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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:08 P.M. EST

MARCH 10, 1976

WEDNESDAY

MR. NESSEN: I think you saw the beginning of the President and the Senate Budget Committee. Again, this is part of the series of meetings you have seen over the past couple of days in which the President is explaining and advocating his defense budget, initially to the Armed Services Committee, now to the budget committees, which will be dealing with it very shortly.

One addition to the schedule today is a meeting this afternoon at 4:30 with I. W. Abel and Richard Simmons. I. W. Abel is the President of the United Steel Workers of America and Richard Simmons is the President of the Allegheny Ludlum Steel Corporation.

I think some of you are familiar with the recent recommendation from the United States International Tariff Commission relating to what is known as specialty steel imports, and the President is going to be required to make a ruling soon on the importation of specialty steel products. The union and the steel industry companies agree on the position they think the President should take and they will be coming in this afternoon to discuss that with him.

For the trip tomorrow --

Q     What did they say? Do you know?

MR. NESSEN: What is the position of the company and the unions?

Q     Yes.

MR. NESSEN: They would like the President to restrict the importation of specialty steel.

Q     But he has not made up his mind?

MR. NESSEN: No, but he is required to make a ruling.

Q     By Tuesday?

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MR. NESSEN: Within a week or so, yes.

Because of the take-off time tomorrow, I think we will skip a briefing tomorrow. The press check-in at Andrews is 1 o'clock, and you can bring your luggage with you at that time. The press plane will leave Andrews at 1:35 and arrive at the Rockford, Illinois airport at 2:30 Central Standard Time, losing an hour getting there.

The President will leave the South Lawn by helicopter at 2:05, will leave Andrews at 2:25, and will get to Rockford, Illinois airport at 3:20 Central Standard Time.

Now if you don't want to take your luggage out to Andrews with you for some reason, you can leave it in room 87 of the EOB up until 10:30 tomorrow morning, but it might be just as easy to take it out to Andrews at 1 o'clock.

The bibles, because there are a number of things that are still not resolved about the trip, I don't see the bibles until tomorrow morning, frankly. The first speech of any importance is the farm speech and the speechwriters say they will try to have that to us late this afternoon or this evening. They have a meeting with the President this afternoon to work on speeches. The next speech would be the foreign policy speech on Friday.

Q When would that be for release, the farm speech?

MR. NESSEN: The delivery time is 4 o'clock local time, something like that. I think we will just make it on delivery because it is too late in the day -- it is about 5 o'clock.

Then the foreign policy speech we would have for you tomorrow night and then the Bicentennial speech in North Carolina we would have for you Friday night, and those are the only three texts that I am really planning on putting out.

Q What would you expect the release time on the foreign policy speech to be?

MR. NESSEN: We might put it out for p.m.'s on Friday. Let me wait and see.

Q What is he going to do in North Carolina besides the Bicentennial speech?

MR. NESSEN: A couple of campaign-type stops on late Saturday afternoon and evening.

Q On that foreign policy speech, will that be available here in Washington? Of course, you will release it out there but how about here?

MR. NESSEN: We will have to dex it back here. We will send it back here by teletype and it will be available here, but it may not be available at the exact same moment because it takes time to send it back.

Q Would it be available in advance?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I think so.

Q Farm speech or foreign policy speech?

MR. NESSEN: Farm.

Well, I don't have a lot to add to the kind of rough outline schedule that I gave yesterday.

Q Do you expect anything the following weekend by way of campaigning?

MR. NESSEN: Well, at the moment there is nothing scheduled but I will just tell you for your own planning purposes that it could very well be a second trip to North Carolina the following weekend. At the moment, there is not anything planned but that is a possibility.

Q Ron, the Republicans in North Carolina are saying that on Saturday the President, after the Guilford Courthouse thing, will do a Winston-Salem shopping mall thing and then go to Miller's Creek for Saturday night.

Q For a square dance? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: There is a shopping center event in Winston-Salem on late Saturday afternoon and then what is the other event you are talking about?

Q In the evening he goes to Miller's Creek in Wilkes County for the Wilkes High School rally for all the Republicans who are going to put on shoes that night. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: That sounds like something I would say.

Are you talking about the West Wilkesboro High School Gymnasium?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: That is right. But that is a public forum. West Wilkesboro High School Gymnasium, and it is an opportunity for the people of that area to ask questions.

Q That is in Miller's Creek, is that right?

MR. NESSEN: I don't see anything on my schedule that says anything about Miller's Creek. It is in Wilkes County, North Carolina. That is where the high school is. West Wilkesboro High School helicopter landing zone is where he is going to come down.

Q None of these questions are screened?

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q They just come out of the audience?

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q You have to wear shoes to ask a question, though, don't you?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to get into that.  
(Laughter)

I don't have anything else to announce.

Q What was the upshot of the staff meeting this morning?

MR. NESSEN: The senior staff meeting?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: It was brief and sort of routine. The President did not attend.

Q I thought it was a lengthy one.

MR. NESSEN: No, it was less than 15 minutes, if I remember. I think it was about 10, but it was very short.

Q Any news on the Illinois interview?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I will let you be the judge of that.

Q When do we get it?

MR. NESSEN: I think they are planning to broadcast it at 10 o'clock tonight, aren't they, and I guess we will put the transcript out embargoed for 10 o'clock.

Q Are these interviews part of the President's campaign?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't know how to answer that. They are all in response to invitations that the President has received and he accepts them as he goes along. He told the Illinois people this morning -- they asked a similar question and he pointed out that, first of all, they were all in response to invitations.

Q Some of those invitations were like two years ago or almost a year ago?

MR. NESSEN: Some of them have been around for a while but, of course, none of them are command performances. I mean, he accepts the invitation and if the newsmen would prefer not to come, obviously they are not required to show up.

He also pointed out that some of the other candidates have the freedom to get out into the States, into Chicago or elsewhere in Illinois and other States, and respond to their interview requests right there on the spot. The President is not able to travel very much because of his duties here at the White House, so in order to accept any invitations he has to invite most of the people to come here.

He also pointed out that the purpose of these, as he sees them, is to make his views on issues and his policies known to the people in the different States.

Q So it is political?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I have just explained to you at some length how he sees them.

Q You said they are invitations. We know there is a system going on where you are really contacting these people in all the States, anchormen and so forth, and inviting them here.

MR. NESSEN: No. I can show you my files, Helen, and these have all been done in response to invitations. Now, in some cases, let's say in the Florida case where a number of radio stations in Florida -- I forget what the number was -- had requested opportunities to interview the President and we invited those people and we expanded the list and invited really most of the radio stations in the major areas of Florida.

Q Ron, you don't mean to suggest that these interviews with the Florida newspaper editors and television correspondents and so on from that State just before the Florida primary and then an interview with the most prominent Chicago television newscasters just before the Illinois primary, that this is just a series of coincidences, do you?

MR. NESSEN: Absolutely not. Of course not.

Q The President must feel that it has a pretty positive political impact, does he not?

MR. NESSEN: No. Tom, as I said, they are not coincidences by any means. They are his method of accepting interview requests from stations and newspapers in the primary States here at the White House rather than on the scene as the other candidates are doing. He is not able to travel as the other candidates do and so can't accept the invitations in the States as the other candidates do so he accepts the invitations and invites the people to the White House because that is where he has to spend most of his time, but I would not think the invitations are coincidences, either. I guess they want to ask the President questions in conjunction with their own State's primary.

For instance, your colleague, Mr. Beckman, I think, made it clear when he requested an interview this week that he wanted his interview to be done so that the Chicago Tribune could print it on the Sunday before the primary, so I would say that there is not a coincidence, either, in the requests or in the acceptance of the requests.

Q But the White House is anxious to arrange the timing as well so it appears just before the primary, is it not, because, as I understand it, the Chicago requests from several of the stations had been in for a long time, for as long as a year.

MR. NESSEN: That is right. As I say, I think the President wants to answer questions about his views on issues and his policies at a time when the people in that State are interested in hearing about them.

Q So it is political? That is the only question we are asking you.

MR. NESSEN: I am giving you a very long answer.

Q Why don't you just say yes, it is part of the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: Why don't you say it, Helen? I am telling you what I want to say. If you want to say that, you say it. I am giving you the answer that I feel is the accurate answer and it reflects the President's views.

Q Have you had any people turn down the invitations?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, a number of people have. Not the invitation -- we don't issue the invitation. A number of people have requested an opportunity to interview the President and we have called them up or written them and said, "Okay, I think we can grant your request," and some people have said, "Never mind, I don't want it."

Q Do you have a number on that, how many people have turned it down?

MR. NESSEN: A couple. I know of one most recently in Florida and I would have to dig back in my files and find out.

Q What was the reason that they gave for that?

MR. NESSEN: Well, in this case it was a person who had broken her leg and didn't want to come up to Washington with her leg in a cast. (Laughter)

Q Didn't someone down in Florida say that it was in the middle of a campaign and they didn't think it was fair?

MR. NESSEN: I would have to look in my files, Phil. There have not been all that many but I would like to look up and see what the reasons were.

Q Just to pursue this a little bit more, you don't mean to leave the impression that the President feels that without these interviews his views would not be known to the voters in those States where he is going?

MR. NESSEN: Well, Tom, I think I have given a lengthy explanation of not only the process but the reasoning behind it and I don't want to try to sum it up in a word or two.

Q Ron, what is the President's philosophy, Mr. Ford's philosophy, of taking the Presidency to the people?

MR. NESSEN: Well, for instance, Thursday he will be taking the Presidency to a lot of farmers in Northwest Illinois and in answering their questions as he did the farmers of Central Illinois last weekend, and those are the people. Then he will be taking it to the people in the shopping center on Thursday night, and Friday morning he will be taking it to the members of the Chamber of Commerce in Rockford and then to the students at Wheaton College, and then to the people in the Chicago Foreign Policy Council, and then to the reporters and editors of Northern Illinois and so forth. Those are the people, I think, and in almost every case these people not only sit and listen to what the President wants to tell them but ask the President about what they want to hear.

Q Ron, just to pursue an earlier question -- I am not sure I understood your answer -- I think the question was that some of these requests have been pending for a long time, in some cases as much as a year, and I think you said that is right.

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q So that the timing, in fact, of the interview is decided --

MR. NESSEN: Not coincidental, as I said.

Q Well, it seems to be determined by the White House more so than by those requesting the interview if they made these requests as far back as a year ago.

MR. NESSEN: I think the timing of all interviews is probably determined by the White House, isn't it?

Q Yes, but you seem to be suggesting that the requests for the interviews are not coincidental, either, and, in fact --

MR. NESSEN: Well, certainly in many cases they are not. Aldo's case is the most recent one I can think of. I have not got a list in front of me here but certainly a number of requests we have gotten lately are directly related to newspapers or broadcasting stations which want to talk to the President immediately prior to a primary in their State. In fact, some of these Florida TV interviews, for instance, were to fill a segment of time that the station set aside for candidates to appear a certain hour each evening in the week before the primary so their invitation or request for an interview was predicated on fitting it into a specific slot in the week before the primary.

Q Ron, how does the President feel about the equal time provision of the Federal Communications Act when he uses the office of the Presidency to grant an interview to individual stations in Miami but a key challenger such as Mr. Reagan cannot get on those same stations?

MR. NESSEN: Tom, as I say, none of these are command performances. They are all, or almost all, in response to invitations or requests.

Q Do you feel the responsibility for fairness is on the stations and not on the President?

MR. NESSEN: Isn't that always the case?

Q Do you have any judgeships or highways or veterans hospitals in Illinois you want to mention?

Q Is the President going skiing in Florida?  
(Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Why is everybody so flakey today?

Q Last night Hal Walker asked the President, Should your opponent Ronald Reagan get out of the race--" and he begged off answering the question. Do you have anything you can give us by way of the President's thinking as to how much longer he, the President, thinks Ronald Reagan will be in the race -- not should be? What is the President's prospect? Does he expect Reagan to go all the way now?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't think he feels, first of all, it is his role --

Q Certainly he has some thoughts, though?

MR. NESSEN: -- to suggest one way or the other and I don't know that he has made any judgment one way or the other. He has said from the beginning, as you recall, that he was going to go all the way to Kansas City and expected to win in Kansas City, and I guess I elaborated one time on that and said he expected to have enough delegates to win actually before everybody convened at Kansas City.

He is taking these one at a time. Each primary is different. Illinois is very different from the others. It is a State where, especially in the central and southern part, I think Mr. Reagan has strong appeal. The President does believe he will win in Illinois. He thinks that the margin, whether it is close or not close, will depend a great deal on his campaign workers not easing up or giving up, and getting out and working right to the end as they have in other States. He does not feel that any figures he has seen or appraisals he has seen lead him to believe personally that he will win by anything like 2 to 1 but he does feel that --

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Q He, the President, will win by two to one?

MR. NESSEN: He does not feel that any figures he has seen convince him that it is going to be anything like that and that it really will depend on whether his workers keep working right to the end.

Q Thank you, but that didn't answer my question. My question was does the President think Ronald Reagan will be in the race all the way to the end?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think he has any position one way or the other on that.

Q Can you give us a scenario of what he did last night? Did he make any phone calls or who he saw this morning?

MR. NESSEN: Well, Jack Marsh had a little buffet dinner for the staff in the staff mess and it was oyster stew. It was oyster stew that he and his sons had shucked the oysters for themselves. They were Virginia oysters from the Chesapeake. The President came down and stayed a while and went up to the Residence. The President did have a bowl of oyster stew. Then he went up and had dinner with Susan and watched some of the television. Bo and Dick Cheney who were both at the PFC called him and told him that the three networks had all projected him to be the winner.

Then when he went to the VFW I brought some of the latest actual vote count with me and showed it to him before he got in the car. Then he went over there and I think you know he made a passing reference to it in his remarks.

Then coming out of there Hal Walker asked him some questions and we played the tape of that, I think, here last night.

Then while he was speaking I had called and gotten some later figures which I showed him on the way back here. Then he came back and he went for a swim and went up and went to bed.

Q Didn't he call the headquarters?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry, I forgot. You are right. He got back here about twenty to ten or a quarter of ten and he made a telephone call to the PFC headquarters in Orlando and he talked to Lou Frey and it was hooked up to a loud speaker system so that the people in the campaign headquarters could hear what he had to say.

Then he went for a swim and then he went to bed.

Q Swimming in the snow?

MR. NESSEN: In the pool.

Q Did he talk to his wife? Did Mrs. Ford call?

MR. NESSEN: I have to check with the operator. She had not called by the time I left.

Q Ron, is there any thought being given now to the revival of a possible trip to the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: No, there is no trip to the Middle East being planned.

Q Ron, yesterday the House made some changes in the Federal Election Commission bill that followed the suggestions that the President has made. They put a self-destruct date on the Commission after the election and they made certain Political Action Committee provisions apply equally to unions as well as business. Will these changes modify the President's objections to the bill and is he still considering a veto?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I have to look at that bill. My understanding is that it is not the bill that you describe just now, but the President's position has not changed. He wants a simple reconstitution of the Commission along the line of the court order and he wants a simple extension of the law with an expiration date after this year's election for a re-examination of it.

Q Did he see the stories that Reagan had raised the Watergate issue in Illinois yesterday?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Did he have any comment on it? Does he think that is in keeping with the Eleventh Commandment?

MR. NESSEN: The President has said all along that he will run on his record and on his position and policy, on issues, and that there is no plan to answer those kinds of charges from the White House.

Q Ron, this morning the Joint Economic Committee put out their annual report and they had some pretty critical things to say about the President's budget and economic policies. Have you seen that and have you got any reaction to what they said?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have a detailed reaction. I guess the reaction here is that the best proof of the President's policies and the fact that they are working are the statistics that come out each week showing inflation going down and unemployment going down and employment going up.

I mean the President's policies are working, he feels.

On the other hand, if you look at the record of that Joint Economic Committee and you look at some of the things that Senator Humphrey was saying and so forth about -- I used to have it but I don't think I do any more -- some of the things he was saying in January about we are on the brink of the new depression, unemployment is going to go so high and so forth, and none of those predictions came true but rather the President's statement then that his steady course was going to work and did work, I think, is really the only answer to those.

Q Query. Has the President taken any interest in negotiations between the United States Government and the Agriculture Department, I suppose, and the State Department and Australia in the beef imports, do you have any idea?

MR. NESSEN: That is the first I have heard of that one, Dick. I have to look it up.

Q Ron, does the President know why he got the award yesterday and does he know that he got the award for his veto of the common situs bill?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure he did get it, did he?

Q This is what they say.

MR. NESSEN: Really.

Q Does he have any feeling about that, accepting an award for a responsible --

MR. NESSEN: First of all, I am not sure that that is an accurate statement, that that is why he got the award.

Q Well, this is what they are saying. This is what the association is saying.

Also, what is his favorite charity?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what he is going to give the money to. I will have to check.

Q Would he have had a different attitude had he known it was for the common situs picketing?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, I don't know that that is why he got the award and I cannot accept that.

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Q This is what they are saying.

Q You said a minute ago there is no Middle East trip being planned. Does that mean you are flatly ruling it out? You know others have said there is a 50-50 chance we will go to the Middle East this year. Does that mean that that is now no longer the case?

MR. NESSEN: At the moment there are no plans for a Middle East trip. I think I have indicated to some people that the question of whether there is going to be any Middle East trip would depend entirely on whether there was a diplomatic need for it and the judgment of whether there is a diplomatic need for it has not been made and won't be made for, I would say, another month.

Q Ron, the Special Counsel to the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency was quoted in the New York Times this morning as saying that "Congressman Pike will pay for this. You wait and see, we will destroy him for this." How does the President feel about a CIA employee carrying on a political vendetta about a duly elected Member of Congress.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know if that is an accurate quote. I think it is a second or third-hand quote. I think it is a second or third-hand alleged quote and I am not going to get into any things between the Pike Committee and the CIA.

Q Mr. Pike believes that the CIA is trying to discredit him and the Congress. Is the President not concerned about the seriousness of this charge?

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to get into anything between the Pike Committee and the CIA.

Q Can you say whether the President is looking into it? It is a part of the Executive Branch.

MR. NESSEN: It is part of the Executive Branch. I have no idea whether that is an accurate quote or not.

Q We didn't ask you that. We are asking is the President looking in to see whether this is a fact or not?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to check.

Q Ron, yesterday the President indicated that he was achieving his goal of full employment and Mr. Greenspan has said that goal -- and I believe it was in the economic report -- is not in fact achievable under the most recent calculations until 1980. I am wondering if in view of the decrease in unemployment in recent weeks that they have revised that goal and think that the full employment goal is achievable before 1980 now?

MR. NESSEN: I mentioned to some people that Alan Greenspan is away for a couple of days but I talked to him just before he left and he feels that if the unemployment figures continue to go down at the rate they are going down, it might be necessary to revise the projections on unemployment that are contained in the budget.

There are a couple of other economic statistics which are inter-related and they are not going to be available for a couple of weeks and he wants to see those before he makes any judgment on that.

The President's goal is that everybody who wants a job, there should be a job for that person, and that goal has not changed. Now when it can be realistically attainable I would like to wait for Alan to get back and make his recalculations.

Q Is there any consideration by the President at this point of opposing further extension on the tax cuts?

MR. NESSEN: Well, Congress has not passed the extension he already proposed and he thinks they ought to do that first.

Q He still is supporting a tax cut?

MR. NESSEN: \$28 billion tax cut, that is right.

Q But in light of the economy recovering there has been a question raised as to whether you overheat the economy now by continuing this stimulative economic growth.

MR. NESSEN: At the moment he is standing by his request that Congress approve a \$28 billion tax cut but he will continue to review the economic statistics to see if any changes need to be made.

Q Ron, in the past Secretary Kissinger has defended himself when charges of improper or illegal wiretap was raised about Morton Halpern and others by saying that Richard Nixon was actually responsible for the wiretapping of Halpern as an individual. Today the deposition that Mr. Nixon gave in the Halpern case was released and Mr. Nixon is criticizing or contradicting Kissinger's statement by saying he did not give any specific order for Halpern and this contradicts what Mr. Kissinger had said. Does this concern the President?

MR. NESSEN: That is a court case that I don't think I better comment on.

Q Ron, what is the President's position on public financing of House and Senate races? I believe he voted against that when he was in the House, but what is his position on it today?

MR. NESSEN: Let me give you his position in the context of where we are today and that is as he said out here and other places he just does not think any issue ought to be dragged in at this late date that endangers the entire Federal election law and runs the risk of having the thing expire and then have the public grow even more suspicious of their public officials and of the propriety of their elections.

Q Well, without reference to any dates, how does he feel about the concept?

MR. NESSEN: The concept? I don't know and I will check for you, but in the present circumstances of trying to get an election bill passed before the latest deadline runs out he just thinks it would confuse and delay the issue, but on the broader question, I will check.

Q Ron, what is the nature of the President's meeting at 5:30 with the President Ford Finance Committee? Will we be able to hear what he says and why not? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: No. It is a private meeting with the Finance Chairmen of his campaign to do private business and it is paid for by the PFC, as all events at the White House are, involving the campaign.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

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(AT 12:38 P.M. EST)