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N E W S C O N F E R E N C E

#248

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:05 P.M. EDT

JUNE 17, 1975

TUESDAY

MR. NESSEN: Senator Scott and Congressman Rhodes came out and gave you a report on the meeting with the Republican leaders this morning and, as they told you, there were three items on the agenda -- consumer protection legislation, the crime bill that will go up either later this week or the first of next week; and the third item was the housing bill. I think you got a fairly complete report from them on that.

Then, after that, the President went over to the Washington Hilton where I think you heard him make his speech to the National Federation of Independent Business.

As for the rest of the day, the President has a meeting at 2:00 with his economic and energy advisers, and the subject of that meeting will be tax reform. I think you may recall that in his State of the Union speech the President said that he would be submitting tax reform legislation this year--proposals. This meeting will discuss some of the options that he has. I don't expect that at this point in the consideration that there would be any decisions made this afternoon.

Q Who is going to be at that meeting? Who are the advisers at that meeting?

MR. NESSEN: The Vice President, Treasury Secretary Simon, Bill Seidman, Labor Secretary Dunlop, Alan Greenspan, Commerce Secretary Morton, Dr. Burns, Frank Zarb, Don Rumsfeld, Paul O'Neill, Dick Dunham and Fred Hickman.

Q Is he thinking of a tax reform, income tax reform, personal and so forth?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to wait and see what the proposals are. This will be my first crack at listening to tax reform, Helen.

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Q They obviously couldn't do a tax reform this year. Is this a longer range thing he has in mind?

MR. NESSEN: Well, no. Actually, in the State of the Union speech he said he would submit the tax reform proposals later this year.

Q It doesn't mean they will act this year?

MR. NESSEN: It may not mean that they act this year, but the fact is that he is on the record as saying that he will propose it later this year.

That is 2:00 this afternoon. Then, I think you have the little package of announcements.

Some of you heard the speech this morning, or read the speech, though, that the President announced he is appointing eight persons to a Commission on Paperwork. I think the Congress approved the Commission and the President is now nominating the names.

Do you have the list of people?

Q No.

Q Ron, why has it taken the President six months to decide who should be on that Commission?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Ron, the press release, on it, it says that they will make a report. Are they going to report orally or on paper? (Laughter.)

MR. NESSEN: Maybe on recycled paper.

Q On both sides or one? (Laughter.)

MR. NESSEN: And in very small print.

Q Can you tell us who wrote that speech? Do you know who?

MR. NESSEN: I frankly don't know.

Q We think maybe Adam Smith wrote it.

MR. NESSEN: Adam Smith ---

Q Or homo habilis. (Laughter.)

MR. NESSEN: It certainly reflected the President's views.

Q It does?

MR. NESSEN: All of his speeches reflect his views, (Laughter) because he reads and rewrites, and one of them, as some of you who waited around last night for the speech know, he rewrote that one quite late into the night.

Q He did?

Q What did he change?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I didn't sit in on those.

Where is the list of members of the Commission? Is it in the bins?

You also have the nomination of Sidney Jones to be the Assistant Treasury Secretary for Economic Policy. And you have the transfer of 23 parcels of land. This is under a continuing program of transferring no longer needed parcels of Federal lands to local communities and States. And also you have 19 people nominated to the--or appointed, rather, to the Commission on Presidential Scholars.

And that is all the announcements I have.

Q UPI is reporting that the Conference on European Security, the prospects for it have suddenly improved, they are quoting diplomatic sources. Can you shed any light on that? And they are quoting the dates of the 28th through the 31st of July.

MR. NESSEN: I saw that story and I don't ---

Q Are we going?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't have anything to give you on that.

Let me stop here for a minute and say that the list of people to the Commission on Paperwork, we decided not to put any papers out on it so it could save paper. It is in the bins.

Q It says the Commission on Presidential Scholars.

MR. NESSEN: No, this is the Commission on Federal Paperwork. Would you make one correction on it? The name of Louis B. Knecht of Rockville, Maryland, who is the International Secretary-Treasurer of the Communications Workers of America, the word "Workers" was left out.

On the European Security Treaty, the last word I had was that there are still some issues that are unresolved, but negotiations are reaching a point where it is possible to be optimistic and if the Conference is concluded along the lines that are now foreseeable and if the early progress is realized, then I think that a schedule of concluding the Conference sometime this summer could occur.

Q With a summit, concluding it with a summit?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President has said himself that if the Conference concludes along the lines that now appear foreseeable ---

Q This story says the President and Mr. Brezhnev have actually agreed on July 28 as the start of a four-day summit.

MR. NESSEN: I am aware of the story, and I was unable to confirm that before I came out here.

Q Ron, does the President have any reaction, has he expressed any concern over the elections in Italy, the local elections which indicate that the national elections, the Communists would increase their clout?

MR. NESSEN: Well, the basic position has to be that the United States would not want to comment on what is basically an internal political matter.

I would only say beyond that that the United States does attach great importance to its relations with Italy, both on a country-to-country basis and also because of its membership in NATO. And I think the trip there recently by the President underscores that.

The President feels that the United States and Italy will continue in their relations to be guided by a spirit of friendship and cooperation.

Q We talked quite a bit about Portugal's internal matters recently and leftist leaning governments there and the threat of that post to NATO. What is the difference?

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to comment on internal elections.

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Q Ron, you promised the other day you would check and find out about this Nonmetallic Mining Review Board that has been listening to Beethoven for four years.

MR. NESSEN: We will look into that.

Q The President is asking for \$60,000 more in the OMB.

MR. NESSEN: We did look into it. I will have to find out what we found out.

Phil?

Q Ron, is the President, as the story reported this morning, wrestling with the idea of how to handle this assassination situation?

MR. NESSEN: I think if you look back at what the President said at his last news conference, especially in response to your colleague, Dan Schorr, and I checked again with him this morning, that is the position that he had then and has now.

When Dan asked him, "Do you foresee any time when it might be in the public interest to release that," meaning the material on alleged assassinations, the President said, "I think there may be."

If you noticed in my opening statements, I said at this time I would not want to prejudge that at the moment, and that is just basically what the President's position is at the moment.

I do think that it is important to keep in mind during this period, when there seem to be leaks every day, that what the President said earlier in that news conference is a matter of great sensitivity, and it is a matter that involves alleged decisions that were made 15 and 20 years ago, that some of the people involved are no longer around, that it is very difficult to judge what others did in other times under other pressures.

It is obviously an area where peoples' reputations are involved, and the President asked then that all this be handled with utmost prudence.

There does seem to be a continuing series of leaks of partial information, or alleged partial information, and there seems to be a lack of respect for handling this kind of thing in a careful way.

The President really wants to reiterate his feeling that it needs to be handled with utmost prudence, both because it is difficult to look back and judge what others might have done, peoples' reputations --

Q -- no one is asking the President to judge --

MR. NESSEN: -- and the President feels it is not in the national interest to spew out incomplete, unclear portions and bits and pieces day after day.

Q Is he upset with Vice President Rockefeller on those grounds?

MR. NESSEN: I think I talked about that yesterday, but his feeling about leaks and little bits and pieces of files here and there, he feels quite strongly that this is really not the orderly and proper way to handle this.

I think you should keep this in mind, that this President has been in office ten months. Whatever may or may not have happened in the past does not involve him. So, he has no personal interest or stake in handling this matter in an orderly way, but he does have very strong convictions and deeply held views on the impropriety of the continuing string of leaks that we have seen.

Q Ron, this story today says the White House investigation of assassination is continuing. Is that true? Is their investigation going on right now?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President said at his news conference that the White House is involved in pulling together, looking for, and that sort of thing, materials that the Church Committee has requested.

Q Ron, both you and the President referred repeatedly to the handling of this material in an orderly and prudent way, and in a careful and cautious way --

MR. NESSEN: And a responsible way.

Q -- and a responsible way. These are, in the minds of some people, merely euphemisms and code words for suppressing and keeping confidential and secret this information. If that is not the case -- and I am sure you would deny that -- what do you mean when you use all these adjectives, prudent, cautious and so forth?

MR. NESSEN: I just spent about five minutes, here, Jim, saying any suggestion that this President is trying to hide something doesn't really add up because he has nothing to hide. He wasn't involved in this. He wasn't involved in the Executive Branch.

But he does--and I think you know this President from observing him over a time now-- have strong convictions and beliefs about doing things in an orderly and responsible way, of not besmirching reputations by partial disclosures and leaks and bits and pieces.

I think if you follow the progress of this story over the weeks, you will see that no coherent picture emerges. One day we have somebody saying that there was involvement by Presidents, and the next day somebody says, who claims to have equal access to information, that there was no involvement by Presidents.

You have had five or six different foreign leaders mentioned, but never any conclusive proof of any plots against any of those leaders.

It is just a disorderly, not responsible way of dealing with an important subject that needs to be handled in a more orderly way that the President has outlined in his last news conference.

Q Does the President believe the people have a right to know? We are not talking about judging past Presidents. I am asking you, does the President believe the American people have the right to know what has been done in their name, by the CIA?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, you didn't ask, but somebody else asked that very question at the last news conference, and I think you should study his answer. The question is not all that simple.

Q Why not?

MR. NESSEN: I think if we could possibly look at this question in all of its ramifications, it would be clear to you that it is not as simple as, do the people have a right to know.

First of all, all the facts are not known and may never be known. The facts that are known now, certainly being leaked and dribbled out the way they are, gives a not complete picture of what may have gone on, and that is why the President feels that this is not the --

Q I want to follow up on just one more thing. I want to say, since all the facts are not known, does the President want to know all the facts? We get the idea he doesn't want to since he carried on --

MR. NESSEN: Where did you get that idea?

Q Because the Rockefeller Commission was aborted in the middle of its investigation.

MR. NESSEN: I think we really need to talk about this subject in a much more calm manner and examine all the implications of things we are saying. You know, Helen, that the Rockefeller Commission itself said it did not have the time to complete its investigation. I think you also know that Rod --

Q Is that acceptable?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, why do we need to go back over old ground that the President has covered in direct response to these same direct questions? I am trying to give you some broad view of why he is displeased with the method in which this matter is being handled now, and also trying to steer you away from what I think some of you have in your minds in terms of somehow, as Jim says, hiding the truth.

The President told you at that news conference, and Rod Hills told you before the news conference, that the Church Committee is well along in its investigation, that the Attorney General is being given material to further look into any violations of law, but it is just not fair to history and not fair to people who were in positions of authority at the time to do it in the manner it is being done now.

I would think because of the importance of it, because of the reputations involved and the necessity to make sure all the facts are known before judgments are made, that you would also want to join in a more orderly way of making this known.

Q Ron, Rod Hills also said the other day that if necessary to get at the truth, the President could call back the Rockefeller Commission or create some new group to investigate these charges. Has he considered doing that? Is his concern about these leaks enough to prompt him to do that?

MR. NESSEN: My understanding is that the Church Committee is moving ahead quite rapidly on this, and the Attorney General has acquired quite a lot of material from here. I have not heard the President speak of recalling the Rockefeller Commission.

Q Ron, without getting into the substance of what is being discussed now -- leaks, good information or bad -- can you confirm the New York Times claim that new information has been found in NSC files dealing with the period between 1958 and 1963, without getting into the substance of the information?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to, Ralph, for the reasons that the President stated. As I say, I think the President hopes that you would all understand and even share his concern about doing things in this manner.

Q Ron, you had a discussion with the President this morning about the subject of leaks, didn't you?

MR. NESSEN: I have talked to the President a number of days about this. I think some of this reflects my own strong feelings, as well as his.

Q But did you have a discussion with him today on the subject?

MR. NESSEN: We have talked about this, I guess, every day since the Rockefeller Commission report.

Q Did you have a discussion today?

MR. NESSEN: I said every day, and today is one of the days.

Q Can you tell us what specifically triggered the discussion that took place today?

MR. NESSEN: Nothing more than triggered the discussions that took place yesterday and every day last week, and that is the series of stories that have dribbled out and have often been contradicted the next day or within hours, and my concern that this is not the right way to do business, and his equally strong concern.

Q Is this being leveled at Senator Church?

MR. NESSEN: Certainly not. The President feels the Church Committee has operated in a very responsible manner.

Q The words "lack of respect for handling things in a careful way," who is showing that lack of respect?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know who your sources are, obviously, but the President feels the Church Committee, Senator Church and Senator Tower have certainly done a responsible job.

Q If the Church Committee decides to make public the assassination data, will the President accept that decision?

MR. NESSEN: I have not discussed that with him, Dave.

Q Ron, is the President and are you questioning the right and the duty of the news media, the press, to attempt to get as much of this information as they can?

MR. NESSEN: No, I wouldn't put it that way. I would rather not deal directly with that question. I think you know that we almost never question the operation of the White House reporters. I am just telling you what the President's feelings are about this matter. He expressed them in his news conference, and I am re-emphasizing what he said in his news conference.

Q You said it isn't the Church Committee and it isn't the news media. Who is it you are criticizing for this nonlogical or nonresponsible way --

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I disagree with your use of the word "criticism." What I am trying to do today, and as I said to Mort, this is to a large extent my own strong personal feelings. It is not to criticize what has been done in the past, but simply to try to put into some kind of framework this issue and how I think and the President thinks it ought to be handled.

It is not meant as a criticism of what is happening, but more of a suggestion of how he thinks it should be handled.

Q Considering the recent past, the Watergate investigation, and considering also the normal operation of a democracy, have you or the President any realistic expectation that your exhortations are going to change this situation? (Laughter)

Q Ron, to follow up that line, isn't it fruitless to try to, by warnings and cautions, to prevent leaks? They go on in the Government all the time, especially when you have delivered, and you have not said that the White House has delivered any rebuke to a person who was in your own domain; namely, the Vice President of the United States, who was on Meet the Press on Sunday and talked about the possibility that the Kennedy brothers were somehow linked to the assassinations?

MR. NESSEN: Mort, what I am doing is not meant as a warning, a caution or a criticism. I know that there is a burning and strong interest in this subject. God knows I know it if anybody does. All I am trying to say is, you know, as somebody who had the same strong feelings about other stories when I was out there, and now from seeing the complexities of this story from another side and from hearing the President's views on it, I am just offering you the President's views on how he thinks that this ought to be responsibly handled in the interest of history and the interest of national security, in the national interest, in the interest of foreign relations and in the interest of peoples' reputations.

Q Ron, would you have preferred the Vice President not answer that question about the Kennedys in the way he did.

MR. NESSEN: I think you will find the President's views on talk of alleged assassination plots was clearly stated in his news conference. That is what I am sticking with.

Q If the President is going to take the most explosive aspect of the Rockefeller Commission and hold it and then pass it over to Senator Church, in effect dumping it in his lap, if there is a President involved, if it is Kennedy or Eisenhower, then if Church announces it, this doesn't get votes from either the disciples of either of those two.

But, I am wondering why, if the President wants to pass that over to Senator Church, why didn't he just let Senator Church do it without appointing a Rockefeller Commission?

MR. NESSEN: Les, do you know of any involvement by Presidents Kennedy or Eisenhower?

Q I don't know.

MR. NESSEN: Then why would you do just the very kind of thing --

Q On the basis the Vice President hinted at it, that is why.

MR. NESSEN: What you are doing is the very kind of thing that the President finds offensive and I find offensive.

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Q I am simply asking a question. Is that offensive, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I believe you know the answer, Les, but I will be happy to go through it again. The Rockefeller Commission, as the Vice President said on Sunday, found itself unable to complete its investigation in the time allotted to it, and I believe he spelled out rather clearly the difficulties in persuading staff members to stay on for the additional months required. The President made clear in his news conference, and Rod Hills did, that they were satisfied that between the Church Committee and the Justice Department and what the White House has been asked to provide for the Church Committee, that the investigation will be completed in an orderly way.

Q In your daily discussions with the President, have you had an opportunity to get an answer to my question yet as to whether the President has expressed any dismay, or criticism, either direct or indirect, of the way the CIA illegally spied on American citizens and violated their Constitutional rights?

MR. NESSEN: The President, has, I think, made it clear on a number of occasions ---

Q Could you cite them, please?

MR. NESSEN: Just a moment. Let me finish my answer -- that he in no way condones, approves, or tolerates violations of law, whether it is within the CIA or within any other branch of the Government, or outside of the branch of the Government. He clearly stands for living up to the laws and he doesn't quite understand why he needs to each day reaffirm his belief in living up to the law and his condemnation of law violations.

Q What proof do the American people have that the law is being obeyed now by CIA?

MR. NESSEN: Bill?

Q You said some of these thoughts were your own thoughts. I wonder if you could give us a direct quote from the President. What in here is the President's views?

MR. NESSEN: I suggest you go back and read his news conference which is the most succinct, clear and forceful statement of his views and he stands by those.

Q All of this other stuff, then, is your thoughts, not the President's?

MR. NESSEN: I am sure he would not use the same language I used, but I am merely reflecting in my own words what he said at the news conference.

Q Ron, do you think that the House Armed Services Committee vote rebuking Congressman Harrington for leaking classified information and/or the House vote yesterday, overwhelming vote of confidence in Congressman Nedzi, reflects the sort of attitude that may help plug leaks and lead to more responsible handling of this?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I ought to comment on the working of Congress ---

Q Really?

MR. NESSEN: --- in that particular area.

Q Ron, I think you made it very clear how you and the President feel this matter should not be handled. But I am not quite clear in my own mind as to how they think it should be handled. Does the President really want this information to be presented to the American people at some time in some manner and, if so, how and when?

MR. NESSEN: I do think, Bob, that you ought to look at what he said at his news conference because he spells it all out. He says that he is going to make these materials available to the Church Committee, he is sure the investigation is going to be finished, that he thinks these ought to be handled with the utmost prudence, and he said, "The investigation is incomplete and the allegations involve extremely sensitive matters. I have decided it is not in the national interest to make public the materials relating to these allegations at this time."

And then he talks about turning over, or rather making available materials to the Church Committee. He says he knows the Members of Congress will exercise the utmost prudence. Those are his views on how it should be handled.

Q But he doesn't say how or when the American public should be informed. We have asked you if you think he wants it released through the Church Committee, and you have declined to answer. All you are saying really is what should not be done.

MR. NESSEN: There has simply been no decision made on that yet so I can't give you an answer on that.

Q By the President?

MR. NESSEN: By the President, that is correct.

Q Ron, are you saying the President believes reporters who leak information about the CIA material should not write stories on it?

MR. NESSEN: As I told Jim, and I told Mort, what I am doing is not criticizing the press, not rebuking, or warning, whatever the word was ---

Q Are you advising?

MR. NESSEN: I am simply saying how the President believes this ought to be handled out of fairness to all people involved.

Q How could we comply with the President's beliefs and hopes other than by not printing stories about things we were told?

Do you get that rather convoluted syntax?

MR. NESSEN: I understand what you are driving at.

Q How could we comply?

MR. NESSEN: Look, Jim, I don't think we need to play with words here. I think you know, I hope you know, the President's strong feelings about this.

Q I know the President's strong feelings ---

MR. NESSEN: And what he considers to be a fair and responsible manner of handling this.

Q I am asking if there is some way that has occurred to you and the President that the news media can comply with this when it is presented with information regarding the CIA material?

MR. NESSEN: He has talked about people with the material, handling it with the utmost prudence. We can go on to other things or stick with this.

Q Are you sending a message to someone, does the President want a message sent to someone about the handling of classified information? There is only certain people in the Government that have it. I wonder if you could tell us who you think you are sending ---

MR. NESSEN: I think the purpose of this today is not, as you suggested, a warning, caution, or criticism. It is, I hope -- I hate to even use the expression, but you know, it is really kind of an educational process, I hope, to just pass on to you what the President believes ought to be the attitude of people at this time toward this subject, and a context within which to consider this story when you sit down to write about it.

Q Write it prudently, but it is okay with you to go ahead and write it? (Laughter.)

Q Ron, does the President have any information about Russian infiltration on Capitol Hill?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what you mean by that.

Q Are there any Russian agents who have infiltrated Capitol Hill? Is there any information on this? Did the Rockefeller Commission run into any information on this?

MR. NESSEN: I haven't heard of it, Phil.

Q Ron, has the President directed or asked anyone in the White House to determine the source of any of these leaked materials?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Has he set up any plumbers or anything like that?

MR. NESSEN: No.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 12:38 P.M. EDT) #248