

39 Remarks to Athletes Attending a White House
Sponsored Conference on Drug Abuse.
February 3, 1972

Ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to begin this White House briefing with a confession that perhaps doesn't need to be made before this distinguished audience. It has been rather well publicized that I am somewhat of a sports fan. As a matter of fact, I have not been able to demonstrate that too much over the past year. I have seen only one baseball game—incidentally, the Senators won that one, too—and no football games, but several on television, baseball, football. The only basketball game I saw, incidentally, was when the [Los Angeles] Lakers lost to the [Milwaukee] Bucks in that great game out there in Milwaukee a few weeks ago.

But in the course of seeing games and, of course, commenting upon them and picking plays—usually ones that didn't work—I have learned a lot about the game, about the men in it, and what they have contributed to this country. As one who sees sports almost exclusively on television, I want you to know that the worst part of it is the commercials, except for one kind of commercial. I think it is one of the most exciting ventures in the whole field of sports, and also in the field of

television broadcasting.

When I saw the breaks come, you know, in the timeout or whatever the case might be, and then on would come what you thought was an instant replay, and then it was a commercial—a commercial by a man that you admired, admired as a fine athlete on the field or on the basketball court, as the case might be, or the baseball diamond. He would come on and he would talk very effectively, very eloquently, about the subject of drug abuse in the United States. I realized as I saw those commercials, first, that we were getting—"we," I mean by that the United States Government, because we asked that those for whom you are playing, that they cooperate, and the networks, of course, have cooperated, and a number of other agencies—you wonder how effective they have been.

Let me tell you we have a little proof. Many of you will know that at the end of the commercials, there is a little sign that goes on, "If you want information about drug abuse, write to the National Drug Abuse Clearinghouse in Washington, D.C." Since those commercials began, there have been over 100,000 requests that

have come in. That means you got through. People were listening. They were paying attention.

What I am saying to you is that, as a sports fan, I admire those here for your great achievements in your chosen professions at this time in your lives; but as an American, I am just deeply grateful for this free time you have been giving, because you can command a little pay for that time—don't give it away free, incidentally, except to us—for the free time you have been giving in making these commercials, in getting at a subject in which every American concerned about the future of his country, and particularly the future of our children, has a very, very great interest.

Now, as far as the briefing is concerned, to show you how broad our interest is, and how we are attempting to wage a battle against drug abuse, which is not limited to just one section, but it is total, it is what we might describe as total warfare against drug abuse in the United States and in the world.

An indication of how it is total are the people who will be addressing you: John Ehrlichman, the head of our domestic staff, will be the master of ceremonies. But we have the Secretary of State, the top ranking member of the Cabinet. Why is he here? Because we want to try to stop drugs coming into this country at the source. We don't produce heroin, for example, in the United States. They do produce it—the poppy that grows heroin—in Turkey. They produce it in some parts of Southeast Asia. We have made remarkable progress in this respect. And this is a result of the cooperation of the State Department, our ambassadors abroad working with the Governments of Turkey, France, and several other foreign

governments. The Secretary of State will fill you in on those activities: stopping drugs from coming in at the source, making it more difficult for them to come in.

Of course, any program is not going to be completely successful. Some are going to get in. They are smuggled in, and there are a variety of ways they can get around anything that we do.

The other thing that we have been trying to do, and this is the second phase of the program, is: Once they get in, then we want to have laws effectively enforced that will punish the pushers. Now, we have set up several programs in this field, the Congress has cooperated, and you are going to be briefed by the top people in our Government who have the responsibility for law enforcement at the Federal level and who, of course, are working with State and local and city governments in seeing that we punish the pushers.

There are many reprehensible crimes, in my opinion, in this country. I can think of no crime, including even the crime of murder, burglary—you name it—which is more reprehensible than for an individual to destroy the life of a young person by pushing drugs. It is a terrible thing to do. We are having an all-out offensive waged all over this country to punish the pushers.

Now, there is another side to it. You know, many times in the field of crime—and I speak now as a lawyer and, of course, the Secretary of State is a lawyer, and so is John Ehrlichman, we all will have this same view—many times in the field of crime there is a tendency to think all you need is a law with a strong enough penalty and there will be no crime. Not true, because that is only one side of it. No matter how strong the penalty is, there are some who are going to break the law.

Once they break the law, particularly

in the field of dangerous drugs, then you have to have some compassion; then you have to take care of the addicts. That doesn't mean you excuse them from breaking the law. It does mean that once they break the law, you have to find a way to get them back into productive society, to take what would otherwise be a totally destroyed human being and make him or her whole again.

That is why we have Dr. Jaffe here, who is the top expert in this country in the field of the treatment of drug addicts. He will tell you something about what we are doing, about how we treat them; not only prevent it, but then, once a person becomes addicted, to treat that particular situation.

So we have named three of the great offensives: One, stop it at the source. That is the Secretary of State's primary responsibility, and, of course, the Secretary of the Treasury, through the Customs and the rest, works in this field as well.

Second, we have the law enforcement, and that is, punish the pushers and the peddlers, and there you will hear from the responsible people in that area.

Then, third, you have the treatment of people once they go over the wall and finally become addicts. Dr. Jaffe and others will talk to you about that.

But now comes your part. The law can be the best enforced law; we can try to stop it at the source; and we can treat the addicts. But most important, what we have to do is to try to educate, particularly, young Americans, so that there won't be the demand. We have to stop them before they start. And that, of course, is where you—the champions on the football field and the baseball field and the basketball court—where you have really done a marvelous job, a job which we

could not possibly pay you for adequately if we had to pay your television fees commercially. But you have done a marvelous job of handling this problem.

I know, incidentally, having done a little television myself through the years, and having done a few spots, what a chore it must have been; you know, they keep going over it, "Another take, please, another take." And you must have said, "Oh, why do I have to do it again? Is it worthwhile?"

I just want you to know, and I want your wives to know, who are here with you: We have looked at the situation, we have looked at the results; I know of no program that has paid off more, that has been more effective, than what the athletes of America have done in this field, and we are here to thank you for it.

Later, at 5 o'clock, when the briefings are completed, Mrs. Nixon will be downstairs and we would like to welcome all of you and your wives in the dining room for some refreshments and meet and greet you each personally.

At this time I will turn the program over to the experts, and will simply close by saying: As a sports fan I admire what you have done in the sports field, but also, as one who has the responsibility to do everything that I can to deal with one of the major problems America faces today, drug abuse, we want to thank people who can reach young people such as a preacher can't reach them, a politician can't reach them, a teacher can't reach them. You can, because they admire you. They respect you. They want to be like you, and that is why you get across.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. He spoke without referring to notes.

Those attending the conference included college and professional athletes, the commissioners and heads of the professional sports

leagues, network officials, and representatives of the Advertising Council, Inc.