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NEWS CONFERENCE

#423

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:10 P.M. EST

JANUARY 26, 1976

MONDAY

MR. NESSEN: The sign-up list has been posted for the Saturday trip to Dearborn and Williamsburg, so if you are interested in going along, you can sign up now.

Let's see if I have any more details of the trip. I don't think so. Somebody asked me, when we first talked about the Dearborn trip, who those Midwestern Republicans were. They are State Republican Chairmen and other State Republican officials.

I would look for a departure for the President at least around 9 o'clock, from Andrews, in the morning and I would look for a return here at around 11:25 that evening, landing at the South Lawn.

There is a dinner in Williamsburg following his speech. It is a dinner given by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation which begins at 8 o'clock. There will be very brief remarks by the President there at 9:15 Saturday night. As you know, the main speech that he will give down there is in the House of Burgesses, but this is very brief remarks at the dinner. He then will leave after dinner and get back to the South Lawn at about 11:25.

So the sign-up list is there.

Now, just to look through the schedule a bit today -- I think you saw the President sign the Economic Report. You know about that.

The President is just about now beginning a meeting with the Executive Board of the American Medical Association. The American Medical Association asked for the meeting to discuss with the President their views on various health issues.

At 2 o'clock this afternoon the President is meeting with the Executive Committee of the National Association of Counties, and that consists of 14 county officials plus the Executive Director plus a couple of people from the Domestic Council and OMB. This is to discuss some of the provisions of the State of the Union speech and the budget which do affect counties, and we will bring out some or all of the county officials later for you to talk to, if you would like.

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Q Ron, on the AMA meeting, was one of those health issues malpractice insurance, do you know?

MR. NESSEN: Well, it is not listed specifically, although one of the things they want to talk about is the actions they are taking to control health costs and a study they are making of health costs. Now it could be that it will come up in that context.

Q Are they going to talk with him about that catastrophic health insurance proposal?

MR. NESSEN: They do want to talk to him about the budget proposals in the health area so I assume that that will come up.

Q Are they for or against it?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Ron, will he ask for their support in persuading doctors from refusing Medicare and Medicaid cases because of the limitation on how much more they can charge than they did last year?

MR. NESSEN: It is not listed as one of the topics of discussion, Aldo.

Q Any chance of having one of them come down after that meeting to give us a fill about what their concern is?

MR. NESSEN: I will talk to them about it.

Q How many are in there?

MR. NESSEN: Eight.

Q Do you have their hometowns?

MR. NESSEN: I don't. I have their position with the AMA, but I don't have their hometowns. We could try and get that for you.

At 4:30 this afternoon the President is going to meet with Congressmen Montgomery, McCloskey, Gilman and Ottinger. As you probably know, they went to Hanoi on December 21 where they received the remains of three Americans who had been killed in the war and they are coming, really, to give the President a report on their trip.

Congressman Montgomery has already in fact turned in a written report on the trip.

Updated mail count, if anybody is still interested -- the amount of mail has picked up, as you would expect, still not extremely heavy when you compare it with some other issues, but this is a mail and telegram count on the State of the Union as of 11:30 this morning. It was 935 letters or telegrams in favor of the President's approach, 193 against and 209 had assorted comments.

Q 209?

MR. NESSEN: The assorted comment category is 209, yes.

Q Ron, is that strictly State of the Union or is that budget and his general policies or what?

MR. NESSEN: We began making the count at the time of the State of the Union, but I would suspect that it probably has some budget comments in there, too.

I know you are probably curious as to what the White House thinks of the publication of the alleged contents of the House intelligence report so I will tell you that the President has not seen the final report and so I am not going to comment on any specific allegations at this time. The premature release of a preliminary draft of the committee report is in violation of the security agreement the White House understood it had with the committee for the handling of classified material. This unauthorized release raises serious questions about how classified material can be handled by Congress when the national security is at stake, and I don't really have anything more to say about that today.

Q Anytime there is a leak you say it raises serious questions. Have you got any suggestions about how it should be handled?

MR. NESSEN: There will be proposals when the President makes his recommendations which I now anticipate we are within a matter of weeks of getting.

Q Ron, was the national security at stake in this?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to go beyond this, Fran.

Q Ron, if the national security is at stake, has any law been violated?

MR. NESSEN: Well, my understanding is that Congress does not have the authority to unilaterally declassify documents.

Q Ron, under what provision is this that you say that they do not have the authority?

MR. NESSEN: I will check on the precise citation for you, Marty.

Q This was a matter of controversy at the time of the original case of the four little words or whatever it was that the Pike Committee put out?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q At that time the Congress was saying that once they had stuff they could do what they wanted with it and the Administration was saying that has been denied?

MR. NESSEN: I think we are talking about two different things here. We are talking about, one, an agreement the White House had with the committee, and under our understanding of that agreement this has been a violation. Then there are -- and I will have to check the citations for you, but the authority to declassify documents, I understand, is vested in the Executive Branch.

Q If that authority has been violated and if it is a violation of law, is the White House or is the Executive Branch, anyone in the Executive Branch, making an investigation to determine who did it and whether they violated a law? In other words, is there an investigation going on or is there going to be one?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of.

Q Well, Ron, because it feels that the agreement was violated and until there is any new legislation passed is the White House policy going to be changed as to any release to other committees, say, Foreign Relations, that no information will be released until this is settled?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of any such plan to change the --

Q Ron, if you believe that the law has been violated, why isn't there an investigation going to take place?

MR. NESSEN: Well, as I say, we are talking about two things. We are talking about the violation of the agreement as we understand it and, in my understanding, that the power to declassify is in the Executive Branch, but I don't know of any investigation or effort to --

Q Has the President made the Members of Congress aware of this directly or through aides?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. You know, Dick, the people here have been talking to the people on the Pike Committee for some time about this and, for that matter, if I read Congressman Pike's words correctly last week, he has strong concern about it himself.

Q Ron, aren't there any teeth in that classification law for unauthorized declassification?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know enough about the law, Howard.

Q Is the President aware that one of the suggestions in the draft report was that national security itself and secrecy were used or rather misused to cover up policy errors?

MR. NESSEN: The President has not seen the report yet.

Q Ron, this is, as Rudy pointed out, the second time that you have alluded to the serious questions and Director Colby is talking about them on the hill, too.

MR. NESSEN: And so is Chairman Church and Chairman Pike. I think they seem to share the concern.

Q Are you going to get together or is the White House going to contact Pike and talk about ways to plug up the leaks?

MR. NESSEN: You mean Church and Pike?

Q Church and Pike.

MR. NESSEN: I think both investigations are about at an end.

Q Secondly, can we assume that the recommendations that will be going up in a matter of weeks are going to address themselves in part to these kinds of leaks?

MR. NESSEN: No, not in part to these kinds of leaks but in part to the question of how does Congress have its legitimate role of oversight when these kinds of things have happened recently.

Q The last time, I think you said the President was very angry about the publication of some information. Is he angry this morning? What is his reaction?

MR. NESSEN: I don't like to characterize his mood. I mean, these are his words relayed through me.

Q Ron, does the President have plans to visit the Middle East some time in mid-April?

MR. NESSEN: You know, Peter, the President has agreed, and publicly agreed, I guess at the time that Sadat was here, in principle to visit the Middle East. Those foreign visits are always arranged at the convenience of the various parties involved. At this point there is no timetable and no specific plans for a visit.

Q The domestic political scene in the United States, how much will that affect the President's plans to visit the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: The determination of whether or not to go to the Middle East and the timing and the subjects and the countries are totally removed from any domestic-political consideration.

Q You say there are no specific plans. Are there general plans?

MR. NESSEN: Only the agreement in principle to go at the convenience of the various parties.

Q Is the official who said that there was likelihood of such a trip then in error?

MR. NESSEN: No. I think we are saying the same thing, Jim.

Q Ron, is this under discussion even though there are no specific plans? Is it under discussion with the Administration?

MR. NESSEN: Not in my ear shot it is not, but you know he has agreed in principle to go.

Q Do you expect this to be discussed between the President and Rabin when Rabin arrives tomorrow, I guess it is?

MR. NESSEN: It is possible, yes.

Q Ron, was the President either discouraged or irritated or pleased or bothered by the fact that reports of this Middle Eastern trip came out of the Kissinger party on the way back?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't hear him express any of those emotions, John.

Q Can you give us some more details about the discussions that Kissinger has had with the President since he returned?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot really give you any details, Phil. Henry did send back very full reports when he was there and has elaborated on those since and some others have been brought into the discussion, too -- Don Rumsfeld and Brent Scowcroft.

Q When will the considerations begin within the Administration and within the White House on the supposed new Soviet proposal on SALT?

MR. NESSEN: Well, by bringing Don and Brent into it I would say that those considerations have already started.

Q What is the initial reaction to the proposal?

MR. NESSEN: I think I would rather wait for the full review, Jim, which is expected to take a couple of weeks.

Q Is the President going to have a press conference this week?

MR. NESSEN: It is not anticipated that he will.

Q Ron, you said the President's intelligence recommendations are now within a matter of weeks?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q If my memory serves me correctly, on New Year's Eve he said he would make those decisions the next week and they would be announced shortly thereafter.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think he has made some of the decisions, at least tentatively. I know he has made some of the decisions at least tentatively.

Q Has there been a delay, though, from what he anticipated at that moment?

MR. NESSEN: No. It is a complex subject and all the information that the President needed to make the final decisions--some of the people who were providing that information, I think, needed to be urged on by the President to get their material in here and that has now been done.

Q Ron, you said you were going to look into whether the President was informed in advance of his veto that so many thousands of those things were form letters. Did you check on that, on the common situs?

MR. NESSEN: Whether he was informed in advance of his veto?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I didn't check specifically on that except that -- what I was reading from the other day was a year-end memo to the President from Roland Elliott wrapping up the mail count and breakdown of issues and stuff for 1975. He also gets a weekly memo from Roland Elliott on how that week's mail breaks down, and so he was getting that all along before the decision.

Q Did it spell out what the numbers are?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to check one of my back copies of it but I feel sure it did.

Q Do you anticipate any messages this week?

MR. NESSEN: Any Presidential messages to the Congress?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: It is possible, Jim, but not likely.

Q What about a press conference, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: No. I mentioned to Fred that it is not anticipated this week.

Q Ron, has the subjects of the President's speeches on Saturday been decided, either the House of Burgess' speech or the subject for the Dearborn speech inasmuch as they were not to be political?

MR. NESSEN: No, I would not zero down to a very precise subject although the Dearborn speech will be, as I said, at least in its content, non-political and it will really focus, I think, mostly on his economic proposals and views.

Q Content but not context?

MR. NESSEN: That is probably a fair assessment, but it is not a campaign trip in the sense that, as I said the other day, he will not be asking for votes for himself.

Q Any thoughts on Williamsburg?

MR. NESSEN: No, but given the event I would say it would certainly have a Bicentennial theme to it.

Q Ron, yesterday Jack Anderson's column made a very warm tribute to the President. I was wondering, had he seen it and what was his reaction?

MR. NESSEN: He had seen it and he was pleased by it.

Q How about his reaction to the press reports of your appearance in Shreveport?

MR. NESSEN: He had not mentioned that to me.

Q Have you seen them?

MR. NESSEN: Somebody mailed me a couple of them.

Q What is your reaction?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any particular reaction.

Q Okay.

MR. NESSEN: Should I? I am sure you would tell me.

Q What happened?

MR. NESSEN: Maybe I missed something.

Q What about Shreveport?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q You didn't get a copy of the Shreveport Journal? They didn't mail you that?

MR. NESSEN: What was it that it was supposed to startle?

Q Page 1 story, "Ron Nessen Blunder -- Cuts Waggoner" and your picture all over page 1 in the negative.

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I did see that.

Q Did you have any comment on that?

MR. NESSEN: The mail count that I gave you -- (Laughter) earlier on my speech.

Q On your speech.

MR. NESSEN: Twenty-eight assorted comments. No, that is a joke.

The mail count I gave you was all for State of the Union and the reaction to the budget specifically has really just begun to come in, and if you are interested I can keep an eye on it and when it gets to some appreciable number I could give it to you. I could give it to you tomorrow maybe.

John?

Q Could I follow up Tom's request that somebody at the AMA come out and talk to us because I imagine some of the subjects covered may be some of those to be covered by the group coming from the counties. I would think that the President would bring up some of these health proposals with transfer plans.

MR. NESSEN: I think you are right.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 12:30 P.M. EST)