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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF

JIM CAVANAUGH
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, THE DOMESTIC COUNCIL

MARY MULLEN
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL RETIRED TEACHERS ASSOCIATION
AND

JACK OSSOFSKY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING

THE BRIEFING ROOM

3:50 P.M. EDT

MR. HUSHEN: Ladies and gentlemen, we have two representatives from the Senior Citizens Group that met with the President today to brief. The meeting, as you know, began about 2:00 P.M. It was scheduled to last about 45 minutes with the President. He stayed almost a full hour and then the meeting continued for another 30 minutes.

We have with us here today Mary Mullen, President of the National Retired Teachers Association, from Laguna Beach, California; and Mr. Jack Ossofosky, Executive Director of the National Council on the Aging, and Jim Cavanaugh, new Deputy Director of the Domestic Council, and I would like to ask Jim just to give you a brief fill on what transpired at the meeting and then the two briefers will be available for your questions.

MR. CAVANAUGH: Thank you, Jack. The President indicated to the organizations and to the individuals who were represented there today his complete dedication to working with them in the years ahead in his Administration and reviewing with them the needs of the Nation's aged.

The groups represented at today's meeting have a collective membership of over 11 million members. As you know, there are some 20 million persons in the country 65 years and over. President Ford indicated to those present that they could be assured of his continuing deep and personal commitment and interest to the problems of the Nation's elderly.

He indicated to them he realized the problems that the Nation's elderly have with inflation and that he had identified inflation as the number one public enemy today. He outlined a number of steps that he will be taking on the fight against inflation in the months ahead, including the economic summit.

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(OVER)

He indicated that he realized the deep problems that the Nation's elderly have in meeting health care costs and indicated his desire to continue to work with Senator Long and Chairman Mills on the issue of health insurance.

The President pointed out that a day does not go by when we don't know of some family that has been hit with a catastrophic illness, that the cost of that illness wipes out a family's resources literally overnight, and that we needed to get meaningful health insurance legislation enacted at an earlier date.

The President indicated he was somewhat disappointed that the vote in the House Ways and Means Committee earlier this week did not move health insurance out of that committee onto the Floor but that we would be working through the current Congressional recess on various alternative health insurance plans and work with the Congress when they return on moving health insurance through the Congress and down to the President's desk.

Q Miss Mullen, I wonder if you could tell us how you feel about the meeting, what you learned from the meeting?

MISS MULLEN: I learned a great deal. I learned this: that there are a number of organizations as well as ours which I represent, the National Retired Teachers Association of over 500,000 members in each of the 50 States including Hawaii and Alaska, and of course the American Association of Retired Persons, which has 7.5 million, but it is interesting and encouraging to know that there are other organizations whose programs are very similar to ours, if not the same.

Q What about your meeting with the President? What is your feeling about that?

MISS MULLEN: I think that the President seemed to me as a man just like any of you gentlemen out here in this meeting, that you can sit down and talk to him face-to-face and hand-to-hand, and work with him shoulder-to-shoulder. I think he has quite a great understanding of our problems and I think he is sincere in making every effort that he can to try to solve some of the problems that inflation is causing, not only for the elderly but for the younger generation such as you.

Q Did you learn anything specific that was new, Miss Mullen, from the President, that you weren't aware of?

MISS MULLEN: No, only that it is encouraging to know that he is aware of so many of the things that are going on.

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Q Did you ask him for anything specific out of this meeting today?

MISS MULLEN: No, we didn't; not anything specific.

Q You were in there for an hour and a half. You had an hour with him and half an hour by yourself. What did you accomplish today by coming here?

MISS MULLEN: Well, we know that the President is aware of the problem, as this gentleman who spoke before me stated, that inflation is the number one priority problem in the country, not only affecting the elderly, but affecting all segments of our population.

We know that we need a health insurance program for all citizens, particularly the elderly, who employ that more as they grow older, and of course the prices of health care, as you know, have skyrocketed, 45 percent in no time at all.

We also learned that we need to improve our program of nutrition, of seeing to it that the segment of the population among the elderly that are on the poverty level receive proper nutrition. Transportation is another problem in our age bracket. We have people who are shut-ins and there is no public transportation to take them to the shopping areas, such as that.

Q Did the President tell you anything that he will do specifically to fight inflation, any specific steps he is going to take?

Q To help you?

MISS MULLEN: To help us?

Q To help anybody?

MISS MULLEN: No, he made no definite statements. You mean in the way of legislation?

Q In the way of anything?

MISS MULLEN: I think he is going to be very interested in seeing that legislation is carried through to improve this situation as soon as he can.

Q Mr. Ossofsky, can I ask you, no President would ever come out against helping the elderly and you have sat in on these kinds of meetings before. What was different? What does it really mean?

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MR. OSSOFSKY: I think it is significant to say that this is a different meeting in a number of ways. First of all, the fact that the meeting took place is indeed a difference. This was a meeting at which the President invited those of us from the voluntary sector who are representing either organizations composed of or serving the elderly to come and talk with him.

I am not at all disturbed by the fact that no major concrete statements or programs came from this meeting. The meeting was for the purpose of the President listening to us, and the fact is he did that, and that to me is a remarkable thing to have had happen.

Q Why is that?

MR. OSSOFSKY: Because it has not happened for a good number of years.

Q Miss Mullen, what legislation to fight inflation did the President say he was going to ask Congress to approve?

MR. OSSOFSKY: The President indicated to us that he would be looking at fiscal policy, and at means of dealing with the budget. It might be of some significance to point out to you that those of us representing the interest of the elderly pointed out to the President that we were concerned that the cuts in the budget that needed to take place ought not to be in services that assist older people in living fuller lives.

A number of us commented on the importance of maintaining and indeed increasing some of the programs that are basically new to the country because we have just begun dealing with the real issues for older people.

Q What did the President say in response to that?

MR. OSSOFSKY: I can't say he made any very specific response but I would say that he generally seemed to react with favor to that notion. The President has in the past recent days indeed spoken about the need to avoid affecting the vulnerable groups of our society as the budget cuts take place, and some of us pointed out that the elderly are among the most vulnerable in our society.

I understand that you would like to have some very hard results of this meeting, and I am sympathetic to that because I would like to have seen that too. On the other hand I am most encouraged by the fact that we not only were invited here today, within the first two weeks of this Administration, but have indeed been invited to come back and keep an open door policy. That is very important for those of us outside the Government.

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Q Were there any meetings set up with you for later on to talk about hard and cold facts about the aged?

MR. OSSOFKY: No, there was no specific meeting, but it was made quite clear that we ought to keep the door open and such meetings with individual members of the President's staff would be made available to us, and indeed there was an implication that the President himself might want to meet again with this kind of group.

Q Was there any indication that those living on fixed income would be invited to participate in the economic summit?

MR. OSSOFKY: It was suggested to the President that the elderly who are living on a fixed income, might both as those who carry much of the burden of the inflation, as well as his people of wisdom and experience have something to contribute to the meeting and I assume that it would be appropriate to tell you that he at that point asked a member of his staff to see to it that that was done.

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Q Based on what you heard today, how soon would you look for lower inflation?

MR. OSSOFSKY: I wish I had a magic date for you. None of us at this meeting had very quick or simple answers, and I doubt that the President does. I think it is going to take some time.

We pointed out to the President, and he seemed to understand and be responsive to the fact that older people are paying a very heavy price for inflation, and I don't mean that as a pun. We gave some very specific examples. Indeed, Miss Mullen pointed out the fact that it cost, in some places, 35 cents to buy a peach, and there were other such instances. I sensed a very concerned President.

Q Miss Mullen, did you get any idea out of that meeting how soon prices would come down?

MISS MULLEN: No, and I don't think -- this is my own thinking: This has been coming on our country, you know, for a long time. It didn't happen in two weeks. So we can't expect a President to solve the problem in two weeks. It has been rolling up, you know what as well as any of the rest of us, for a long, long time.

MR. OSSOFSKY: You might be interested to know, too, that in addition to concerns about health care and programs of services, there was also considerable emphasis put by a number of speakers at that meeting for creating opportunities for continued employment by older people. There was considerable concern expressed about the fact that many older people are pushed into poverty or pushed out of the opportunity to work by virtue of compulsory retirement.

There were many suggestions made to the President today about things the Administration ought to look into and begin dealing with. I don't want to create the impression that we have solved our problems in today's meeting. None of you are so foolish as to believe that even if I told you that.

I think we made a very significant beginning for a group of people who represent great numbers of our population. And by the way, we are not just talking for 21 million older people. We are talking about the future of all the people in the country. Eight out of ten people today between the age of 30 and 40 will reach 65 and older. So we are not dealing here with a minority of the population.

The programs that are established, the tone that is set in dealing with this sector of the population will, in time, affect the future of all of our citizens. And the fact that so early in the Administration we had an opportunity to sit down with the President and examine how these kinds of issues affect older people was of tremendous importance to us.

We also agreed, I dare say, that we may ultimately disagree about some things, and the President made it clear that there may be some suggestions that were put forward today that will indeed not find favor with him.

The fact is, we can at least have enough of an open door to exchange views in private hearings of this sort, and perhaps as a result, find it possible to avoid public confrontations later on.

Q Do you have a deadline for the President to act on the aging legislation or programs?

MR. OSSOFSKY: No, but I would say that certain aspects of aging legislation have already been acted on. The fact that the President has signed the housing and community development bill, which includes new housing for older people, is a benefit to older people. He indicated to us his anticipation of signing the pension reform act. That is tremendously important for older people, particularly for those who will be aging in the coming years.

That is very immediate results, from my point of view, about a very quick response to the needs of older people.

Q Mr. Ossofsky, did you present the President with a written list of legislative proposals?

MR. OSSOFSKY: No, but most of us did present the President or his staff with a brief statement summarizing certain recommendations, and I will be happy to make mine available to you. I am afraid I don't have lists from all the other organizations.

Q Could you tell us what headed that list or those lists?

MR. OSSOFSKY: Well, all of us agreed that inflation is a major problem for older people. The President called it public enemy number one. In the statement to the National Council on the Aging which I presented, we happened to have called it the number one terror for older people. And indeed it is a terror not only for those already retired, it is a sense of terror for those in the middle years who are seeing that their future hopes and pensions they are putting aside funds for will be eroded at the point of retirement.

So inflation is indeed a major problem. Our hope is that in dealing with the problems of inflation we will curtail our Government's spending, if that is one of the roads to be taken, in areas other than the curtailment of social services. A number of our speakers did deal with that issue and urged that the President be careful in that way. As a matter of fact, the phrase that I used in that regard was that when the surgeon's scalpel is used, we hope it is used with great care as far as human service is concerned.

MISS MULLEN: We thank you for inviting us and I would like to say to you, get ready for retirement because you will all be there one day.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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(AT 4:06 P.M. EDT)