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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE

OF

CARL ALBERT

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

MIKE MANSFIELD

SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MONTANA

HUGH SCOTT

SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

JOHN J. RHODES

REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE STATE OF ARIZONA

THE BRIEFING ROOM

9:20 A.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: Ladies and gentlemen, we want to move along because the Congressional leaders need to go back to the Hill to work.

The President met this morning with the bipartisan Congressional leaders and members of his staff. The President gave a report on the Middle East talks and Dr. Kissinger filled in some of the details.

There was very strong bipartisan support expressed by both the Democratic and Republican leaders there this morning.

I am going to bring out the leaders so you can ask your questions of them. I am just setting the stage for what you are about to hear.

There was very strong bipartisan support expressed for Dr. Kissinger's peace mission and the disappointment expressed that it had not been successful.

We have with us today the Speaker of the House, Carl Albert; Democratic leader of the Senate, Senator Mansfield; Congressman Rhodes, the Republican leader of the House; and Senator Scott, the Republican leader of the Senate.

I will let them speak for themselves. I think Speaker Albert will speak first.

CONGRESSMAN ALBERT: We have just been given a complete briefing on the efforts of the Secretary of State in the Middle East. The Secretary has made what we all consider a superb effort to work toward the peaceful settlement of all issues which divide some of the countries in that area.

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I think I can say without too much fear of contradiction that in the area in which the Secretary was working, regardless of some differences that may exist among us about certain other things, that we are approaching this problem in a 100 percent bipartisan effort.

I would like for the other leaders to speak for themselves on the subject.

SENATOR SCOTT: Ladies and gentlemen, I have never seen a more unified, bipartisan, responsible approach than that we saw this morning.

There was general sympathy and awareness and approval of what the Secretary had done. There was very warm applause near the end for his report.

Israel had faced, at the beginning of these negotiations, a world demanding the return to the 1967 boundaries, a demand by practically all of the known world except the United States. The United States policy was a strategy of formulating step-by-step negotiations in consultation with all the parties and often at the initiative of various parties. The purpose was peace through the reduction of tensions.

It would appear -- and the final statement would have to come from someone else -- but it would appear that the United States' efforts will continue, perhaps in some other forum, perhaps at Geneva, but in any event, the essential thing, I think, the American people will want to know is that the Congressional leaders are bipartisan. They are responsible. And in this case, division stops at the water's edge.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I was encouraged very much by the feeling in the room of unity. The Secretary of State made a very frank, very open report as to his activities. He outlined them in some detail as to what he had done and reiterated the fact that the main items of negotiation on the Israeli side, of course, were consistent with the desire for a statement of non-belligerency from Egypt. In return, there would have been some giving of territory, including the two passes and the oil fields.

There were sticking points, and the negotiations did stick on one of those points. The question now is where do we go from here? I think it is very important to note that the leaders were very much in support of not only the efforts which Secretary Kissinger had made but expressed great confidence in him and in his abilities to continue to lead the foreign policy of the Nation as we go into dangerous days ahead.

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There was no feeling of despair. There is no feeling that war is imminent. There was a feeling of great concern as to the future of that part of the world.

Personally, I think that the two nations, the Arab nations and the Israeli, will now, I hope, assess the situation themselves and perhaps decide for themselves as to where they go from here.

It is also, of course, my personal hope that they will decide that there are lots of things they can do besides fighting each other.

SENATOR MANSFIELD: There is nothing much that I can add to what has already been said by the leaders of the House and the Senate.

The meeting was depressing and disappointing because of the lack of success on the part of Secretary Kissinger, whose efforts we fully and completely support.

We think he was moving in the right direction trying to set up a situation as a prelude to the Geneva Conference. It is our hope that even though there has been a lack of success up to this time, that efforts will continue between the two countries concerned -- Israel and Egypt -- and that the differences will be evened out and that the danger of further difficulties in the Middle East will be alleviated if not overcome.

It appears to me that Secretary Kissinger's desire to achieve a first step on the Sinai was the logical one to assume because there are other areas which are more difficult -- the Golan Heights, Sharm El Sheikh, and the Arab portion of Jerusalem.

It is also my understanding that there will be a reexamination -- a reassessment -- of United States policy in the Middle East. But I would hope that this temporary failure would not become permanent and that the gravity of the situation would be recognized by all parties concerned.

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Q What do you mean by reassessment of American policy in the Middle East?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: You will have to ask the President that question, but that is a process that is underway, or will be underway shortly.

Q All of you seem to be saying that the step-by-step diplomacy is over and the next logical step is Geneva, or at least our active role is now minimized.

SENATOR MANSFIELD: Unless conditions change in the Middle East, the next step will be Geneva. That will be much more difficult than trying to achieve a settlement on the Sinai because the cast of characters will be enlarged considerably.

SENATOR SCOTT: Unless, of course, we are asked to come back by the parties with some reason for being there.

Q Gentlemen, an official traveling with Secretary Kissinger's party apparently told newsmen that contributing to the failure of lack of an agreement was the lack of action taken by Congress vis-a-vis Indochina. Apparently, the United States' word is not as strong as it used to be because we are not honoring our commitments fully in Cambodia and Vietnam. Was that mentioned this morning?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: Not at all because the one place where there is a unified support of the Administration's foreign policy is in the Middle East.

CONGRESSMAN ALBERT: May I say, I may be word quibbling, but I think what the President was driving at is that conditions may arrive at the point where we have to re-examine -- reassess is a little strong, it seems to me. I am just throwing that out.

Q Gentlemen, who gave you the feeling -- I think Congressman Rhodes mentioned this -- no feeling of despair, no feeling that war is imminent? Was that expressed by the President?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I think probably that was my own reaction. I don't recall those words having been uttered by anybody other than myself.

Q Do you all agree on that assessment -- the Democrat and Republican leaders?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I do.

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Q How about who is to blame for this? Was there any one party more to blame than the others?

SENATOR SCOTT: We were all asked to be very considerate of that risk involved, that we ought not to be assessing blame, that we ought to be considering whether there is anything which the parties can do, or the United States can do. We ought not to try to assess blame here.

SENATOR MANSFIELD: What I would again say is that Secretary Kissinger was not to blame.

SENATOR SCOTT: We were unanimous, I think it is fair to say, that Secretary Kissinger was not to blame. Articles to the contrary would not express the sentiment of this meeting.

Q Congressman Rhodes, you said there was a sticking point in your enumerated number of differences. What was that sticking point?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The sticking point, obviously, was that Egypt was not willing to assume a state of nonbelligerency, as such, although they were willing to make an agreement and to foreswear hostilities during the term of the agreements.

The agreement itself would have consisted of giving up of certain types of territory, which Israel wasn't willing to give up without a nonbelligerency status. That was the sticking point.

Q Gentlemen, did you only discuss the Mideast? Did you discuss any other foreign policy matters or domestic matters?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: Only the Middle East.

Q Senator Mansfield, when you mention the possibility of a reassessment in the Mideast, are you conveying the thoughts of the President and Secretary Kissinger, or were those your observations?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: I am conveying their thoughts.

Q Gentlemen, did you get any reading of whether or not the Soviets and the Egyptians may be closer together now following the failure of these talks?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: None.

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Q Did you get any reading of what the Soviets may do in the Mideast?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: No, except they will be represented in Geneva.

Q Was there any feeling that Secretary Kissinger should not have been in the Middle East that long while Southeast Asia was going down the drain?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: None at all.

Q Senator Mansfield, could you elaborate a little on what you said about re-examination and reassessment of U.S. policy?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: I would, if I could, but you will have to ask the President what he has in mind.

Q But it is underway?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: Yes.

Q Senator, may I follow up on my question of a little earlier?

SENATOR SCOTT: First, the Speaker has made the point that re-examination might be a better word than reassessment. I would kind of go with that.

CONGRESSMAN ALBERT: I think they use both words.

Q Senator Mansfield, do you feel that Congressional action or inaction on Indochina could have had any impact on the Mideast negotiations?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: None at all.

CONGRESSMAN ALBERT: This point was not raised at all. I say this as one who has generally supported the Administration in Southeast Asia, although I think we all recognize that is an entirely different issue. Southeast Asia is not where it was a year ago. This is an entirely different problem. I can't see any possible relationship between the two.

Q There is a slight conflict between Senator Mansfield and Congressman Rhodes. Congressman Rhodes said there was no feeling of despair, and Senator Mansfield said that the meeting was depressing and discouraging.

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SENATOR MANSFIELD: There are different meanings between what I said and what Congressman Rhodes said. I think, if you will look in Webster's, you will find that there is that difference. (Laughter)

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I agree with the Senator. I think you can be discouraged without being depressed.

CONGRESSMAN ALBERT: I think there is no loss of hope. I think we had better say we still have hope that the things will be worked out.

Q I address this thing to any of you. What can you do in Congress now to help the situation? What are you planning on doing?

SENATOR SCOTT: I can volunteer one thing; that is, since the leadership was well represented in that meeting by the Chairman, and ranking Members were all consulted, the President has promised that he will keep us immediately and intimately advised of any further U.S. policy decisions in this area; that our opportunity exists, as always with the leaders, to make clear to those who might express differences of opinions which might, in turn, lead to a deterioration in the Middle East through divisiveness, that we would want to discourage that and would ask everyone in Congress to be at this point extremely careful not to endanger the policy positions of the United States.

Q Senator, do you and Congressman Rhodes agree with Congressman Albert and Senator Mansfield, on their assessment that there is no connection between Indochina and the Middle East?

SENATOR SCOTT: I agree.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The matter was not brought up in the meeting.

Q Do you agree?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I think it is too speculative a question to answer.

Q Senator Mansfield, do you believe that the results of Secretary Kissinger's trip resulted in any lessening of American cooperation with either Israel or Egypt?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: The desire of the Administration is to cooperate with both countries to try and arrive at a decision affecting the Sinai. That came pretty close, but not close enough, and the result is that Secretary Kissinger had to return home at this time.

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If there is a possibility in the immediate future that his proposals could be accepted and his good offices could be worked out, I think that the chances for success would still be there. That is a very "iffy" answer because a lot depends on the immediacy of facing up to this situation and arriving at a decision covering the Sinai.

Q Senator Mansfield, from that podium all last week there were a number of days where Congress was criticized for what is happening in South Vietnam, that Congress is to blame for that, and in Cambodia.

What is your reaction to this criticism that Congress is to blame for much of the problem in that part of the world?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: I think we have views and the White House has its views, and I think they are expressed not on a personal basis, but on the one hand to get the Congress to act, and on the other hand for the Congress to defend itself.

Q Is Congress to blame for this? Does it have any responsibility there for what is happening?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: In the Middle East?

Q No, in Southeast Asia.

SENATOR MANSFIELD: No, I don't think so. I think we are acting as far as we can; and if you are referring to legislation concerning Southeast Asia, it was reported out of the Foreign Relations Committee a week ago but was not put on the calendar until after we adjourned Saturday morning around the hour of 2:00.

Q Are you going to act on it before you go home?

SENATOR MANSFIELD: I doubt it.

Thank you very much.

THE PRESS: Thank you, gentlemen.

END (AT 9:38 A.M. EDT)