

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:00 A.M. EDT

JUNE 18, 1976

FRIDAY

MR. NESSEN: Let Janice Adele pass out these statements. They are self-explanatory, and while she is doing that I will give you whatever other little information I have.

The President had a meeting this morning with his National Security and diplomatic advisors beginning at 8:30, it lasted about an hour. The attendees were the President, Kissinger, Bush, General Brown, Dick Cheney, Jack Marsh, Clements and Scowcroft. The purpose was to review the situation in Lebanon and the plans for the evacuation.

The President has cancelled his trip to Iowa because of the impending evacuation and the situation in Lebanon. Mrs. Ford and Jack Ford will be going in his place.

The only other thing I have to tell you is that the bodies of Ambassador Meloy and Counselor Waring will be arriving at Andrews at 4:20 tomorrow afternoon and the President will go to Andrews to pay his respects. The Cabinet meeting, which is about to begin -- and I think some of you are in the pool to see that -- is a long-scheduled Cabinet meeting unrelated to the situation in Lebanon.

Q Can we go file?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Will it be discussed, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Let me find out.

Q Will you read the statement?

MR. NESSEN: Due to the continuing uncertainty of the situation in Beirut, the President has directed the United States Embassy there to assist in the departure by overland convoy to Damascus of U.S. citizens who wish to depart Lebanon at this time.

The convoy is expected to leave Beirut Saturday, and American citizens are being alerted both by the Embassy and by broadcast on the Voice of America to be prepared for departure at that time, if they so wish.

The remains of Ambassador Francis Meloy and Mr. Robert Waring have been brought to Damascus overland. They will be picked up by a U.S. plane and returned to the United States, arriving on Saturday.

Only those Embassy officials not essential to our continuing operations will be leaving Lebanon. The American Embassy in Beirut is to remain open to continue our efforts to help bring an end to the strife which has brought this tragedy to Lebanon.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (11:10 A.M. EDT)

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 3:30 P.M. EDT

JUNE 18, 1976

FRIDAY

MR. NESSEN: I don't really have very much. I just wanted to keep you posted on where we stand. The only thing new that I have is that at 7:00 p.m. the President will meet pretty much the same group he has been meeting with -- Kissinger, Bush, Brown, Scowcroft -- to have a final review of the evacuation plans. Other than that, the President has been in the office all day doing paperwork and meeting with members of the staff.

Q Does the call to the Iowa Republican dinner come before or after that meeting?

MR. NESSEN: I don't even know if there is going to be a call, Walt.

Q Well, we were led to believe this morning that perhaps there will be a call. Is it now not going to happen?

MR. NESSEN: Who led you to believe that?

Q That was my understanding of what you have said.

Q What is the likelihood of that?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any feeling for it one way or the other, Phil.

Q Ron, it is our understanding, I think it has been on the wire, that exactly 30 of the 1400 and some odd Americans and U.S. dependents have signed up for this convoy out and there also were comments from Americans there that Washington seems much more concerned about the situation in Lebanon than the Americans in Beirut do, which raises the question of what kind of reports the President is getting from there. How serious is the situation, or is it perhaps overreacting?

MR. NESSEN: I saw a UPI story that indicated that well over 100 people had signed up and that the number was increasing all the time and that the phones were tied up with people calling for information.

Q What is your information?

MR. NESSEN: I have not checked the NSC cable for a while. I don't know what the number is.

Q In terms of the evacuation, no troops are going in at all and it is all being kind of British security all the way through, is that it?

MR. NESSEN: First of all, let me say there is no anticipation of any American troops being involved, but as for the exact details of the evacuation, I am not going to be able to give them to you, for obvious reasons.

Q Ron, the State Department announced this morning that they had received a guarantee of safe conduct and the Associated Press followed that question up by asking who was the safe conduct guaranteed from; in other words, who provided it, and at that point they said we were not going to say.

I am wondering, do you have any idea why the State Department would announce that we are getting a safe conduct and then not say who is providing it so that it illustrates what is safe? Are we dealing with the PLO or not?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't see that the State Department had said anything like that.

Q I can guarantee -- I just came from there.

MR. NESSEN: For obvious reasons, in a very delicate situation like this, I am not going to spell out details of the evacuation.

Q How about Les' direct question? Are we dealing with the PLO?

MR. NESSEN: I think I have said all along through this that there is no direct contact with the PLO.

Q Could I ask, if there is no plan to use American forces for the evaluation of American military forces, why the President feels it necessary to stay here in the White House and watch this evacuation being conducted by -- or even if it is a relatively small evacuation of 150 people with no American troops, why it is necessary for him to watch-dog this thing this closely?

MR. NESSEN: He needs to oversee the preparations for the evacuation and follow the developments as they occur.

Q Ron, maybe a direct question. Many of these questions are suggesting that this thing may be trumped up domestically, at least. What is your reaction to those suggestions?

MR. NESSEN: Phil, that question is so far from anything that compares to the reality of the situation that I don't intend to dignify it with an answer.

Q Nine days ago, Ron, the American Foreign Service Association wrote a letter to the President representing 9,000 Foreign Service protesting his entertainment of Numayri of Sudan, who had released the killers of Ambassador Noel.

Dr. Kissinger has not even answered the letter. Is the President going to answer the letter at all?

MR. NESSEN: I am sure the letter will be answered, Les.

Q It will?

MR. NESSEN: Those people you speak of, the question was raised here the other day, and I indicated then that they were in jail in Cairo or somewhere in Egypt.

Q Ron, I am glad you brought that up because the State Department admitted this morning that no one from the State Department that Mr. Funseth has ever heard of has been in Egypt in the place where they are allegedly detained. No one has any guarantee that they are not on a Mediterranean villa or in a hotel or anything and the State Department -- 9,000 of them -- their Board of Governors said that we have no guarantee that they will even serve out the seven-year sentences.

Now, what about that? Do you have any other information on that? Does the President know that these people are in jail that murdered Noel?

MR. NESSEN: The letter has arrived from the association representing the employees of the State Department.

Q He will answer it?

MR. NESSEN: The letter will be answered, and to the best of my knowledge the people you speak of are detained in Egypt.

Q Ron, could we get back to the number of people being evacuated? When you last saw cables, was a figure indicated? Do you have no information on the number being --

MR. NESSEN: I saw a UPI story, as I said, a short while ago.

Q I am talking about NSC figures or figures from the American Embassy in Beirut.

MR. NESSEN: I have not seen a figure.

Q So, it might not even be a dozen, then?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know exactly what the issue is.

Q What is the President being told about this?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what he is being told about the number signing up, Fran.

Q Ron, is the United States Government planning to charter special planes to bring these people to Athens and further?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the plans are once they reach Damascus. I will check for you.

Q Is Rumsfeld going to come back any earlier than --

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any indication that he has changed his plans?

Q Ron, was President Ford told about what the wires were reporting about the convoy carrying the two bodies being caught in cross-fire?

MR. NESSEN: I checked into that report. The only thing that even vaguely resembles anything like that report is that there was some fighting off in the distance nowhere near the convoy.

Q This does not worry the President for the particular safety of any of the Americans trying to go out by convoy route?

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q Why don't you check that report?

MR. NESSEN: I have checked that report with the NSC.

Q Can't the NSC tell you how many people have signed up for the evacuation tomorrow?

MR. NESSEN: They certainly can, but I didn't ask them. I didn't know it was an issue.

Q How about asking?

MR. NESSEN: I will ask.

Q Ron, Jim Baker was at the Cabinet meeting this morning and escorted the Secretary to wherever he was going. My question is, did Baker report on the delegate hunting at the Cabinet meeting?

MR. NESSEN: There were a number of things discussed at the Cabinet meeting, Phil.

Q Was that one of them?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to say anything more about the Cabinet meeting.

Q Why? Is this an open Administration or not?

Q Was politics discussed?

MR. NESSEN: There were a number of things discussed, Fran.

Q Larry reported that Kissinger reported on the Mideast situation. Now, why can't you tell us if Baker reported on the delegate situation?

MR. NESSEN: I am just going to say there were a number of other matters discussed, including legislative proposals.

Q Why did the President decide it was necessary to have another meeting this evening? Could you be more specific?

MR. NESSEN: To review the final evacuation plans, Walt.

Q Can you be more specific than that?

Q You said make decisions.

MR. NESSEN: I don't recall that I said make decisions. If there are any decisions needed, he will certainly make them.

Q Will General Brown be at the meeting tonight?

MR. NESSEN: I anticipate that he will.

Q But still no American troops are involved?

MR. NESSEN: There is no anticipation that there will be.

Q Why does Brown keep coming to these meetings?
(Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: What was that? What was the question-- I mean the answer?

Q The reference to the Duke University appearance.

MR. NESSEN: I see.

Well, you know that the Sixth Fleet has been off the coast there for a long time, I forget how long, but in case they were needed in any way in an evacuation. There are no plans for them.

Q Ron, is something happening over there of such a gravity as to necessitate or require this many meetings of the President's national security advisers? I mean, we don't know very much, so I have to ask a stupid question like that. Is something happening over there of such gravity that the President has to meet with his national security advisers twice a day?

MR. NESSEN: A very delicate evacuation of Americans who want to leave is being organized, Walt.

Q Is something happening over there of such gravity that the President is required to meet this frequently with his national security advisers?

MR. NESSEN: I am telling you that a very delicate evacuation of Americans who want to leave Lebanon is being arranged, Walt, and obviously the President is having what meetings he needs to oversee that process.

Q What meeting is this now, the fourth, the fifth?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. Let Larry give you what meetings we have had.

Q Ron, if you look back over reports on Cabinet meetings since you have been Press Secretary and since Mr. Ford has been President, you will find there have been some rather detailed reports on what was discussed at Cabinet meetings.

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Why have you decided not to tell us whether or not they discussed the delegate count?

MR. NESSEN: I did tell you about the Kissinger report, and I mentioned that there were some legislative proposals discussed and other matters, and I would like to leave it at that.

Q Are you ashamed of any political talk that happens in the Cabinet?

MR. NESSEN: I am not ashamed of anything, Ann.

Q What about his plans for tomorrow now?

MR. NESSEN: We will put out a schedule before the end of the day.

Q Will you get us those NSC cable figures on the number of evacuees as soon as possible?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I will see what the status of that is.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 3:43 P.M. EDT)

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 8:00 P.M. EDT

JUNE 18, 1976

FRIDAY

MR. NESSEN: The purpose of the meeting was to review the final evacuation plans.

Q Do you have a list of participants?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q It would be nice if you brought it out, though.

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to be able to tell you the details of the evacuation, I think for obvious reasons.

What has happened now is that the President has sent General Brown and Secretary Clements back to the Pentagon to monitor the developments from there. Brent Scowcroft is here, of course. So is Cheney, and me, and Marsh is going to go home for a while and feed his kids and come back.

The President has gone home to dinner and will then keep in touch with the situation here.

I don't know precisely what to do with the lid situation because I don't have any way of knowing whether there will be anything further out of here tonight or not. As I say, I plan to stay and Cheney and Scowcroft and Marsh will be back and the others manning the fort over at the Pentagon, and so I don't know what to tell you.

Q Could you give us a call if you have something? Is that pretty difficult?

MR. NESSEN: You mean a limited call-out for a full call-out or what we could do is leave a sign-up for a call-out.

Q What are you expecting?

MR. NESSEN: It is hard for me to anticipate anything.

Q When do they start to move, actually, our time?

MR. NESSEN: I can't give you that.

The President, as I say, is going to have dinner and then will keep on top of the situation.

Why don't we do this? Why don't we have a sign-up list for those who are interested in a call-out if we have anything, and we will be faithful about calling out and if you don't hear, then you will know that we won't have anything here before 8:00 a.m.

I am not going to promise that we are going to have anything at 8:00 a.m., but that would be the earliest we would have anything if we don't call out tonight. How does that sound?

Q Ron, again, if you want to make it off-the-record, fine, but we are talking about a motorcade that is going to travel about 80 miles.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the distance is, and I can't tell you what the route is.

Q We are talking about something that should be completed very quickly.

Q No more than two or three hours?

MR. NESSEN: It is not on I-95, Russ, I can tell you that.

Q On Pennsylvania Avenue in rush-hour, it is not going to take that long to travel 80 miles, is it?

Q On the record, can you give us any guidance if there are any plans to use American military personnel in that or does your original disclaimer hold?

MR. NESSEN: My original disclaimer holds.

Q Ron, what if something should develop between now and dawn there when the Americans are to gather at the Riviera Hotel? Is that the kind of thing that you would do a call-out about? I don't know what to anticipate, but the call-out would be --

MR. NESSEN: Why don't you leave it up to my judgment? I will call out if there is anything significant to announce.

Q Ron, the presence of Brown and Clements standing by in the Pentagon ready room suggests the Sixth Fleet is on some kind of alert.

MR. NESSEN: Not an alert, Russ, but they have been there all along from the very beginning for the purpose of taking part in an evacuation of Americans if that should become necessary and it remains their assignment.

Q Let me ask the question more specifically. If the convoy were to encounter difficulties, say artillery fire along the way, and if the convoy were halted, is it contemplated a U.S. air strike would be called in?

MR. NESSEN: I can't answer that, Walt.

Q If we came back at 11:00, would we be able to man the barricades here?

MR. NESSEN: If you would like to --

Q I would like to come back.

MR. NESSEN: This office will be open, obviously.

Q Can we get back through the gate?

Q Why don't you tell them at the gate?

MR. NESSEN: I am going to be here, and we will make the arrangements.

Q Ron, do you have numbers for us on the number of people signed up for the convoy?

MR. NESSEN: Not firm numbers, no.

Q Do you have a ball-park figure?

MR. NESSEN: The ball-park figure is up to about 200 assignments so far.

Q Wouldn't you expect some people would come who didn't necessarily sign up?

MR. NESSEN: It is possible.

I think you ought to keep in mind that what we were talking about earlier is that something over 400 of the Lebanese-Americans in the relatively peaceful Northern zone are controlled by the Christians, and there is no reason for them to get out.

A certain number live in areas where it is difficult or impossible to get to an evacuation convoy, and others are Lebanese-Americans and they may have American passports, but they have no real ties with the United States or relatives here now and so for their own personal reasons they are not expected to want to leave Lebanon at the moment.

Q How many of the 53 Embassy employees do you anticipate leaving at this point?

MR. NESSEN: I would rather not put a number on that right now.

Q Will there be some thinning out at the Embassy?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, it is anticipated.

Q Has that thinning out already occurred?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q How will the President keep focus? Through Scowcroft?

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q Is the President planning to go to bed tonight?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know at this point, Walt.

Q Do you know when his wife is due back?

MR. NESSEN: About 10:30. I guess she is keeping pretty much to his schedule.

Q Does the use of the American military include the air cover for the convoy, possible air cover?

MR. NESSEN: It is not anticipated.

If you want to go away until 11:00, that is safe. As I say, I will be here.

Q Okay. May we have a lid until 8:00 a.m.?

MR. NESSEN: You actually have a lid until 8:00 a.m., that is correct. Sign up for a call-out, and for those of you who want to man the barricades, you are welcome to bring pizzas back and stuff.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 8:08 P.M. EDT)

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