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NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 7:10 P.M. (Madrid Time)

MAY 31, 1975

SATURDAY  
(Madrid, Spain)

MR. NESSEN: Some of your colleagues have expressed a certain amount of confusion as to several paragraphs in the pool report from this morning on the flight of Air Force One from Brussels to Madrid, at which a senior American official made some remarks and there was some confusion as to what those remarks meant.

I have had a chat with the senior American official and I would like to clarify one or two points. I don't see any need to take questions, but I think this will help some of you who have asked questions about the paragraph.

If you have the pool report from Air Force One, Brussels to Madrid, it is on page two. The second paragraph is the paragraph that is causing some confusion.

Let me say this in general terms. The senior American official --

Q Let me say this: There are a lot of reporters who wrote that story and they are not in this room and have not been alerted in any way.

MR. NESSEN: That is why we are making a transcript, Helen.

Q It is a sleeper, people are on deadlines.

Q Before you start, I would like to say one thing. You should welcome questions if you are going to challenge the report the stories are based on.

MR. NESSEN: I am not challenging the story or the reports based on it. I am giving the press a fuller expression of what the paragraph means.

Q Won't you expand on the --

MR. NESSEN: I don't feel I am qualified to expand beyond the clarification I want to offer.

Q What if it isn't clear?

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MR. NESSEN: Let's wait and see if it is clear.

First of all, the senior American official, in his reference to the possibility of any new war in the Middle East, feels that he was not saying anything new. He feels that he and the President, on many previous occasions, have said the same thing, that really all he meant to do was to repeat previous statements by himself and the President that if there were not a settlement in the Middle East, then the chances of a new war increased.

The paragraph in question speaks of a resurgence of interest in step-by-step diplomacy in the Middle East, which is true.

Q What?

MR. NESSEN: Which is true. There is a resurgence of interest -- in the view of this senior American official -- in step-by-step diplomacy in the Middle East.

What he feels may have gotten somewhat confused was the reference to the Soviet Union. He believes that the Soviet Union, as the sentence says, he feels the Soviet Union is becoming aware of the complexities of a full-scale Geneva meeting, however, he does not believe, in his view, that the Soviet Union is, at this point, pressuring or pushing or putting its influence behind a resumption of step-by-step diplomacy.

The other item he would like clarified is that there should be no announcement expected following the Salzburg meetings, no dramatic or new announcement out of those meetings.

The senior American official feels that it would be impossible to have such an announcement come out of that meeting until the President has had an opportunity to talk to Prime Minister Rabin and the senior American official wants you to realize that you should not build up an anticipation of a statement in Salzburg, and then, when there is no statement or it is not a major development, that the Salzburg talks should then be written off as a failure.

Q Would the senior official like to write our stories for us? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I did this because of an interest expressed by some of you and because, based on some wire accounts that have been called to my attention, there were varying interpretations of what the senior official meant to say, and I felt it would be of interest to pass on to you what he felt he meant to say. I hope that has not offended you greatly.

Walt?

Q With regard to the first point you made on the likelihood of war in the Middle East, I think that the suggestion that that has always been said by Kissinger and the President may well be true, but it has never been said that strongly or that definitively and if he said that, then I think that we are proper in sticking with the pool report as the story was reported in the pool report and following.

MR. NESSEN: Walt, obviously, you are free to write your stories as you wish. I am passing on to you what the senior official felt that he meant.

Q We don't think there has been any misinterpretation of what he said.

MR. NESSEN: Helen, I didn't say there were any misinterpretations of what he said. Some reporters asked me if I could clarify and some reporters pointed out to me that various interpretations were being put on his remarks.

Q Do they feel any clearer now as a result of this?

MR. NESSEN: Barry?

Q I wanted to ask if you could give us any instance of either the President or the Secretary of State saying war is a mathematical certainty within two years if there isn't progress. The phrase is "mathematical certainty."

MR. NESSEN: I don't have my files with previous statements. I know both have spoken of the high probability of war in the absence of a settlement.

Q You are speaking of interpretation here, but you are not withdrawing or correcting any statements that were made on the record on the basis of BACKGROUND, right?

MR. NESSEN: No. I am saying what the senior American official feels he meant to say-- I think, perhaps, the most serious concern he has at this moment relates to the linking of the Soviet Union to a resurgence of interest in step-by-step diplomacy.

He would rather put it in terms that the Soviet Union is becoming aware of the full-scale complexities of the Geneva meeting, but at this moment, the Soviets are not pushing for a step-by-step.

Q You are not ruling out a statement at the Salzburg meeting?

MR. NESSEN: Not ruling out a statement but, if there is a statement at all, or if there is not a dramatic announcement, the senior American official would not like you to interpret this as a failure of the Salzburg meeting.

Q He said in this pool report five times there was not going to be an announcement, so I don't see any problem there. He said, "There will be no important announcements."

MR. NESSEN: All right. I was just trying to help.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 7:18 P.M. Madrid Time)