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Edmund S. Muskie Papers

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Press Conference - Claremont, New Hampshire - On Vietnam as a Campaign Issue

Edmund S. Muskie

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Frank Reynolds -- Senator, have you heard what the President said this morning?

Muskie -- It's kind of hard to in there, among all the (inaudible)...

Reynolds -- Yes. Well, he said that Democratic candidates for President should carefully examine any criticism of Administration policy in Indochina and he urged them to make sure their statements do not give the enemy an incentive for continuing the war. He said he does not question anybody's patriotism or sincerity, but he said all candidates should remember only the President can negotiate an end to the war, and he said a candidate for President has a higher responsibility than an ordinary critic. What is your response to that?

Muskie -- Well, I'd agree with all of it. I would agree that we ought to carefully examine what we say, that we ought to be responsible, and I would agree that as candidate for the Presidency I have a different more serious kind of responsibility than say even a Senator, although a Senator's responsibility's a very serious one too, something the President tends to neglect and forget when he fails to take the Senate fully into his confidence on what he's doing, what he proposes to do. I'd say that what he admonishes us to do is well within the guidelines I've set for myself....

Voice -- ...there is any implication in what you've said that you are offering alternative terms that might induce the other side to to want to...

Muskie -- Well I've never regarded myself as being in a negotiating position. But those outside the administration, including President Nixon, before he was President, have indulged in criticism of current policy, as we must. As a matter of fact, in his first speech as President, his first full policy speech on Vietnam, at the very outset he said in so many words, 'I have criticized President Johnson's policies', and he did so. And he certainly ought not to feel now that he's above criticism that he directed at President Johnson. We don't the criticize for the sake of criticizing. I'm not by nature, you know, a bellicose partisan. I've never been accused of that before, that I can remember. But here we have a serious national issue. The American people want this war ended. They want it ended as soon as possible. Now the President offered us a proposal ten days or so ago which he himself described as three months old. He said he'd offered it to the other side last October. And he's told us that they had ignored it. Well in my judgment that's the equivalent of a rejection. If they regarded it, in his words, as the most generous offer in history, their response doesn't suggest it. So they in effect rejected it in the course of that three month period by ignoring it. And he offered it ten days ago as though it were a new, and generous, offer at the same time he conceded it had been rejected in the past. Well, this did not offer new hope. To offer something that had already been turned aside is not to offer new hope to the

American people that we're about to do something that can end our involvement in the war. And those of us who understood that, who understood that, in my judgement had an obligation to say so. Now I don't think that there was any interruption of the negotiating process. As a matter of fact, on the very day that Secretary Rogers accused me of intervening in the negotiating process the Viet Cong in Paris offered a new proposal, presumably in reaction to, if not response, the President's. So the

process is going on. And the question is, what do we as a country do next in the face of a clear indication that the other side is not going to accept this latest proposal of the President's. And all of us, all of us have been discussing this, you know, including the Administration, for two years. This isn't the first time that we've asked the Administration to offer a complete withdrawal in exchange for prisoners...long before he offered his latest proposal...this is nothing new. And I still think this is an offer that ought to be made, and I still think I have a responsibility to say so. And I think that saying so is well within the limits of responsible debate that I take it the President undertook to define this morning.

Reynolds -- Well, what do you make of his (inaudible) to avoid giving the enemy an incentive to continue the war?

Muskie -- Well, I think he'd like to inhibit criticism if he could. That's not the first time that kind of thing's been said, and I don't blame him for trying if he can. But he ought to understand that dissent on this war is now five to six years old and it's not about to be put down by his dislike of criticism.