



H. R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969 – April 30, 1973

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Tuesday, February 16.

The day started with an early Cabinet meeting which was supposed to last only an hour, beginning with a five minute recap of Laos by Laird. Unfortunately, Laird went on for 35 minutes, and that threw things off a bit. Elliot Richardson, who was supposed to do the briefing on the new health proposals, was only left with ten minutes before he had to leave at 9:00 for a trip to New York. And apparently, the meeting disintegrated badly from there on, as Patrocelli tried to peddle the health program and ran into quite a bit of Cabinet opposition, including the Vice President. The President did an excellent wrap-up after the Laird report on the whole Vietnam thing, making the point that we're accomplishing the withdrawal from Vietnam in a very spectacular way; that is, that our casualties in January of this year were one-fifth what they were when we came in two years ago, and our troop level is down to one-half of what it was then. And we have South Vietnam now in a position where they're capable of defending themselves. This is a major accomplishment, especially in the face of the strong opposition we've had politically, and the minimal support we've had from the American establishment. He makes the point that we'll be judged by how we come off as a-- in the final result, that the easy thing would have been to get out. The easy thing would have been not to do Cambodia or Laos, but then we would have had serious problems later. We did not expand the war; North Vietnam did. If this all works out, we'll be judged well. If it doesn't, we'll be judged badly, but, considering the limitations, the anguish at home, the opposition, we've done very well. Next year, we'll know whether we've succeeded. Right now, we're trying to buy some insurance.

The President then introduced the health section of the meeting, making the point that in a period of reform, you don't reform just for the sake of reforming. In history, where reforms have done well, they've been highly sophisticated and they've been very careful not to do harm to the things that they're reforming. He then made the point that even though there's a lot wrong with the American health system, it still is a fact that anyone who can afford it comes to the United States for health care; so our free medical system, with all its faults, still produces the finest health care in the world. With that, we go on to the program of trying to make it better.



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He spent the afternoon at the EOB, primarily working on his briefing book, getting ready for the press conference tomorrow. He did call me over for a couple of sessions, mainly reviewing a number of general PR, schedule, and other minor items. He discussed the question of Henry going on the *David Frost Show*, which Frost wants him to do, regarding the State of the World. The President has told Henry no, feels that we should never have Henry on television regarding substance. It's okay for him to brief at the White House, but he should not go public. If Henry could figure out how to give some insight into the President as a man, and so forth, he could be extremely effective in that area publicly, but, so far, that hasn't panned out.

He was very much concerned about the lack of momentum, apparently, over the Lincoln recess weekend. We didn't make any news with our programs; the opposition did make some, and he feels we may be losing the initiative, to a degree, at least. We also got into a discussion of polls again, particularly the Harris poll that came out over the weekend and was covered in the news summary, which reports the President's popularity dropping and also his position weakening vis-à-vis Muskie in the trial heats.

End of February 16.