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NEWS CONFERENCE

#552

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:50 A.M. EDT

AUGUST 4, 1976

WEDNESDAY

MR. NESSEN: There are just a couple of additions to the President's schedule today.

The President met for about 30 minutes this morning with Secretary Mathews. He asked Secretary Mathews to come in and bring him up-to-date on what is being done to discover the cause of this illness in Pennsylvania.

At the moment, it is not known what is causing the illness in Pennsylvania, and this was just a routine report to tell the President the process that is being followed to find out what is causing it. I think it would be fair to say that there was nothing new told to the President that has not been made public already in terms of the testing that the CDC is doing in Atlanta and so forth.

Then, there was --

Q Can we ask questions about that before you leave that point?

MR. NESSEN: Sure.

Q Is the President satisfied that everything the Federal Government can do is being done?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Did Mathews also give him an up-date on the outlook for getting the inoculation program going?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, that was the second part of the meeting, and I want to emphasize, if I can, that is a separate matter.

There is no indication that there is any connection, but Secretary Mathews did bring the President up-to-date on the outlook for the legislation that would clear up the liability problem concerning the swine flu vaccinations.

Q Did the Secretary tell the President that there is no relation between what is happening in Pennsylvania and swine flu?

MR. NESSEN: All he reported was that the CDC and other health authorities are trying to find out the cause of the illness in Pennsylvania.

Q What did he tell him specifically about the legislative outlook?

MR. NESSEN: Well, let's see, I have his report here, if I can find it.

He said, basically, that the House Health Subcommittee last evening reported out a bill that would resolve the liability problem. He talked to him about an amendment that has been attached and that the chairman, Chairman Rogers, is going to try to get action on the measure before the recess, that there is no set time for committee action, but hopefully, it would be before next Tuesday with floor action after that, and some technical details of the amendments, language and so forth.

Q Did Rogers say in his opinion this bill would resolve the liability question?

MR. NESSEN: This is similar to a proposal that the Administration -- well, Mathews indicated that he was keeping in touch with the manufacturers and the insurance companies, keeping them posted on the bill and any amendments added to the bill, and any amendments they felt should be added to the bill to resolve the issue.

Q It is his feeling, then, that this piece of legislation will do it?

MR. NESSEN: It is working its way through and is being amended. The manufacturers and insurance companies are being kept informed.

Q Another question.

Was there any discussion of any health danger to the President going to Philadelphia this week?

MR. NESSEN: Well, there are no plans for the President to change his plans.

Q I understand, but did the subject come up in the meeting?

MR. NESSEN: I did not attend the meeting, but I know for a fact there are no plans for the President to make a change.

Q You mean to say that if it was discovered this was a contagious disease in a given area, the President would not think twice about going?

MR. NESSEN: I would say certainly, if sometime before the scheduled trip it appeared that there was a situation such as Helen describes, I am sure that there would be some thought given.

Q Ron, is Dr. Lukash watching this?

MR. NESSEN: I think some of you called Dr. Lukash and he indicated to you what I had said, that right now there are no plans to change the trip.

I think it is more a matter of the CDC and the HEW watching it, rather than Dr. Lukash.

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Q Ron, the swine flu epidemic is now in the works for five months, so there is a considerable controversy. Can you give me the reason why the National Academy of Science has not been called upon to pass judgment on it because it is an independent academic research institution usually there to advise the President? We have statements from politically dependent public health officers by the dozens who are either for it or evade the issue. Why not call the independent agencies?

MR. NESSEN: If I recall back to the time when the original series of meetings and a decision was made to go forward with a mass inoculation program, I know of at least two meetings I attended at which there were a number of outside doctors and immunologists and drug company representatives, State and local health department officials -- there was a very wide range of outside people brought in and it was upon their advice as well as HEW advice that the President decided the danger was great enough to go ahead with the mass inoculation program.

Q Again, the majority of the people were dependent on Government money and actually in the pay of the Federal Government. At the same date this conference had taken place, I talked to CDC in Atlanta and they doubted whether there was any evidence of an epidemic. I think in this kind of situation the National Academy of Science is more than qualified to be an independent judge.

MR. NESSEN: I recall that meeting and there were, as I say, a number of outside doctors, public health officials and so forth, and I remember clearly the President going around the room and saying, "May I hear anybody who opposes" -- he did it in several stages and he said, first of all, "Is there anybody who disagrees with the idea that there is a real potential danger of an outbreak," and nobody spoke. Then he said, "May I hear from anyone who does not think we should go forward with a mass inoculation program," and nobody spoke up. So, there was an opportunity for all those who were there, including the outside doctors, public health officials and drug company representatives to speak up, and they didn't.

Q Ron, according to some information I have from Philadelphia, there is some apprehension about the fact that there are people from all over the world attending this Eucharistic Congress and theoretically at least they could be carrying strains of this flu, if it is shown to be flu, throughout the world when the conference closes this weekend. Did the President and Secretary Mathews discuss what has been discussed in Philadelphia; that is, some kind of mass inoculation program for the people attending this Congress?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't sit in on the meeting, but I know the first step before deciding what to do is, first, to determine what is the cause of the illness, and that is going forward as rapidly as possible.

Q Is some kind of a judgment hoped for before the end of this Congress and before these folks leave?

MR. NESSEN: Dave told the President that the earliest determination on the cause of the illness would be tomorrow afternoon -- that is the earliest -- but if it is something that is more difficult to pinpoint, it could be later than tomorrow afternoon before the cause of the illness is determined.

Q Are contingency plans being laid in case it should be later, about a mass inoculation program?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think it is possible to advance to that step until the cause of the illness is determined.

Q Do you know if the President got in touch with other officials up in Pennsylvania, such as Governor Shapp or Mayor Rizzo?

MR. NESSEN: I know that the President himself has not made those kinds of calls, but the Domestic Council is watching it closely and Dave Mathews is watching it closely.

Q Ron, last night on the air for the public and the world to get these announcements about this thing, some of the reporters sounded childish -- there was such a difference of opinion. Can't you all shape up some one central authority for speaking out on this and give us hourly or every half-day some real, authoritative information?

MR. NESSEN: I think once the determination is made by the Communicable Disease Center in Atlanta as to what is causing the illness, then, perhaps, as Larry suggests, the next steps can be taken.

Q I think there was about \$50 million given to Philadelphia for preventive medicine in connection with the Bicentennial. Is that money going to be used for some of this work, or what?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know the answer, Sarah.

Q Is the President taking any preventive medicine prior to his trip to Philadelphia?

MR. NESSEN: Not to my knowledge, no.

Q Has he had a swine flu shot?

MR. NESSEN: The swine flu shots have not been released by the manufacturers yet.

Q Can't the doctors give anything on this? They used to give us flu shots.

MR. NESSEN: I want to make sure that we are going down the track that whatever it is that is causing the illnesses in Pennsylvania, and the whole separate question of swine flu and the liability problem and the inoculations and so forth; I mean, there is no evidence now to mix these two concepts together. The cause of whatever is causing the illness in Pennsylvania is simply not known right now.

The other addition to the President's schedule today was a visit by Senator Cliff Case of New Jersey. It was arranged last evening at the Senator's request. It was a rather brief meeting and he asked for a chance to come in and see the President to discuss the New Jersey delegation to the Convention, and I believe most or all of you had a chance to talk to Senator Case when he came out.

Q How long was he with him?

MR. NESSEN: The meeting was scheduled for only about five or ten minutes, and I think that was about the length of it.

Q Congressman Cohen came in to see the President today, too. Was that on politics?

MR. NESSEN: If Mr. Cohen came in, then it was as part of the group that came in to discuss the uranium enrichment bill.

Q Is that what Cohen was here for?

MR. NESSEN: He was here for that purpose, yes.

Q Did Cohen ask for an appointment last week on another matter, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Somebody mentioned here at the briefing yesterday that Congressman Railsback --

Q Yes, I did.

MR. NESSEN: I guess it was you. And Cohen had asked for an opportunity to meet on another matter.

Q I didn't mention Cohen's name yesterday. I said Railsback, but weren't the two together?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, but Bill Cohen came in this morning to talk about the uranium enrichment bill.

Q Did he talk about something else, too?

MR. NESSEN: Not today, no.

Q Did Railsback come?

Why would he ask for an appointment one week and come see the President the next and not talk to him about what he wanted to see him about?

MR. NESSEN: I think you know there was a tentative vote in the House yesterday on the proposal the President has sent up, the so-called uranium enrichment bill --

Q I am not talking about that.

MR. NESSEN: -- which begins the process of transferring production of enriched uranium from Government to private industry. The vote up there was a very narrow one of 170 to 168, in which the Administration's position was defeated. The President asked a number of Members to come and talk to him about that legislation and let him again make his case for why his legislation should be passed, and both Bill Cohen and Tom Railsback and about two dozen others were here. They subsequently went back to the Hill where a vote was taken and the earlier defeat was reversed and the President's position prevailed. So, that was the purpose of this morning's meeting.

Q I am asking you now if while they were here if Cohen and Railsback didn't talk to the President about another matter?

MR. NESSEN: They did not.

Q To speed things along, we asked Cohen about this out there and Cohen said he had not asked the President about the other matter. He said he felt his views were well known at the White House and they did not discuss it.

MR. NESSEN: Thank you, Bob.

Q On the whole subject now, both Railsback and Cohen have said publicly now that they want all the materials on Connally that came before the House Impeachment Committee or anything else to be presented to the President, and they have talked to Buchen, Friedersdorf and so forth.

Is the President going to give serious consideration to Watergate material relating to Connally before he makes any decision on a running mate?

MR. NESSEN: The last time I checked there were something like a dozen requests from Members of Congress for a chance to come in and talk to the President about their views on his Vice Presidential nomination.

Q I am not asking that.

MR. NESSEN: At the moment, no meetings have been set up, but that will just sort of put it into context.

I think while this process is underway, I indicated before I don't think I want to talk about this candidate for the nomination or that one, other than to say the President is going to conduct a thorough review of the qualifications of any potential nominee or nominees to whom he will give serious consideration.

Q Ron, I think you ought to answer Helen's question. She asked a specific thing and it has other angles to it than just ordinary review of those names.

MR. NESSEN: As I said, I do not think that during this period when the President is consulting on names that I ought to talk about specific people.

Q It started before he started consulting on names. This started before that.

MR. NESSEN: As I indicated to Helen, there is going to be made by the President a thorough review of the qualifications of those people.

Q Will that thorough review include consideration of the papers being given to Buchen by Railsback and Cohen.

MR. NESSEN: When it comes time to begin that phase of the selection process for Vice President, I will spell out for you what the review process is.

Q Ron, is that step two?

MR. NESSEN: That is step two.

Q When will that phase begin?

MR. NESSEN: It certainly cannot begin before the 11th of August, because that is the deadline for the names to be sent in. It would be after August 11.

Q Would it be done in Kansas City or here?

MR. NESSEN: I will explain it when we get to it.

Q Has it been explained to you yet?

MR. NESSEN: Lots of things have, Ann, you would be surprised.

Q Has that yet?

Q Newsweek had indicated to me that the President had already made up his mind about Connally, insofar as the milk fraud allegation. That is what Cohen is talking about, about the March 31 tape or tapes and it was my feeling from what the President said that the President had been judged by his peers, and nobody else can say that, but he said it.

Has he made up his mind about Connally, that Connally is already clear so he does not have to go back and review all this?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I can say anything more than when the time comes to review or to consider those who will get the final sort of serious consideration for the job that the President will conduct a thorough review of their qualifications.

Q Cohen is concerned about a three-minute tape, just a conversation between Connally and Nixon which the Impeachment Committee subpoenaed, but never got.

Do you know if the President ever heard that three-minute tape, or if he would? And three, if not, would the President have the authority to hear that tape?

MR. NESSEN: I do not know anything about that, John.

Q Would you mind inquiring into that and letting us have a real reply this time?

MR. NESSEN: I think my real reply is, Sarah, that when the time comes to narrow the list and give final consideration to those who are in the finals, the President will conduct a thorough review of their qualifications.

Q This is a question separate from just Vice President. This is a question of interest, whether the man is going to be Vice President or not.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know anything about the tapes.

Q Why don't you inquire and give us an answer to the question?

Q Ron, this is a very important thing, it is an enormously important thing. It has been raised by a respected Member of Congress, and it has been asked by people down here.

Could you take the question?

MR. NESSEN: I think the question was asked in the context of the President's decision on his Vice Presidential running mate, and I have given you all the information I can on how that process --

Q Just put it back in with Watergate. It is a good Watergate question, if you don't want to take it outside the context of Vice President. I want to put it outside the context of Vice President right now. It is a good question any day.

MR. NESSEN: Would you restate the question, John?

Q Cohen is concerned about a 3-minute tape. It occurred after the longer tape in which Connally and a bunch of other people were with Nixon. Connally said, "May I see you a couple of minutes. He actually saw him for three minutes. In there was a mention, apparently, of Texas oil, according to the Fred Graham article in New Republic. In any case, the tape was never played for the jury and it was subpoenaed by the Rodino Committee and they were never able to get it.

My question is, has the President ever heard that? Two, would he want to hear it before considering Connally any further --

MR. NESSEN: You mean consider him as Vice President?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: You mean, the question has to do with the selection process for the Vice President?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: As I said before, when the President winnows the list down to those who will get final consideration, they will undergo a thorough review process of their qualifications.

Q I will leave out the word "Vice President" and ask you straight out, has the President heard this tape; is he authorized to hear it, and will he hear it?

MR. NESSEN: I will check for you, Sarah.

Q I think we have to assume that the President will look into Watergate by your answer. A thorough review means all aspects of a man's life.

MR. NESSEN: I am saying there will be a thorough review conducted, Helen, on their qualifications.

Q Will you find out, since you are looking into questions here, you may or may not get definitive answers on, can you find out when the President will make known his personal preference for a running mate?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I will be able to say any more than I have said before, Jim, which is, at the appropriate time.

Q Ron, you mentioned today for the first time, finalists. Do you anticipate there would be a list of finalists released?

MR. NESSEN: I mean at some point, the dozens, or hundreds, or however many names are turned up by the consultation process, will have to be winnowed down and the President will have to begin to settle on a smaller and smaller group until he ends up with one.

Q Do you anticipate a public release of names when he gets down to two or three or five?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't have anything further on the process at the moment.

Q Ron, presuming that the tone of this fall's Carter campaign may be indicated by yesterday's reference in Manchester to the "Nixon-Ford Administration and the chasing of an ex-movie actor in search of delegates," I am wondering if the President ever asked, or wondered, to you, when talking to you about the Carter-Maddox Administration, whether Governor Carter really feels being an actor is more of an honor than being elected Governor twice by the voters of California?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I would love to answer that question, but I don't think that over the next 90 days, or however long it is going to be, I just don't think this is the proper place to answer campaign speeches.

Q Can I follow this up? In your opinion, in your field of expertise, don't you think it might be possible that the President would be able to deal with such Carter statements more immediately and more effectively if he were to accept the offer of the League of Women Voters and the CBS, NBC and ABC for a series of debates?

MR. NESSEN: I don't recall that I have heard directly from the League of Women Voters. I can't remember whether I have or not, but I think the President has indicated that he hasn't decided yet whether to conduct debates or not.

Q I am asking for your opinion as a skilled newsman.

MR. NESSEN: Thank you. (Laughter) That is the nicest thing you ever said, Les.

Q Don't you think that the President could immediately answer this more effectively rather than either ignoring it or firing a barrage from across the country or something from up north here? Ron, as a newsman, don't you think the President could answer more immediately and more effectively if he were willing to debate? This is your own opinion.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I can answer that, Les.

Q If the President is attacked or criticized in the campaign, you are saying this is not going to be a podium to answer? In view of the President's lack of accessibility, sometimes for two or three weeks or so forth, who will do the answering?

MR. NESSEN: I think when we get around to the campaign you will see how it unfolds, Helen.

Q Ron, did the President have any reaction to Carter's forecast of vicious personal attack from the Republicans?

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to take on that kind of -- I am just not going to make it a practice to answer campaign speeches from here.

Q Will Bill Greener be answering?

MR. NESSEN: You can ask Bill.

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Q Ron, will there be any provisions, as the campaign goes on through the fall if President Ford is the nominee and if you feel you didn't want to answer some of the political questions from here, will there be anything like a regular daily Greener briefing at the President Ford Committee?

MR. NESSEN: I haven't talked to Greener on that.

Q Will it be part of your pattern not to answer some of the political questions over here?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think we are quite ready to unfold the strategy for the election campaign.

Q Ron, you think that is part of the strategy?

MR. NESSEN: I understood it to be a question about campaign strategy, where will political statements be issued from or where will political charges be issued from. I thought yours was a more general strategy type question.

Q I am asking for those of us who will presumably be covering President Ford if he is the nominee and, since during the primary and convention and pre-convention time, you have deferred some political questions to Jim Baker and the like, whether, if President Ford is the nominee, whether you will continue to refer people over to the Ford Committee for political questions and, if so, have you arranged for Mr. Greener to have any kind of daily briefing over there?

MR. NESSEN: I have not talked to Bill about what he should do in the way of a briefing schedule. The rest, I think, we will just have to see how it goes.

Q Would you be willing to have a daily press briefing with you handling the Presidential questions for the first 20 minutes and have Bill Greener here to take political questions? He can come over here. It is not far. Would you be amenable to that?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think we have worked out the arrangements yet.

Q Is Obenshain coming? I don't know how to pronounce his name.

MR. NESSEN: Dick Obenshain. We will check that to see who is coming to the meeting.

Q While you are checking that, could I ask a question on the previous subject?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q I am not sure whether you answered this question in one of your answers to one of Les's earlier questions. Has the President ever completely ruled out the possibility of a debate between himself and Governor Carter? We knew the Reagan debates were ruled out. Have you or the President ever ruled out a debate in the fall campaign?

MR. NESSEN: The last thing I know of that the President said on this matter, or that the Ford campaign said on this matter was a letter written to Common Cause last December. I think this is the one that Les cites to us from time to time.

Q Only twice, Ron.

MR. NESSEN: It says that the President is going to do a lot of interviews and stuff and somewhere there is a question in here about the debates.

He hasn't really directly said yes or no on the question of debates.

Q Then, we can conclude it is still something of an open question, that is hasn't been --

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what you are leading up to.

Q Nothing.

MR. NESSEN: There has been no decision made on debates.

Q I seem to recall most distinctly, I may stand corrected, but I seem to recall that one of the reasons for writing that letter was in answer to Common Cause -- will you subscribe to Common Cause ideals, one of which, a very important one of which is to appear on a platform together with rival candidates. And that was the letter that was sent and this, I believe -- the letter you have there -- is what the President Ford campaign responded.

I think there is wording in there -- I will check today -- I think there is wording in there that indicates the President said yes, or at least his spokesman said yes, we agree. This is what was so mortifying when there was no appearance on the platform with Ronald Reagan and so forth. So, I do hope it can come in the fall.

MR. NESSEN: I think the mortifying part must have been the part where the committee chairman said, "In general, we fully subscribe to the overall intent and purpose reflected by the nine items set forth in your collect list."

Q Ron, may I ask you a question when you get through, about the White House dinners?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Does anybody check the music, check the program, check the content of remarks that the entertainers are going to make at these White House dinners? Did the White House know ahead of time, when they had this program here for the Queen, that they were going to have the Muskrat song and did the White House know ahead of time when going to have this lewd remark made by the pianist last night. Did anybody hear the pianist play before last night?

MR. NESSEN: What was the lewd remark?

Q No, I won't say it.

MR. NESSEN: Will you write it on a piece of paper and hand it up?

Q No, I don't think we need to repeat things like that. I am not making an effort to get those things repeated. I want to know if anybody at the White House checks these things before they appear. May I have the answer?

Q Why, when they had dessert last night, was Russ Ward not served his peach?

Q Ron, I resent any reporter coming in on top of a serious question with a comical thing like that. I would like the answer to my question first, please?

MR. NESSEN: On the Queen's dinner, I think the explanation has been given several times before, which is --

Q It was left up to Bob Hope?

MR. NESSEN: There is an effort made at State dinners from the point of view of the President and Mrs. Ford to attempt to use the State dinners to reflect a wide range of American musical or theatrical talent. One of the considerations that goes into selecting the artists who appear at State dinners --

Q I am not talking about selecting, I am talking about who gives the critique on these things? Who listens and who checks this ahead of time?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure what the procedure is.

Q In the past, in past Administrations, there have been rehearsals and checks made on these things before they were ever invited.

Does anybody do it here?

MR. NESSEN: I will check and find out who, if anybody, makes a pre-clearance.

Q I understand that Ann-Margaret did something up with the Shah of Iran's party and so forth. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Why do I miss all the goodies?

Q Ron, I think it is a serious question.

Q Ron, you say there were a dozen Congressmen who have requested meetings with the President to convey their views?

MR. NESSEN: As I understand it, about a dozen meetings have been requested and some meetings involve more than one Congressman.

Q Are those meetings going to be granted?

MR. NESSEN: At the moment, they have not been scheduled, but I think in each case their views will be presented to the President. Whether it is possible to work out an appointment or not, I don't know.

Q What is the Scranton meeting all about today?

MR. NESSEN: It is on a couple of things. UN business, primarily, and secondly, a trip that he recently made to Europe. He will be reporting to the President on that.

Q What will the Pennsylvania delegate's visit be on today?

MR. NESSEN: There will be no politics in that meeting. Brent Scowcroft is attending and it is strictly on foreign policy.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END #552 (AT 12:20 P.M. EDT)