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NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:09 P.M. EDT

MAY 22, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: We have some journalism students from the University of Mississippi here, who we welcome to our briefing. They will probably have a lot of drop-outs from that class after they see this. They will probably go into medicine or road construction. (Laughter)

At 9:45, the President met with Senators and Congressmen who serve on the science and technology committees, and the purpose was to discuss the position of White House science adviser. Senator Moss and Congressman Teague and Jim Cannon came out and talked to you after that meeting and gave you a pretty fair idea of what was discussed there.

The President has had his meeting with President Senghor of Senagal. It was over just a few moments ago, and we are in the process of preparing a report on it, which we will post fairly soon, I hope.

At 1 o'clock, the President is having a working lunch in honor of President Senghor, and we have already put up on the bulletin board the coverage details of that and the guest list. If it is not up now, it will be shortly because we have it.

The President is just now beginning a regular meeting that he has with Vice President Rockefeller.

At 5:15, the President will have a reception. He will be the host at a reception in the Residence for 140 former Members of Congress. The President will speak briefly in the East Room, and that is open for coverage.

Tomorrow, as you know, the President will have his interview with the foreign correspondents, beginning at 11 o'clock in the Diplomatic Reception Room. We gave out most of the details on that yesterday.

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The interview is embargoed for 1 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, which is the time it will be broadcast in London by the BBC. We will pipe it back here so you can hear it as it is being taped. That is at 11 o'clock.

We also will provide a page-by-page transcript and the sound will come back here through the mult so you can make your own radio recordings of it as you go along.

Because of the timing of the interview, I guess we will pass on a Nessen briefing tomorrow. We will obviously post any announcements and be available for questions.

The briefing on the European trip looks like Saturday, unfortunately between 1 and 1:30. We will have more definite details of that tomorrow, the location and so forth.

Q Even 12:30 would be better.

MR. NESSEN: I am trying, Frank, but the senior American official has to see the the most senior American official.

Q We will compromise for the senior at 6 p.m. Friday.

Q A morning briefing is ruled out, then, for Saturday morning?

MR. NESSEN: At this moment, it looks like it is, Aldo.

Q Could it be later than 1:30 Saturday?

Q What kind of briefing is that going to be, Ron? Just background or what?

MR. NESSEN: My feeling is that we really ought to try to make it a real briefing on the European trip on background, and then perhaps if there were other questions on other matters, we could do that as a separate part at the end.

You know, in light of the Far East experience, when the pre-trip briefing turned into an open news conference and dealt mainly with the Middle East, and then when we got to the Far East I think there was some feeling of not having enough information.

So, this one I would really like to at least keep the initial portion of it as a real briefing on the European trip, and then have the other afterward.

Q Ron, will this be for immediate release, the information?

MR. NESSEN: I would think so. Yes, the information certainly will.

Q You will post the time and place, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Now a little bit on the European trip.

We are going to have today for you at least the beginning of the material for your press notebooks. We will have the press notes section, actually, and as the days go on through Monday, we will be putting in additional material on each country and each stop.

The entire book will be available on the planes Wednesday, and you do have a ten-hour flight, so that should give you time to study what you don't get before then.

We do not have the detailed schedule yet, and we are working on it. Some of the events and the precise arrangements are not firmed up yet, and that is what is holding that up.

You have a little packet of announcements, I think, which include the appointment by the President of 11 members to the Commission on White House Fellowships.

You also have the nomination by the President of James H. Blair of Lansing, Michigan, to be Assistant Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development for Equal Opportunity.

The President is transmitting to the Congress the first annual report of the Development Coordination Committee.

For any of you who want copies, they are in the Press Office, and you can get them after the briefing.

The President is transmitting to Congress the fiscal 1974 annual report of the Coastal Zone Management and copies of that report also are available in the Press Office.

Also, we have passed out copies of the Proclamation the President is issuing for Memorial Day.

Q Ron, on Blair, is he black?

MR. NESSEN: I have no idea.

Q Ron, do you know what his politics are, or does it say anything?

MR. NESSEN: I am checking.

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Q Do you have an idea what he is going to be doing over the Memorial Day holiday?

MR. NESSEN: The President?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: For planning purposes, I think he has already told some people he is going to a reunion on Saturday for former shipmates on the USS MONTEREY.

Blair is an Independent as far as party affiliation.

So, I think he will go to that because he has already told people that he will. I will give you the exact details. There will a travel pool sent to L'Enfant Plaza.

Q At night?

MR. NESSEN: 7:15 Saturday.

Q Anything for Monday?

MR. NESSEN: I think, again for planning purposes, you can look for some public commemoration of Memorial Day, but I don't have the exact details for you now.

Q Ron, on that thing tonight, could you tell us who these Congressmen are, how they were selected, and what they are doing here?

MR. NESSEN: This is an organization which has a regular meeting. In fact, this is their fifth annual meeting. They are actually here for two days of activities and this is a kind of wind-up of the two days of activities.

Q Bipartisan?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, yes.

We have a participants list and I think we will just go ahead and post it. They are both Republicans and Democrats. They number 140 and as I say, they have been in business for quite a while.

Q What is the official name of the committee?

MR. NESSEN: It is just called "Former Members of Congress." (Laughter) I know that is ambiguous, but that happens to be the name.

Q Is the President a member?

MR. NESSEN: He certainly is a former Member of Congress.

Is it a formal organization of which he is a member?

Q How many of them are not lobbyists?

Q Do you have any guidance on what he is going to say?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't. I think it will be off-the-cuff.

Q Ron, you were asked the question about James Blair, whether he is black. Now, is there any reason why, other than possibly that you don't know, is there any other reason why you don't know whether he is black or not, since it is a factor in the appointments? Some jobs are sensitive for that reason.

MR. NESSEN: I have no idea what you mean by a man's color being a factor in his job. I simply don't know what color he is, and I didn't ask.

Q Ron, 76 Senators have signed a letter to the President urging support for Israel in an historic fashion as Americans always supported Israel.

Has the President received that letter? Has he read it, and what is his reaction if he has?

MR. NESSEN: He has received the letter. He believes that it is valuable to have a wide range of views. He will consider the letter. He welcomes all suggestions from all sources, as the United States continues its reassessment of Middle East policy.

Of course, the United States is dedicated to the survival of a free and independent Israel. The United States also has been working hard to maintain peace in the Middle East, and peace in that area is the best long-term assurance for Israel and the other states in the area.

Q Ron, in view of this concern by these 76 Senators, will the White House, at long last, explain how the President believes Israel could be what he termed more flexible, or have you been ordered to keep this a mystery?

MR. NESSEN: Are those my only two choices of an answer, Les?

Q Ron, I just wondered.

MR. NESSEN: I think you have raised the question a number of times, and I thought I had --

Q It is a very important question, and now that 76 Senators have indicated this very deep concern about a very serious question, I am just wondering whether there is any possibility you might give us an answer.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so, Les.

Q Ron, would the President have preferred to have received this letter after his meeting with President Sadat?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any indication of that.

Q Does he intend to meet with these Senators or to confer with them or respond to the letter?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of any plans to meet with the 76 Senators. As I say, he will certainly consider the letter and the recommendation.

Q Ron, part of the complaint in the letter was that the reassessment policy has not included in a kind of formal way Congressional consultation. Does the President now intend to set up a new structure for including Congress in this reassessment of our policy toward Israel and the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: Not a new structure, Tom, no.

Q Could you tell us what he may be doing that would reflect more Congressional consultation or points of view?

MR. NESSEN: This letter, itself, certainly represents bringing to his attention the views of 76 Senators. He has frequent meetings with Senators, Members of the House, and I know that at some of these meetings they do express their views on the Middle East.

Q That is an initiative that comes from Capitol Hill. What will be the initiative from the White House?

MR. NESSEN: I don't agree that it is an initiative that comes from Capitol Hill. He often invites Members here.

Q He didn't invite the letter, for instance. What will he do in an attempt to encourage more Congressional input in this reassessment?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that I can give you anything specific beyond the kind of contact he has had with the Hill already.

Aldo?

Q You mentioned that peace was the best assurance for survival of all the nations. In your reaction to the letter, are you suggesting that the letter perhaps might make peace more difficult to keep or that it might perhaps make it easier for the President?

MR. NESSEN: I don't suggest either one of those, Aldo. I would not draw either one of those conclusions from the letter.

Q I might ask a follow-up on my question about Sadat. You said you had no indication that the President felt that this was an awkward time to get a letter from three-fourths of the Senate. Does the President, or his advisers, consider that this letter, with its very, very strong support for Israel, make it more difficult or in any sense awkward for the President in his meetings with Mr. Sadat in Austria?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q You do not see this in any sense as a handicap or an impediment or difficulty in the discussions with Sadat?

MR. NESSEN: No.

I do want to point out to Tom that, Tom, I don't want you to go away with the impression that there are not consultations with Congressional leaders. The President has conferred with Congressional leaders and both Secretary Kissinger and Under Secretary Sisco have met with Members of Congress and will continue to meet with Members of Congress as part of the reassessment.

Q Ron, the President didn't solicit these views, did he, by any chance? Did he, by any chance, ask some of the Senators to put in writing what they were thinking?

MR. NESSEN: In addition, Tom, I think you know that he does not only consult with Congress on this matter as part of the reassessment, but also, outside organizations which represent views on the Middle East.

Q Are you saying, Ron, that some Members of the Congress have been called in by the White House as a definite part of this reassessment to make a definite contribution to this reassessment? In other words, are you saying that they have been called in, or consulted with, specifically for their input into this reassessment?



MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Can you tell us who they were?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure whether they were called to meetings at which they were asked for their views which may have been called for another purpose, but in the course of his various meetings with Congressional leaders, he has talked to them about the Middle East.

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Q Ron, would you answer my question regarding the letter, please?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry. I forgot what it was.

Q Did the President in any way ask for the views contained in this letter by the Senators?

MR. NESSEN: Did he solicit the letter?

Q Solicit from any of those 76 anything that might have --

MR. NESSEN: Let me make sure I know what you are asking now. Are you asking in relation to Tom's question, has he consulted -- are you saying did he say, "Send me a letter with your views"?

Q Exactly.

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Does the fact that the reassessment has not been completed mean that the President will be negotiating with Sadat before the United States has a clear policy on what should be done next in the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: No. I think what the President himself said in the interview with the New York Daily News was that he believes that before completion of the reassessment he should have the opportunity to talk to both Sadat and Rabin.

Q Ron, just to clean that up on this business of consultation, presumably this reassessment will have some kind of resolution.

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q Will the President seek Congressional endorsement or consensus on that resolution? Once the reassessment is finished or is in its final stages, will he then go specifically to Members of Congress and ask for their endorsement or ask for their judgments on the final stages of the reassessment?

MR. NESSEN: Tom, it is hard to predict how it will be put in its final form and announced and so forth. I just can't answer the question at the moment.

Q Ron, can you say what had been the President's reaction to the news that the Syrians had accepted to prolong by six months the presence of the UN forces, and was that the object of the exchange of letters between Syrian President Assad and President Ford some days ago, which we never knew what was in it?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of an exchange of letters between the President and Assad.

Q Ten days ago, about the time of the MAYAGUEZ incident.

MR. NESSEN: I think you raised that one other time, and as I say, I don't know of an exchange of letters. I will have to check on the Syrian decision to --

Q What about the decision?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I say, I need to check on that. I did not do that.

Q Can we move on to something else, please?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think generally, the White House is pleased the Syrians have done that.

Q Ron, did you say of the Senators who spoke with the President and the matter of the Middle East did come up? Did you say, to your knowledge, the President has not sent for any one or any number of Senators for that specific conversation, that specific topic?

MR. NESSEN: I say that I don't know whether these were done in meetings specifically called for that purpose or as part of other meetings, and I don't have a list of who was consulted, but I know it is one of the steps in the Middle East assessment.

Q Ron, has any single Senator or Congressman been called to the White House for the specific purpose of a consultation on the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I told Cliff I don't know, but I will check.

Q Ron, did the President promise Speaker Albert that he would delay the imposition of another dollar oil import duties beyond June 30?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I am aware of.

Q When did they meet?

MR. NESSEN: Speaker Albert and the President?

Q Albert says that he asked the President to delay it.

MR. NESSEN: He may have referred to a phone-call to the President, but I am unaware that the President has promised to delay -- for what period of time? I don't know of any such promise.

Q When is the decision going to be made, Ron? It was not, apparently, made last night.

MR. NESSEN: No, it was not. I would say sometime in the next few days.

Q Before he goes to Europe?

MR. NESSEN: I think there is a good possibility.

Q Ron, yesterday you said on this whole subject that the President felt as long as the House does stay in session there is hope of action. Since we have got six hours or so to go, maybe less before they leave, has he now abandoned that hope?

MR. NESSEN: He is losing hope. (Laughter)

Q Ron, Congressman Young of Florida has observed that the UN refuses to help the refugees from South Vietnam in the manner that it has helped the Palestinian refugees for several years, and he is proposing a bill to deduct what we spent on helping the refugees from our UN support.

I am wondering, has the President any viewpoint on this or how does he feel? Does he feel the UN should support the refugees as they have for the Palestinian refugees or not?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard the matter discussed here, Les.

Q Ron, yesterday a group of Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps Generals and flag officers came to the White House for a meeting. Can you tell us with whom they met and if that meeting had anything to do with the review of the MAYAGUEZ operation?

MR. NESSEN: They did not meet with the President.

MR. GREENER: They met with Ted Marrs.

MR. NESSEN: That is right. I didn't connect these two things together.

Yes, they did meet with Dr. Theodore Marrs, who is a Special Assistant to the President, in the Roosevelt Room on the missing in action question. As you may know, Dr. Marrs is the White House liaison dealing with MIA organizations.

Q This is MIAs in Vietnam or MIAs on the MAYAGUEZ

MR. NESSEN: In Vietnam.

There were representatives of the National League of Families, VIVA, which is Voices in Vital America, the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council, and no doubt some of those Defense Department people are the ones that you saw coming in.

Q It had nothing to do with the MAYAGUEZ?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Ron, in connection with the MAYAGUEZ, you said, I believe it was early this week or perhaps last Saturday, that the President had asked for a review to determine for the two weeks prior to the seizure to determine if we knew that they were harrasing other ships in the Gulf of Thailand and if any Government agency knew it and why that information was not passed on. Do you have a report on that?

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

Q On that, Ron, has the President issued any instructions to the Pentagon, the Defense Mapping Agency or whoever would be responsible for it to make sure that if there are any other episodes anywhere in waters anywhere in the world of ships being harassed, they make damn sure the warnings get out immediately.

In other words, pending the report, has he issued interim instructions like that?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, but I will check.

Q Ron, I have a question going back to the letter business. Senator Humphrey this morning, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Foreign Aid, complained that the President's foreign aid message to Congress last week did not have anything on the Middle East and he specifically said that this seemed to him to be a means of pressuring Israel more before the visit with Rabin.

He said that if he does not have a package on the Middle East by mid-June, around June 18, his committee may draft its own legislation on the Middle East foreign aid package. Do you have any comment?

MR. NESSEN: Only that the new aid levels to the Middle East to Israel have not been determined yet, and I think we have said before at various times during a discussion of the reassessment that it should not be considered as being directed at anyone or as holding out the prospect of using American aid in a punitive way, that American aid will be determined, the levels of it, on the basis of our own interests and as well as our commitment to the survival of Israel.

Q Ron, is the White House aware at all of the capture by Cuba three or four weeks ago of a couple of fishing boats from this country down there? There is a story out of Miami yesterday that came up through the AP channels. If so, do we give a damn about the fishing boats like we would the MAYAGUEZ?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard anything about any fishing boats being captured.

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Q Let me put the question to you this way, Ron. We have now had two American officers murdered in Iran, three American citizens kidnaped in Africa and about a dozen Americans are being held under house arrest in Laos.

MR. NESSEN: They have been released, Jim.

Q They have been released? All right. We will stay with the kidnappings and killings. That may suffice unto the day.

Why have none of these brought the type of reaction, or similar reaction, that the MAYAGUES incident brought?

MR. NESSEN: I think you know the answer to that, Jim. Each episode is responded to in the appropriate way.

Q What will be the appropriate reaction in the case of three Americans kidnaped in Africa?

MR. NESSEN: As I understand it, the government there has said it would do all it could to find out where they are, who has them, and to get them back.

Q We are not doing anything militarily over there that you know of?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Ron, what plans are there, or what do you know of what the U.S. effort is to recover those three students?

MR. NESSEN: As I told Jim, each of these is handled in the appropriate way. Certainly, in the case of the MAYAGUEZ, there was a diplomatic effort made which produced no results and so the action was taken there that was appropriate.

In the case of Iran, the government has condemned the episode and is making an all-out effort to -- I think has identified the assassins from what I hear -- and is out to get them.

In the case of Tanzania, the government there also has acted quickly to find out who the kidnapers were and where the people are being held, and to get them back. So, I see no conflict in handling different episodes in different ways.

Q Well, there is a conflict, Ron, because the Equadorians are taking millions of dollars in ransom from getting the tuna boats. If you can explain why it is appropriate for one merchant ship to turn loose the Marines and the Air Force and yet, we have lost 132 boats. Could you explain what you mean by "appropriate," Ron?

MR. NESSEN: It is about the same explanation I gave yesterday, Les, when you raised the same question, which is that we do have diplomatic relations with Equador and we are handling that matter through diplomatic channels.

Q There is considerable agitation in Laos that we end U.S. aid. Is this being reviewed? Has a decision been made on it? What is the situation?

MR. NESSEN: I think a question on aid to Laos was raised before here and I said that we were keeping that situation of aid to Laos under review. I think it is fair to say now that while that review is going on, that the aid is continuing at a restricted level.

To anticipate your follow-up question, you will need to talk to the people who administer the AID program to find out what has been reduced, and so forth. I don't have the information.

Q Let me follow Ted's question by asking you this: As you are undoubtedly aware, the foreign aid statute prohibits American foreign aid to a Communist nation unless the President specifically determines that that is in the national interest.

Two questions: First of all, does the United States now consider Laos a Communist nation: Two, if it does, has the President made a determination that continuation of aid to Laos, regardless of what level, is in the national interest?

MR. NESSEN: Let me answer it this way, Jim. Let me back up a little bit and say that the Pathet Lao are exercising more and more control over the direction that the Laotian government takes. We do not consider it now a Communist government. We do believe that a coalition of sorts still exists.

We are, as I say, reviewing the aid under those circumstances, and in the meanwhile, are continuing the aid at the restricted levels.

Q Now that aid of the military side has already been cut very sharply, has there been a further cut?

MR. NESSEN: Cut in the sense of what is being shipped? The shipments have been restricted.

Q Slowing down shipments.

MR. NESSEN: For the details, you should check the people who handle it.



Q What instructions or guidance, or whatever it is, has gone out to the Embassy there regarding the withdrawal of American personnel?

MR. NESSEN: The number of American Government employees and their families in Laos is being reduced. Now, when I checked on this, there had not been a report from the Ambassador as to the numbers involved. I think maybe the State Department can give you a later report, perhaps, on the numbers.

Q Do you yet anticipate an evacuation of American personnel similar to those in Cambodia and South Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: No evacuation has been ordered.

Q Do you anticipate one?

MR. NESSEN: It is difficult to anticipate a course of events.

Q Is the President very optimistic that this increasing Pathet Lao control over the direction of the Laotian government can be checked or stopped?

MR. NESSEN: I think I would just as soon not forecast the future.

Q Ron, a minute ago you said that you still considered that there would be some, in effect, non-Pathet Lao elements in the Laotian cabinet. Other than Souvanna Phouma himself, who are they? Have you identified them?

I asked that because of the resignation of the Defense Minister and the Finance Minister, who, I was under the impression, were just about the last government people left in the cabinet and they are gone now.

MR. NESSEN: I think for the details of this Jim, you could talk to the State Department, which is a source of more detailed information.

Q No, but you have made a statement that you still consider there to be some non-Pathet Lao elements and I am just wondering --

MR. NESSEN: I say we still consider it a coalition Government of sorts. Of sorts.

Q Of sorts. That is precisely what I am asking. Presumably, you have some basis of fact on which you make your statements.

MR. NESSEN: If you do want more details and prefer not to go to the State Department --

Q It is a coalition Government, it is not Pathet Lao.

MR. NESSEN: I say if you prefer more details and are inclined not to call the State Department, which has the details, I will see what I can dig up for you here.

Q Ron, has the President ever received that review of the evacuation of Saigon that he ordered?

MR. NESSEN: Was there a review of the evacuation of Saigon?

Q You told us on that podium that there was one.

MR. NESSEN: Was there? I don't recall any review of the evacuation of Saigon.

Q Remember, I asked specifically about General Wilson's role in the evacuation, and you told us it was under review, the entire operation was under review.

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

Q Ron, are there any contingency plans for an evacuation of Laotians who might be considered high risks in the possibility of a takeover by the Communists, a complete takeover in Vientiane?

MR. NESSEN: I have not heard of any, and I think you need to remember the geography of Laos, which is quite different from the geography of Cambodia and Vietnam. There is a long common border with Thailand, separated by a river.

Q Ron, could I ask a domestic question, a very easy one, I think. Apropos of the very strong possibility of his going to West Point, is the President in favor of female cadets at the military academy?

MR. NESSEN: I asked him that very question, Les.

Q You did? (Laughter)

Q Finally. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: He wants to think about it a little bit.

Q He does? Hmmm. (Laughter)

Q Are the talks with Sadat and Rabin negotiation in the sense that some advancement toward a settlement might emerge from this, or are they part of a reassessment?

MR. NESSEN: Mort, I don't have the information to answer that question.

Q One other thing. There was a letter from Senator Percy that was separate from the 76 Senators' letter. Has the President received that and does he have any comment on that one?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't know there was a separate letter. I had not heard it. If he sent it, it is presumably here, but I have not heard about it.

Q Concerning action on energy, Ron, has the President heard anything from the Hill or does he hope to hear anything from the Hill that might lead him to take no action at all and to defer his taking of action until the return of Congress?

MR. NESSEN: I think his inclination now is -- I don't want to speak before the decision has been made because it has not been made -- but I will tell you that his general feeling is that having introduced this energy bill on the 15th of January, and we are up to the 22nd of May, and there has been no action whatever on the floor, the only Congressional action has been to reduce energy production through the strip mining bill.

He looks at the increasing reliance on imports and these stories suggesting that some of the oil producing countries may raise their prices. He is just determined that we need to begin a program to end reliance on foreign sources of oil, which places us at their mercy in terms of price and supply.

So, those are some of the things in his mind as he makes his decision. I cannot answer your specific question because he has not made the decision.

Q You are leaving us with the impression, Ron -- in fact, you said yesterday administrative action is quite possible before the Europe trip.

MR. NESSEN: I would leave it at that.

Q Ron, what specific information does the White House have on the students who were kidnaped and are any efforts other than diplomatic being considered?

MR. NESSEN: The students in Tanzania?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: The Tanzanian authorities are investigating and two officers from the American Embassy in Dar es Salaam have gone to the area or are on the way to the area where the kidnaping took place.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 12:46 P.M. EDT)