another
21 25,000 and perhaps even more increments within a nine to 12
22 months' period. Do you think that the South Vietnamese Army
23 is ready to fill this gap or are we really just trying to buy
24 time for the Nixon Administration?

25 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, first of all I think I can respond

1 directly by saying that I do believe that they are ready to
2 fill that gap. I think in talking about pulling out troops, I'd
3 rather think in terms of replacements by the Southvietnamese.
4 One of the problems we had out there was to make sure that a
5 larger number was being equipped with the M-16 rifle. That
6 was a rather slow process. But that was one of those morale
7 builders that really built up and exhilarated these South Viet-
8 namese troops. So all signs being equal, I think they will be
9 equal to the situation and to the challenge.

10 MR. DONALDSON: There is also a hope explicit in the
11 troop withdrawal that North Vietnam might match it, might also
12 deescalate by withdrawing some of her own troops. Do you think
13 that is a real possibility?

14 SENATOR DIRKSEN: It is hard to tell. On the basis of
15 their expressions thus far, one might not believe so, but I
16 think there are certain factors in the picture that add up
17 substantially to the hope that perhaps it could happen.

1 MR. LAWRENCE: Senator, during the Korean War again you
2 and other Republicans were quite free in your criticism of the
3 way the war was being conducted. Why are you so extraordinarily
4 sily sensitive now when Senator Kennedy suggests that maybe
5 Mr. Nixon isn't running this war right?

6 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Bill, I don't believe I can recall the
7 anybody on our side of the political fence ever cast any
8 aspersions whatsoever on our military command in Korea. But
9 you see, the statement that the Senator made was a direct
10 affront, I thought, and a direct reflection upon our dearest
11 commanders in Vietnam.

12 Now, who will deny that General Creighton Abrams is one
13 of our very finest commanders and a man who studied in the
14 military art?

15 Now, when you talk an operation and say it was senseless
16 and irresponsible, well, whoever ordered that operation was
17 then senseless and irresponsible in doing it, and that, of
18 course, had to be taken at face value and some response had
19 to be made.

20 MR. LAWRENCE: Senator, I didn't mean to suggest that
21 you ever criticized General MacArthur. Far from it. What I
22 was talking about was your criticism of Mr. Truman. I remember
23 the criticisms of the Republicans that you wouldn't bomb beyond
24 the Yalu, the privileged-sanctuary theory, the terrible
25 casualties you were taking at Heartbreak Hill, which I suppose

1 is just another name for Hamburger Hill in another
2 piece of real estate in the Far East. We didn't hold
3 Bearbreak Hill either. We gave it back in the settlement.

4 Didn't you make those criticisms?

5 SENATOR DIRKSEN: I made my share of criticisms at that
6 time, but I was very careful not to reflect upon the capacity
7 of those who were leading the troops.

8 Now, the Commander-in-Chief is a different thing. He
9 is not a military man --

10 MR. LAWRENCE: He is fair game?

11 SENATOR DIRKSEN: He is fair game in the sense that he
12 is President of the United States and he is a policy-maker.

13 MR. LAWRENCE: And he is another politician.

14 SENATOR DIRKSEN: He is the Commander-in-Chief but he is
15 not an officer in the field and that sets him apart.

16 MR. DONALDSON: But Senator, we have a fundamental
17 question here of how to fight this war when we are engaged
18 in negotiations. Let's look at the search and destroy
19 operations and the operations like the one on Ap Bia
20 Mountain, Hamburger Hill. There are many people, including
21 Ambassador Governor Harrison, who believe we have to de-
22 escalate the fighting; we have to de-escalate the engagement.
23 Do you approve of continued military operations that throw
24 American units against the enemy in these fierce assaults when
25 then they give up the territory?

1 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Sam, I could make you a kind of a
2 mixed answer but I don't think I shall, and for a very good
3 reason. I am not over there. I can't tell, 12,000 miles away,
4 what the situation dictates, what they should do at a given
5 instance, and how should they do it. That is a military de-
6 cision that has to be made and if I were to make it, I think I
7 would lay myself open to the charge that I am trying to run the
8 war just like this Committee on Conduct of the War, that we
9 had when Lincoln was the President.

10 MR. DONALDSON: Well, are you saying Senator Kennedy
11 is disloyal then? You almost --

12 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Oh, no, not for a moment have I ever
13 ventured in that field. I tried to be temperate as I could.
14 I insisted that what I said didn't dislocate my affection for
15 him, but I did believe that it was an unwarranted affront to
16 the judgment of our military commanders over there without
17 knowing, without having been there, or being there, and under-
18 standing very fully.

19 MR. LAWRENCE: Senator, I think it is fair to say that the
20 American people have an attitude that they want to give Mr.
21 Nixon plenty of time to settle this war by negotiation, but
22 they do want it settled.

23 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Yes.

24 MR. LAWRENCE: How much time does he really have before
25 he has to show some real progress?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well now, we have made this much progress at least: The first contingent coming home in a month or two. Now, behind that there ought to be some action. How long would it take? Well, of course, you are dealing with difficult people, with an oriental caste of mind. My own belief is that probably, after this first contingent comes home, you will have a four or five months period when nothing actually developed, but then something can very suddenly develop.

MR. LAWRENCE: Politically you better settle this before the '70 elections though, hadn't you?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, this is a considerable distance in the future.

MR. LAWRENCE: I know, but isn't it true --

SENATOR DIRKSEN: But a lot of progress ought to be made not only -- well, not in fiscal '69 because that ends up on June 30th, but in calendar '69 there ought to be reasonable progress.

MR. DONALDSON: But what about Bill's question, if you don't settle it by the '70 elections, are you going to fail in an effort to win seats? Are you going to lose seats?

SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, obviously it is going to have an impact on the electorate in this country. We have been at this now a long time. I have said time and again we have been there just too long, and the longer it goes, the unhappier

1 our people become, and, of course, the way they register
2 unhappiness is on election day.

3 (Announcements)

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5 MR. DONALDSON: The big vote coming up in the Senate
6 is on the ABM Safeguard Missile System. Do you think that the
7 President can win that vote without a further compromise?

8 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, Sam, is there a compromise?
9 They indicate, of course, that if you re-label it and call
10 it "Research and Development," that that might make it
11 easier and more palatable to swallow, but that is not a com-
12 promise. That is just changing the label on the can.

13 MR. DONALDSON: But you are not deploying then?

14 SENATOR DIRKSEN: I know, but for myself I just don't
15 want to go down that alley. This is a very serious business.
16 And, insofar as I know -- and obviously I can't put words in
17 the mouth of the President -- but insofar as I know, there is
18 no compromise. It's got to be a deployable ABM and if we
19 can't get that your hands are tied.

20 MR. DONALDSON: Are you saying then that you would not
21 at this time entertain any compromise? You are known to be
22 very flexible when a big issue is important and you think it
23 needs to be gotten through the Senate.

24 SENATOR DIRKSEN: Well, Sam, I think you ought to ex-
25 press that another way. I become flexible upon occasions when