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N E W S   C O N F E R E N C E

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:50 A.M. EDT

MAY 8, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: As you know, the President held a Cabinet meeting on the SEQUOIA last night. It lasted until a little after 10 o'clock.

Q      What time did it start?

MR. NESSEN: It started at 6:30 or so. There was a small pool here when we got back, and I gave them a brief report on the meeting.

The President met this morning at 10:45 with the Speaker of the South Korean National Assembly Chung Il-Kwon. This was a courtesy call. It gave the President an opportunity to reassure South Korea of the solidity of our security commitment to Korea.

The Speaker is in Washington and will also have a meeting, or has had meetings, with the Vice President, Secretary Kissinger and Members of the Senate and the House leadership. He has with him six members of the Korean National Assembly, and they will go from here to France, Germany and Japan.

Their trip is to review various matters of concern and interest to Korea with its allies. These matters involve national security and economic matters.

Q      Can we pause a moment?

What exactly did the President say regarding American troops in Korea?

MR. NESSEN: I was not in the meeting, Helen. As I say, the general purpose was to reassure South Koreans of the solidity of our security commitment.

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Q What is your understanding of how that statement relates to the question of the troops?

MR. NESSEN: I think yesterday it was pointed out there is a defense treaty with Korea approved by Congress, but what the details of it are, you need to get from the State Department. I don't have the details.

Q May I try one more direction? Given the current concern in the post-Vietnam assessment period of the understanding of our allies, we are standing by them, would that seem to rule out any consideration of reducing our troop levels at this time, or would it even raise the possibility of an increase?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't know the answers to those, Steven. I think you need to deal with somebody at the State Department who has a better grasp of the details of Korean policy.

Q The South Korean Ambassador did say he felt sure that American troops would fight in Korea if there were an all-out invasion by the North. The Ambassador said it might not be necessary for American troops to fight, that South Korean troops on the front lines could handle the attack.

Can you confirm that American troops would do this?

MR. NESSEN: John, as I say, there is a Congressionally approved defense treaty. What the provisions are, I do not have in front of me, but I know that if you want to know the provisions of it, the State Department can provide you with the treaty. I don't know what the provisions are of the treaty.

Q Is there any cut-off date, do you know that, or is it a continuing treaty?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, I don't know the details of the treaty.

At 11:15 the President met with John Sheehan, who is leaving his position as a member of the Federal Reserve Board, Board of Governors. He is leaving on June 1, after three years of service on the Board.

The President thanked him for his service and he also solicited Mr. Sheehan's views on monetary policy. Mr. Sheehan is going back to the private sector.

Q Did they differ from Dr. Burns'?

MR. NESSEN: I did not attend the meeting, Jim, but I am sure that you can call Mr. Sheehan and ask his views on monetary policy to see if they differ from Dr. Burns'.

Q I just thought you might know.

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

At noon, the President will meet with the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. During this meeting, the President is expected to reaffirm American determination to stand by allies and friends. We will have a report on the meeting afterward. They have just gone in there now to take photos.

This evening, the President and Mrs. Ford will be the hosts at a State Dinner in honor of Prime Minister and Mrs. Lee. We do have coverage arrangements worked out which we will post.

Q Ron, can you explain why there is a State Dinner for Lee and not any of the other foreign heads of States?

MR. NESSEN: The others were not here on State visits.

This afternoon, the President is having one of his regular meetings with the Vice President. I don't have the agenda for that.

At 5:00, the President will meet with Arthur Goldberg. It is a private meeting. Among the other subjects to discuss, I believe the Middle East situation probably will come up.

As you will recall, Mr. Goldberg was the American Ambassador to the United Nations during the 1967 war and during the passage of the UN Resolution 242. Dr. Kissinger will attend the meeting.

Mr. Goldberg does have some views on the Middle East situation and asked for the meeting to present them to the President.

Q Does he represent any groups?

MR. NESSEN: No. He is a private citizen now.

Q Do you expect we will see him afterwards?

MR. NESSEN: I will check. I suspect he may come out the front entrance here, the West Lobby entrance.

Q Ron, did Mr. Goldberg ask for Kissinger's presence?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that, Dick.

Q Did Mr. Ford ask for Kissinger's presence because they thought he was going to need him there since Mr. Goldberg is going to ask for some more aid?

MR. NESSEN: I had not heard that, Sarah.

Q But Mr. Ford requested Kissinger to be there, let us say that.

Q Is Kissinger going to be there?

MR. NESSEN: I said Dr. Kissinger will be there, as he is at most meetings involving foreign affairs.

Q I know, but my question was, did the President especially request that he be there, summoned him for this meeting?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think he specially asked him.

Q Or is he barging in? (Laughter)

Q That is a good question.

MR. NESSEN: No, he is not barging in.

As far as I can tell, the President asked Mr. Goldberg to come in rather than vice versa, as I may have indicated a minute ago.

Q Can you explain, then, why he would ask Mr. Goldberg to come in?

MR. NESSEN: It is part of a series of people he has invited in to talk about issues that they have some knowledge or interest in. I think you recall the Gene Rostow meeting, Mac Bundy meeting, and so forth.

Q Is it fair, then, to say this is part of the Middle East reassessment?

MR. NESSEN: No. I think he is getting some views of people who have been involved in --

Q Just simply for making reference in a story, how could it not be part of the Middle East reassessment if the President calls in Goldberg to specifically talk about the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: And other matters.

Q Views on the Middle East. You gave that as the stress of the meeting.

MR. NESSEN: No, that is right.

Q I think you have already said that reassessment is still going on and will not be completed until sometime next month, isn't that right?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, and also I am glad you mention that, Jim. I have checked further on the timing of the Middle East reassessment, and I think it would be more accurate to say the reassessment will not be completed until after his meetings with Sadat and Rabin. I think we had indicated it would be completed during the month of May, before the meetings, and that was said at a time before the meetings were set up.

Now that the meetings have been arranged, it was felt that it would be better to await completion of the reassessment until he has had these talks with Sadat and Rabin.

Q That being the case, the reassessment is still going. How could it be other than that the meeting with Mr. Goldberg is part of the reassessment since it is still going on?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, can't we just leave it that he is asking and discussing the views of Arthur Goldberg on the Middle East?

Q As part of the reassessment?

MR. NESSEN: No, I would not like to go that far.

Q Ron, also is he discussing with Arthur Goldberg his views on the United Nations and Israel's role there?

MR. NESSEN: The meeting has not taken place yet, so I don't know all the items that will be discussed, but it is basically about the Middle East.

Q Is Malcolm Toon going to Israel?

MR. NESSEN: We don't have anything to announce today.

Q Ron, can you explain, as best you can -- the entire reassessment thing is with countries where we have Ambassadors now, in each Arab country as well as in Israel. There was a war and that is over. The President reacted as he did to it and the Secretary of State reacted.

Why would it require, seriously, all these weeks for a reassessment of a situation that is not new?

MR. NESSEN: In the Middle East, are you talking about?

Q Yes, I am talking about the Middle East.

MR. NESSEN: I don't understand exactly the thrust of your question. I thought the President at the time that the step-by-step negotiations were suspended indicated he wanted to take that opportunity to reassess all elements of American policy in all countries in the Middle East. Obviously, he wants to take all the time that is needed to do that.

Q My question -- I don't mean to be impertinent -- is, a reassessment of a known factor in a situation we are so close to, why should it take this very long period of time to reassess? It has been weeks since the Ambassadors were here and all of that. I wonder if there are any factors you can share with us perhaps in this entire reassessment.

MR. NESSEN: I think only that he wants to reassess the policy in the Middle East in light of the suspension of the step-by-step talks and now the talks with Rabin and Sadat have been added, and that is going to be part of the reassessment.

There are some changes on the Saturday plans. We told you about the Lee Elder Golf Tournament on Saturday and indicated there would be a second helicopter that would carry a press pool.

I think what we are going to need to do is to move the press pool by car or bus. I don't have exactly the arrangements of what time it leaves or whether it will be a car or a bus, but we will get that for you by the end of this week.

The President, when he gets back from the golf tournament on Saturday, he and Mrs. Ford will be the hosts at a reception at 7 o'clock here at the White House in honor of the Chiefs of Delegation to the OAS General Assembly, which is meeting in Washington.

Q Do we have coverage on that?

MR. NESSEN: We don't have the coverage plans yet.

Q Will there be coverage?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. We have not come to grips with that, yet.

Now, if the President goes to Camp David this weekend -- if -- it will be either Saturday night after the reception, or Sunday. We will let you know as soon as he decides, first of all, whether he is going to go, and if so, when he is going to go.

Q If he goes, will be back on Monday?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. At least by Monday.

Q Would he return Monday or would he come back Sunday night?

MR. NESSEN: It is not even decided whether or not he is going to go yet, Ann, so I can't tell you when he is coming back. But his normal pattern is to come back Sunday night, but we don't know whether he is going yet.

Now, you have the following package of announcements: Two nominations to the Federal Farm Credit Board; the nomination of J. Hart Ely, as General Counsel of the Department of Transportation; the 11th budget rescission and deferral message; the disaster declaration for Nebraska as a result of the tornadoes and storms there on Tuesday; and the Fourth Annual Report on the Federal Railroad Safety Act of 1970.

Q Ron, the Wholesale Price Index --

MR. NESSEN: Let me go on with one or two more things, first.

I want to straighten out one thing in the pool report last night from the Cabinet meeting. I reported that Defense Secretary Schlesinger had told the Cabinet 250 aircraft had been recovered and flown out of Vietnam before the surrender.

There was some confusion as to whether that included the planes that had gone to Thailand, 120 or so, or not included. The fact is it did include. Let me give you a rundown now. What Secretary Schlesinger said was 250 aircraft, both airplanes and helicopters, had been flown out of Vietnam before the surrender.

Now, I checked around this morning and got some additional details. Twenty-five of that 250 were helicopters. The rest were airplanes. All of the 250 were flown to Thailand except seven airplanes flew to Singapore.

In addition to the 250 -- that is 225 planes, 25 helicopters -- in addition to that, not counted in that, were 48 helicopters flown to the MIDWAY. These are not the helicopters that were flown to the BLUERIDGE and dumped overboard. These are 48 helicopters flown to the MIDWAY, landed and reverted to American ownership, so that is 250 plus 48.

All these aircraft were flown out by either Vietnamese or Cambodian pilots. That is where the situation stands now. There may be other planes or helicopters here or there which have not been accounted for yet, but that is the total at the moment.

Q Ron, did he put a price tag on those 250?

MR. NESSEN: He did not, Peter.

Q This should be deducted from the rough estimate of \$5 billion in material that was supposed to have been left behind?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. He has said before that somewhere between \$500 million and \$800 million worth of equipment was taken out at the last minute and that includes these planes and helicopters.

Q Ron, the question has always been whether or not the Ambassador frustrated DOD aspirations to take a lot of material out. So, in that context, I would like to ask, since these were all flown out by Viet and Cambodian pilots, was it flown out at U.S. request and policy or was it just people looking for a way to get out and that was the best way?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have the answer to that, but the Defense Department could give it to you. He did not talk about where the initiative came from for the planes. He did say that the United States had arranged for a good part of the South Vietnamese Navy to sail away. But I suggest you talk to Laitin on that.

Q How did the Cambodians get involved in an evacuation from South Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry. These 250 aircraft, I should have made clear, were from both Vietnam and Cambodia.

Q How many are still in Thailand?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have a breakdown on that but Laitin would be able to give it to you.

Q Did they go from Cambodia to Vietnam or direct from Cambodia two weeks after the fall?

MR. NESSEN: No, this includes the planes that were flown out of Cambodia before the fall.

Q Ron, did Singapore return those seven planes? Is that a subject of discussion today?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the status of those seven is. Joe Laitin can give it to you.

Q Ron, while we are on the subject of what was taken out and what was left behind in Vietnam, what does the President think about, and what is he doing about, the remains of the two Marines?

MR. NESSEN: The President has, first of all, asked for a full report from the Marine Corps. Secondly, every possible channel is being used to retrieve the bodies of the two Marines.

Q Since General Wilson was in charge of the operation, does the President have any second thoughts about his nomination as Commandant?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, the Marines have been asked for a full report.

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Q Would this reflect on General Wilson?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard of any.

Q When you say "every possible channel," do you mean contacts with the revolutionary government in Saigon?

MR. NESSEN: I would rather not go into the channels because of the delicacy of the situation.

Q Ron, earlier I sent in a query about a report we had about a reduction in U.S. personnel in Laos. Do you have anything on that?

MR. NESSEN: Nobody here knows anything about it. I checked it.

As you know, a lot these days I have asked you to call the State Department for details of the refugees, the evacuation and resettlement and so forth. I now have a name and a phone number for you. This is someone I think many of you know and respect greatly.

She is Eleanor Green. She will be handling press queries on refugees and evacuation and resettlement. Her phone number is 632-9380.

Q Is she replacing Mr. Smith over there? Is that the idea?

MR. NESSEN: This is in addition to Smith.

The President of France, President Giscard d'Estaing, telephoned the President this morning and thanked the American people for their contributions during World War II.

Q A little late. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: This is the anniversary of VE Day, as you know.

Q Did President d'Estaing call personally or how was it communicated?

MR. NESSEN: It was a personal phone call. They established, as I am sure you know, a very friendly relationship in Martinique and have talked on the phone other times.

Q Then why isn't he going to the Brussels meeting? (Laughter)

Q Did they discuss any other subjects?

MR. NESSEN: No. In addition, there is a wire service story from Moscow that Leonid Brezhnev has also sent a message to the President on the 30th anniversary of VE Day. The text is on the wires, so I won't bother you with that.

I am checking to see whether any other messages have come in on this occasion. I think just before we came out here there were not any to report on.

Q Did George Wallace send any messages? (Laughter)

Q Was Brezhnev's message written?

MR. NESSEN: As far as I know, Brezhnev had a written message.

Q Did the President send any messages out to anybody?

MR. NESSEN: We will check that.

Q Ron, since we are on that subject and it was apparently a USIS tour that these foreign journalists were on, when Governor Wallace, according to the Post, suggested we were on the wrong side -- (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: In that war?

Q --I wondered seriously if the U.S. Government did anything to apologize, explain, elaborate, support, deny or if the President has any comment on that happening on a U.S. Government-sponsored trip.

MR. NESSEN: He does not.

Q No comment? Did the State Department do anything?

MR. NESSEN: You have to check the State Department.

Q Ron, there have been several stories that the Mormons are now selling canned food, the latest being they got a black nationalist peddling canned food that you store up. (Laughter)

Now, does the President approve of this? Does he regard it as being thrifty and perspicacious or hoarding? (Laughter)

Q What is happening at this briefing, anyway?

MR. NESSEN: I am wondering the same thing myself.

Q Ron, there have been numerous stories that there are Mormon salesmen who are selling stuff that you store, and I am just wondering, does the President feel we should do this? Does he look on this as being wise, to buy all this stuff or does he look on it as hoarding? I would like to know, what does the President think about this?

MR. NESSEN: I have not had the opportunity to ask the President that, Les. (Laughter)

Q Then you have had the opportunity to ask him about affirmative action. What does he feel about affirmative action?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have an answer for you on that, Les.

Q Do you anticipate you will get one, Ron, because you said you would.

MR. NESSEN: I said I would check into it. I don't have an answer today.

Q Ron, the Wholesale Price Index -- speaking of food (Laughter) -- shows a 1.5 percent increase over the past month, seasonally adjusted. That figures out to 18 percent a year.

Food was the major commodity causing it to go up, but anyway, do you have any reaction to that in terms of what this means as far as whether we have licked inflation? Any comment?

MR. NESSEN: I think when there were several months there, where there was an extremely small increase in the Consumer Price Index, and over the past four months in a row, before April, an actual decrease in the Wholesale Price Index, I think we said we did not regard that as a permanent reduction in inflation.

This increase was not a surprise. There were sharp declines in wholesale prices of farm products between December and March, as you know, and I think we said at that time that those sharp decreases could not be expected to continue.

So, as I say, it is not a surprise that farm prices went up 4.8. If you look at the other part of the Wholesale Price Index, you will see that industrial commodities, which are considered to be especially significant, rose only one-tenth of 1 percent and that pleases the White House.

However, the rise in the overall index by 1.5 does, I think, emphasize what the President has said over and over again, which is that inflation is by no means licked, and I think it emphasizes some of the public statements and messages he has made concerning the need to avoid reigniting inflation by excessive Government deficits.

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Q With those food prices, does he still want the Americans to plant WIN gardens this spring?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard him talk about that in some time, Walt. (Laughter)

Q I want an answer.

MR. NESSEN: That is the answer.

Q Going back to the Cabinet meeting last night, I understood you said at the Cabinet meeting last night you thought White House staff members were giving too many interviews to reporters, and this morning, three people who were at that meeting phoned me to cancel interviews I had set up for today, and I just wonder --

Q You were effective. (Laughter)

Q -- I just wonder what implications that had for the open White House?

MR. NESSEN: Let's just back up a minute and let me set this straight. I did not speak at the Cabinet meeting last night at all on any subject.

Secondly, my private and group remarks to members of the White House staff have been just the opposite, that they should. I think we made a big change here in the way the White House used to operate, which was any request for interviews with any staff members had to be passed through the Press Office.

I think everybody here knows one of the first things I did was stop that and that is in writing. Everybody is free to talk to or not talk to whoever they want to and when people call me and ask me whether they should, what I normally say is, "That is up to you." I am not going to be either a talent booker or a censor. I think everybody here has had experience with White House staff members and know that is the policy that is being followed.

So, your premise is wrong. I did not speak at the Cabinet meeting on that or any other subject. Beyond that, your premise is wrong -- I have not said that previously to staff members.

Q It seems to be the policy until this morning.

MR. NESSEN: Sarah?

Q Is the President concerned that the maneuvers of the Soviets in Cuba in the latter days of April constituted a violation of agreements that we have had in the past between Cuba and the United States over the use of weapons down there?

MR. NESSEN: I have not looked into that subject, Sarah, but I will for you.

Q It is one that I believe the Secretary of the Navy has addressed himself to at the Navy League meeting in New Orleans, and there are ample reports that the Soviets practiced hitting U.S. cities with strategic bombers and also engaged in submarine maneuvers that would be not in accordance with previous agreements with the United States.

MR. NESSEN: I have not looked into the subject.

Q Would you be kind enough to check this very definitely with the President and give me an answer?

MR. NESSEN: I will.

Q Ron, does the Administration have any reaction to Castro's statement to McGovern that the CIA made some attempts to assassinate him?

MR. NESSEN: Is that what Castro said?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I did not hear that.

Q And also, he asked that the embargo be lifted on medical supplies and foodstuffs.

MR. NESSEN: The assassination part I have not heard anything about and I did not even know he said that, but on the other part dealing with the embargo, the White House is aware of the reports on that news conference and notes that he seems to have accepted what the United States has referred to before as the mutuality of obligation -- that is an expression the United States had used before -- in saying that any change in the status of our relations would involve such a mutuality of obligation.

Now, from our side, the OAS sanctions remain in effect unless that organization takes formal action to lift them.

The United States has said before that we see no virtue in perpetual antagonism between the United States and Cuba. There are, though, significant areas of difference between the two countries remaining.

The State Department, I believe, would be prepared to talk about the specific subject of the embargo as it relates to medicines and foodstuffs.

Q Would you explain the euphemism "mutuality of obligation"?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President sort of explained that one night. I believe he said we will change our policy when we see a change in their policy. I think that would be the simplest way to sum it up.

Q Ron, what are the areas of difference remaining?

MR. NESSEN: I would prefer that you would talk to someone more expert in Cuban relations at the State Department, Bob.

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Q Did the United States have any part in the OAS decision to postpone the decision on the sanctions at this meeting?

MR. NESSEN: That is not a subject that is coming up at this meeting, but the United States has, including back at the Quito meeting, has taken a position that it would not advocate one way or the other.

Q This definitely seems to be a new line for the White House.

MR. NESSEN: You asked me for a reaction. I gave it to you.

Q Specifically, Ron, I am not clear about your reference to medicines and food stuffs and it is because of my own ignorance -- are they presently embargoed or not embargoed?

MR. NESSEN: You are asking just a technical question.

Q I am asking, are they on the embargo now or not?

MR. NESSEN: That is something you need to check at the State Department. I don't know the details of the embargo.

Q What I am trying to get at is if they are embargoed now, are we lifting our embargo on food stuffs and medicines to Cuba, if they are on the embargo now? I don't know.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, either, and I say the State Department is prepared to talk about the embargo and specifically about that aspect of it.

Q Certainly, if we were lifting the embargo on two major items, medicine and food stuffs --

MR. NESSEN: You would know about it.

Q Wouldn't that be a major announcement by the White House that you would be making?

MR. NESSEN: I would not leap to any conclusion about lifting that embargo, Jim.

Q I am trying not to leap to a conclusion, but you dropped it in there.

MR. NESSEN: No, that was reported to be one of the remarks in the news conference, and I say for that much detail on the embargo you should talk to the State Department. They are prepared to talk about it.

Q Ron, you said that the White House notes that Mr. Castro seems to have accepted the mutuality of obligation. Are you saying this is a recent acceptance? Is this something he had previously rejected or not accepted in our view?

MR. NESSEN: No. I was asked for a comment on his news conference, and this is something that was noted from his news conference.

Q This is from the news conference?

Q Are you noting this is something he now accepts and did not previously accept?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know about the past. I am giving you reaction to the news conference. As I say, I am clearly not a diplomatic expert, as some of you have noted, but for detailed information the State Department does have information.

Q Was Cuba discussed at the Cabinet meeting last night?

Q Ron, are you announcing a change in American policy toward Cuba?

MR. NESSEN: I am not intending to, Peter. My intention is to respond to Fran's question on what is the reaction to Castro's news conference.

Q Is there a change in U.S. policy? We don't understand your reaction, Ron. Is there or is there not a change?

MR. NESSEN: I am not announcing any change in American policy.

Q Ron, it seems you were saying the White House effects a change in Cuban policy.

Q That is right.

Q How about an answer on that one?

MR. NESSEN: This is the reaction to the news conference, John. I can see there is great interest in Cuban relations, and I think you ought to talk to the State Department people, who are experts on this. I don't want to mislead you, and I don't want to talk about a subject that I am not as much of an expert in as you should be talking to.

MR. NESSEN: I think you should talk to the State Department.

Q Ron, was Cuba discussed at the Cabinet meeting last night.

MR. NESSEN: It was not.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 12:28 P.M. EDT)