

"THIS DAY TONIGHT"

Interview given by the Prime Minister, Mr John Gorton
on ABC Television

Interviewer : Philip Koch

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Q. Prime Minister, could this American withdrawal of troops point the way to you bringing home some of our own soldiers?

PM: I don't think so. As I said in the House on the 15 May, this unilateral withdrawal was quite possible. But I think it would be wrong for various reasons to think of bringing home Australian troops at this time. For example, since our Army was built up to its present strength - our Army contingent - the Americans have increased their forces by some 50,000 and what they are doing now is taking away some of the increase that was made since we made our commitment. They have got 540,000 troops there. Secondly, I think it would be rather shabby to withdraw Australian troops at this stage because the Americans have built up the South Vietnamese to try and take some of the burden off the half million troops they've got. We wouldn't want to add to the burden, or at least stop the burden being reduced. Thirdly, our force is a self-contained force and unless it was all withdrawn, withdrawing parts of it would be militarily quite ridiculous.

Q. Did President Nixon consult with you in any way on what he might or might not do at the midway talks with President Thieu?

PM: Yes, I had a personal letter from him yesterday about it, but I had discussions with him in the United States as well and we had previous correspondence, and indeed, we have expressed a view ourselves. But it was because I knew this kind of limited unilateral withdrawal was a possibility that I made my statement in the House on the 15 May, pointing out that it was a possibility and that if it took place it should be taken as a sign of strength and not in any way as a sign of weakness.

Q. Well, then how do you feel about the pressure on President Nixon at home to end the Vietnam war. Do you think he might be forced into making poor concessions which would be less than satisfactory to South Vietnam and Australia?

PM: I don't believe so. I believe he realises there will be, as there are, quite strong pressures from various quarters in the United States to end the war; that he recognises this and he accepts that it would be the wrong thing to do to end it other than by attaining the objective of giving the South Vietnamese people the right to free elections and to choose the sort of government they would wish. He made that clear to me and I believe his communique from Midway makes it equally clear.

Q. Now, before the Midway talks, President Nixon put forward a peace plan in which he called for a mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam. Do you expect Hanoi to reciprocate now in any way?

PM: I would be surprised if they did as a result of that gesture by the United States. This must not be confused, this unilateral withdrawal of some 25,000 troops who are going to be replaced by South Vietnamese troops. This must not be confused with a mutual withdrawal such as was suggested

Q. I was thinking more in terms, Prime Minister, of later on. This is the first 25,000 and President Nixon has indicated that he might withdraw more. If he did, would you expect Hanoi to come to the party?

PM: I would again be surprised if Hanoi took any note of anything except an agreement for mutual withdrawal. I think the President has made it clear that though in future he is going to examine further possible unilateral withdrawals and replacement by South Vietnamese troops, he would want to be sure if he did that, it didn't weaken the Allied position and he has also made it clear that he is adhering firmly to the objective of self-determination for the South Vietnamese people.

Q. So then you don't feel any concern that perhaps there would be too many American concessions at Paris in this regard?

PM: I don't think we should confuse the Paris peace talks with what is actually happening now in South Vietnam, but I myself believe that the United States President would be quite firm - flexible but quite firm - in attaining what he stated over and over again to be the objective, that the South Vietnamese people should be able to choose a government of their own free from terror and at free elections, at which anybody could stand.

Q. Well what would happen if the North Vietnamese - Hanoi - launched an all-out offensive later on this year in South Vietnam in which the South Vietnamese forces broke down? Could you envisage President Nixon sending back troops to Vietnam?

PM: Well, in the first place, I don't see that the withdrawal of 25,000 troops out of 542,000 is going to lead to a situation where the whole thing can break down. That doesn't appear reasonable. I believe if there were a general offensive by North Vietnam, it would be a tragic misinterpretation on the part of North Vietnam. They would be interpreting this as weakness when it isn't a sign of weakness at all.

Q. Thank you, Prime Minister.
