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N E W S   C O N F E R E N C E

#202

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:03 A.M. EDT

MAY 1, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: I thought I would tell you about my vest, first of all. This is a bullet-proof vest sent to me by the Justice Department. Some people from the Justice Department came over here and watched a briefing one day.

They sent a letter saying, "After watching the pounding you took at the press briefing, it occurred to me that LEAA has developed something you should have for future briefings -- a bullet-proof jacket."

This is described as lightweight body armor, made of a synthetic fabric, designed and tested to protect against the .38 special and less powerful handguns -- the .22, the .25 and the .32.

Q Is this on or off the record?

MR. NESSEN: This is just fooling around, Russ.

Q Yes, but is this on or off the record?  
(Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: And then the Justice Department says, unfortunately -- talking about LEAA researchers -- they just shrugged their shoulders when I asked how it would be under the insistent questions of reporters.

So, fire away.

Q Did they tell you the standard weapon here is a .45?

MR. NESSEN: It won't cover that.

I think I will take it off. I think I am among friends. (Laughter)

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The President is meeting with Prime Minister Nouria, of Tunisia, and we will have a report on that for you shortly after the conclusion of the briefing.

This evening, as you probably know, the President will have a working dinner in the Prime Minister's honor in the State Dining Room. The toasts will be piped back here to the briefing room.

The Prime Minister will arrive at the North Portico at 7:40, and there is full press coverage of that. You should leave the press room at 7:30, and no black tie is required for that.

At 8 o'clock, the working dinner starts in the State Dining Room. There will be press pool coverage at the beginning of the dinner. You will need a black tie for that.

The pool for the start of the dinner is the wires, the Washington Post and Star, Storer Broadcasting, Time Magazine and NBC correspondent, and photographers and cameramen.

To be at the start of the working dinner, you should leave the press room at 7:55. The toasts will be exchanged at 9:15, and piped back here to the press room.

Transcripts will be available as soon as we can get them done.

At 12:10, the President will be leaving for the Commerce Department to participate in the ceremony at which Rogers Morton will be sworn in as Secretary of Commerce. The President will speak at that ceremony at about 12:20, and will be back at the White House about 12:50. We will have the text for you after this briefing.

As soon as he gets back to the White House, the President will purchase the first Bicentennial Series E Savings Bond commemorating the 200th anniversary.

Q Do you know the denomination?

MR. NESSEN: It is a \$200 denomination, and the seller will be Secretary of Treasury Simon. This will be open for taking pictures or filming.

Today happens to be the 34th anniversary of President Roosevelt's purchase of the first Series E Bonds from Secretary Morgenthau.

At 1 o'clock the President will present the President's Trophy to the 1974 Handicapped American of the Year, who is Elton Ringsak, Sr., a State Senator in North Dakota.

This award has been presented annually since 1951 to the handicapped American whose selection will be the most helpful toward encouraging, inspiring, facilitating and promoting the useful employment of other disabled persons. That, too, will be available, if you care to photograph it or film it.

At 1:50 the President will participate in a ceremony scheduled for the Rose Garden, if the weather is all right, at which five new members of the National Consumer Advisory Council will be sworn in. There will be full coverage of that.

The members are Dr. Stewart M. Lee, the Chairman of the Economics Department at Geneva College; Dr. Jean Mayer, who many of you know, the Professor of Nutrition at Harvard; George E. Myers, Director of Public Relations for CUNA, Inc; Dr. Hans B. Thorelli, Professor of Business Administration at Indiana University, and Dr. Edward R. Willett, Professor of Finance at Northeastern University.

The weather has gotten bad enough that the swearing-in will be in the Cabinet Room instead of the Rose Garden, so there will be a pool instead of full coverage. The President will speak briefly there.

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There are two other members who have been appointed to that Commission. For various reasons, they are not able to be here today, but their names will appear on the press release we give you.

At 2:00, the President will have one of his regular meetings with the Vice President. I don't have the agenda for you.

We will have the trip schedule for tomorrow available early in the afternoon.

After this briefing, you will receive the following announcements: In addition to the text of the Morton remarks and the release on the Consumer Advisory Council, you will also get a proclamation designating May as Older Americans Month; a letter to Congress transmitting the 19th annual report on the Trade Agreements Program; a release amending the disaster declaration for Tennessee; a letter to the Speaker and President of the Senate on the energy program along with a Proclamation formally delaying the imposition of the dollar fee that was scheduled to go on today.

I believe Frank Zarb gave you all the details you need on that. But you will get the text of the letter today.

Also, you will get an Executive Order changing the membership of the Energy Resources Council. We will also have a posting on a \$7 million supplemental appropriation requested by the State Department. It has nothing to do with Vietnam. Also, we will have the President's letter to the Speaker and President of the Senate requesting prompt action on this \$327 million Humanitarian Assistance Act.

Q Ron, whatever became of that fact sheet on the oil decontrol that you promised us yesterday?

MR. NESSEN: That is put out at the FEA. I saw copies of it, so it is ready.

The President has designated Attorney General Levi to be the United States Representative at the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Austrian State Treaty in Vienna on May 15. This State Treaty was signed on May 15, 1955, by representatives of Austria and the four post-war occupation powers -- the United States, Great Britain, France and the USSR.

It re-established a united, free, independent and sovereign Austria. The Attorney General will be the United States Representative at the 20th anniversary ceremony.

Q 20th or 30th?

MR. NESSEN: Fifty-five and 20 are 75.

That about does it. I want to wrap this up in about 35 minutes so I can go to the Morton swearing-in.

Q Will we have a veto of the farm bill today?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. Didn't we announce that?

Q No.

MR. NESSEN: Did I forget that?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: At 2:00, Secretary Butz will be here to talk to you about the veto of the farm bill. We will have the various documents that go with it at that time.

Q Has he actually vetoed it as of this moment?

MR. NESSEN: I don't believe he has signed the veto yet.

Q He has not?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Ron, does the White House have any response to the broadcast by the Communists this morning that we should move the ships away and stop picking up the South Vietnamese?

MR. NESSEN: All of the ships are in international waters, Bob.

Q So, they will stay there?

MR. NESSEN: Joe Laitin is having a briefing at Noon at which he will discuss the deployment of the ships. You will probably want to get the details from him.

Q Ron, Mrs. Ford said in New York yesterday that the President plans to speak to the American people on the subject of Vietnam. Is that scheduled and when and how?

MR. NESSEN: No, it is not, Fran.

Q He is not planning to do it?

MR. NESSEN: I say it is not scheduled.

Q But he is planning to do it?

MR. NESSEN: He will be speaking out on the subject.

Q When?

MR. NESSEN: There are no specific plans, Ralph.

Q Just a precautionary question, I guess. Will it be, by any chance, at the commissioning of the NIMITZ Saturday?

MR. NESSEN: No. There are no plans right now for a specific speech on the subject of Vietnam.

Q Might it come this week, nevertheless?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of any plans for one this week.

Q Ron, what about the subject for tomorrow? Will that be a serious speech?

MR. NESSEN: At Winchester?

Q Yes, sir.

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't think he is involved in speaking. Susan is getting crowned.

Q Ron, you said that there are no plans for him to make a speech on Vietnam, yet you say he is going to be speaking out on it.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I suspect he will be speaking out on the subject of Vietnam as we go along, but there are no specific plans for a specific speech on Vietnam.

Q Ron, yesterday several questions were addressed to you about the legality of the President's action in bringing out thousands of Vietnamese. I wondered if you pursued that matter with the President after your remarks yesterday?

MR. NESSEN: He told me he was aware of what I had said and I discussed what I had said, and he felt that that was precisely what he wanted to say because that was precisely the way he felt.

I had done some research on my own, incidentally, after that briefing, and found that any number of news executives and newsmen had been in touch with me or other White House or State Department officials in the past couple of weeks about evacuating their Vietnamese employees, and that included a whole series of phone calls from Dick Wald, the President of NBC, who was speaking on behalf of all the networks, as well as some other news organizations, asking about evacuating their Vietnamese employees.

I had a visit from Bill Small and Sandy Socolow, of CBS, who talked about the evacuation of their Vietnamese employees. I had a number of other communications and visits and phone calls from members of the press and press executives.

I had a phone call from a friend of mine who is a producer at NBC, married to a Vietnamese woman, and was concerned about getting her family out. I saw in the paper this morning where my neighbor and friend, Dick Swanson, who has a Vietnamese wife, had gone himself to make sure that his wife's family got on the American evacuation flight.

I must say that in all of these calls and visits and communications, none of the American news executives ever asked me whether the President had legal authority to take their Vietnamese employees out. They wanted their employees out for their own safety and never raised the question of the legality of it.

I suppose that mirrors the fact that they had the same concern about the lives and safety of their employees -- some of whom are our friends -- that the President exhibited when he decided that as many Vietnamese as possible should be taken out.

So, I assume from that that those news executives shared the President's concern about the safety of Vietnamese. We are not overly concerned about the legality of it.

Q Ron, have any of the news executives or any of the networks criticized you in any way since that time?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard of any, Bob.

Q Then, I just wonder why did you mention this?

MR. NESSEN: Just to indicate the kind of concerns that people shared with the President as far as safety is concerned.

Q Ron, does the White House have any response to the charge made on Capitol Hill yesterday by Senator Edward Moore Kennedy that the evacuation involved catastrophic bungling? I believe those were his words.

MR. NESSEN: The evacuation was carried out successfully. All Americans are out and a good number of Vietnamese are out.

Q Any comments on the Washington Post story that the President sent a very strong message to Mr. Martin alleging that not enough times is being spent on evacuation of Americans and too much on Vietnamese?

MR. NESSEN: I would only say that a good number of details of that story are incorrect. There were a great number of communications that went back and forth during that night and day. The fact is that 6,000 Vietnamese did get out, approximately. All the Americans got out. It was a successful operation.

There did come a time when it had to end, and I would not say anything further about that.

Q Could you tell us what the incorrect details are?

MR. NESSEN: It is over. It was a successful operation and I don't think I will go any further.

Q Ron, yesterday you said that someone knew that some of our Marines were still there after the announcement was made that the evacuation was completed. My notes indicate you were asked who, and you did not answer. Who knew that the Marines were still there?

MR. NESSEN: I did not, frankly, bother to follow that along, Ted.

Q Did Dr. Kissinger know?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, I did not follow that along.

Q Do you know who knew?

MR. NESSEN: I just have not bothered to pursue the matter.

Q Did the President know?

MR. NESSEN: Ted, as I said, I did not pursue the matter.

Q I understand that, but I am asking the question.

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I understand.



Q As far as you know, did the President know there was still Marines there?

MR. NESSEN: I simply have not gone into the matter other than to correct the record with a short statement that night. I did not detect any great interest in it, so I did not bother to pursue it.

Q Ron, could we make an official request for you to pursue that, please?

MR. NESSEN: The question, again, is who knew the Marines were there?

Q And specifically, did Dr. Kissinger know and did the President know?

MR. NESSEN: I will check that for you, Ted.

Q Ron, is the President unhappy that the Nixon-Thieu correspondence was released?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard him say he was unhappy.

Q Ron, on that subject, can you tell us on what you are basing a statement that these agreements were already on the public record? Can you say who said and at what time that the United States had pledged to provide full force in the event of North Vietnamese cease-fire violations?

MR. NESSEN: Norm, you probably were not here last night when I went through, at some length, the public record of statements, many of them stronger than the statements in the letters.

I think most of your colleagues have that. I have the public statements here and if you are interested, someone in the Press Office will go through it with you.

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Q I certainly am.

Q When was that put out?

MR. NESSEN: We were here at 7:15.

Q I am not aware of that. I called last night to find out what the White House was saying about this. I left my questions and got no answer. You say you assume we all know this. I don't know it. Could you go through the answers that are stronger than were made in the private communications?

Q Ron, isn't there a transcript of that?

MR. NESSEN: There is a transcript of my briefing last night, in which I read and gave the dates and citations. It is available, and you can check it.

Q Ron, did you say last night in the briefing what statements you felt were stronger than "full force"?

MR. NESSEN: I think they speak for themselves, Phil.

Q Did you say that last night?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I said some of these statements appeared to me to be stronger than what was in the letters.

Q Is there any way to identify those?

MR. NESSEN: I really don't want to go through this whole thing again. I guess I am about to go through the whole thing again.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan, on "Meet the Press" January 28, 1973, said, "There are no inhibitions on us."

Secretary of State Kissinger was asked about that about two or three days later in an interview with Marvin Kalb. The question was, "There are no inhibitions on us on the use of air power, is that correct?" Kissinger: "That is legally correct. We have the right to do this."

Q Dates on that, please.

MR. NESSEN: February 1, 1973.

Q Ron, can you just cite --

MR. NESSEN: If you want me to do it, let me do it. If you don't want me to do it, check afterwards and you can read the record yourself.

Q I will be delighted to have you do it.

MR. NESSEN: I think you have the public statements of President Nixon, Secretary Kissinger and the joint statement that was issued at San Clemente at that time. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Porter, in a speech in Grand Rapids on March 21, 1973 said, "If it continued" -- referring to infiltration by North Vietnam -- "this infiltration could lead to serious consequences."

Secretary of Defense Richardson at the time, appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 2, 1973, was asked -- and I think this is a significant question because it indicates that the same questions that are being raised now were being raised and answered more than two years ago -- "There are reports out of South Vietnam today that President Thieu of South Vietnam says that the United States and the South Vietnamese government have an agreement that if there is an offensive, that if the North Vietnamese do come in, that the United States will come back with its airplanes and with its air support. Do we have such a commitment?"

Answer: "This is a question simply of very possible contingencies. I would not want to try to amplify on anything he said, or to subtract from it." Then he went on to say, "The President has the Constitutional power to do this."

I think probably the most significant and strongest quotation of the time was the next day, April 3, 1973. Secretary Richardson, then the Defense Secretary, was asked by a reporter outside of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, "Is it possible that we will have to bomb either North Vietnam or in support of the South Vietnamese Army again?"

Richardson: "It is certainly something we cannot rule out at this time."

Q Ron, then can you cite any example, which you have not at this point, where Nixon Administration officials said the United States had a commitment to the government of South Vietnam expressed in a letter by the President to the President, that the United States would return with military force in the event of cease-fire violations. You cited one case in which that question was asked and was not answered.

MR. NESSEN: He said that was certainly one of the contingencies.

Q But it did not say there was such a commitment.

MR. NESSEN: Norm, the war is over. The issue is academic. Congress acted in the summer of 1973. If anyone did have a belief that there would be American military action, since the summer of 1973 the issue has been academic and moot.

The letters are on the record. The public record is there. Whether the words "vigorous reaction" is stronger than "full force" I will leave to the semanticists.

I believe I am going to stop.

Q Ron, one question that I have not heard asked that I am kind of curious about is, after the summer of 1973, was there any communication with the government of South Vietnam explaining the War Powers Act or was it felt that was unnecessary?

MR. NESSEN: I have not searched the record.

Q Ron, there were reports this morning from our people who were among those evacuated, that they were being told by American officials on the ship that the North Vietnamese set a deadline for evacuation which was not met by the American Embassy and that that is what prompted the last shelling of Tan Son Nhut and put U.S. things into motion, cost the lives of two Marines, et cetera.

Can you confirm such an ultimatum by the North Vietnamese and the U.S. response?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Have you heard about that?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Will you check it?

MR. NESSEN: Okay.

Q Ron, has the President asked Ambassador Martin what he meant when he said there is a Washington side and the other side?

MR. NESSEN: They have not been in contact with each other.

Q Ron, has the United States Government decided yet what it is going to call the capital of South Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Ron, the Foreign Minister of Thailand says that the United States soon will begin, in his words, "an enormous withdrawal of troops and equipment."

My questions are, number one, when was the President first informed of this, and what was his reaction to this, and does the domino theory come into play in the conversation with Thieu by the President?

MR. NESSEN: I think you should just back up a second, Cliff. Your questions are based on a whole series of assumptions. I think I can answer the general question without accepting your assumptions.

The United States has been in close consultation with the Thai government on American troop presence there, and these consultations on the troop levels are expected to continue.

Q Then the wire report quoting the Foreign Minister of Thailand, to your knowledge, is not accurate?

MR. NESSEN: I am telling you what the situation is.

Q This is a fairly important matter. The Thais are saying -- or at least this particular Thai official is saying -- that 26,000 or 27,000 American troops are coming out of there and coming out of there real quick. Is that wrong?

MR. NESSEN: The consultations are continuing, Jim.

Q So, the troops are not at this point coming out?

MR. NESSEN: The consultations are continuing.

Q You are not denying it?

MR. NESSEN: The consultations are continuing. Consultations on troop levels are continuing.

Q A two-part question on Korea. The last several days President Park Chung Hee has sort of escalated his rhetoric about the prospect of another North Korean invasion this year.

My first question is, is the President concerned that South Korea might be the next Communist target or at all concerned about the present situation there, and secondly, is any review going on now about the presence of 40,000 U.S. troops there and whether they should remain?

MR. NESSEN: I don't really have anything that I know of that is very helpful on the Korean situation.

Q Ron, what does the President plan to do in regard to the airplanes that were flown out of South Vietnam to Thai bases, and the Thais are now saying they are going to send those back.

MR. NESSEN: The United States is in contact with the Thai government on that matter, but I don't have anything I can give you on it right now.

Q Ron, there has been a lot of resistance to the idea of large numbers of Vietnamese refugees coming to various states. Is it the President's desire that all the Vietnamese who were taken out of Vietnam be resettled in the United States, or does he have an upper limit on the number that he would like to see settle here? What are his thoughts on refugees settling here?

MR. NESSEN: As I said yesterday, his thoughts are he has seen the editorials and the public statements by officials suggesting that it is the American tradition to show compassion and charity to our people who have fled oppression in their own countries, and he certainly expects Americans to show that same compassion this time.

Secretary Kissinger indicated the other day that while there have been some contacts with other countries about taking in some of the refugees that he would anticipate probably 90 percent of those would be coming to the United States.

Many have relatives in the United States and will be moving in with those relatives, and many others have sponsors in the United States and beyond that I just don't have very many details of how the rest will be cared for.

Ambassador Brown is coordinating the refugee program and is making those plans, and that would be a good place to check for further details.

Q Ron, why have you decided to refer questions about what the future policy and thinking of the South Vietnamese will be out there in regard to those ships -- why are you referring us to the Pentagon?

MR. NESSEN: Are you talking about the ships that are offshore?

Q Yes, sir.

MR. NESSEN: Because it is a question of moving military vessels. I did talk to Joe several times this morning, and I know he is going to talk about it at noon and is going to have a guest at his briefing who will be able to give even further details about it. They are in international waters. I don't know that it is a policy question.

Q Well, has the President told Mr. Schlesinger to just do whatever he thinks best or has he given him some views as to what he wants to continue doing?

MR. NESSEN: There are some ships staying --

Q What role is the President playing in this?

MR. NESSEN: He is Commander-in-Chief still this morning, Bob. Some of the ships are going to stay there to pick up the people out of the low boats that are coming off.

Q Back to the letters. When did the President --

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so, Ted. I really don't.

Q I am sorry. It is a free country, and I have a right to ask a question.

MR. NESSEN: Ask away.

Q When did the President know the exact language, specifically, "full force" and "swift and severe retaliation" rhetoric contained in the letters? Were those phrases used in the memorandum that he got from the NSC within a few days after he became President?

MR. NESSEN: Another question.

Q Ron, you said the letter matter is moot. Do you believe the President's credibility in saying that the letters add nothing to the public record is also moot?

MR. NESSEN: Another question.

Q Or inoperative?

MR. NESSEN: Thank you.

The press office announcements that we told you were coming are all in the bins.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 11:35 P.M. EDT)



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N E W S   C O N F E R E N C E

#203

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 4:05 P.M. EDT

MAY 1, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: The President has asked me to read you a statement. We will have printed copies available to give you immediately after this. I don't think any questions will be required.

The President is saddened and disappointed by the action of the House of Representatives today in rejecting assistance to the refugees from South Vietnam.

This action does not reflect the values we cherish as a Nation of immigrants. It is not worthy of a people which has lived by the philosophy symbolized by the Statue of Liberty. It reflects fear and misunderstanding, rather than charity and compassion.

Despite the House vote, the President believes that in this tragic situation the American people want their country to be guided by the inscription on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

After World War II, the United States offered a new life to 1,400,000 displaced persons. The generosity of the American people showed again following the Hungarian uprising of 1956, when more than 50,000 Hungarian refugees fled here for sanctuary. And, we welcomed more than a half million Cubans fleeing tyranny in their country.

Now, other refugees have fled from the Communist take-over in Vietnam. These refugees chose freedom. They do not ask that we be their keepers, but only, for a time, that we be their helpers.

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Some Members of the House of Representatives apparently voted against the legislation to assist the refugees because of a section relating to evacuation from South Vietnam. The evacuation is complete.

The President urges the Members of the House of Representatives and of the Senate to approve quickly new legislation providing humanitarian assistance to the South Vietnamese refugees. To do otherwise would be a repudiation of the finest principles and traditions of America.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 4:10 P.M. EDT)