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NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:29 A.M. EDT

JUNE 19, 1976

SATURDAY

MR. NESSEN: I just wanted to keep you posted as we go along. The President met from 10:20 to 11:12 -- that is 52 minutes -- with the following people: Kissinger, Scowcroft, General Brown, Marsh, George Bush, Secretary Clements, Bill Hyland, Deputy to Scowcroft on the NSC, and Dick Cheney.

Q Isn't that the same group he has been meeting with?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, it is.

Q Why is Marsh always in on these?

MR. NESSEN: Marsh is a Counsellor to the President and he has dealt in the area of national security.

Q For that reason?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Who was the last one?

MR. NESSEN: Dick Cheney.

The purpose of the meeting was to review the situation in Beirut.

Q What did they decide? Nothing?

Q Are they still going to go tonight?

MR. NESSEN: Are they still going tonight? You mean the road convoy? They reviewed the situation.

Q Ron, do you anticipate another meeting by this same group prior to the departure of the convoy?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have a time for you, Russ, but I would just say probably yes. Almost certainly yes.

Q On what?

MR. NESSEN: To continue reviewing the situation.

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Q Well, are you leaving open the possibility that there will be another postponement?

MR. NESSEN: I just won't speculate.

Q You knew about a convoy yesterday and today you can't speculate?

MR. NESSEN: No. I mean I obviously am not going to stand here like it is 7 o'clock at night over there and say, you know, we think it is going to be postponed. We don't think it is going to be postponed. At the moment as far as I know the British have announced that it is leaving at the same time so I mean I just don't have any reason to think that that is not their plan.

Q That was a hard 24 hours then?

MR. NESSEN: The way I read the announcement made to the crowd over the bullhorn it was show up here at the exact time 24 hours later.

Q Ron, can you tell us now who is providing the promise of safe passage for the convoy and who withdrew it?

MR. NESSEN: I can tell you ON BACKGROUND that it was the PLO but not in a direct conversation with the United States.

Q This guarantee of safety by the PLO has been forwarded to us through the British Embassy in Beirut?

MR. NESSEN: Well, ON BACKGROUND just, it was not forwarded to us directly.

Q Are they still the ones who are involved in the safety?

MR. NESSEN: ON BACKGROUND, the convoy would initially have to pass through territory controlled by the PLO.

Q But we also understood from stories that the Syrians and the Libyans are involved in this safe passage.

MR. NESSEN: After you reach a certain point on the road you then cross into territory controlled by the Syrians.

Q Ron, do you have any figures on Americans, any later figures?

MR. NESSEN: The last I saw was that 140 Americans had shown up for yesterday's -- last night's -- convoy.

Q You have no reason to believe that number will differ for the convoy coming out?

MR. NESSEN: I would think if it changes at all, it would increase.

Q Well, that does not seem like very many Americans seeking to be evacuated. You explained out of the total of 1100 to 1400 that maybe 400 or 500 would have no reason or means of evacuating. What about the rest?

MR. NESSEN: Phil Habib was also at that meeting.

I think if you could just go back one second and recall that when the crisis started there were something like 6400 Americans -- is that the correct number, John?

MR. MATHENY: That's correct.

MR. NESSEN: So what you have talked about is something, say, over 5000 Americans have already gone in the 17 months or so of the crisis.

Q When does the 6400 figure start?

MR. NESSEN: Say a year and a half ago, roughly. Roughly a year and a half ago.

So you know you are down now from 6400 to, say, a maximum of 1400, say, half of which almost are living in zones that are relatively safe, controlled by the Christians, others are Lebanese Americans whose families, businesses and livelihoods are in Lebanon and not in America so they don't want to leave for that reason. But the lives and safety of 140 Americans is quite, I think, of considerable importance to the President. So it may seem relatively small but their safety is not unimportant by any means.

Q Ron, is there any danger that if this thing gets delayed another 24 hours that the situation in Beirut or in Lebanon could change and it would be more difficult to get out as days go by?

MR. NESSEN: Annie, I think because it is quite a delicate situation that I don't want to speculate on what could happen beyond the next planned time of departure.

Q What is the United States doing to try to bring about a settlement to this problem?

MR. NESSEN: Well, at the moment, with the death of the Ambassador, we are in consultation and communication with the governments of the area and the parties in Lebanon, but beyond that I can't spell it out any more thoroughly for you, Helen.

Q On consultation and on the political matters or on --

MR. NESSEN: We are ready to help the parties to resolve the matter in a peaceful way.

Q Given this small number of Americans, Ron, why don't we send three helicopters in and take them out?

MR. NESSEN: Russ, I don't feel that is a matter I can talk about even off the record.

Q Ron, is it up to the British to decide whether to go or not go with the convoy?

MR. NESSEN: Well, in the case of last night's convoy, Forrest, the American officials were there at the Embassy when the decision was made not to go and, in effect, there was not really much of a decision to make. I mean the people who were going to be responsible for securing your route said, "We cannot assure the security of the route." Now there was not very much of a decision to make after they told you that. I mean, the decision would have been, well, to go ahead despite the lack of security and despite the report of heavy fighting along the road, so the Americans were there and participated with the British when the decision was made not to go -- the American officials from the Embassy.

Q You don't know of any more meetings today with the same group?

MR. NESSEN: I can't give you a time, Helen, but as I think I told Russ, I certainly would anticipate there would be another meeting.

Q Is President Ford any closer to sending a new Ambassador over there?

MR. NESSEN: I just have not checked that, Ann.

Q And is he going to watch the take-off again tonight?

MR. NESSEN: I would anticipate that the procedure would be very similar to last night, that is correct.

Q Ron, the funeral is tomorrow, I think.

MR. NESSEN: Is it? I heard that it was Monday.

Q Monday? I thought it was Sunday.

Will the President go to that?

MR. NESSEN: Right now, Phil, I don't know of any plans for him to go but I have not checked all that thoroughly either, but I have not heard of any plans for him to go.

Q Will he have prepared remarks for Andrews?

MR. NESSEN: I think he will have remarks, I don't know whether they are going to be written down or whether he will speak off the cuff.

Q Are you anticipating an operation tonight similar to last night and will there be the kind of call-out that we had which seemed to me to be --

MR. NESSEN: I think it seemed to work well last night. What I would do is that at some time in the late afternoon or evening after the ceremonies at Andrews and everybody has come back here or whatever, those of you who want to be called during the night if there is anything could sign up and otherwise we would put a lid on. I think it worked okay last night.

Q What is tomorrow?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of anything on the schedule tomorrow. I think there was some thought of playing golf tomorrow but I don't know whether he will or not.

Q What is the Iowa reaction?

MR. NESSEN: I have not had a chance to check that out this morning.

Q The President doesn't know how he did then?

Q Do you expect a reaction before the day is over?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. It may be that we would take a look at all the results and offer some comment. I have not had a chance, frankly, to check that yet.

Q You mean all the States?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Ron, one question. I am not exactly clear on what the President's role was last night and early this morning when he came to the Situation Room.

MR. NESSEN: Well, the original intention was for the President -- he didn't come to the Situation Room, he came to Brent's office. The original intention was to come there 15 minutes before the convoy was supposed to depart so he could monitor it and its progress. Then, as you know, only moments literally before the convoy was to leave it was cancelled because of the inability to get an assurance along the road.

Well, he stayed there for, I guess, slightly over an hour to get the details of that and to talk to the various people involved and to find out what the next step anticipated was and so forth. When it became clear that it had been postponed 24 hours and that there was nothing further to do last night, he then retired.

Q Have we tried to get the same kind of guarantee from all factions? I mean there must be about two factions now that we are not getting it from, the Phalangists and the Jumblatt because --

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think I will pass on that in getting into that much detail of the consultations. We are in consultation with the various groups and countries in Beirut.

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Q Ron, we have not talked about housing for these Americans in Damascus. Have we been in touch with the Syrian Government about how to provide for their necessities while they are there or the transshipment to some other country?

MR. NESSEN: I have not looked into that part of it, Russ. I will, and find out what arrangements are being made in Damascus.

Q Ron, you may have answered this question during the night, but can you give us any detail, any color, is the President going to telephone, talk to the people in Beirut?

MR. NESSEN: I don't recall that the President talked directly to Beirut. He talked to Kissinger on the phone and talked to Clements on the phone and Scowcroft, and others talked directly to Beirut.

Q Did the President hear the conversation of General Scowcroft talking to some American official in Beirut?

MR. NESSEN: He heard one end of the conversation, yes.

Q He heard Brent's end?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q There was no speakerphone or anything else where he could hear?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Has the President asked Clements and Brown to man the barricades at the Pentagon again tonight?

MR. NESSEN: Let's wait until we get a little closer to tonight and then we will give you the line up of who will be where in the later evening.

Q Had the President retired for the evening prior to the 1:45 call?

MR. NESSEN: What he had planned to do was, as I say, to come back 15 minutes before the convoy left, and he planned to wait up for Mrs. Ford to return from Iowa and chat with her while he waited for the time to come. She got back I think a little later than anticipated and he dozed off while he was waiting for her to come back. He didn't go to bed. He just put his head back and dozed off in the chair and then she came back and then he came over here.

Q So, it was sometime after 3 o'clock before he went to bed?

MR. NESSEN: Before he actually went to bed, yes. He left the NSC at about eight minutes of 3:00 and then he stopped in his office briefly and left here I think about a minute after 3:00, 5 minutes after 3:00, or something.

Q I take it there will be no State Department briefing today on something that didn't happen?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Could it be tomorrow?

MR. NESSEN: Let's wait and see what happens tonight.

Q How about on the busing meeting? What are we going to get?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. Is there a burning desire to have a briefing?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I have no problem.

Q What about Arch Moore? What is he doing here?

MR. NESSEN: Did you want to talk to Arch Moore when he comes out?

Q Yes.

Q We want to know why he is here.

MR. NESSEN: I will have to check why he is here, find out precisely what the purpose is.

Q Find out the purpose.

MR. NESSEN: All right. We can either bring him here or alert you to when he leaves the West Wing.

Q You will do one or the other?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q That will not conflict with the people who come out of the busing meeting?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't think so.

Q How long is this Moore meeting going to last?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what it is scheduled for.

MR. ROBERTS: It is behind now because of this other meeting. It was originally scheduled for 15 minutes.

Q Will politics be discussed?

MR. NESSEN: I would not be surprised.

Q Will President Ford make any phone calls to Iowa or keep in touch with his people there, to Delaware, to Rogers Morton or to Washington State?

MR. NESSEN: I will have Larry check his phone call plans.

Q Ron, when was this busing meeting scheduled?

MR. NESSEN: This is part of what the President promised two or three weeks ago -- probably closer to three weeks ago -- to consult with various outside groups to hear their views on the busing issue before he made his final decision on legislation.

Q So, it has been in the works for a while?

MR. NESSEN: It has been in the works for a while, yes.

Q What is that guy's last name?

MR. NESSEN: Which guy?

Q The tall, blonde fellow?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry, we are not allowed to give away the names of NSC people. (Laughter)

John Matheny. He is substituting for vacationing Margie Vanderhye.

Q Is she okay?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q We have requested some pictures documenting the crisis discussion. I have looked at one. It has not been passed out yet, but I have seen one. I just wonder if we could get three or four, a series of the things, as many of these are not -- for television, for example -- particularly good.

MR. NESSEN: I have a feeling, Phil, that if we gave out three or four pictures that someone would suggest that we were hiking this crisis for political purposes --

Q It is a formal request to have pictures.

Q You have done it before.

MR. NESSEN: At the moment there are no plans to put out any pictures of last night's meeting or today's meeting.

Q Can this be on the record, that several people have asked for pictures?

MR. NESSEN: It can be on the record, but there are no plans to put any pictures out.

Q You have a lot of them available.

MR. NESSEN: Kennerly always takes a lot of photos.

Q That would be a great help.

MR. NESSEN: Okay.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 11:45 A.M. EDT)