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

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:09 P.M. EST

APRIL 22, 1976

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: The bibles are ready for the trip and will be handed out right after this briefing.

The Butler University speech for tonight is being typed. It has not been finally approved by the President so it is still questionable whether we are going to have it or not.

Also, if you don't get the Butler speech in advance --

Q Don't sweat it.

MR. NESSEN: -- don't sweat it. (Laughter)

Q It is the start of a Q & A?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, it is a brief opening remarks.

Now I don't think the schedule showed an NSC meeting this morning, did it?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Well, the odd thing is that some news reporters asked the President what the NSC meeting was all about, and he told them, which is highly unusual. It has to do with the study that is going on on the strength of the American Navy and that is about all I can tell you about it, and that is all the President said, too.

The interview that the President is doing today is with a number of radio stations from Texas.

Q Such as?

MR. NESSEN: Stations like KTRH, which wrote in on April 8 asking for an interview; and KEY, which wrote in on April 2 and asked for an interview; KJET, which wrote in on March 31; KRTV --

Q What exactly do these letters say?

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MR. NESSEN: Well, their letter says, for instance, they understand the President is coming to Texas -- this is KTRH. They understand the President is coming to Texas in connection with the primary campaign. "We are hopeful his schedule will permit an appearance on KTRH's 'Talk of Houston.' Several Presidential candidates have already appeared on this program or have committed themselves to an appearance. Your advice or assistance in arranging an interview would be sincerely appreciated."

That was a follow-up letter to one they wrote on February 23 saying that they would like KTRH to be considered in any plans to invite Texas reporters to the White House, as was done for the New Hampshire local stations.

This interview is going to be filed immediately by the people who are doing it so the transcript will be available as fast as the transcribers can do it. Now that should be before you have to leave for the airport. If not, it will be taken on the press plane and handed out there. I think there are some interesting items in it that you will probably want to look at.

Q Like what, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Primarily, you know, the major issues of the day.

Q Such as?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President is asked in there a number of questions about America's defenses and so forth.

Q Was he asked, Ron, why Don Rumsfeld had not agreed this morning that the United States was number one? He kept saying again there was a rough equivalent.

MR. NESSEN: I didn't hear all of Don, but I did hear the part where Don said that this issue is too complex to be summed up by people using oversimplified expressions such as those to try to encompass an enormously complex subject. I heard that much of Don.

Q We are number one and are going to stay that way?

MR. NESSEN: We are what?

Q That we are the most powerful nation in the world and are going to stay that way.

MR. NESSEN: Certainly that is true.

Q Is that the oversimplification? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Let me get back on the track here. What are we talking about now?

All right, after this interview the President is going to visit briefly with Ambassador Albert B. Fay, who is the American Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago.

Q Where is he from, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: He is a Houston businessman. (Laughter)

Q Is he a registered Republican?

MR. NESSEN: He may be.

However, the briefing paper which is prepared by the NSC indicates that this is a serious foreign policy discussion with the Ambassador.

Q Ron, how many members are appointed to the Commission on the Executive Exchange by the President? They come from States which have not had the primary? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I don't even know who they are. I didn't look at that thing.

Shortly, the President is going to accept an award from the Big Brothers of America. It is actually the Big Brothers of the Year Award, I believe. That can be covered if you would like.

The Vernon Walters resignation, I understand there have been some questions about it today since it was not spelled out all that fully in the announcement.

Q All that fully?

MR. NESSEN: What basically has transpired is that when George Bush took over as CIA Director, which I believe was January or February, Vernon Walters submitted -- well, let me go back one step. Vernon Walters was scheduled to retire from the Army after 35 years service last September. He was given an extension in order that he could continue to serve during the transition period to George Bush. When George came aboard, which was January or February, Vernon Walters submitted his resignation and said, you know, I am overdue to get out of the Army now and I know you want to pick your own team, so George said, no, I would like you to stay on at least until we get squared away. So Vernon Walters had stayed on.

Now the new date of his retirement from the Army is June 30. George has found a Deputy that needs to be nominated now so that he can go through the Congressional confirmation process and be confirmed before June 30, which is the next retirement date of Vernon Walters from the Army.

The letter of resignation that was submitted by Vernon Walters in January and the President's responding letter will be published shortly, but just to tell you, the President does have very high regard and so does George Bush for General Walters and they have a high regard for the job he has done at the CIA and for his country, and, in fact, Vernon Walters indicated that he would be happy to continue to serve in whatever capacity the President wanted him to, and that is being considered by the President.

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Q Ron, are you saying the President held that letter of resignation from January until today?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Did he ever give any indication to Walters whether it would be accepted or not?

MR. NESSEN: No. As I say, it was held because originally George Bush said, "No, I don't want you to leave now, I want you to stay," and during this transition period and while George Bush was building his own team and that has been done now.

Q Well, Ron, was that letter given to Bush in January or to the President?

MR. NESSEN: Well, my understanding is it was given to Bush for transmittal to the President.

Q So he never transmitted it to the President until today?

MR. NESSEN: No. That is the normal process.

Q That is what happened right?

MR. NESSEN: That is my understanding of what happened, that is correct.

Q When was the letter delivered to the President?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know exactly.

Q This morning?

MR. NESSEN: No, no, certainly not. Before that.

Q Are you sure?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I am sure.

Q Will he be given a medal like Colby was?

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

Q If so, will that be an open ceremony? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: All right. Let's work our way through here now.

Q Ron, let me ask you about Walters' successor. Does the President have strong feelings about not putting a military man in that Deputy Director role?

MR. NESSEN: Does he have strong feelings about not doing it?

Q Yes. He is putting a civilian into a job that has, by tradition, been filled by a military man with some exceptions, of course.

MR. NESSEN: Well, this is clearly the person that George Bush wants for his deputy.

Q So Bush is filling the job and the President is submitting the nomination.

MR. NESSEN: No, Bush has recommended this gentleman.

Q Ron, what part in the appointment of Mr. Knoche does, one, his experience in the day-to-day operations of the agency play since he is going to be running the day-to-day operations and, two, the morale factor within the agency concerning a career diplomat.

MR. NESSEN: I am not that familiar with the background on this but Doug Bennett can help you further with it.

Q Ron, is there some reason why the President didn't ask Walters to stay on even though he was getting out of the Army?

MR. NESSEN: Well, as I say, his 35-year period was up last September. It was extended once to June and he had indicated his feeling that he wanted to retire.

Q Could he not have stayed on on the job in a civilian capacity?

MR. NESSEN: George Bush wanted to build his own team and indicated that to Vernon Walters last January. In fact, it really came more the other way, that Vernon Walters said, "I know you want to put your own team here at the CIA and so I am submitting my resignation," and George urged him to stay on for a period.

Q I am a little puzzled by your use of the term "resignation" when I was just told by a CIA spokesman that in fact it is the incorrect term, that he is retiring from the Army and that no resignation is involved.

MR. NESSEN: I have been trying to make that point here this morning.

Q Well, is he retiring from the Army or is he resigning from the CIA? That is all I am asking.

MR. NESSEN: Both. But the retirement from the Army is the sort of motivating force behind his resignation from the CIA job, as I understand it.

Q Could he not retire from the Army and remain in that spot at the CIA?

MR. NESSEN: Technically he could, yes. That is what I mentioned to Dick, but, you know, he recognizes and did in January when he originally submitted his resignation or announced his retirement that George Bush wants to build his own team at the CIA.

All right. Now I think Frank Zarb has straightened out the stories about whether the FEA is going out of business. Does anybody have anything remaining on that?

Q I have a question about something else Zarb said yesterday.

MR. NESSEN: Yes?

Q He said there is an increasingly great chance of another Arab oil embargo. I just came from a press conference with Zarb, and when he was asked, "Are you basing this on any particular classified intelligence information that you have as a member of the energy councils of Government," he said, "Well, I do get reports from time to time," but he was not any more specific.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what specifically he based that on other than perhaps the feeling of tensions in the Middle East and so forth. I don't know of any specific event that caused Frank to say that.

Q Did you ever answer my question on the cruise missile yesterday? Was the President making an announcement?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't get an answer to that, Walt. I am sorry.

Q There is a story coming out of State today which differs somewhat with your version yesterday on the status of SALT talks. The story coming out of State suggests, as my question implied yesterday, that indeed the SALT talks have been put on the back burner, or I think the story was on ice for all this year, this being a political year, and you said they were continuing.

Now the State Department and the White House are somewhat at odds then on that.

MR. NESSEN: My understanding of what the State Department has said or will say is that the meetings within this Government to review the latest Russian response are continuing and that the SALT talks have not broken down, there are several unresolved issues on which we are exchanging views.

Q Ron, would it be fair to say, though, that -- I think the gist of the State Department story that Jim raised is that there is no expectation of reaching any agreement this year.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I just really am not able to prophesy what the course of events will be. The status is that the Russians have sent a note in with their latest position, we are reviewing it and will respond. There are some unresolved issues.

Q The President has said several times recently that he would continue to pursue his policy on that -- continuing the negotiations, that is -- but that he could not say when or if any agreement might come about.

Now is it possible for you to tell us, does the President still expect to have an agreement this year? Does he expect to have one at all?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot go beyond what he said, and I don't want to try to forecast the outlook either, on SALT.

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Q Ron, has the President inquired of the Vice President yet or will he do so this afternoon of what he was referring to in the suggestion that there were Communists or former Communists or leftward-leaning unrevised --

MR. NESSEN: Well, the President is just not aware of what the Vice President said to a group -- to that group, whatever group it was -- if anything, along these lines.

Q Is he going to inquire?

MR. NESSEN: Now they do have their regular weekly meeting scheduled this afternoon but it is a private meeting and what they talk about or what they plan to talk about I just -- you know, at the moment, the meeting has not transpired yet so I don't know what they will talk about.

Q Is there a security risk in Senator Jackson's office?

MR. NESSEN: What?

Q Is there some reason to think there is a security risk in Jackson's office?

MR. NESSEN: Well, the President assumes that a United States Senator has responsible people on his staff.

Q Does he assume that the Vice President makes the same assumption?

MR. NESSEN: I am speaking for the President only.

Q So the President is not concerned by this -- this has not caused him any new worries?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, he is not aware of what the Vice President said, if anything. I don't know whether they will talk about it this afternoon. For his part, he assumes that a U.S. Senator does have responsible people on his staff.

Q Does he believe that if such a remark was made by the Vice President an apology should be made?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't want to deal with it on that basis.

Q In one fashion or another, it does reflect on the Ford Administration, though, does it not? So wouldn't they very likely discuss it this afternoon, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Tom, I simply don't know. They have not met yet.

Q But the fact of the matter is, wouldn't you say it is likely that they will discuss it?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot say whether it is likely or not because they have not met and I don't know what they are going to talk about.

Q Did you ask the President about this this morning?

MR. NESSEN: Well, obviously, I have some views that I am relaying to you, Phil.

Q Views on this?

Q What are they?

MR. NESSEN: The President assumes that a United States Senator has responsible people on his staff.

Q Does the President have any view on whether he will bring it up with Rockefeller this afternoon?

MR. NESSEN: Since the meeting has not taken place, he does not know whether it will come up, either.

Q He has a certain amount of control, I would suspect. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Maybe not.

Q Does Rockefeller set the agenda for these meetings?

MR. NESSEN: Well, if they have not met yet, it is not possible to say whether it is going to --

Q Did the President indicate that he was going to discuss it with Rockefeller?

MR. NESSEN: This is all I can tell you on the issue at the moment.

Q Come on, Ron. You said you discussed it with him. Didn't he suggest to you one way or the other whether he was going to discuss it?

MR. NESSEN: I am telling you everything I can tell you at the moment.

Q Ron, does the President think that the Vice President ought to make the same assumptions he does regarding U.S. Senators?

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

Q Ron, has the White House got a copy of the Conference Report on the FEC bill yet?

MR. NESSEN: It is not written yet, Saul. It can't be written until they come back from their vacation.

Q If you send somebody over to my office, I can let you have my copy. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so. I mean, you have something but --

Q Are you certain that there is not in the White House a copy of the House version of that Conference bill? If not, the legislation?

MR. NESSEN: We do have a draft of the Conference Committee Report --

Q Thank you.

MR. NESSEN:--I have just learned. That is to be, as I understand it, considered by the committee when it comes back.

Q Answer the question.

MR. NESSEN: The answer to that is yes, we do have a copy of what it is they are going to consider.

Q Would he sign that? As it is now constituted in draft form?

MR. NESSEN: It is not anything that is here for his decision. It is something that the Members will take up when they come back.

He has seen it; I don't know if he has read it.

Q What are his views of what he has seen?

MR. NESSEN: Well, it is something that he can't have a view on because it is something that does not have any standing.

Q The defense bill is not here yet and he has already said that --

MR. NESSEN: Let's take a step back here for a moment, gang. You know the second day in a row there is the implication that somehow the President is delaying action on the FEC.

Now I mentioned to you yesterday that the President asked for a timetable of his actions so he could make sure that he had acted at every turn in an effort to speed enactment of the law rather than to hinder enactment of the law. This has been prepared for the President, this is a copy, and it includes October 15, 1974, the President signing the FEC law into law.

January 30, the Supreme Court ruled that the Commission and its method of appointment in some ways was unconstitutional and the President issued a statement that day --

Q Ron, you did this yesterday.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I didn't do it yesterday because I didn't have it, Muriel.

Q The fact is, the question is, Ron, that the House has sent down its version of its Conference Committee Report and the President can have a view on it.

MR. NESSEN: Congress has taken two vacations, Tom. The Congress has put off action until April 27 on extending, a commission that expired on March 22. You know, that is where the blame belongs.

Q Ron, I am not asking you where the blame belongs.

MR. NESSEN: Will the President sign --

Q No, that was not my question.

MR. NESSEN: Okay, let me hear Tom's question.

Q My question is, you now have a copy, as we hope you discover.

MR. NESSEN: Of what?

Q Of the Conference Committee -- House version, right? The draft?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure which version it is, but anyhow we have a copy of something the Conference Committee will consider when it comes back on April 27.

Q As I understand it, that was the draft that was sent here by Congressman Wiggins who is a Member of that Conference Committee. My question to you was, and it seems to me a fair one, did the President have a reaction to that draft and to those points of discussion raised by Wiggins when he sent it down here, and you said originally, "No, how can he have?"

MR. NESSEN: Well, all right. I thought you were asking whether he would sign this if it were translated into law or something like that.

Q And the answer is you don't know, right?

MR. NESSEN: Well, it is not a document that the President can react to. It is some proposals that the Members will consider when they come back on April 27.

Now his personal reaction to it, unrelated to whether he will sign it or not, is he leafed through it and noticed that about four pages of it amounted to an extension of the law and another, I think, twenty pages of it amounted to changes in the law, and he made that comment.

Now I don't think that indicates one way or the other what he is going to do if and when a piece of legislation comes down here, but that was his personal reaction to it.

Q But is that copy -- and it seems to me we are engaged here in a really senseless exercise because you know precisely what I am talking about -- if he looks at that copy and sees within it drafts of law rules to govern--for instance, contributions from labor unions-- he surely must have a reaction to some of those proposed new rules.

MR. NESSEN: Tom, the President cannot determine whether to sign or veto a piece of legislation until it is in its final form and comes down here for his decision.

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Q Did he not offer Mr. Wiggins any guidance at all on his views on some of these proposals?

MR. NESSEN: If he has, I am not aware of it.

Q He does that all the time. He did it with the defense bill and he did it with the Hatch Act. He made clear determinations that he would veto the defense bill and he made a clear announcement that he would veto the Hatch Act long before the Hatch Act report ever got here.

MR. NESSEN: And in this case he has indicated that what should be done, and he has been urging this since the 30th of January -- nearly three months -- is a simple extension of the Commission and have it reconstituted in a constitutional way so that the candidates can get their money and the election can be run under the same rules it was started under.

Now if you want to know what is his position on FEC, that is his position on FEC and has been since the 30th of January.

Q Didn't he say specifically on the 26th of February that he would veto any bill which invited further court action or which changed the rules in the middle of the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: It was, I think, the 27th of January, but -- I mean the 27th of February -- but, in any case, the President has --

Q What did he say?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't know, it is in the files, Phil. We can dig it out for you.

Q Ron, what did the President say in addition to noting that there were 20 pages or so about the change in the law?

MR. NESSEN: That is all.

Q He just made that comment?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Not what he thinks of those changes?

MR. NESSEN: He did not. He just noted that that is what Congress had been spending its time on or whatever house this was the version from, and when, for the last three months, they could have done what all the candidates are asking Congress to do, which is to extend the law, and which he has asked.

Q What is the answer to Saul's question? Does he still stand behind that statement he made in February?

MR. NESSEN: Which was what?

Q The statement you just referred to that he would veto any law or any bill that changed the law.

Q What is the answer to Bob's question?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know exactly how to answer the question. You know, I don't -- what was the question again?

Q Does he still stand behind the February statement?

MR. NESSEN: Which was?

Q Whatever it was.

MR. NESSEN: Let me look up what he said so I know whether he stands behind it or not.

Q It included changing of the rules in the middle of a campaign and inviting further court action.

MR. NESSEN: Let me look it up.

Q Ron, is it fair to assume that there is nothing objectionable enough in this draft to cause the President to say "if that remains, I will veto it?"

MR. NESSEN: I would not leap to that conclusion. It is something that the President does not intend to make a decision on because there is nothing to make a decision on until a piece of legislation comes here.

Q Ron, if the President considers this so important, why is it that he has only just leafed through this document?

MR. NESSEN: If Congress considers this so important, why has it taken three months and gone off on two vacations without acting on it?

Q I asked about the President.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I am asking about Congress.

Q Well, we ask the questions.

MR. NESSEN: I sometimes ask some of them myself.

Q Ron, is it fair to go out of this briefing today saying that the White House has come to no decision yet on whether the bill will be vetoed or approved?

MR. NESSEN: I think it would be fairer to say that since Congress has not acted on this matter that the President cannot make up his mind whether to sign or veto a piece of legislation which he has not seen yet.

Q So he is still keeping his options open?

MR. NESSEN: No, because there is nothing here to choose an option, there is no legislation here.

Q And it is also fair to infer that he was pleased by having four pages on one subject and 20 pages on something else?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think it was more of a comment on how much time this is all taking and why it is taking so much time because instead of the simple extension he has called for for three months, they are in there changing the rules of the game in the middle of the game.

Q Ron, the point is, though, that they have taken this time and they have done the 20 pages of changes and that is what is before the conference committee, the Congress and the President. Yesterday you said that he couldn't have a view because you had nothing in writing. Now you have it in writing, therefore --

MR. NESSEN: But what is it we have in writing? It is a set of proposals that the conferees will get back to work on sometime next week. When they decide what they want to do and send it down here, the President will decide what he wants to do. What they should have done a long time ago, in the President's view, is extend the law so that the candidates can get their money.

Q Why is it that the President can make up his mind on some bills before he sees them and not on others?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think he normally makes up his mind until there is a piece of legislation in existence.

Q Walt cited a perfect example.

MR. NESSEN: But then, again, consistency is the hobgoblin of a small mind.

I was just trying to get a little literate here.

Q Ron, can you tell us if the President sees any inconsistency in Rumsfeld's statement that there is rough equivalency with the Soviets and his own flat statement that we are not number two?

MR. NESSEN: I don't see any conflict, no.

Q Does he agree that in some areas it is just rough equivalency?

MR. NESSEN: I think the public record is pretty clear there, Fran, without reopening it today.

Q Just to keep the record updated, there are those who are charging that you were trying to starve out Reagan.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Is this true?

MR. NESSEN: Well, Phil, look at the record, for goodness sakes. That is why I was trying to read this thing before Muriel said you didn't want to hear it, but clearly not. I mean it is the Democratic Congress, if anyone, who is trying to starve out Carter, Udall and all the other candidates, Reagan and anybody else.

Q Are they trying to starve out the President?

MR. NESSEN: I don't mean they are trying to starve out, but if there is any starving out, the cause of the starving out is the failure of a Democratic Congress to enact the bill, if there is any. I don't know what it means, anyhow, and I am sorry I accepted it.

Q Ron, there is a report here this morning or this afternoon that money was passed in a plain brown envelope from a junior White House aide to a reporter for a news magazine. Do you know anything about that? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Now, let's see. (Laughter)

Just to tell you about my own personal travel plans, I am going down to the great State of Texas this afternoon, as are some of you, to take part in a seminar at the Johnson Library on the press and the White House. I think Helen is going, Frank is going and Deakin and Sidey and so forth.

Q This is tomorrow?

MR. NESSEN: It is tomorrow and then I will join you in Tyler, Texas, on Tuesday. John will be here and running things well while I am gone.

Q Ron, Betty Ford was quoted yesterday as having said that she thought parts of the Saturday night live show were somewhat lacking in taste and that the President agreed --

Q Question, please?

MR. NESSEN: I will repeat it loudly when I answer.

Q -- and that the President agreed with that view. Is that correct? Is that your understanding?

MR. NESSEN: The way I read what she said was: "I thought the White House material was very funny and so did the President. We both laughed at it and had a good time."

Q Isn't there an earlier quote?

MR. NESSEN: But this is the later quote. (Laughter) I wonder why it is the later quote.

Q What about the other material?

Q Did the President ever say anything more to you about your appearance on that show?

MR. NESSEN: No, he has not.

Q Ron, can we return to the Rockefeller thing just a minute?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q You said the President's only reaction was that a U.S. Senator assumes the responsibility for his --

MR. NESSEN: No, no, no. He assumes that a United States Senator has responsibility.

Q Was Rockefeller down there ostensibly to advance the Ford candidacy in the primary? Wasn't there any expression of "What's the matter of Jackson's staff coming up in the meeting with Republicans in Atlanta?"

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, and the President does not know what the Vice President said, if anything, in that meeting.

Q Ron, to pursue that one bit further, you said that you didn't know if they had been discussing it at this meeting and you also said, I think before that, that at this point the President is just not aware of what the Vice President said.

MR. NESSEN: Correct.

Q Are you leaving open the possibility that the President won't even inquire?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't know one way or the other, Dick.

Q Well, I mean if you don't know, then that possibility exists, doesn't it?

MR. NESSEN: It also doesn't exist.

Q The President did not give you any indication that he would ask the Vice President?

MR. NESSEN: One way or the other, I don't know.

Q Is he not concerned about the effect of that statement?

MR. NESSEN: I thought we went through this whole set of questions already one time.

Q We didn't do very well the first time.
(Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: But I am not going to get any better the second time.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 12:40 P.M. EST)