

“We Are Worried, Awfully Worried”

Date: October 8, 1940

Participant: Franklin D. Roosevelt Sr.

Participant: Walter Winchell

Participant: Unidentified Speaker

Start Time: Unknown

Place: Executive Offices of the White House

Following a press conference, President Roosevelt spoke privately about the crisis in the Far East, where the British were about to begin the resupply of Chinese forces resisting Japanese occupation. Distressing reports from Japan suggested that the only way to avoid a regional war would be for the United States to vacate its bases throughout the Pacific—including Pearl Harbor.

President Roosevelt: Look, here’s one thing I wanted to ask my old friend the Scripps-Howard papers about. [*Laughs.*]

Unidentified Speaker: One of your old friends [*unclear*].

Walter Winchell: We’re all your friends.

President Roosevelt: [*Coughs.*] Now, look, before you read that, I want to ask you this. Roy [W. Howard] the other day received—Roy Howard—a telegram, apparently, which was published by, I think—I think UP [United Press] carried it, all the UP papers—a telegram, as I remember it, from the chief of the Japanese press association, whatever that is.

Unidentified Speaker: [Hoshio] Mitsunaga.

President Roosevelt: What?

Unidentified Speaker: Mitsunaga.

President Roosevelt: Uh-huh. Well, evidently an old friend of Roy’s. [*Winchell acknowledges.*] In which, Mitsunaga, or whatever his name was, said the damndest thing that ever happened. I wouldn’t refer to it, because it will only stir up bad feeling in this country, and this country is ready to pull the trigger if the Japs do anything. I mean, they won’t stand their nonsense. Public opinion won’t, in this country, from the Japs, if they do some fool thing. Well, this Mitsunaga fellow wires to Roy and says, “There will be no war with the United States”—I’m quoting from memory—“on one condition, [*raps desk repeatedly*] and one condition only. And that is that the United States will recognize the new era in, not the Far East, but the East, meaning the whole of the East.

Furthermore, that this recognition, there must be evidence of it, and the only evidence of this recognition the United States can give is to demilitarize all of its Naval and Air and Army bases in Wake [Island], Midway [Atoll], and Pearl Harbor [Hawaii]!” God, that’s the first time that any damn Jap has told us to get out of Hawaii! And that had me more worried than any other thing in the world—

End of excerpt 1.

President Roosevelt: Well, of course, we are worried, awfully worried, about things today. Like this opening of the Burma Road on the 17th. That’s a pretty definite challenge on the part of the British. And the only thing that worries me is that the Germans and the Japs have gone along, and the Italians, for, oh what, five, six years, without their foot slipping, without them misjudging foreign opinion. They’ve played a damn smart game. [*Unclear*] chances, can’t keep on doing that all the time, and maybe do something foolish. [*Unclear.*] And the time may be coming when the Germans and the Japs will do some fool thing that would put us in. That’s the only real danger of our getting in, is that their foot will slip.

End of excerpt 2.

“Franklin D. Roosevelt Sr., Daniel J. Callaghan, William M. Callaghan, May Craig, Stephen T. Early, Earl Godwin, Walter Winchell, and Unidentified Speakers on 8 October 1940,” Press Conference 688, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [The Presidential Recordings of Franklin D. Roosevelt]*, ed. Kent B. Germany, Ken Hughes, Guian A. McKee, and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4022341>