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NEWS CONFERENCE

#517

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 2:20 A.M. EDT

JUNE 20, 1976

SUNDAY

MR. NESSEN: After careful consideration of the alternatives and in light of the uncertain security situation along parts of the road to Damascus at the present time, the President has decided that the best means for the departure of Americans wishing to leave Lebanon is by sea. Other foreign nationals can be included.

Let me say parenthetically at that point it appears now that about 200 Americans and perhaps 300 or more British have expressed an interest in going by this route. That is the current outlook.

This operation would be beginning Sunday morning Beirut time.

This is a humanitarian operation. It will be carried out by an unarmed Navy landing craft. This landing craft is known as an LCU -- about 41 meters long. I guess that would be about 120 feet. It can hold up to 500 people.

Because it does look like there might be perhaps more than 500 who want to go, there will be another smaller landing craft which is normally carried by an LCU called an LCM. An LCM is really fairly small. It is designed to carry one truck and one artillery piece. It can hold up to 150 people. So there will be those two Navy landing craft both unarmed.

The United States has received assurances as to the safety of the evacuees.

Q From whom, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: ON BACKGROUND, Jim, indirectly from the PLO.

Just to fill in a few more details for you, it was about 6 o'clock that the United States learned that we could not get a guarantee of safety along the road to Damascus because of fighting, including a reporting of a fire fight at one point along the road. And so at that time the President made the decision.

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Brent Scowcroft was in the NSC office, Secretary Kissinger at the State Department, Clements and Brown at the Defense Department. After consultations back and forth, the President made the decision about 6 o'clock.

Jack Marsh and his staff have contacted the leaders and relevant Members of Congress.

Q Both parties?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

The President came over to the NSC office about 1:55 to monitor the operation. He was going into the Oval Office -- just did, and he will be staying there to monitor the operation. Don Rumsfeld has returned from his trip, arriving at the Pentagon about midnight, and he is there also.

Q The operation has begun?

MR. NESSEN: The pick-up has not begun, let me put it that way.

Q About 3:00 A.M. our time.

MR. NESSEN: Where did you get that from?

Q They had a time out of the Counsellor's office -- local time.

Q I saw 4 o'clock on the wires.

Q It said 2 o'clock, too.

MR. NESSEN: As there are various estimates of what time, we had better not pin it down.

What will happen is a Navy ship called an LSD by the name of the SPIEGEL GROVE -- it is about 510 feet long -- part of the Sixth Fleet -- will move to within three to five minutes of the beach outside the territorial waters, and will release the LCU and the LCM, which will then go the rest of the way to the beach and pick up the people.

Q Is this the end of the information now?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. If you want to go and file now, I will talk to the other folks who arrived late.

Q What did the President do earlier this evening?

MR. NESSEN: He was over in the residence with Mrs. Ford -- had dinner and took a nap before coming over here at 1:55 A.M.

END

(AT 2:35 A.M. EDT)

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 4:05 A.M. EDT

JUNE 20, 1976

SUNDAY

MR. NESSEN: The landing craft reached the beach at 28 minutes after three Washington time. A full, comfortable load -- in other words, the number of people that can be carried comfortably on the ship, which is 400 -- have been processed to go aboard. They haven't quite started loading yet.

But it is 152 Americans and 248 other nationals, mostly British, so that's a full load of 400 which have been processed to go aboard and will be going aboard shortly.

Q Just one landing craft went ashore?

MR. NESSEN: So far.

Q Which one was that?

MR. NESSEN: The LCU -- the larger one.

Q Is that all that want to go? Is that the 400?

MR. NESSEN: I am not clear whether there are going to be more that want to go, which would mean bringing the little one, or taking this one out to the LSD, removing the passengers, and then sending it back to shore. We don't know yet what the next step will be.

Q Any problems develop? Any hostilities of any kind?

MR. NESSEN: All smooth and quiet so far.

Q By processing, what would that be?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, you know, check their passports, et cetera.

Q Is that 400 capacity for that craft?

MR. NESSEN: That is the comfortable capacity. You can jam 500 on but the decision was not to.

Q According to the wires, the PLO is providing security in that area, or at least was at the British Embassy and wherever the Americans were, which is apparently a couple of blocks away. Do you know if they have provided security for this transition of getting these people down to the ship and on?

MR. NESSEN: If that is being reported from Beirut, I would not argue with it.

Q Anyway, the LCU has not yet pulled off the beach?

MR. NESSEN: It has not taken the people on yet. They are just ready to go aboard.

Q Are there any American combatants of any kind in the beach area?

MR. NESSEN: There are not. And the sailors on the LCU are unarmed.

Q Do you have reason to believe there are more than 400 evacuees?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I do. I think there'll have to be another run made either by the smaller ship or by turning this one around and sending it back.

Q Do you have a report of the weather in the area: Are the seas calm?

MR. NESSEN: The weather is clear -- 10 miles visibility. About 9 knot-wind -- sunny.

Q There is no danger involved in taking these out?

MR. NESSEN: You mean to take these people out?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Not from the seas, no.

Q Does the beach have a name?

MR. NESSEN: It does, but I'm not sure whether we're ready to give it out, Jerry. If you want to you can say it is in the area of the Riviera Hotel, which is the British Embassy area.

Q Do you know how long it took the craft to get from the big ship in?

MR. NESSEN: I wish you would check Greener on that. I know they are pouring stuff out over there.

Q Is the President still in his office?

MR. NESSEN: No. He went back to the NSC office.

Q Why didn't they use helicopters?

MR. NESSEN: It was just decided, as the original statement said, after weighing a lot of alternatives, this was decided to be the way to do it.

Q Is the President still in the monitoring posture?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. There are phone calls coming in and cable traffic coming in. He has talked to Secretary Rumsfeld on the phone.

Q Has he been in contact with the Task Force commander?

MR. NESSEN: No, not directly. But there are cables and phone calls coming in to others in the NSC.

Q He has the capability, hasn't he?

MR. NESSEN: I guess so, but he has not.

Q Anything you can say about deciding not to wait for another 24-hour cycle and go the overland evacuation route?

MR. NESSEN: I would say only that having had the motorcade postponed last night because of no assurances of safety and the same thing happening a second time, the feeling was there was nothing to lead us to believe that we could get that assurance tomorrow.

Q We have been urging Americans to leave Lebanon for months and months. 6,000 did and 1400 didn't. All of a sudden we have escalated it and made it kind of an urgent advice to leave and help you do it.

Is there some possibility of impending action in Beirut that we think may happen that might imperil the people? Is that why the emphasis now, or is it just to keep the British company?

MR. NESSEN: No, Jerry, I wouldn't take it that lightly. For one thing, the situation has changed from what it was in the last several months because you have had two Americans murdered for one thing.

Up to now you have had Americans in Beirut that have mingled and traveled without harrassment throughout the country as Americans. Now, you have had two Americans deliberately killed. That changes the situation somewhat.

You have had almost all the other Westerners -- the British and the French -- make the decision to evacuate. It was decided that it would be better not to leave the Americans as the only Westerners who had not left.

Q I have heard many speculative reports that Syria is about to open an offensive to impose peace on Lebanon by force, and that this would escalate the danger.

MR. NESSEN: I don't want to speculate on that from here. I think the reasons I have given give you some idea of what the feeling was.

Q Ron, do you have any idea how long this evacuation by sea will take? Is this going to be pretty well wrapped up in one day?

MR. NESSEN: I would think if it continues to go smoothly, I would think it would be wrapped up in a couple of more hours, at most.

Q Will the large ship be escorted to Athens?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. You can check with Greener on that. I don't know the answer to that.

Q What is the President's mood -- somber?

MR. NESSEN: I would say serious and somber.

Q Is he in pajamas or sport clothes?

MR. NESSEN: He has on a brown suit, white shirt, and tie.

Q In reference to Syrian troops in Lebanon, is it still Administration policy that we would like all intervention withdrawn?

MR. NESSEN: It is certainly our policy that we would like the situation settled peacefully. As I have said before, the larger the outside military intervention, the greater the risk of the conflict expanding and escalating.

Q That means we would like the Syrians to leave.

MR. NESSEN: I think I'll answer it that way and not specifically.

Q Actually the answer at the other side of town where the fog is thicker is that we favor all political efforts and oppose all military intervention. Of course, the Syrians are doing both. You can't have one and not the other.

MR. NESSEN: At this hour on a Sunday morning I don't feel equipped to get into that.

Q I just want to make it worthwhile -- your visit.

MR. NESSEN: My visit is worthwhile to see you all.

Q Does the President plan to continue the monitoring process?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q For how long?

MR. NESSEN: Until the operation is completed.

Q 40 hours?

MR. NESSEN: Until everyone is aboard the ship and cruising back to Athens.

Q Any security being provided by war ships for the SPIEGEL GROVE?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that. I think Greener can help you.

Q Do you know how far off the SPIEGEL GROVE got?

MR. NESSEN: No closer than three miles. Somewhere between 3 and 5 miles.

Q International waters?

I thought the SPIEGEL GROVE was unarmed?

MR. NESSEN: No, I said the landing craft that went up to the beach was unarmed. I don't know about the SPIEGEL GROVE.

Q Can we get pictures of the President during this monitoring process?

MR. NESSEN: Do you mean your own pictures?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. Let me check and see and see how he feels about that.

END

(4:25 A.M. EDT)

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 6:15 A.M. EDT

JUNE 20, 1976

SUNDAY

MR. NESSEN: The President left the NSC at 5:16 to go to bed, thanked everybody there.

We can't give you an official number on how many people have left because we don't have a good count yet, but it is roughly in the area of 260, 270, 275, something like that.

Q: Now is this total Americans and foreigners?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, it divides up about half Americans and their dependents and about half foreigners.

Q: What happened to 449?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. We can't figure out where that number came from either.

Q: What figure are you using?

MR. NESSEN: We don't have a firm figure.

Q: Roughly?

MR. NESSEN: Roughly around 270, 275, something like that.

Q: All nationalities?

MR. NESSEN: Roughly half Americans and dependents and half other nationalities.

Q: Well, why don't people want to leave Lebanon? Why are all the Americans staying?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q: Were they afraid of this evacuation effort?

MR. NESSEN: I can't give you an answer to that.

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Q: Could you give us now the exact time that they got to sea?

MR. NESSEN: Bill Greener is in the final phase of typing the chronology and I am going to refer most of the questions out there now because he has put ---

Q: We want the President's involvement now. Did he get telephone word or was he told, "this is it"? Was he in the NSC ---

MR. NESSEN: Yes, he was.

Q: -- situation room?

MR. NESSEN: No, he was in the NSC office and he had Don Rumsfeld phone there. Don, of course, was in contact with the naval elements and he was also in phone contact with the Embassy in Beirut.

Q: The President was?

MR. NESSEN: No, the President wasn't at this particular stage talking on the phone himself, but the other people in the office were.

Q: You say it was about an hour operation, I mean one hour for the whole thing?

MR. NESSEN: No, it was longer than that, wasn't it? It hit the beach at 3:28 and -- well, I think you have got to get Greener's chronology because they were keeping the exact times out at the Pentagon.

Q: We are asking about the President. What time did he know that they had -- left at 5:16. Was he there about five minutes? Saying thank you or ---

MR. NESSEN: Well, I just didn't note down what time it was that the word came that -- you know, the word came that the landing craft had left the beach and then the word came that it had arrived at the SPIEGEL GROVE and then there was word that it was inside the SPIEGEL GROVE and so forth.

I didn't jot those times down.

Q: Ron, in each case, did the President get this information from Don Rumsfeld?

MR. NESSEN: Don called the information, that is right. The President talked to him a couple of times and other people talked to him other times, but the ---

Q: He was not monitoring any radio traffic?

MR. NESSEN: The President, himself, was not monitoring the traffic that was coming either from the Embassy or on the military circuits.

Q: Can you tell us what governments facilitated in this evacuation?

MR. NESSEN: Well, obviously, the British.

Q: Do you know how many Americans, apart from our agreement, are still in Lebanon?

MR. NESSEN: No, I cannot get a firm figure on that.

Q: Okay, but you said the Sarkis-Franjieh Government and individuals. Who are the individuals?

MR. NESSEN: Well, there were a lot of people who helped to make the arrangements for this and I can't spell out for you who exactly all the people were.

Q: Arafat?

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to be able to spell out exactly who they were.

Q: Well, was this the first and last evacuation?

MR. NESSEN: There are no plans for any further evacuations from Beirut.

Q: Are you disappointed in the number that came out tonight? Did you expect more?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't have any expectations one way or the other. You know, the notice has been up and the people have been made aware of the fact that the evacuation was going to go ahead and so forth. So, I don't have any basis to ---

Q: When he was in here you used the figure 279.

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I know. We just don't have a firm figure yet because nobody has done a firm head count and sent the word back. It is in the 279 neighborhood.

Q The 152 Americans that you were originally talking about, is that ---

MR. NESSEN: Apparently there was a lot of double counting going on and so forth at that stage of the operation.

Q Can you tell us where you got your initial figure of 400, which subsequently was increased to 441?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. These numbers were being relayed from Beirut and apparently there was some double counting going on and so forth.

Q What happens now? They are on their way to Athens, right?

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q What happens then?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, Helen.

Q What happens to the President for the rest of the day?

MR. NESSEN: He went up and went to sleep. He is going to church. I think you know he is going to attend the 11 o'clock services.

Q St. John's?

MR. NESSEN: That is right, yes.

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Q Does he have anything more to do with this or is it all --

MR. NESSEN: The evacuation, as the statement says, has been concluded without incident.

Q Is he going to the funeral of Ambassador Meloy?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't have any plans for him to go.

Q Ron, did he talk with Kissinger at all during this two or three hours before the evacuation was complete?

MR. NESSEN: I am trying to think whether he talked directly to Kissinger. There may have been one call with Kissinger.

Q What about George Bush and George Brown?

MR. NESSEN: He did not talk directly to them during this operation.

Q Any other National Security Council people, other than Rumsfeld?

MR. NESSEN: No, not that I recall.

Q Do you know who suggested that they go by sea? Was this one of the contingency plans from the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

MR. NESSEN: It was one of the contingencies that was developed during the course of this series of meetings that have been held over the past couple of days. I think it would be fair to say that when you look at the alternatives that it was considered to be the safest method.

Q Is there any thought of bringing out all of the U. S. Embassy personnel?

MR. NESSEN: No, the embassy will stay open.

Q Do you know how many embassy staff members --

MR. NESSEN: I don't, Russ, because the other estimate that I had of how many would be leaving was based on the idea that you would need a certain number to go along as escorts with the convoy when it looked like they were going by road. Now the fact that they went by ship sort of changed the numbers that were needed so I don't have a firm count on how many have left the embassy.

Q Ron, a day or two ago you made a comment about when you take a look at all the factors that were involved in this decision you will see why it had to be handled this way.

MR. NESSEN: No, somebody asked the question was this crisis trumped up. I think Phil asked that. "Was this crisis trumped up" I think were his words or "Was the President's cancellation of his trip to Iowa trumped up in an effort to gain some sort of political advantage over Reagan" and I said when you look at some of the decisions the President is making in this period you will see why that question does not deserve an answer.

Well, the decisions were: Do you go by road with the uncertainties along the road and the different groups you have to deal with along the road? How do you keep communications with the convoy on the road, or would it be better to go by helicopter and what are the dangers of going by helicopter? Or do you go by ship and what are the dangers of going by ship?

A whole series of decisions had to be made and that is what I was talking about.

Q Did the President make the final decision to go by sea?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q And it was his decision?

MR. NESSEN: Absolutely.

Q Are we now aware of all the decisions that went into this or are there others that you have not mentioned?

MR. NESSEN: No, those are the major ones, I think.

Q Did the President have to stay up tonight or was it just his preference or was he exerting some minute by minute control?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I would say that he was there to be ready to make whatever decisions had to be made if it had not gone as smoothly as it did.

Q Was there any contact with the Russians to assure them that we were not landing the Marines or with any other government?

MR. NESSEN: I am not aware of any.

Q Ron, the fact that the PLO apparently provided security in Beirut as has been reported by agencies there, did the President have any reaction to that or do we feel indebted or are we grateful for that fact? Is there any expression of any kind the President made regarding that fact?

MR. NESSEN: No. I don't think I can comment any further on that, Jim.

Q Is the fact that he expressed, generally speaking, appreciation for outsiders who helped -- was that also part of the PLO in this case?

MR. NESSEN: I think you could read those there to mean some of the -- Well, I think I am not going to elaborate on that.

Q Ron, will you read the statement?

MR. NESSEN: I will.

As I say, as far as I am concerned there is a lid on. The President will go to church at eleven. I don't plan anything further on Sunday. Bill Greener is at the Pentagon with a chronology, timetable of --

Q He could play golf?

MR. NESSEN: Could. He could play golf.

Bill Greener has a chronology at the Pentagon and also will answer additional questions at the Pentagon.

Okay. If everybody is ready, I will read the statement by the President.

The evacuation operation in Beirut today was completed successfully without incident. The success of this operation was made possible through the combined efforts of our armed forces and State Department personnel both here and in the field.

The President wants to express his deep appreciation and pride in the outstanding performance of all the men and women who contributed to this effort. We are grateful as well for the assistance of other governments and individuals that facilitated the evacuation.

The United States will continue to play a positive role in seeking to restore stability and bring peace to Lebanon. The President would like to express to all those who played a part in the success of this operation his heartfelt thanks.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 6:30 A.M. EDT)