

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:55 P.M. EDT

JUNE 9, 1975

MONDAY

MR. NESSEN: Right now the President is out in the Rose Garden with 33 graduates of the Capitol Page School and their families, and he is going to give them a Presidential certificate. The actual graduation exercises are tonight at 8:00 in the Cannon House Caucus Room.

Then, this afternoon at 2:00 the President is meeting with his energy and economic advisers.

Q     Do you know what that is about?

MR. NESSEN: No, I really don't. It is a very short agenda. The two topics are a review of the current economic state, and a consideration of problems involved with electric utility construction.

Then, as you know, the President is having a news conference tonight at 7:30, and he will be spending most of the rest of the afternoon preparing for that. It looks to me like the weather is going to hold up so it will be in the Rose Garden, as far as I know. If it suddenly turns bad, we move over to 450 of the EOB, but at the moment I think the Rose Garden looks okay.

Then -- just to project ahead a little bit -- on Saturday, this coming Saturday, the President is going down to Fort Benning, Georgia, to participate in the ceremonies commemorating the 200th anniversary of the United States Army and the Infantry. This is an all day celebration at Fort Benning. It is also going on at other Army installations.

Just to give you a very rough and tentative schedule, I would plan for the President to leave the White House at about 8:00 in the morning and get back to the White House at about 3:00 in the afternoon. The ceremonies down there, most of them will take place at York Field at Fort Benning. The President will speak there, and at the moment I don't have any further details, but will give them to you as the week goes on.

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Q Is this the Bicentennial ---

MR. NESSEN: The 200th anniversary sounds like the Bicentennial.

Q Why Fort Benning? Is Fort Benning one of the oldest bases, or what?

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Q It is the headquarters of the infantry?

MR. NESSEN: It is the home of the infantry.

Q Why Fort Benning -- why that base in preference to any other base in the Army? I know it is one or two of the oldest bases. Is that one of them?

MR. NESSEN: Among the 13 original colonies, Georgia has the largest Army training facilities of all the 13 original colonies.

Q Is that the basis?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q What is the subject of the speech?

MR. NESSEN: I have not seen a draft yet.

The President of the Socialist Republic of Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu, will call on the President on the afternoon of June 11th, during a brief stopover in Washington. This will give the two Presidents an opportunity to review U. S.-Romanian relations and to exchange views on other matters of mutual interest. He has been in Brazil and Mexico, and, so, it was convenient to stopover in Washington when he was on his way home to Romania.

Q Ron, will Ceausescu be extending an invitation which will be accepted by the President to visit Romania this year?

MR. NESSEN: Last August, as you may remember, there was a visit by an official emissary of the President of Romania, and he extended the invitation. And the President accepted it. No date has been set.

Q Was it for this year?

MR. NESSEN: It was just an invitation to visit.

I think you have a little packet of material, which contains the following: a nomination by the President of four people to be members of the United States Advisory Commission on International Educational and Cultural Affairs. The President also is nominating L. J. Andolsek for reappointment to the Civil Service Commission. He has been a member since 1963, and he is a Democrat. His salary is \$38,000. The President is nominating Thomas E. Noel to be Assistant Administrator of the Federal Energy Administration for Management and Administration. He is a Republican and also makes \$38,000 a year.

The President is transmitting to Congress the 7th Annual Report on Natural Gas Pipeline Safety. Copies of the report will be available in the Press Office following the briefing.

And the President is transmitting to Congress the 1974 Annual Report by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. You have that letter of transmittal, and if you want to see a full copy of the report, it is in the Press Room.

This afternoon, at 4:00, here in the Briefing Room, Rod Hills will be down to chat with you. This will be an on the record briefing. I believe Rod will be able to clear up a number of the questions that we had on Friday. The briefing will be embargoed for use immediately following the President's news conference.

Q Does that mean the report is going to be put out at 4:00?

MR. NESSEN: Not, it is not the report. It is a briefing to try to clear up some of the questions that were asked last Friday, frankly.

Q Why do we have to have an embargo until following the President's news conference? Can't the President answer these same questions, and won't he, at the news conference tonight?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President will have some other things to say on the report, Tom, and I thought that, perhaps, the better way to do it would be to get some of these matters out of the way that we had on Friday and then have the President talk about his own area that he will talk about tonight and then have both of them to go at the same time after the news conference.

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Q Ron, was this what delayed your briefing -- to work out the arrangements for this?

MR. NESSEN: Partly, yes.

Q Ron, when the President makes his opening statement, this may fit in with it?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think perhaps it will. I will talk to Rod before he comes out and we will determine whether it is for release at 7:30, which I guess is what you would prefer.

Q Ron, is this a public relations gimmick to soften the impact of things on the President?

MR. NESSEN: No, it isn't, Sarah.

Q When will the report be released?

Q Ron, I fail to understand why it could not be released at 6:00 or 6:30, before the President's news conference. What is the thing with having it released afterwards?

MR. NESSEN: Some of the things Rod will talk about will not be useable by themselves until after you have heard what the President says, Tom.

Q Then, how can we even file under an embargo if the story is not complete until the President's speech?

MR. NESSEN: I think we will have some things to tell you at 4:00 that will enable you to write your stories.

Q Ron, do you have the President's opening statement for tonight?

MR. NESSEN: There will be an opening statement by the President.

Q Will it be on the CIA?

MR. NESSEN: What, the opening statement? Yes.

Q Or on the Rockefeller Commission?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Will this be for film?

MR. NESSEN: That has not been decided yet, Phil. I did not really talk to Rod in that much detail, but we will get it worked out by 4:00.

Q Is this the first time in history we have ever heard a pre-press conference on the Presidential press conference?

MR. NESSEN: No, but what you have had, Sara, is where the President is making an announcement or unveiling something, and then we have a briefing to provide you with background and so forth which is embargoed for the same time as the Presidential statement.

Q That is the way it should go, really. It should be for release immediately when the President speaks.

Q Ron, could you explain now when the report is going to be released and whether the Rockefeller Commission itself, which did the work, is going to brief in advance of that?

MR. NESSEN: Of course, the President will announce tonight -- he has read the report over the weekend and I think he will probably announce his decision tonight whether to release it.

Q Ron, has he made the decision?

MR. NESSEN: I think he has made the decision, yes.

Q Is there any doubt that he is going to?

Q Is there any particular reason it cannot be announced at this briefing if he has made the decision?

MR. NESSEN: At this briefing here?

Q Yes. Is there any reason why you can't announce it?

MR. NESSEN: The President prefers to announce and explain his decision himself.

Q Have you yet heard anything to disabuse you of the notion or the assumption that the report will be released?

MR. NESSEN: I said back in January that I assumed it would be and I still do.

Q Ron, if it is, will the Rockefeller Commission brief on the report?

MR. NESSEN: If it is, we have not worked out the specific arrangements, but we will.

Q If there is some sort of embargo arrangement, could we have Mr. Belin and Rockefeller brief on the subject?

MR. NESSEN: If it is released, you can be assured that you will have adequate briefing.

Q Can you rule out tonight?

MR. NESSEN: For what?

Q For the release of the report?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot rule out anything, Helen, because the President has not announced his decision yet.

Let me see. I told you about the Hills briefing at 4:00. Now, let me read you a statement here that says this.

Q Ron, could I raise a question of why it would not be better to hold that Hills briefing closer to the President's press conference rather than have it at 4:00?

MR. NESSEN: Actually, Rod has some other things to do today, and this was the time most convenient to him, and I also had hoped that we would have as large as possible audience for the thing because there was, I think, intense interest in some of the things that Rod will be prepared to answer this afternoon, at my briefing on Friday, and I thought it would be good to get a lot of those things cleared up.

Q Is this room large enough to hold all the people that are going to want to come in?

MR. NESSEN: It was large enough on Friday.

Q That was before you opened it all up, though.

Q Let's hear this statement.

Q What is this statement on?

Q Who is it from?

MR. NESSEN: I guess you can put it under my name.

Why don't I read it quickly and by the time the briefing is over they will have copies all made.

The President is very concerned that Congress has failed to pass the second supplemental. He feels that it is essential that Congress pass this so that this Federal Government can honor its commitments to groups such as the GI bill program participants.

As you are aware, on June 2 the Executive Branch was not able to make a regularly scheduled payment to veterans because the Congress had not yet completed its action on the second supplemental. As the days go by we have now missed a second payment so that there are about 300,000 GI bill participants who will not receive their benefit checks on a timely basis.

In another week, we are going to miss another regularly scheduled payment date. In addition to that, if Congress fails to take action on the second supplemental by the end of this week, not only will the GI bill program participants be in arrears for their benefits, but we will be at the point where the Executive Branch is not able to make advances to the States for the unemployment insurance programs and we no longer will have any funds to obligate for food stamp participants.

Also, 30 million Social Security checks of \$50 each are waiting on passage of this bill.

Q How much is the supplement?

MR. NESSEN: \$15-1/2 billion.

Q What is the hold-up?

MR. NESSEN: The hold-up is the House of Representatives passed the bill. The House has passed its version. There is a provision in there called the railroad roadbed improvement appropriation which the House of Representatives and the Administration don't believe should be part of this bill because it does not really deal with the overall problem of railroads. And the Administration feels that you would just be throwing away money to do this on a piecemeal basis under the guise of creating jobs, and the House has agreed with that and has already twice turned down this provision for the same reason.

However, the Senate is insisting on keeping this railroad roadbed provision in the bill.

Let me just say that what is holding up the bill is the Senate insistence on including this railroad roadbed provision.

Q Ron, is this the public works jobs to improve roadbeds? Is this the same thing we were talking about last Saturday?

MR. NESSEN: No. The \$5.3 billion or \$5.9 billion bill. This is not that bill.

Q What would this provision do that the Senate is insisting on it?

MR. NESSEN: Have you got the details of that provision, John?

Q Has the Administration had its men out there lobbying to sustain the House position?

MR. NESSEN: I think they made the Administration position clear.

Q Which is?

MR. NESSEN: The bill ought to be passed quickly so GI's and veterans and the others can get their money and not hold it up with a fight over improving railroad roadbeds.

Q When was that supplemental request made?

MR. NESSEN: John will get all the details for you after the briefing.

Q What is the amount involved?

MR. NESSEN: Over \$15 billion for the overall bill.

Q Is your position the same on the report of the bombing strikes in the last days of the evacuation in Saigon and South Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, it is not a question of a position. It is a question of the facts, and the facts of the matter are that, there were no -- and I tried to emphasize this to some people that called me over the weekend before the story was printed. I just want to state categorically that there were no massive air raids on South Vietnam in connection with the evacuation effort.

There was one tactical air strike, consisting of two F-4s, against an anti-aircraft position, and one helicopter returned gun fire on an enemy gun position that was firing on it. These reactions were necessary to insure the safety of American lives and the success of the evacuation.

Q Were they previously reported?

MR. NESSEN: My memory is that, at the end of the evacuation, these were reported.

Q How many bombs were dropped in attack air strike?

MR. NESSEN: The NSC's recollection was two.

Q Two 1,000 pounders?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any idea of the size of the bombs.

Q Were any B-52 sorties flown out of Thailand?

MR. NESSEN: I think a categorical statement that there were no air raids, massive air raids, on South Vietnam, seems to me, takes care of this. Categorical means categorical.

Q It does not take care of the possibility that sorties were flown and bombs were dropped.

MR. NESSEN: You mean, the planes whizzed overhead and turned back?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Have you heard something like that?

Q No.

MR. NESSEN: Neither have I.

Q I just wanted to check all the possibilities.

MR. NESSEN: I understand.

Q If you want to be categorical, let's be categorical. Were there any B-52s flying over the evacuation zone awaiting orders to drop --

MR. NESSEN: Not that I am aware of.

Q Is your use of the word "massive" designed to cover B-52s?

MR. NESSEN: My use of the word "massive" is to make sure you understand there were two tactical airplanes that made one strike on one anti-aircraft position and one helicopter fired at a gun position that fired at it.

Q Are you saying, then, these were the only air strikes that the U. S. was involved in during the evacuation?

MR. NESSEN: I have been trying to say that since last Friday.

Q What kind of aircraft were they?

MR. NESSEN: F-4s.

Q Ron, was the President aware of these, or did he give the order for these strikes?

MR. NESSEN: He knew about these two tactical air strikes that were flown in connection with the evacuation to protect the evacuation.

Q Ron, was this reported in the letter that went to Congress?

MR. NESSEN: My memory is that it was, and a number of other people thought it was too. But I did not check that out this morning. I remember that.

Q Do you have any details of other problems to be discussed with the President of Rumania?

MR. NESSEN: Do I have any information about the subjects to be discussed, did you say?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I don't have a detailed agenda, but I assume trade matters would be among those discussed.

Q What about immigration matters?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any other items on the agenda, Bonnie, except the fact, I assume, trade will be one of them.

Q Do you know whether Romania gets most-favored nation treatment now, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know the answer to that, Peter.

Q Didn't Nixon give it to them?

Q Do you have a schedule on the Rabin visit, the details on it?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't have it yet.

Q Isn't that one of these days involved with the Ceausescu visit?

MR. NESSEN: It is one of the same days that Rabin is going to be here, yes.

I do hope that we are clear now on the bombing raids, because, in all honesty, I have tried to make this point since last Friday without, obviously, a great deal of success. But there are occasions when I feel that it is totally justified to say, "Look, I categorically deny that anything like that happened," and I feel that this is one of those occasions, that there are not any little catch words or code words being used here. It just didn't happen.

Q Ron, do you have a time on when this strike did occur, or when it happened, and where was this anti-aircraft?

MR. NESSEN: I did not, Bob, but it was at some point during the evacuation.

Q Ron, is it your feeling, as Press Secretary, that your denial, beginning last Friday, should have forestalled and prevented publication of that story?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, John, I don't think I ought to be a media critic. I really don't.

Q Where was this anti-aircraft position? Do you have a place?

MR. NESSEN: I don't, but, again, I have a memory that this was outlined at the time. But I have to look back in the records and find out if that is true.

Q Ron, has the President gotten any information, or expressed any particular concern about the reports that estimated 3 million Cambodians were forced out of Phnom Penh, and apparently, there is no information about them?

MR. NESSEN: Is he concerned about them?

Q Has he expressed any concern and has he gotten any reports at all?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that there is anybody there any more to send any reports back.

Q So, has he expressed concern about it, because it just seems they are missing and nobody knows?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I have not heard him talk directly about that subject. I know, at the time of the Mayaguez, when he was talking about the predictability, or unpredictability of the Cambodians, that that was an example of the kind of new authorities who were in place there and the kinds of things they did which were not entirely understandable to us.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END

(AT 1:17 P.M. EDT)

This Copy For \_\_\_\_\_

NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 1:40 P.M. EDT

JUNE 9, 1975

MONDAY

MR. NESSEN: I was asked whether the protective air strike that was launched during the evacuation was known at the time. Phil Buchen has kindly dug out of his files the letter that President Ford sent to Congress on April 30, 1975.

It says this: "U. S. fighter aircraft provided a protective air cover for this operation and for the withdrawal by water of a few Americans from Can Tho, and in one instance, suppressed North Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery firing upon evacuation helicopters as they departed. The ground secured forces, on occasion, returned fire during the course of the evacuation operation."

So, it was mentioned.

Q That does not say anything about the F-4s, though. It talks about helicopters, am I correct?

MR. NESSEN: No, it says: "U. S. fighter aircraft provided protective air cover and, in one instance, suppressed North Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery firing upon evacuation helicopters."

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Q Which incident is not mentioned in the letter? Is it the helicopter incident or is it the F-4?

MR. NESSEN: Apparently, the helicopter was not mentioned in the letter.

Q If I remember, at the time of the MAYAGUEZ thing ---

MR. NESSEN: We are talking about the Saigon evacuation.

Q The Vietnamese evacuation, it said one F-4 returned fire and silenced a battery. Now we are adding a second F-4 to that.

MR. NESSEN: It was one sortie consisting of two airplanes.

Q At the time, as I remember, it was one F-4 returned fire.

MR. NESSEN: I don't ---

Q This letter that was sent, was that sort of a summation of the evacuation or what was it?

MR. NESSEN: If you recall, at the time we said that the President was sending this letter in keeping with the spirit of the War Powers Act. So I can leave this here for you.

Q That was made public, wasn't it?

MR. NESSEN: Sure. So anyhow, what I am trying to say, I guess, is that yes, the episode was announced at the time.

Q One of the episodes?

MR. NESSEN: As you will.

Q For planning, you left me with the idea that perhaps we are going to get the Rockefeller report dumped on us tonight.

MR. NESSEN: I thought I said no, clearly no.

Q Ron, apparently you had a little briefing here after your briefing in which you told some people you expected the report to be released before Rabin gets here. Is that for publication?

MR. NESSEN: A White House source said that.

Q That is Tuesday.

Q That is tomorrow.

MR. NESSEN: Or Wednesday morning.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 1:45 P.M. EDT) #242