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Interview With Terence Hunt and Walter M. Mears of the Associated Press

November 14, 2000

Impact of 2000 Election

Q. Why don't we start with the election? Do you think either Vice President Gore or Governor Bush is going to be able to govern effectively in a situation as divided and increasingly embittered as it is now?

The President. I think it's too soon to draw that conclusion. I think the American people are pretty good about uniting around a President, particularly if the President gets a certain grace period. And I don't think that the circumstances are as rife, or ripe, for discord as they were in '93, where Newt Gingrich was in control and—the Republican apparatus in the Congress—and had a certain theory about what he was trying to do. I think now the country may be quite sobered by this, and the Congress may be somewhat sobered by it. You might well find that there is a real willingness to work together.

The fact that the American people were closely divided on the candidates for President, and would have been closely divided even if Ralph Nader weren't in here, the Vice President would have won the election probably, what, 51.5 to 48.5 or something. That indicates that the American people—I don't think that means that they don't believe there's a dynamic center that can be achieved. And I think that's what they will want from the next President and from the next Congress. So I think it's too soon to say that bitterness and partisanship will paralyze the next President. We don't know that, and I hope it won't be the case.

This is actually, if you think about it, while it was a hard-fought campaign, there wasn't a lot of personal criticism in it—some from the Republican side against the Vice President but not nearly as harsh as we've seen in some campaigns of the past and even less from the Democratic side against Governor Bush. There was some, but not much. I think, on balance, it was an election fought out over two different approaches to the country's challenges and opportunities and different positions on specific issues. So I don't think we are necessarily doomed to 4 years of stalemate and partisanship, and I hope that won't be the case.

Q. People are talking about the—some people were even saying the election is being stolen, and there's all this bitterness, suits. You don't think that that poisons the atmosphere?

The President. Well, I think that depends on what happens in the next few days. And so far what I've tried to tell the American people is, they have spoken, and we're trying to determine what they said. I think there's another million or so votes to be counted in California, New York, and Washington State, maybe even a little more. I guess still the—some prospect of asking for a recount in Iowa and Wisconsin by the Bush people.

And then there's the attempt to resolve all the questions that are out there about the Florida vote. And I think we just—you know, the process is underway. Both sides are clearly very equally represented. And I just think we ought to let the thing play out. It will work itself out in some way or another. We've had this happen before. In 1800 Thomas Jefferson was elected in a very divisive, highly partisan election and went into the House of Representatives. I think he even had to vote on the fitness of the electors. He was a sitting Vice President. You know, he gave a very conciliatory Inaugural Address, saying, "We are all Federalists; we're all Republicans," and led to a whole new era in American politics, out of what was an exceedingly divisive election. He was reelected, and Mr. Madison was elected, served two terms; Mr. Monroe was elected, served two terms. It was actually probably the most stable period in our country's history, in terms of leadership, born out of an exceedingly divisive election in 1800.

So I think it depends upon whether the people believe that this whole thing plays out in a fair way. So that's why I've encouraged the American people to just relax, take a deep breath, recognize that a result of this kind is always possible in a democratic election that's hard-fought, and that the most important thing is that, when it's all said and done, that people believe that all the issues were resolved in a fair way and that the people—franchise was protected and the integrity of the process was. It's unfolding. We just—and

I think as long as it—I just think that's what we ought to keep in mind here.

There's lots of time, you know. The Electoral College is not supposed to meet until December 18th; Inauguration is January 21st. It's a very stable country, and they're working through it, and we'll see what happens.

Court Involvement

Q. Are you comfortable with the courts being as heavily involved as they're becoming? Should a judge decide whose vote counts and whose doesn't?

The President. I think, in some of these cases, there may not be any alternative, because the right to vote is protected and defined in both State and Federal law. There's probably no alternative here.

Now, in the first case, I understand today the judge actually declined to get involved. Isn't that right?

Q. Yes, she would not stay the hand-counting.

The President. I think that the courts probably will be reluctant to be involved as long as they believe that nothing—there's been no legal or constitutional infringement on the franchise. We'll just see what happens.

Q. The Vice President has gone back to court against the secretary of state's ruling that it has to be done by 5 p.m. tomorrow.

The President. Like I said, I've done my best not to comment on the process but just to say it's unfolding; both sides are well represented; they're arguing their points strongly. We should not expect either side to do anything less than to make their strongest case. That's what they're supposed to do.

Electoral College

Q. Do you agree with Senator-elect Clinton that the Electoral College should be abolished?

The President. Well, I have mixed feelings about it. I think the idea—first of all, it was established to some extent for practical reasons, as you know, in the 18th century, and the practical reasons are no longer relevant. You know, we know how people voted when they vote. So nobody has to come tell us.

The other argument is that it gives some more weight to the small States, because the votes are not proportional to the House of Representatives; every State gets the two Senate votes, too, in the Electoral College. And arguably, it gets more attention from the candidates to the small States.

Now, I think that ought to be examined. I'm not necessarily sure that's so. For example, if you're a Democrat and you know you're going to lose every State that's not on the Mississippi River, until you get to California, Washington, Oregon, and maybe Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, would you not go there? Would you be any less likely to go there if there were no Electoral College? Or might you take a run through the high plains and stop in Denver and think that it matters what margin you lose by?

Because what happens is, when these candidates have public funds—they have limited funds and limited time—it affects not only their advertising budget but their travel budget. If you're a Republican and you know you can't win New York, you don't go there. But if you knew that it might make the difference in whether you got 35 or 42 percent of the vote—in this case, if you're Al Gore and you don't think you're going to win Ohio, it might make the difference in 46 and 49 percent of the vote—might you go?

So I don't—I'm not quite sure. Again, I believe how this plays out will determine it—not only my opinion about it but maybe a lot of people's opinion about it.

Q. Do you expect there to be a serious move? I mean, do you think that there is——

The President. I don't have any idea. I know that Hillary feels strongly about it, and it has really nothing to do with the fact that she's a Senator-elect from New York now. But you can ask her why she feels that way.

I have mixed feelings. I think that, you know, certainty and clarity of outcome is important, so I think it depends on—I think that a lot of people's views will be determined by the sense they have about the fairness and adequacy of this process over the next however long it takes to resolve. And we'll just have to see.

Presidential Transition

Q. Do you think it's appropriate at this point for either Governor Bush or the Vice President to be planning a transition?

The President. I don't think I should comment on what they do. I don't think it's appropriate for me to comment on that.

Resolution of 2000 Election

Q. Do you think that this is going to be resolved by the time you get back to Washington next Monday? Do you think it should be resolved by then? And at what point do you think Americans begin to lose faith in the outcome?

The President. I don't know whether it will be resolved when I get back. I don't have an opinion about that.

I think the important thing is that the process be resolved in a way that is as fair as possible, meaning that the American people on both sides of this have the highest possible level of confidence that the people who went to the polls and voted—that the totals reflect, as far as possible, a fair assessment of the people who went to the polls and voted.

And I think that, you know, there are lots of questions out there, and I don't think I should comment on it. There is a process in place. They are both arguing their points strongly, as they both should. And I think that's the most important thing, more than whether it's one week or 8 days or 6 days or 12 days or whatever.

Q. Given how far we've come, do you think it's possible that we're going to come out of this and people are going to think it was fair, with all the angry charges that are going back and forth and the court challenges?

The President. First of all, this is not just a matter of charges; there are certain facts. And I think the facts will come out and be established, and then the disputes about how the factual situation should be handled will be resolved, and people will reach a conclusion about whether they believe that or not.

I think it's quite possible that people will think in the end that the matter has been fairly resolved. They may or may not. I certainly hope that they will. But I think it depends upon what the facts are and then how the facts are resolved.

But again I say, this process is still in play. I don't think the American people should—and I don't think the press should rush to judgment here and just conclude that no matter who is declared the winner that the people who voted for the other candidate will think that something wrong was done. I think it depends on how it is handled and what the facts are.

Q. Sir, what's your outside timetable, and what's a reasonable amount of time?

The President. I just don't want to comment on it because I don't want to prejudice the process. That would be unfair to both candidates for me to say. I think my role now is to uphold the basic principles of democracy and the integrity of the vote and to ask the American people to give this process a chance to play itself out.

Vietnam

Q. Moving on to your major stop on this trip, Vietnam. In 1969, which was the last year an American President went to Vietnam, you wrote a letter saying you hated and despised the war and had worked and demonstrated against it.

Now that you've been in the position of making decisions of war and peace, do you still feel that way about Vietnam?

The President. What I feel about Vietnam is that, thanks in large measure to the bipartisan leadership of Vietnam veterans in the Congress—Bob Kerrey, John Kerry, John McCain, Chuck Robb, and Pete Peterson, when he was there, now is our Ambassador—the American people have been able to look to the future and hope that a future can be built which opens a new page in our relations with Vietnam, and hopefully one that will put an end to the divisions between the Vietnamese people and the American people and between the American—within America and within Vietnam and within the Vietnamese people, including the Vietnamese who are in America, who believed in what we were doing.

That's what I think. Now, when we look back on it, the most important thing is that a lot of brave people fought and died in the North Vietnamese Army, the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese Army and the United States Army; our allies, the Republic of

Korea and other allies who were there. A lot of people still bear the wounds of war in this country and in Vietnam. And the best thing that we can do to honor the sacrifice and service of those who believed on both sides that what they were doing is right, is to find a way to build a different future, and that's what we're trying to do.

Everything I have done for the last 8 years has been premised on that, starting with trying to obtain the fullest possible accounting for the POW's and the MIA's. And none of what I have done, as I say, would have been remotely possible if it hadn't been for John McCain and Chuck Robb and Senator Bob Kerrey and Senator John Kerry and Pete Peterson. They literally made this possible, they and the veterans groups and the Vietnamese living in America who all supported the American position in the war.

So I think—I don't see this so much as coming to terms with the past as moving forward into the future.

Q. Were there ever points when you were grappling with some of these questions in the past 8 years, when you thought about Lyndon Johnson facing those things in that very troubled period and having to make those decisions which, at the time, you very much disagreed with?

The President. I see now how hard it was for him. I believe he did what he thought was right under the circumstances. Let me just say parenthetically, I'm glad to see that there is a reassessment going on about the historic importance of President Johnson's term of office, the work he did for the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act.

Some people are even beginning to acknowledge that his war on poverty was not a total failure, that in fact poverty was reduced. In fact, we just this year finally had the biggest drop in child poverty since 1966, since Lyndon Johnson was President. And I believe that—you know, these decisions are hard. And one of the things that I have learned, too, is when you decide to employ force, there will always be unintended consequences.

Q. You talked about all the losses on both sides, 3 million Vietnamese losses, 58,000 Americans. Were all those lives wasted?

The President. Well, first of all, I don't think that any person is fit to make that judgment. People fight honorably for what they believe in, and they lose their lives. No one has a right to say that those lives were wasted. I think that would be a travesty.

Every war is unfortunate, and when it's over, you always wish it could have been avoided. But I think it's a real mistake to look at it in that way. I think what we have to do is to think about what we can do today and tomorrow and in the years ahead to honor the sacrifice of the people who believed in what they were doing. And I think that for 8 years that's been the policy of this country. And as I said, it had bipartisan support and absolutely critical support from leading veterans in the country—in the Congress and in the country.

Q. Do you think the United States owes Vietnam an apology for its involvement in the war?

The President. No, I don't.

MIA's/POW's

Q. The MIA/POW question is very crucial to us and obviously has been through these 8 years. Do you have any feeling about the Vietnamese, who have many, many more people never accounted for after this year. Is there anything we can do to help them come to terms?

The President. I think if there is anything that we can do to help them, we ought to do it. Of course, their people mostly died there, in their country. I think that we should always be in a position of doing whatever we can to help them get whatever information or records we might have to resolve anything on their front.

They have let us look at tens of thousands of pages of archives and other pieces of evidence which have helped us to identify hundreds of remains and return them, and we're still working on it. And I think this is something we ought to keep doing together. I think this effort we have undertaken is what made it possible for the veterans groups and the families of the people who are still missing to support this step-by-step advancement in our relationship. And I think it ought to be a two-way street.

Q. Do you have any reason to believe that any Americans remain in captivity in Vietnam, after the last American POW's were released in 1973?

The President. We have no evidence of it. I know there are people who still believe that may be the case. And all I can say is that every time we've gotten any lead, we've done our best to run it down completely, and we will continue to do that.

Q. Nothing has panned out in any of these reported——

The President. Nothing has panned out. You know, I'm like every other American, I think. I've always hoped against hope that a few of them were still there and still alive and that somehow we could find them. But so far all the rumors and all the leads have turned up dead ends. But I would never close the door on that. If there is ever any indication of anything else, I'd be glad to look into it, and I think any subsequent American Government would.

Vietnam-U.S. Relations

Q. How would you describe Vietnam, in terms of its relationship with the United States? Where are we now? Friend? Partner? How would you describe the relationship?

The President. I would say that our relationship is evolving. I think our work on the POW/MIA issue has been quite positive and has improved. I think the interviews that they have done of the people we've asked to be approved for relocation to the United States, they've improved that quite a bit in the last couple of years.

I would say that the trade agreement is a very good thing, for the same reason I thought it was a good thing for us to make the trade agreement with China. It's not as extensive, and it requires year-by-year renewal, and will do so until they meet all the terms of becoming members of the World Trade Organization. But it's a very positive thing.

I hope that we will continue to see some progress there on the human rights issues. There are still political prisoners, religious prisoners that we feel should be released. And I hope they will continue to do that. We've had some—seen some movement there in the last year of the release of some of the Protestants and some Catholics from prison. And I think we have to just keep working on that. And then I hope there will be an opportunity for some educational exchanges. And eventually, I hope that some of the Vietnamese living in America will become part of our ongoing development of relationship, because I think that's kind of the next big step, I think, from our point of view.

Q. What do you mean, that the Vietnamese community would become a bridge to their original home or—what do you mean?

The President. I think that a lot of the Vietnamese living in America, as you know, or as I said, were basically people who were strongly supportive of the position the United States took in the Vietnam war, or their children. But the younger people also want to build a new relationship with Vietnam. They want to see Vietnam modernized. They want to be, I think, eventually reconciled with their relatives or the people that lived in their villages. And I think that over time, we'll see some more contacts there, and that will be positive.

Q. Do you ever reflect on what it means for an American President now to go to the place that symbolized and distorted our politics? You know, for much of a generation—I mean, if you look at Watergate, Watergate could almost be traced to Vietnam. So much happened because of Vietnam. Is this a new chapter? Is this a closing of that door, do you think, in any way?

The President. Well, I think it's a new chapter. The thing that makes America work over time is our ability to visualize new futures and achieve them.

We don't need rose-colored glasses here. We still have differences with the Vietnamese about the form of government they have. But we've decided to approach them the same way we've approached China, the same way we deal with other countries with whom we have continuing differences.

But I think there's a strong sense that it's time to write a new chapter here. This is, after all—this country, the 12th or 13th biggest country in the world. They have about nearly 80 million people, and 60 percent of them are under 30, an enormous percentage of them under 18.

Q. So they know of the war, but they didn't experience it the way we did.

The President. What they know of the war is what they hear their parents talk about or what they'll learn in history books, the same way that our children do, those of us that are of that age. I think that what we want to do is give them a chance to—the Vietnamese a chance to find some greater prosperity, the global economy, and we believe it will bring greater openness to their society and a whole different future for them—a different relationship and a different relationship that will involve the Vietnamese who've come to our county and, on the whole, have done so very well in America and enriched our Nation.

Situation in the Middle East

Q. I was going to ask you if there really is anything left to be done in the Middle East, whether diplomats can now cause what's happening in the streets to stop happening?

The President. I think it depends on whether we can reduce the violence to the point where it's possible to resume negotiations.

Q. Can you do that?

The President. The unbelievable irony of the present situation is, with this level of violence is unfolding in the aftermath of the first serious discussion, official discussion that the Israelis and the Palestinians had, which occurred at Camp David on the serious, difficult final status issues of the Oslo agreement. And I might add, after Camp David, they continued to talk in informal ways. And they know that while there are still differences between them, they are agonizingly close to a resolution of these fundamental issues.

I think they also know that violence begets violence and that in the end they're still going to be neighbors. So they're either going to keep killing each other at varying rates with one side feeling beleaguered, the Israelis, and the others feeling oppressed, the Palestinians, or they're going to come to grips with this and complete the process they agreed to complete when they signed the agreement on the White House lawn in September of 1993.

So that's the frustration. The answer to your question is, yes, there's more that can be done, but I do not believe it can be done with this level of violence going on. I just don't think that's possible.

Q. How do you get control of that—Sharm al-Sheikh, you weren't able to do it there. You've had these——

The President. The Sharm al-Sheikh agreement was perfectly fine. It just hasn't been implemented. So that's why I saw Arafat and Barak this week, and I think within—in this coming week you'll see whether there is going to be any kind of effort to change course.

You know, somebody has got to quit shooting. And I think the demonstrations in the daytime have gone down among the Palestinians, but the nighttime shooting hasn't. I think everyone understands now that it may not be possible for Chairman Arafat to control everything every Palestinian does immediately. It may not be possible for Prime Minister Barak to control everything every Israeli does immediately. But this thing can be reduced dramatically if they want to get back to the negotiating table. I think the Israelis will respond in kind if the Palestinian shootings will diminish now. You know, we had a rough day today, and the Palestinians said it was in retaliation for the shooting of the resistance leader the other day. We'll just have to see what happens.

But the ironic answer to your question is, every time I talk to them, I come away more convinced that we could actually have an agreement if they could free themselves of this cycle of violence and get back to the negotiating table.

And I think if they—I think there's a way to do it, and I'm going to try to see what we can do this week. That's all I can say. I'll do my best.

Q. A secret plan? A Clinton secret plan?

The President. No, I don't have a secret plan. I just think the more I talk about this sort of thing, the harder it is to do.

North Korea

Q. We wanted to ask you about also North Korea. Did the missile talks fail in Malaysia—did they fail to give you what you wanted

to hear? How far apart is that, and what's the prospect of a trip there?

The President. Well, we're making some progress, but we haven't resolved it all. We think it's quite important to work out an arrangement with them in which, one, we stop the missile development—they stop the missile development and the sales of missiles. Now, they obviously need to earn some funds from some other places, and we think there are ways they can do that.

Secondly, we want to keep the North-South dialog going. We strongly support what President Kim Dae-jung did with Chairman Chong-il. We think that was a good thing to do, and we think it ought to continue. And we want to also continue the agreement we made with them early in my term, which ended the nuclear development program, which when I became President, I was told by my predecessors that it was the most serious national security problem we were facing at the time.

So I wouldn't rule out or in a trip, if that's where you're going on this. I just think the most important thing is that we're engaged with them and we're making constructive progress. And I hope we can make more before my tenure is over, because I think it will leave my successor an easier time.

President's Experience in Office

Q. What's your greatest personal satisfaction of your 8 years, as you near the end of them? And what's your greatest personal disappointment?

The President. Oh, that's hard to say; it's hard to say on both counts.

My greatest personal satisfaction, I think, is that our country is in so much better shape than it was 8 years ago and not just economically. I think it's economically probably the strongest it has ever been, but it's also a more equal society. We have incomes rising at all levels for the first time in three decades. We have a big drop in poverty. We have a big drop in crime. We have the welfare rolls cut in half. We have fewer people without health insurance, for the first time in a dozen years.

Performance of our students in the schools is getting better. We have more minority kids taking advanced placement courses and going on to college. And I think in each of these areas we've had policies which have contributed to this.

We also have a real—I think there is more social cohesion, notwithstanding the division of this vote. We've got 150,000 kids serving in AmeriCorps, more than served in the Peace Corps in the first 20 years. We've had, I think, a real attempt to try to bridge the racial divide in this country and deal with those issues and confront a lot of the problems that still exist in America.

So I feel good about both the fact that the country is in better shape and, I think, there is a lot of self-confidence, a sense of possibility in this country. I think in part that explains how free people felt to debate the issues in the last campaign and to make their choices. I'm very, very grateful for that.

And I will leave office with that sense of gratitude, because I think that's what every President wants to do. Every President wants to feel that during his tenure of service, America grew stronger and healthier and better. I feel good about where we are in our relations with the rest of the world. I think we've basically been a force for peace and prosperity.

What is my greatest regret? I may not be able to say yet. I really wanted, with all my heart, to finish the Oslo peace process, because I believe that if Israel and the Palestinians could be reconciled, first the State of Israel would be secure, which is very important to me, personally, and I think to the American people; secondly, the Palestinians would be in control of their own destiny; third, a peace with Syria would follow shortly; and fourth, the Middle East would not only be stable, which is good for America's interests, and not just because of the oil but the forces of progress and prosperity—progress and reconciliation, excuse me—would be stronger in all countries, including Iran. And I felt that I really think this is a sort of linchpin which could lead to a wave of positive developments all across the region. And I think that's very important.

Most of the people in the Middle East are young; there are all these kids out there. What are they going to—are they going to be raised to believe their faith requires them to hate the Israelis and the Americans and anybody else that's not part of their faith and

politics? Are they going to be perpetually poor, even if they have a fairly decent education? Are we going to see that whole region being integrated into a global system and these children having a whole different future, in which they're reconciled with their neighbors in Israel and deeply involved in the world in a positive way? Are they going to be using the Internet to talk to terrorist cells about chemical and biological weapons, or are they going to be using the Internet to figure out how to grow new businesses and have new opportunities and build new futures for their families and their children? So if it doesn't happen I'll be profoundly disappointed, but I'll never regret a minute I spent on it because I think it's very important for the future.

I have never bought the thesis—on an inevitable collision course with the Islamic societies, or that the 21st century had to be dominated by terrorists with highly sophisticated weapons, fueled by broad popular resentment from people who are both disenfranchised and poor. I don't think it has to be that way, and I think if we could really make a big dent in this problem, it would give confidence to the forces of reason and progress throughout the region.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 12:40 a.m. aboard Air Force One en route from Kona, HI, to Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 16. In his remarks, the President referred to Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea; and Chairman Kim Chong-il of North Korea. A reporter referred to Secretary of State Katherine Harris of Florida. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Proclamation 7377—America Recycles Day, 2000

November 15, 2000

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

As we look forward to Thanksgiving, our annual celebration of America's great bounty, it is appropriate to observe America Recycles Day and focus on how to preserve that bounty for the benefit of future generations.

Recycling waste and purchasing products made from recycled materials are among the easiest and most effective measures every American can take to conserve our resources and create a cleaner environment. Currently, our country recovers more than 28 percent of the billions of pounds of waste generated by Americans annually—an effort that translates into enough savings to supply the energy needs of 9 million U.S. households. But the recycling process succeeds only when recovered materials are returned to retailers as new products that are purchased by consumers; otherwise, the recycled products themselves must be disposed of as waste.

Buying recycled products conserves resources, reduces water and air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and saves energy. While beneficial for the environment, the recycling process is good for our economy as well. By promoting the development of markets for recycled products, we are also creating new jobs, many of which are in America's inner cities, where job creation is particularly critical. It is estimated that while incinerating 10,000 tons of waste creates 1 job, and landfilling the same amount creates 6 jobs, recycling the same 10,000 tons creates 36 jobs. Nationwide, recycling and remanufacturing provide 1 million jobs and $100 billion in revenue.

To ensure the Federal Government's leadership in the recycling effort, I signed an Executive Order in 1998 directing all Federal agencies to expand and strengthen their commitment to recycling and buying recycled-content and environmentally preferable products. The Federal Government now purchases more than $350 million in recycled-content products annually—an increase of $112 million a year, or 30 percent, from just a decade ago.

America Recycles Day helps us to build on this progress by uniting environmental and community organizations, business and industry, and agencies at all levels of government as partners in the vital effort to keep recycling working. By encouraging every business and consumer in America to start or enhance recycling efforts and to buy recycled-content products, we can sustain our