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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
PRESS CONFERENCE  
OF  
DONALD RUMSFELD  
ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT  
  
THE BRIEFING ROOM

11:59 A.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: I would like to introduce to you, for some things he would like to say to you and for your questions, the Assistant to the President, Ambassador Rumsfeld.

MR. RUMSFELD: Greetings. It is a pleasure to be here. I thought what I would do is just make a very brief remark and then I will be happy to respond to your questions.

We received a number of calls from the press, and I have been on the job now about 3 hours and 58 minutes, and I thought rather than spending all of my time during this first day or two responding that it might be useful to visit briefly now and give people a chance to pose some questions, if that is your wish.

I have been asked to and have accepted this post as Assistant to the President. For the period immediately ahead, I am continuing as Ambassador to NATO.

As you know, the President has announced a nomination for the successor, and I expect to be going back to Brussels sometime in October to wind up my responsibilities there.

The post that I have been assigned is to assist in the task of coordination of White House operations. My preference and my desire and my intention during this early period is to tackle that job, attempt to fulfill the responsibilities that the President has assigned me, and to work to see that the Ford Presidency goes forward.

There is a great deal of work to do. There is a new budget for the next year. There is a legislative program. The President has indicated that he wants an orderly decision-making process in the White House. He has charged me with the responsibility of assisting him in seeing that that is achieved.

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I have one thing that I have asked of the President and will try to adhere to. I know it will be difficult, but I have suggested to him, and he has agreed, that for the period immediately ahead I feel it is desirable for me to dig in on my responsibilities, to -- probably to the extent I am able -- avoid deeply enmeshing myself in substantive questions and attempting to see that the general operations are fully coordinated and that the procedures and the decision-making process here in the White House proceeds on a basis that is orderly so that the decisions of the office of the Presidency can be made.

I will be happy to respond to your questions.

Q Mr. Ambassador, do you feel that candor suffered any ills in the manner in which your position was handled by the White House; specifically, the fact that General Haig was supposed to stay on for the indefinite duration and you expressed great reservations about taking this position, and yet apparently from the onset this change was planned?

MR. RUMSFELD: It is not correct from the onset that this change was planned. It is my understanding, which is admittedly incomplete -- and I don't want to try and answer a number of questions about the discussions that took place between General Haig and the President -- but insofar as I understand it, the President did ask General Haig to stay on.

General Haig expressed a desire to return to military service, and within a very recent period the President agreed to that. If there is something beyond that, I am not aware of it.

I can speak for myself, however, and I had the assignment, of course, of coordinating the transition for a period of something just under two weeks in the very early period. During that period, I was asked by a number of people in the press if I was going to replace Haig, and I indicated that I was not.

At that point, as I indicated in response to questions, it had never been discussed with me by the President. I amplified to three or four people, as I recall, as to what my thoughts were about that possibility, and I gave my thoughts very directly and very honestly.

I was in the United States for a period because my father passed away. The President called and asked me to come to Washington, and I kind of lost track of when that was, but I think it was a week ago or so, and I came in on Sunday and met with the President, and he talked to me, indicating literally for the first time on this subject, told me what his situation was, that General Haig would be leaving.

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He outlined a set of responsibilities that he felt were very important that they be filled, and filled promptly, and he indicated he felt I was the person to do it, and after some discussion about those responsibilities, I agreed to do it.

In answer to your question, no, I don't feel that candor suffered because we were very direct and specific. I found that way, however, about my entire career. If anyone told me I would be managing wage-price controls 15 minutes before I started to do it, I wouldn't have believed it.

Q How will the Ford White House been different from the Nixon White House?

MR. RUMSFELD: Well, since I am an instant expert of four hours on the subject --

Q If you include some of your transition recommendations, it would be good.

MR. RUMSFELD: -- my understanding is a number of the transition recommendations have already been implemented. I have not gone back and reread that report to see to what extent they have or haven't, but that is certainly something I ought to do.

Without getting into comparisons, and admittedly after only a very brief time here, my feeling and my hope is that the Ford Presidency will in fact be that, a Ford Presidency.

Now, how will that differ? I suppose every President differs. They are different people. President Ford comes to this job from a background which you are very familiar with. So, too, I come to the post having served in the Congress, having been involved in domestic affairs, economic affairs and most recently national security affairs.

The White House should, in my judgment, be a reflection of the President. It should fit his approach, his preferences, his needs, and it also should reflect the circumstances of the times we are living in.

So, how will it be different? I guess I really can't say at this point except that the goal of the President and certainly my goal is to see that it is an office of the Presidency that reflects him and the circumstances of the times.

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Q I am talking about the power per se that your role will have and what we saw in the last Administration and you were a part of the last Administration, so you have firsthand knowledge of where the pitfalls were.

MR. RUMSFELD: I, of course, have been in Washington, since I left the Navy, almost steadily since 1957, first as Assistant to a Congressman during the Eisenhower Administration, and as a Congressman during the Kennedy, Johnson and early part of the Nixon Administration.

They have differed. I guess the question you are asking really is not so much of the President or me but the office of the Presidency, how will it operate. I think one very important thing which the President has said, and which I personally subscribe to deeply, is that he is a person who by background and inclination wants, desires and in fact will have multiple sources of information; that is to say, I have no desire or no intention, nor does he, to have the President or me or anyone else lock the door.

He is comfortable visiting with people. He is interested in their views. He is used to it. I feel it is valuable and important that there be effective communication between a President and the office of the Presidency and the American people and the Congress and the press.

The other side of the coin, the balance that has to be struck, is there must be an orderly process, if the Presidential decision-making is going to go forward in a way that best serves the American people.

Certainly, knowing his background and his desire and knowing my background and my interest and knowing the things that he has said, and in fact his behavior pattern, I would guess that we would without question see a continuation of this desire on his part to see that he has information from various people in various ways, and not one single funnel to him.

Q Mr. Rumsfeld, you said you would not be getting involved, by your request, and you would avoid getting involved in substantive questions until these other things are done. Are you meaning to say, firstly, that you will not be accessible to us for a time or are you also meaning to say that you will not play a direct role in making policy recommendations for a time?

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MR. RUMSFELD: I made my comment carefully, and I indicated that it was my conviction that I had to get into this job and see that the overall operation of the White House went in a smooth and orderly way.

It strikes me that to do that effectively, it is not really possible for me to become a firefighter, dealing with one particular problem now, that what is important is for me to deal with the broadest coordination questions, and I intend to do that.

Now, in terms of my commenting on these subjects, sure, I have obviously from my background an interest in economic policy. I have an interest in domestic policy. My present assignment in NATO involves me deeply in national security policy.

I am human, I am just one person. There is no way in the world for me to do everything at once and I have tackled some assignments previously, and I have found the best approach for me is to dig in, to deal with the pieces in an orderly way, and I intend to do that.

Now, insofar as my availability to the press on substantive questions, my inclination is to not become an additional press spokesman or an additional economic spokesman. Mr. Nessen has been assigned that responsibility for the press. We have people who have been assigned responsibilities for national security affairs, for economic affairs, and the importance is achieving good communication out.

The danger is that notwithstanding one's interest or views that you can confuse the communication going out by having me then start commenting on a whole range of things. So, in answer to your question, my present plan is that if people call me and say what is this about economic policy, rather than becoming a frequent visitor down to this podium, or rather than responding to a whole lot of questions on that, it is important that we use our economic spokesman, and questions be directed to him and the people who are spending full time working in that area.

So, that is my hope. Now, how it will actually work out I don't know, quite honestly. I have never had this job before and the President of the United States has never been President before.

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Q Mr. Rumsfeld, I wanted to follow up this question because we have been told, number one, this is going to be a Ford White House and not a Nixon White House, that you want effective communication and candor.

A week ago I asked how many Nixon holdovers are on the White House payroll, and I have just been told that it is not possible to find that out. I wonder why. And secondly, three Presidential press spokesmen have told this group that Dr. McLaughlin is going to leave soon. I wonder if it is possible to get a definition of what "soon" means.

MR. RUMSFELD: Well, needless to say, after the first three hours I have not reviewed those questions and I --

Q Can you help us in getting this information, because this is not what I regard as candor or effective communication. We saw a thing in the Star News that there is a whole bunch of these Nixon people like Buchanan and Clawson still on the payroll and we would like to know why.

MR. RUMSFELD: It is probably one of many questions that deal with a variety of White House operations and certainly I will be talking with the people on the White House staff about a variety of matters, possibly including those.

Q I am not quite sure I understood one of your questions about your role here. Were you saying in effect that you will have a policy-making role in such areas as economics, national --

MR. RUMSFELD: No, I am specifically saying that I don't know how my role will evolve. I know what my assignment has been and maybe -- the President, in meeting with the senior staff this morning, made some comments which might help to clarify it. I don't think it lends itself to perfect clarity, however, because I am just starting and I don't know quite how it will evolve.

I can modestly say he was pleased I was here; he indicated that I would be in charge of coordination of White House operations. He said that all Presidents differ in their approach and their work patterns, but that any organization needs top-notch coordination and that he knows me and he said some other things, which I won't go into.

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He said that he has asked me to assume that responsibility for overall coordination of the White House, and that he says my task in the period immediately ahead to see that the White House operation is running smoothly and that the burden is on me and so on and so forth.

Now, to do that it seems to me that I will not end up trying to troubleshoot a whole lot of series of problems. My general approach in dealing with the new assignment is to look at it in its broadest form, to establish some priorities and begin to deal with them and work off the problems and, therefore, I don't intend to become a spokesman on these other substantive areas that someone asked me about.

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Q In your introductory talk, you made at least three references which do indicate that you don't intend to stay on an overly long time. You said, in the period immediately ahead --

MR. RUMSFELD: I made no comment that I intended any such implication.

Q You said during the early period, and again, you went back to during the period immediately ahead. There is a man nominated to replace you. Surely you must have some idea what you want to do after you get all of that coordination done.

MR. RUMSFELD: I do not, and I am sorry if I left that impression. I was trying to present to you my sense of what I have to do in this period immediately ahead. How the job would evolve after that is what I don't really know. I am not in a position to say.

Q Is there a time limit on your tenure?

MR. RUMSFELD: No, there is not a time limit on my tenure, but I look at my work in pieces, really, and it seems to me that coming into the job new, it is understandable that I would kind of look at the period immediately ahead and say, "What needs to be done first, what are my priorities," and that is how I have approached it, and it is certainly what I meant.

Q Do you anticipate any role on any political campaigns in the next couple of years?

MR. RUMSFELD: The next couple of weeks?

Q During the period of time you will be here as coordinator.

MR. RUMSFELD: I quite honestly haven't addressed it, but now you have posed it, it strikes me I am going to be rather busy doing this job.

Q What are you going to do in the course of a day? What are you going to coordinate? Are you going to make the President's schedule? How do you see your job in terms of what you specifically will do?

MR. RUMSFELD: Well, I can tell you a little bit about this morning for openers. We had a senior staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room.

Q Did you preside?

MR. RUMSFELD: Yes, I did, except for the brief period when the President was there. We used that forum, that forum has been used to exchange information and alert people as to what is taking place in other parts of the organization. I met with the President, I believe, about 8:30.

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Q What time was that staff meeting?

MR. RUMSFELD: Eight o'clock this morning. We discussed a number of items. The vast majority were scheduled items, as it happens. He had a series of recommendations that had come up from his senior advisers, and various people, and we went through those, deciding yes, no, he could do this or couldn't do that; let us move this up or back, or what have you.

We then participated in a meeting with the President and Mr. Nessen where Mr. Nessen posed a number of questions to the President. I then had a series of brief meetings with some other people, including Mr. Nessen, and went back to my office and sent out some indications of things that the President decided at that early meeting, and then I took a deep breath and walked in here.

I will take the last question right here. Make it a tough one for me because the others haven't been.  
(Laughter)

Q This is the first time we have seen him and the first time we know how the White House operates.

MR. RUMSFELD: No, I haven't indicated at all how the White House operates. I have indicated what I am thinking about for the future.

Q Let me go ahead, and that is, will you be responsive to questions from the press? Let me go on. In the last Administration, I don't know what happened with others, but in my own case I found often when I tried to find out something, they would direct me to General Haig, and there was no response when I put in telephone calls. In other words, we just left there without an answer to very important questions. There are going to be moments when, I am sure, you are going to be the person who could give us the answer. Are you going to be responsive under those circumstances?

MR. RUMSFELD: Well, first of all, I have, over a period of time as a Congressman and Director of OEO, and the Cost of Living Council, of course met with the President on a regular basis, and as Ambassador to NATO. This is a different situation in that I am an Assistant to the President, so I haven't really thought through, and certainly at some point, I will talk to Ron and the President about -- I walk into it with a bit of bias, to be perfectly honest with you.

I am not personally persuaded that an Assistant to the President can usefully become public -- I have a question in my mind about the extent to which it would be appropriate for me to become a regular public press briefer, if you will.

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In answer to your question about specific questions, certainly I will see people as we go along. I, like anyone else, you have so many hours in the day and you will do it, but my intention would be that rather than having people say, "Ask Rumsfeld about a specific thing," rather than that, they would indicate that there are people charged with specific substantive responsibilities here.

If it is a legal question, we have people who are dealing with that and they are experts on that. If it is an economic question, we have people and they are dealing with that. To the extent that there are a category of things that would come to me, certainly I would attempt to answer them to the extent I am able. And the President, of course, is the President. He is the man. This is his office and he does meet, and will meet regularly, with the press, I believe, and that has been indicated that would be the principal communication.

Q Mr. Ambassador, do you have a timetable for accomplishing what you want to do?

MR. RUMSFELD: No, I really don't, at the moment. I will. There is no other way to proceed. But what I have to do -- I have told you what I have done this morning up to now. I have to find time, make time, to identify these problems, to see that people are assigned responsibilities for dealing with them and then to follow up on them in an orderly way.

I do not have a specific time-table because I have not had a chance to sit down with each of the members of the staff here and deal with those. The answer to your question is, at the moment, I am.

Q One other question, if I may, Mr. Rumsfeld, besides that one. Would you list for us, if you can please, who the senior Presidential assistants are who will have regular access to the President not necessarily through you; that is, those who will be able to see the President without going through you?

MR. RUMSFELD: This morning, the President -- in the senior staff meeting which includes people that Ron has been meeting with every day, and he can certainly give you the names of those people, I would think -- he indicated to those people that he does in fact, when they have things they want to deal with him about, that they come in to see him.

So, certainly a quick answer to your question is, at the very minimum the people that were in that senior staff meeting, which includes his top array of people that Ron can give you the list of --

Q He can give us the names?

MR. RUMSFELD: Yes.

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Q Who will see the President? Who will actually decide? He will decide himself who wants to come in, and so forth, that he will see? There is no traffic cop like there was before?

Mr. Rumsfeld: All I can tell you is what happened this morning with specificity, and that was I had a list of scheduled requests and I went in and I went over them with him quickly, one after another. Some we postponed a decision on. He, of course, is looking at his calendar because of Mrs. Ford's health and in terms of events like that.

In terms of specific appointments, the President is the one who decides who he sees, and he decides his calendar and his appointments, and I will, of course, be working with him on it like I did this morning.

Q Mr. Rumsfeld, you do view your role -- we haven't mentioned his name -- but you do view your role differently from that performed by Mr. Haldeman, I gather, and do you feel you have learned something from the way he performed his role as White House Chief of Staff? I realize that is not your title, but you come closest to that of anyone in the White House now.

MR. RUMSFELD: Well, I am not going to, after three hours, draw comparisons that should probably be best left to history as to who did what, which way. My intention is to do this to the best of my ability and, hopefully, in a way that is consistent with what the President wants. I have told you literally everything I can think of as to what the President has said about the task.

I intend to tackle it, and I think I will leave now and start tackling it.

Q What is your first priority?

MR. RUMSFELD: To start right now.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 12:20 P.M. EDT)