

Pool Report #1 - Air Force One, Andrews AFB to Miami - February 28, 1976

Wheels up at 7:18 a.m. Aboard: Bo Callaway; Bill Roberts (the former Stuart Spencer partner in Spencer-Roberts, and Ford troubleshooter in Florida); Representative Herbert Burke, R-Fla.; Cheney; Milt Friedman, (speechwriter).

Roberts said the Cuban - American vote is important, that there are about 30,000 Cuban refugees who are registered Republican voters in Florida, concentrated mostly in Dade County and Tampa areas.

Nessen, asked to confirm reports that Thomas Gates would be the head of the liaison office in Peking, said, "We don't have an announcement today."

Nessen said Betty Ford and Rep. Lou Frey, Ford's Florida Chairman, would meet the President at Miami International Airport.

He said the naturalization ceremony involved 1,178 people, 41 of them children, and that the bulk of the new citizens were Cuban refugees. A reception after the ceremony will be in the parking lot outside the auditorium because, with families, there were 2,600 people, too many to have it inside.

Nessen said Ford would speak briefly at each of 14 planned motorcade stops, spending 15 or 20 minutes in each place. He identified Ford's overnight host in Sarasota, William Cetzen, as a "fortyish, well-known local attorney" who also is on the board of the tennis club where Ford will play tomorrow. Cetzen's neighbor, C. Dana Rollings, President of the Pan American Bank of Sarasota, will be a tennis player, and the fourth will be the club pro, John Lawrence. The church where the Fords will attend Sunday services is Episcopal.

Asked what the "appropriate measures" were that Ford said would be taken if Cubans tried aggressive acts in the hemisphere, Nessen said he did not want to spell them out.

As for Florida, Nessen said of Ford, "He thinks he's going to win." No one knows now, said Nessen, if Reagan is still ahead but White House believes the momentum is on Ford's side. Ford's last trip, "no question about it, helped the momentum," he said. But he called Florida "one of Reagan's best states" and said that "when the last count was taken, he (Reagan) was ahead. It's going to be a damn close race, I'd say nip and tuck." He did say it, too.

Bo Callaway told the pool he was confident about Florida but would not predict a margin, would be satisfied with 50% plus one. Callaway said he did not think Ford would get to northern Florida, but that Callaway had spent 3 or 4 days there. He said Ford was skipping it not because it was a difficult area -- Reagan is "extremely strong" there, he said -- but because Ford is concentrating on spots where there are more Republican votes. Under Florida primary rules, winner of statewide preferential vote will get all of the at-large delegates -- he thought there were about 30 -- and Ford wants to get them plus maintain momentum by winning the preferential.

Callaway said that PFC will conduct "tracking polls" in Florida and Illinois to keep track of issue development, having gone into New Hampshire primary with 6 week old data. First Florida results will be provided to PFC, but not made public, on Monday.

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Asked about the Nixon effect, Bo said that "we should be able to tell something on that" after the Florida polling. He said that also would be one of the elements of a "post-New Hampshire poll" being conducted to try to determine what had or had not worked in New Hampshire. What if the polls show Nixon is hurting Ford? "That's Ron's job," he said, declining to answer.

He was lavish in hailing Betty Ford as a political asset. Callaway said he went on a 16-day trip right after Betty did her controversial number on "60 minutes" and he encountered "enormous reaction in the Bible Belt," such as one minister who delivered a sermon on the theme, "Betty Ford against the Bible." Callaway said that even then he found, and Governor James A. Rhodes of Ohio agreed with him, that "in the long run Betty Ford is going to be an enormous asset." Even the people that didn't like '60 Minutes' are saying, 'We like her because she speaks her mind,' " he said. "The American people are smarter than you give them credit for," he said, and have determined that Betty is a "gracious lady with a wonderful family." He said he diverted some funds held in reserve to run a Betty Ford radio spot in the last couple days in New Hampshire and it was "enormously effective."

Asked if he thought Reagan would pull out if Ford could win Florida and Illinois, Callaway said: "If we win Florida and Illinois -- which I fully expect we'll do -- it'll be very difficult for him (Reagan) to continue a credible campaign." New Hampshire, Florida and Illinois are Reagan's "best states," so loss of all three would damage him, he said.

Callaway described himself as a "moderate dove" in debate over how to deal with Reagan. "I don't believe in giving him a free ride," he said, but because of potential impact on party, Callaway said he would oppose "attacking him in a strident manner or really going all out against him" unless Reagan were to become harshly critical of Ford.

Callaway came back later to clear up the delegate selection. Florida Republicans will have a total of 66 delegates. In each of the 15 congressional districts, the winner of preferential vote will get 3 delegates; these delegates will be named by the party, not the candidate who wins, but will be bound to the winner for the first two convention ballots. There are 5 bonus delegates; 1 delegate goes to either Ford or Reagan for every 3 congressional districts he wins. Finally, there are 16 at-large delegates to be pledged to the statewide winner of the preferential vote.

BOYD - Mutual
OSBORNE - New Republic
NAUGHTON - New York Times

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