

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OF SINGAPORE, MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT THE "MEET THE PRESS"
-- NBC'S TV PRESS CONFERENCE OF THE AIR --
HELD IN NEW YORK, RECORDED ON APRIL 11 AND TELECAST
ON APRIL 15

Moderator:

Lawrence E. Spivak

Panel:

Edwin Newman NBC News

Harrison Salisbury New York Times

Crosby Noyes Washington Star Post

Robert Christopher Newsweek Magazine

Mr. SPIVAK: Our guest today on "MEET THE PRESS" is the Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. He is a lawyer and has served as his country's only Prime Minister since it attained self-government in 1959. Prime Minister Lee is in this country for meetings with President Nixon and other US officials and a series of lectures on American campuses.

We will have the first question now from Edwin Newman of NBC News.

MR. NEWMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, you spent 75 minutes with President Nixon on Tuesday. Did he make any commitments to you or commitments to Southeast Asia in general?

MR. LEE: No, he didn't.

MR. NEWMAN: You're disappointed?

MR. LEE: I did not expect any commitments. I wanted a broad picture as he saw it of how Southeast Asia fitted into this new global strategy of a different kind of world balance.

National Archives of Singapore

MR. NEWMAN: How does it fit in? Does it fit in the way satisfactory to you, logical to you?

MR. LEE: If what is possible of achievement by way of detente with both America and China, America and Russia and at the same time Western Europe and Japan and America can resolve their difficulties over balance of payments in trade and other problems of burden-sharing, then I think it will be a more peaceful, more stable, perhaps more prosperous world which can flake off to third countries or countries of the third world like Singapore.

MR. NEWMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, do you consider that the United States achieved peace with honour in Vietnam?

MR. LEE: You are asking me a very leading question, Mr. Newman. I cannot answer that question. I am a guest in this country. I

think I can say this: that you disengaged from Vietnam in an honourable way. Whether there is peace in Vietnam is another matter.

MR. SALISBURY: Mr. Prime Minister, I think you said on one occasion that you thought that communism was a doctrine which appealed to what you called the more intense peoples of the world or of

Asia and had little or less appeal to those who are less intense so far as their culture is concerned. I am wondering if I quoted you correctly where you place the peoples of Indo-China and where you place the peoples of your own land of Singapore?

MR. LEE: First, if I may just make a slight correction to what you have said. More intense peoples are more likely to take to communism because communism is a demanding task-master. Less intense peoples, they want the fruits of communism but they don't like to put in the discipline and the sustained effort that is required of them before they enjoy the fruits.

Where do I put the peoples of Southeast Asia? Well, west of the Mekong, they are influenced by the Hindu civilisation. East of the Mekong, particularly Vietnam, they are more influenced by the Sinic culture of Chinese culture. They are the more intense types. Hence the very distinct difference of the levels of a conflict between forces engaged in Vietnam and forces engaged in Laos and Cambodia. And it is the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong that give the stiffening to

the Pathet Lao and the various insurgent groups in Cambodia. But, of course, scattered throughout Southeast Asia, there has been some migration of peoples from more intense cultures to these areas where the culture is less intense.

But, on the whole, I would say that it is unlikely that the communist insurgent movement or liberation-type movement could find sufficient followers to overthrow established governments in Southeast Asia.

MR. SALISBURY: Like your own government?

MR. LEE: Well, I would not say that, unfortunately, I've got a population which is about more than 75% ethnic Chinese.

And although we have been placed in a much more relaxed environment climatically, there is still the overflow of years and years of the cultural values and the impetus is still there. So I am taking no chances.

MR. NOYES: Mr. Prime Minister, it seems to us that the American policy at this point is leaning rather heavily on the idea that the Soviet Union and the Chinese want a period of peace and stability in

Southeast Asia, at this point. Do you agree with that as a proposition?

MR. LEE: Well, as a proposition, I think it is sound because the Chinese are too preoccupied with other problems both internally and on their frontiers with the Soviet Union -- the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. The Russians, on the other hand, will need some time to build up their naval capacity. It is still fairly modest in the Indian Ocean. So neither superpower is really all that prepared to push somebody out to fill up the space, so to speak. But, of course, if there is a vacuum, then you have one, the one which is more prepared, will immediately be drawn to fill the vacuum.

MR. NOYES: Well, along that same line, do you think that there is a possibility that the Chinese are anxious to keep the United States in Southeast Asia or in Asia as a responsible power possibly as a way of limiting the expansion of Soviet influence in the area?

MR. LEE: I think the only person who can give you an honest answer to that, if he wants to, would be the Chinese Prime Minister. I don't know whether he had agreed to your proposition that the United States is a responsible power and, therefore, they would prefer to have you there. It'll be most embarrassing to express his concurrence with that philosophy. But as they are not in a position to move in, and as the competition or the conflict is much more acute between them and the Russian, I think it is fair inference that they would rather have the Americans than the Russians.

MR. CHRISTOPHER: Mr. Prime Minister, you were once described as a 20th century Victorian because of your government's, such measures as your government's cracking down on films of violence and its very active attempts to discourage young men in Singapore from wearing long hair. How do you reconcile measures of this kind with the maintenance of democratic society in Singapore?

MR. LEE: Well, first of all, I don't imagine myself to be a Victorian. If I were a Victorian, then I couldn't run the kind of economy

which Singapore is developing. You need a different kind of outlook. You've got to adjust and adapt in a very rapidly changing world. But what I try to do is to bring in the sciences, the knowledge, the technology, the industries and insofar as is possible try and leave out the accompanying social ethos which Western managers, Western mass media reflect of their own societies because developing countries like Singapore cannot afford the luxury of protest and ennui just for the sake of protesting and because they are bored with life and need some stimulant, whether chemical or otherwise, to keep an interest in life.

And we've got literally problems of life and death -- of poverty and good health.

MR. CHRISTOPHER: In the more general line, Sir, your government has effectively suppressed over the years a couple of newspapers, jailed a certain number of editors. Is this part of the Western ethos that you are trying to freeze out -- that is, freedom of the press, an unacceptable part of the Western ethos?

MR. LEE: No, I don't think so at all. I think there is fair latitude in the mass media. But you must remember that we have inherited a plural society which the British brought together -- peoples of different religious, linguistic, cultural backgrounds. And you've got seven newspapers in four major languages -- Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English. Then the press must exercise some constraints because appeals to the visceral part of the human being -- his language, his culture -- that it is being threatened, that it is being destroyed -- that does not bring about an intellectual and rational response. It often leads to violence, riots. It has led in the past to such violence. And the two newspapermen whom we jailed -- they have been released and they have come clean. And they were paid danger money to write all this thing up. One had his salary trebled because he knew what he was doing was a risky business and wanted to cry it off, but the boss said, "Treble your pay."

MR. SPIVAK: Mr. Prime Minister, may I ask you a question? You were once quoted as saying that the wrong kind of conclusion to the mess in Vietnam can absolutely unscramble the whole lot

of us in Southeast Asia. Are you satisfied that the United States has brought about the right kind of conclusion to the mess in Vietnam?

MR. LEE: I cannot say that. I think I can say that the United States have got the best possible deal it could have got in the circumstances, to disengage American forces. And it was quite remarkable really that so much was given away by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. And I myself find it very difficult to believe that this could have been achieved without the bigger powers being brought into the picture.

MR. SPIVAK: Well, now, there are great many people in this country today who would like to see the United States military presence out of Asia in large measure or entirely. Now, what effect would this have in your judgment on the smaller countries of Asia. Particularly -- a country like yours?

MR. LEE: I think where you have established a certain equilibrium because you, for good or bad reasons, had decided to establish a presence since the 1950's, then countries which

have been working on those premises -- that there will be a continuing presence -- will be thrown into considerable disarray if that presence were suddenly removed and they were faced with a completely new situation. It is not a radical or a popular thing to say everybody likes to say is the popular one, namely, "Yankee go home!" But who comes in? Because the vacuum will be filled and if it is filled by a much more clumsy, more heavy-handed power, life could become a great deal more uncomfortable for the smaller countries in Southeast Asia.

MR. SPIVAK: And how serious do you think it would be if Cambodia fell to the communists?

MR. LEE: If I may borrow an American expression, I think 'the action is in Vietnam, not in Cambodia.' If the communists win in Vietnam then they've got Cambodia. If they win in Cambodia and they haven't got Vietnam, they will just get a lot of problems on their hands. They will have to feed the people, instead of you trying to bring in supplies, food, petrol and

other provisions into besieged cities -- they will have the problem of feeding these people.

MR. SPIVAK: Are you suggesting then that it is all right for us to let Cambodia go?

MR. LEE: I am not making any such suggestion. I don't think it is a fair conclusion to draw from me.

MR. SPIVAK: I am drawing no conclusion. I am just asking a question.

MR. LEE: Cambodia will go if the communists are prepared not only to take the towns but also to defend them. They can take them. But I don't think they are in a position to defend them. And therefore, the main towns will be there. They are in occupation of two-thirds of the countryside.

MR. NEWMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, in one of the lectures you gave during this trip, one you gave at Lehigh in Pennsylvania, I got the impression that you suggested that if South Vietnam now fall to the communists, to the Vietcong, it would not necessarily

be tremendously serious for the rest of Southeast Asia. Is that a correct impression?

MR. LEE: I scripted that part of my speech. I say: if South Vietnam were to go communist in the immediate future, it does not necessarily follow that Thailand or the other countries in Southeast Asia would go communist. Because the mood today is very different from the mood in 1954 after Dien Bien Phu when everybody believed that it was invincible, the communist movement, the wave of the future.

MR. SALISBURY: Mr. Prime Minister, you've often said that the world has got to learn to live with China. And I am wondering -- my question has two facets to it. Do you think that the United States is learning to live with China? And secondly, how are you in Singapore learning to live with China?

MR. LEE: I think the United States have started this process of learning to live with the China that is and not the China that the United States thought was. And this process, of course, will accelerate in the next four years. As far as Singapore is concerned, we have always lived with China. We inherited

the British recognition of China in 1949 which meant that they own two banks and three insurance companies. And trade and intercourse have been going on all this while.

MR. SALISBURY: Does this cause you problems?

MR. LEE: From time to time. They got into a kind of frenzy, like the Cultural Revolution, they hang up banners and red flags and they put loudspeakers outside their bank premises and give lectures or chant slogans. It's a minor breach of the peace. We overlook these things. But when they refuse to comply with our banking regulations, then of course, that is a different matter. We suspend their clearing facilities.

MR. SPIVAK: Gentlemen, we have only four minutes left. MR. NOYES.

MR. NOYES: To get back to a point you were making earlier, Mr. Prime Minister. How do you rate the danger of a war between the Soviet Union and China at this point?

MR. LEE: Well, nobody can answer that question. But every passing day, surely, the danger of collision, of a pre-emptive strike by the Soviet Union on China leading to God knows what -- it must lessen.

MR. NOYES: Do you think the Chinese policy today is still being very powerfully influenced by their apprehension of the danger of an attack from the Soviet Union?

MR. LEE: Well, all the indications are that they are preoccupied with this problem and, indeed, probably have good reasons to be for quite some while until they have got the credible second strike capability.

MR. CHRISTOPHER: Not long ago, Mr. Prime Minister, you said that Americans ought to remember that they are citizens of a great power and behave accordingly. What do you think, Sir, that we Americans should be doing that we are not doing or vice-versa?

MR. LEE: It is a very imprudent thing for me to suggest what they should be doing which they are not doing. I think one of the problems is the compression of time with the speed of change. And perhaps, there has not been that time given to the American people and their leaders to adjust their outlook, their attitudes and act not just in the interests of America but in the interests of the people whose fate is connected with what happens to America. In other words, when they speak or when they act it is more than they should speak and act to a much wider constituency, not just America.

MR. NEWMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, you spoke earlier about distinction among Southeast Asia peoples between intense and less intense, and you said that the United States became embroiled in North Vietnam because it did not understand the intensity of the people of North Vietnam. But you have also said that without the United States having been in Vietnam the rest of Southeast Asia would have gone into the communist millenium. Now, are you glad that we misunderstood, as you see it, the North Vietnamese?

MR. LEE: With the benefit of hindsight, it could have been done with much less expense and pain and suffering. If the line had to be drawn, it would have been cheaper, more convenient, more comfortable and I think more practical to have held it west of the Mekong River, because then the intrusions would have been of the intense peoples into the territories of the less intense whom you could defend and who would report the presence of intense peoples who were invading them.

MR. NEWMAN: What about Thailand? Do you think we have to make Thailand an American buffer state, American-backed? Are they intense enough to be a buffer state?

MR. LEE: No, I don't think they have any intention of being an intense buffer state, and they are not that kind of people. I don't believe that an indigenous Thai insurgency movement can overthrow the established government.

MR. NEWMAN: But you think the United States must back Thailand as a buffer state? You have said that publicly.

MR. LEE: No, I didn't say that. I said ... And I think the Thais would take offence if I said that. What I said was that having got the Thais committed so far, you just have got to give them some time to adjust.

MR. SPIVAK: Thank you Prime Minister Lee for being with us today on "MEET THE PRESS".

National Archives of Singapore