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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 4:40 P.M. EST

JANUARY 4, 1975

SATURDAY

MR. NESSEN: First of all, you are going to get an Executive Order and a statement by the President. Why don't you get those and read them, and then we will start the questions when you have had a chance to digest what is in there.

I will tell you what we will do on the cameras is we will go through this and then we will redo whatever part we want for the cameras.

Q Ron, first of all, it seems fairly obvious from what has happened that the President feels that the CIA has done some things that were illegal or unwarranted or both, and yet this does not say so. Is it not the case?

MR. NESSEN: I think it is fair to say that from his reading of the Colby report and from his talks with Secretaries Kissinger and Schlesinger and Director Colby that enough questions have been raised that the President felt it was desirable for a citizen's committee to look into this matter.

Q Has he seen or is he going to see Mr. Helms?

MR. NESSEN: The President did see Ambassador Helms for a short time today at the request of the Ambassador.

Q When?

MR. NESSEN: It was sometime between one and two o'clock.

Q Ron, that implies he would not have seen him if Helms had not asked to see the President, is that correct? He had no intention of asking Helms to see him.

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MR. NESSEN: I do not know what might have happened, Gaylord. They did meet.

Q As you know, Ambassador Helms put out a statement through the State Department that categorically denied there was any illegal domestic surveillance. Does this statement and the establishment of this Commission mean that the President doubts that categorical denial?

MR. NESSEN: I do not know how you reached that conclusion.

Q It is a question, not a conclusion.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I do not really have anything to say about Ambassador Helms.

Q Ron, in the statement by the President, the last sentence in the fourth paragraph, it says, "The Justice Department is, of course, also looking into such aspects of the matter as are within its jurisdiction."

Do you have some elaboration on that? Does this mean that they are looking into the situation right now to see whether or not the laws have been violated or does this mean the Justice Department will cooperate with the Blue Ribbon Commission?

MR. NESSEN: No, that means the former, that they have, in the past couple of days, begun to look into any possible violations of the law, and the appropriate statutes are cited in the Executive Order.

Q At whose behest, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I am told that the Justice Department is prepared to answer questions about this.

Q Ron, you said you did not have anything to say about Ambassador Helms. Are you supporting his denial or are you questioning his denial or are you refusing to comment on his denial?

MR. NESSEN: I just do not have anything to say about Ambassador Helms.

Q Ron, is there an idea of who the members will be, who the chairman will be and how many people will be on this Commission and further, will there be any persons presently in the employ of the U.S. Government on the Commission?

MR. NESSEN: We hope to be able to announce the names of the panel members and the chairman soon, and by soon I would think we are talking about next week. There would not be any members of the panel who are currently employed by the Government.

Q Would there be any Members of Congress on the panel?

MR. NESSEN: There will not.

Q What will be the size of it?

MR. NESSEN: I think you are talking about a panel in the area of five to seven members.

Q When would their report be expected?

MR. NESSEN: It is required by the Executive Order to be in by three months from the date of this order; in other words, three months from today.

Q Does the President have anyone in mind already? Has he contacted anyone in mind to be chairman?

MR. NESSEN: He has talked to some people.

Q Ron, while we were in Vail you told us the President believed all he had at the time was allegations in the newspaper. Does the President still believe all he is confronted with here are allegations in the newspaper?

MR. NESSEN: Walt, as I said, the report from Director Colby and these meetings he has had raises enough questions so that he feels it is desirable to have this citizens panel.

Q Ron, this may be self-explanatory, but the Commission, to be certain, will not investigate any activities of the CIA abroad, is that correct?

MR. NESSEN: The Executive Order lists the functions of the Commission in Section 2, and I think it is fairly clear that it is to ascertain and evaluate any facts relating to activities conducted within the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Q Ron, will the President ask Mr. Helms to stay in the United States long enough for his panel to talk to him?

MR. NESSEN: I have had no indication that there are any changes in Ambassador Helms' plans.

Q Ron, could you tell us what 50 USC 403 is? That is the statute cited.

MR. NESSEN: This is the legal charter of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Q Is that the aspect the Justice Department is also investigating?

MR. NESSEN: I really think you should check with the Justice Department, which has somebody ready to talk to you.

Q Will their final report be made public, the blue ribbon panel's report?

MR. NESSEN: The findings and recommendations of the Commission will be sent to Congress, which is the same way of saying that they will be made public, as far as I know.

Q How about the Colby report? Will any parts of that be made public?

MR. NESSEN: I don't believe that has been decided yet.

Q When will that be decided? We have been hearing "this week, next week" about releasing portions or the whole report.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know today, actually.

Q Ron, is the Commission going to have subpoena power?

MR. NESSEN: I am told that subpoena power is probably not needed in this case in the sense that the people that they will be talking to are for the most part Government employees, and certainly the documentary evidence they will be looking at is in the hands of the Government. Subpoena power also requires legislation. The President is not able on his own to grant subpoena power.

Q How about power over those CIA members who have resigned from the service?

MR. NESSEN: If it turns out that for any reason subpoena power is needed, then the President would have to consider asking Congress for the necessary legislation to grant it.

Q Did you, at any point after the President read the Colby report, hear him express any reaction which you can convey to us, either surprise or shock or anything to that effect?

MR. NESSEN: Only that it raised the questions that he feels justify the appointment of this commission.

Q What are those questions, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot give you those questions, but I think it is fairly well spelled out in both the Executive Order and the statement what the Commission will be looking at.

Q Ron, have any individuals already accepted membership on the Commission?

MR. NESSEN: No, not formally.

Q Ron, he has asked that the committees consider the findings and recommendations of the Commission. Is he asking the Congressional committees to hold up until this Commission?

MR. NESSEN: No, quite the opposite. He says at the beginning of that paragraph that he is aware of the plans and he pledges cooperation.

Q Ron, how long was Mr. Helms with the President and was anybody else present for that meeting?

MR. NESSEN: The meeting began at 12:30 and lasted for 20 minutes. As far as I know, they were alone.

Q In his office, the Oval Office?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Why weren't we told?

MR. NESSEN: Weren't you told? I thought Dr. Kissinger said Helms was coming to see the President.

Q Why didn't you tell us?

MR. NESSEN: I have been busy trying to get all this together.

Q We asked your office several times today whether Mr. Helms would be coming and whether we would be notified.

MR. NESSEN: The answer is we have a short staff today and we have been trying to get out this material.

Q Did you purposely not tell us?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Can we take it from this statement that the President believes that covert as well as overt activities of the CIA are necessary to the country?

MR. NESSEN: The President does spell out at certain points here what he believes to be the legitimate functions of the CIA.

Q There have been some CIA officials who said they should de-emphasize, if not eliminate, the clandestine activities. From this statement it sounds like the President is endorsing business as usual as long as they stay within their charter.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that that is really a factor in this particular investigation.

Q Ron, usually when a panel like this is created, the appointment of the members is announced at the same time. Is the fact that is not happening here indicate the President is, one, having trouble getting people or does it also indicate that some individuals have turned him down?

MR. NESSEN: No, there does not seem to be any trouble getting people. It is just decided on who he wants on the panel.

Q Did you say he has not yet asked anyone to serve?

MR. NESSEN: Not formally. As I said, he talked to some people.

Q Who has he talked to? Can you tell us that?

MR. NESSEN: No, I cannot.

Q Is there any inclination of the President to be more open about what the CIA does and what its budget is?

MR. NESSEN: I do not know that. That is not a factor in here. It is a question, but it is not related to this particular case.

Q I know, but in the discussion about where do we go from here, has opening up the CIA to more public review been discussed or considered beyond this narrow charter?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, I don't know that that is a factor here. It is a separate question that we might try to get some answers on, but it is not related to this.

Q Ron, will you be available after we are through here for an economic briefing?

MR. NESSEN: Frankly, I don't have a lot on the economic meeting because I was in and out of there for the past couple of hours. It is still going on.

Q But you will be available later to talk about it?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. I can give you what little I have, which is very little.

The meeting is still going on. I think you saw who the participants were. I should tell you it dealt both with economics and with the energy program. It was not just economics.

At the beginning of the meeting, Secretary Simon talked about problems caused in the credit markets by the current economic situation, including large Government borrowing. He said this was serious in its implications. He also talked about the effects of this on the interest rates, the housing industry and the effects on the economic recovery.

Chairman Burns reviewed the role of monetary policy in a situation such as we have today. He talked about the dangers of too rapid expansion of the money supply, which would cause increased inflation a year or two down the road.

After a discussion of the economic proposals and going over some specific options on which the President indicated his tentative decisions, there was then a portion of the meeting devoted to the connections between the energy and the economic plans, and at that point the meeting shifted over to discussion of the new energy policy.

That is where it was when I left, and again in the area of energy, the President reviewed specific options and made some tentative decisions. That is really all I can tell you.

Q Ron, the tentative decisions in the economic area, do they include a tentative decision to ask for a tax cut?

MR. NESSEN: Gaylord, you know the answer to that.

Q That is a question.

MR. NESSEN: At the request of the President, all the participants in the meeting agreed not to discuss specific proposals.

Q Do they expect to complete all the tentative decisions today?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Or tomorrow?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Do you have any idea of the time table?

MR. NESSEN: Soon, but not today.

Q Did you say the President made tentative decisions, or they did?

MR. NESSEN: All the decisions are made by the President, John.

Q I thought I heard you say they, but you did say the President?

MR. NESSEN: He, with a small "h".

Q Back to the CIA for one last question. When does the President contemplate the commission start its work? Does he have a date in mind, like immediately? As soon as he has named them?

MR. NESSEN: Immediately, as soon as he has named them.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END

(AT 5:05 P.M. EST)