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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
CLIFFORD P. CASE
SENATOR FROM THE
STATE OF NEW JERSEY
AND
JOHN J. RHODES
REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE
STATE OF ARIZONA

THE BRIEFING ROOM

10:05 A.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: I thought we would have two of the Republican Congressional leaders talk to you.

The meeting ran quite long, as you see, about two hours. We have Congressman Rhodes, the Republican leader in the House; and we have Senator Case from the Senate because Senator Scott had a short follow-up meeting with the President and was unable to join us here.

Senator and Congressman?

This does not indicate it was a real tough meeting. But I think when John tells you how he did that, you will get a chuckle.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I don't know that you will get a chuckle, but I think I should explain myself.

I was to be on Issues and Answers on Sunday. My press secretary was at the house briefing me and my dog wanted in, so he went to the door to let the dog in -- a feisty Dachshund. He started to growl at him and I thought he ment business so I reached out to grab the dog and my old football shoulder went out of place.

So, thank heavens, John Anderson was available to go on Issues and Answers because I couldn't.

The meeting today had to do with three subjects. One was Vietnam, one was energy, and the other was the budget.

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The situation in Vietnam continues, of course, to be very serious and the conversation consisted mainly of prospects for a bill which is in the Senate -- about which Senator Case is much more familiar than I -- concerning authorization for aid and rehabilitation, and also, a bill which has passed the House Appropriations Committee which would provide appropriations both for rehabilitation, evacuation and also some military aid.

Insofar as the budget was concerned, the discussion centered mainly on the actions of the two budget committees -- one of the House and one of the Senate -- and an analysis of what they did.

As far as energy was concerned, of course the main topic of conversation was the progress of legislation in the House and in the Senate which would have the effect of implementing some of the President's requests insofar as that type of legislation is concerned.

Senator Case?

SENATOR CASE: Thank you, John.

I think I can add very little except there was a very marked, I think, drawing together among everyone there -- the Administration as well as the Members of the Congress -- on the matter of the legislation for Vietnam.

The Senate bill, as Congressman Rhodes has stated, is on the floor now. It provides, in two parts, \$100 million for evacuation and general purposes related to that; and the other, for \$100 million, also for humanitarian purposes, the latter to be expended through international agencies and private agencies.

The general feeling, I think, was that this immediate legislation, if it is adopted, and I believe it will be adopted, has been very carefully worked out and will provide the kind of flexibility that the President needs in dealing with the immediate problem and the transition. We are very hopeful that we will accomplish that in the Senate today.

Q Senator Case, is that \$100 million, when you talk about evacuation and general purposes, can that be used for military purposes?

SENATOR CASE: It can be used for any purposes for the objective of accomplishing the evacuation. It can be used for military purposes. It can be used for anything at all so long as the objective is honestly for carrying out the evacuation.

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Q Does the President feel that this is now sufficient to accomplish what he wants in Vietnam? Is he satisfied with these two amounts of money?

SENATOR CASE: I don't know that I could say that he was satisfied with the amount of money. I don't think, though, the amount of money is the immediate point, because, after all, as far as military aid goes there is still an authorization of \$300 million which can be used, or appropriated, if the Congress feels that it is desirable to do it, and if the President feels that any part of that money could be spent.

I think I can honestly say that he does feel that this formula we have worked out under a similar thing attendant in the House will accomplish the immediate purpose and provide a way in which the United States can move forward in a unified way.

Q What is the immediate purpose, Senator?

SENATOR CASE: The immediate purpose is the evacuation of Americans and dependents, and the accomplishment with as little hardship, as little distress as possible of the transition. That is the immediate purpose.

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Q Senator, since we are now told Saigon is no longer militarily defensible, are they talking on the inside about evacuation of all Americans from Saigon?

SENATOR CASE: We have -- and I think it is appropriate to say this -- succeeded in stimulating the progress of the evacuation, and we are now told that by the end of the business day -- I think today -- the number will be down to some 1,500, or something of that sort, the minimum necessary to carry on skeleton operations.

Q What is it today? Down from what, Senator, do you know?

SENATOR CASE: Whatever the number was.

Q Were you told the number today?

SENATOR CASE: The number at the close of business today will be that figure I just gave you.

Q Will they be left there, then?

SENATOR CASE: This is a matter that, of course, depends upon the turn of events. It is naturally hoped it will not be necessary to use military force to get the last group out. Certainly, that ought to be our objective, and I am sure it is the objective of the Administration to try and do this thing without the so-called surgical operation.

Q Was there any hope expressed that Saigon might not fall, or any expectation?

SENATOR CASE: I want my colleague to express his appreciation of what the situation in the room was. I saw no such hope.

Q There was none expressed by the Secretary of State, or the President?

SENATOR CASE: No, I think not.

Q John, could we ask you what is your evaluation, and the chances for that military appropriation to get through the House itself?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The appropriation will require a rule because the parts having to do with rehabilitation are not yet authorized, and the situation in the Rules Committee, I think, is somewhat precarious, although I am told that the leadership on the other side will favor a rule being granted.

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Then, of course, you come to the floor of the House with a very distinct probability that an amendment might be offered to strike the \$165 million for military use. I really have no way of predicting exactly what would happen with that.

I should imagine in that the probabilities that the other \$165 million for evacuation and rehabilitation would be passed.

Q Was there any discussion of the likelihood of U.S. troops being necessary to assist in the evacuation?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: It was understood, I think, that under certain circumstances it might be necessary for the insertion of force temporarily for the purpose of securing landing areas, but there was certainly no discussion of any large-scale operation by American personnel.

Q Did the President expand on his remarks in that interview last night on the likelihood of the necessity for the use of U.S. troops in Vietnam for the evacuation?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, he did not.

Q Did he discuss the beefing-up of the Pacific troop strength at all for this?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, he did not.

Q What was the general appraisal of the situation in South Vietnam that was given by the President or the Secretary of State? Did they give a timetable for how soon they expect Saigon to fall?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, the only date that I heard anybody mention was the probability that May 15, being the birthday of Ho Chi Minh, they might want to celebrate it in Saigon.

Q Who said that?

SENATOR CASE: Secretary Schlesinger mentioned it. It was just a speculative remark on his part.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I think it was based only on speculation.

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Q Did the domino theory come up in this morning's meeting?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No.

Q Was there any discussion of the contacts we are making with other governments aimed at negotiated cease-fire? Was that explored at all?

SENATOR CASE: This was mentioned as the kind of thing that was being done and, of course, should be done, and everybody expects will be done, but there was no special emphasis on it, as I recall.

Q Was there any specifics as to who we are talking to and the progress of such talks?

SENATOR CASE: I don't recall specific statements about that.

Q Do they plan to leave 1,500 Americans in Saigon until the city is under seige, until the airports have closed, until they are forced into the situation of using American military force there to get them out?

SENATOR CASE: The purpose is, we are trying to avoid the situation in which force is going to be necessary and try, through all the efforts that we can, and the discussions that you referred to here are part of that, of course, so that it will not be necessary to use military force in order to get any last ditch efforts to get the last segment out.

We certainly hope this is so, but the point we want to emphasize is, is because we in the Senate and the House felt that way a week ago, very concerned because we were not then assured adequate progress had been made to the end all Americans could be taken out if this extremity arose.

Q Did you talk about evacuating Vietnamese nationals?

SENATOR CASE: Only to the general extent that we have discussed it all along and as embraced in our bill; that is, those who are dependents of Americans and such others who were greatly endangered who might be brought out as an incident of the evacuation of the Americans.

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Q But not tens of thousands?

SENATOR CASE: It was generally agreed-- and I think everyone accepts this fact--if anything of that sort is possible, and it may be desirable, it could be done only as a part of a general agreement between North and South Vietnam and ourself.

Q Senator and Congressman, did the President give you any briefing on what sort of diplomatic initiatives are underway? Is there anything you can tell us about that, who they are working through? Are third countries involved?

SENATOR CASE: This was not developed except, I think, in general reference.

Q Was there any discussion this morning about world reaction to the U.S. problems and how the U.S. is reacting in South Vietnam?

SENATOR CASE: There was a little.

Q What was it?

SENATOR CASE: There is -- what shall we say -- a tag end or hangover on the part of some people that I don't regard as enormously significant myself, and I am glad to have the chance to say so, that by not being able to end this thing in the way we would most like to, we have lost great prestige and that the American word means nothing and that people are going to turn elsewhere for succor and support and sustenance, I regard that as utter nonsense myself, and that is all I can say.

Q Who was promoting that this morning? The President? The Secretary of State?

SENATOR CASE: I don't know that anybody was promoting it. There was some mention of it around in general terms, but I don't think that this was a matter of any great consequence. I leave that to John for reply.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The mention was merely made, of course, that there were certain pronouncements being made by people around the world, indicating that there was something less than complete confidence in the United States' will to fulfill the role which we have previously filled.

But, I also agree with the Senator that this is utter nonsense, and will disappear as time goes by.

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SENATOR CASE: I think it is noteworthy to say this, that you get this kind of thing from people who have their own very selfish interests of their own to serve, and I don't pay very much attention to it.

Q Is that a direct reference to Secretary Kissinger?

SENATOR CASE: Oh, no, no, I didn't mean that at all.

Q You said one who has been expressing that point.

SENATOR CASE: Well, any man who is operating in the field of foreign policy is going to have the feeling he would like to have a great clout, it is perfectly natural. I remember it from Dean Rusk. I remember it from Dean Acheson, as far as that goes.

To some extent, I think it is kind of a professional hang-up almost, but I don't think the Secretary has any more than a perfectly normal amount of it. I think, as John Rhodes said, this is going to pass very quickly.

Q Was it a Congress person or an Administration person who was making these observations?

SENATOR CASE: I don't think I want to characterize it. We are all one great brotherhood.

MR. NESSEN: Congressmen, while you are here, let me say just one word, that the discussion of evacuation, I think you would agree, was in the context that the situation there is very fluid and nobody truly knows what the next step will be, whether there will be an attack on Saigon or not, and an attack on Saigon, there is a hope that there would be a negotiating period now that would eliminate this kind of thing. The talk of the evacuation was in that context.

SENATOR CASE: We only wanted to answer your questions. That is the reason it took that rather hard line.

Q Ron, since you are up there, is there any sense of commitment on the Administration of giving up something, making it a major point of negotiations to get out the Vietnamese who have supported the American cause or worked for American companies?

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MR. NESSEN: Steve, let me review my notes and give you any additional matters after this.

Q I want to ask John Rhodes one more question; that is, did any of this great brotherhood suggest to the President it might not be such a good idea to blame Congress for the loss in Vietnam?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: That was not brought up, Mr. Pierpoint.

THE PRESS: Thank you, gentlemen.

END (AT 10:20 A.M. EDT)