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NEWS CONFERENCE

#555

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:05 P.M. EDT

AUGUST 9, 1976

MONDAY

MR. NESSEN: I don't have anything.

Q Good. Thank you, Ron.

MR. NESSEN: Okay, thank you, Dick. (Laughter).

Q How is the President celebrating his second anniversary in office?

MR. NESSEN: Working.

Q What is he doing?

MR. NESSEN: He has some staffer meetings. He has an NSC meeting this afternoon and he is working on his acceptance speech.

Q What drafts are we on, on the acceptance speech, now?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Any plans for a press conference today or this week?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Can you find out what draft it is at some point, or how far along he is?

MR. NESSEN: I will try.

Q What is the subject, abortion? (Laughter).

MR. NESSEN: No, we hope it is not.

Q Ron, the Washington Post reports that an unidentified White House staffer is saying that it was a common interpretation that the President was talking about abortion yesterday when he referred to "increased irreverence for life." Is that true?

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MR. NESSEN: I don't know who that staffer was.

Q The question is, what was the President talking about when he said "increased irreverence for life"?

MR. NESSEN: I won't elaborate on his words.

Q Is this the reason Mrs. Ford did not go with him?

MR. NESSEN: No, it isn't.

Q Or was Mrs. Ford not invited by the Bishops?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to look at my letter from Cardinal Krol, but I don't think Mrs. Ford was invited.

Q When he said "increased irreverence for life," certainly that doesn't mean the restoration of the death penalty, does it?

MR. NESSEN: I will not elaborate on his words, Les.

Q Why not, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Because I try not to elaborate on the President's words. He can speak very clearly for himself.

Q When the Washington Post reports that a spokesman for the White House said this could be interpreted as abortion, why is it you won't clarify it? Is it abortion or not?

MR. NESSEN: The audience seemed to understand him, Les.

Q Did they have a correct assumption of what the President was talking about?

MR. NESSEN: I won't elaborate on the audience response, either.

Q Besides, Les, I wouldn't pay much attention to what the Washington Post says. They didn't run our interview. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: The letter of invitation from the Cardinal indicated that the Board of Governors of the Eucharistic Congress were joining with Cardinal Krol in "extending to you a cordial invitation to the Eucharistic Congress." So it appears that the invitation did not extend to Mrs. Ford.

Q None of the Church officials brought their wives, either. (Laughter)

Q Ron, Evans and Novak say the President is going to compromise on the cruise missile to get a SALT agreement before the election.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't have anything specific to say about the details of that column. First of all, the President believes that a SALT II agreement, and what it seeks to accomplish, which is a ceiling on offensive nuclear weapons, is in the interest of the United States and in the interest of the world. But he is not going to conclude any treaty that does not fully protect the interests of the United States.

There is no particular timetable for reaching that treaty. If and when a treaty can be worked out with the Soviet Union that does fully protect the interest of the United States, he will agree to it, but not until then. There is no timetable for one.

Q Has the United States made a response to the latest Russian proposal on SALT?

MR. NESSEN: We have not.

Q You have not?

MR. NESSEN: We have not, Jim.

Q Is that what today's NSC meeting is about?

MR. NESSEN: We never tell what the subject is, Phil.

Q Did they get the information they were looking for last week?

MR. NESSEN: The information for this meeting today is now ready to go forward with the meeting, that is right.

Q What is it?

MR. NESSEN: I can't tell you, Fran.

Q Ron, I am sorry, I have been out of the country. Do you know yet when the President is going to Kansas City, and if you don't know, when will you know?

MR. NESSEN: He has not yet decided, as I think he told Helen and Dick and the others over the weekend. I don't expect a decision to be made really until the end of the week.

Q Ron, yesterday Elliot Richardson said that the White House is asking for his financial information, apparently because he is being considered for Vice President. How many other people have been asked to supply financial data to the White House?

MR. NESSEN: I was trying to follow my directions and not give the number, but the President, I think, indicated in response to a question from Dick over the weekend that it was something more than a dozen.

Q Can you elaborate on that any more?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q It is true that Richardson is one of them, then?

MR. NESSEN: I won't elaborate on names.

Q Is there some sort of a packet of materials that indicates what the President wants in the way of --

MR. NESSEN: I mentioned the other day that they are really being asked to provide the same material that any candidate for a top Presidential appointment is asked, and I have the questionnaires that are required to be filled out by candidates for top White House jobs. It is not precisely the same questionnaire, but it is the same thoughts. I also have the memo that Phil Buchen sends to people who are being considered and if any of you want to look at these after the briefing, I will be happy to have you do that.

Q Ron, don't you think it is a little bit ludicrous for some of these people to be coming out and saying they have been contacted and the White House refuses to even confirm that? What is the purpose of that?

MR. NESSEN: It is the way the President wishes to conduct this process of selecting his Vice Presidential running mate.

Q Is he unhappy because these people are disclosing this?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't hear him say one way or the other, Phil.

Q Why does he prefer they not acknowledge that they have been called?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President indicated he would like to conduct this on some basis of confidentiality.

Q Then why is he not unhappy when they come out and say they have been contacted?

MR. NESSEN: They are all folks who are used to dealing with the press.

Q As you know, the President has said several times the swine flu threat is very genuine, the most recent time being last Friday. My question is, what medical evidence does the President have for making that statement at this point in time?

MR. NESSEN: This goes back to a series of meetings he had just before the decision to go forward with a national inoculation program. He gathered together medical people from both inside the Government and outside the Government, public health officials and drug company officials, and they laid all the evidence on the table and examined it, and then he asked -- I think I mentioned this the other day -- whether there was anybody there who did not agree or objected to the idea that there was a real danger of a swine flu outbreak this winter, and nobody said that they did not share that. Then he asked if anybody disagreed with the idea of going forward with a national inoculation program, and nobody there disagreed with it. It was on the medical evidence.

The President, I think, has said, Walt, that none of the researchers have said we are 100 percent sure there is going to be a swine flu outbreak. They have said there is all this evidence pointing in that direction, and I think at the time the President either directly or through me indicated that it was better to have the inoculation program and thereby prevent any outbreak than to take a chance and say, "Well, we are going to hope there won't be an outbreak." Because, once an outbreak starts it is too late to begin the program. I think he even used the expression "this is an insurance policy" to make sure there is no outbreak.

Q My question was -- I think you heard it -- what medical evidence is there? So far you have not provided any evidence.

MR. NESSEN: Let me get you together with Dr. Cooper, the one who assembled the medical evidence that was presented to the President, and he can lay it out for you.

Q Can you clarify one thing in the weekend interview that doesn't come across clear to me? The President stated he would make his selection known about 24 hours before --

MR. NESSEN: I think the question was, when will you make your final decision? And the President said he would make it within 24 hours before he announced it.

Q Can you clarify for us whether he will make his decision known before or after the balloting for the Presidency?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think he said last week, or had me say on his behalf, that he would follow the traditional method of announcing his choice for running mate, which is after his own nomination.

Q Back to the swine flu issue, does the President or does the White House or does anyone in the medical community of the United States have evidence of more than one confirmed case of swine flu in the past 12 months in this country, out of 215 million people?

MR. NESSEN: Walt, I am not a medical expert, and you are quite right -- it is a medical or epidemiological question, and Dr. Cooper is the one who assembled the information that was persuasive to the President, to Dave Mathews, to all the medical people who were at that meeting, and I would like for you to let me put you in touch with Dr. Cooper.

Q I will be glad to if you will give me the number.

MR. NESSEN: I will.

Q Ron, there have been some differences of opinion about how a vaccination program should be carried on and as to whether a mass inoculation program is the best thing to do. Has the President reviewed that with the medical authorities since the last meeting?

MR. NESSEN: Dave Mathews has given the President periodic reports as the testing and so forth goes on, and I can't tell you exactly what the last finding was, but HEW is concentrating on what the best method of a mass inoculation is, and the President is being kept informed.

Q Could I pursue this one step further? If the threat continues to be genuine, as the President persistently suggests, then why isn't the medical community up in arms? Why is the chief promoter of this program a political figure, being the President of the United States?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, Walt, I think I see what you are suggesting, and I --

Q I am not suggesting anything, really I am not. I just want to know why it is that none of the doctors you referred me to are up in arms saying, "Listen, the President is right, we have to do something about this?" The chief spokesman for the program continues to be the President and not the doctors.

MR. NESSEN: I don't agree with that, but I will make sure that you are shown the data that supports the conclusion that the danger of a swine flu outbreak is sufficiently great to warrant the program.

Q Ron, has there been any thought given to some sort of mass program for Victoria flu, which actually killed 2,000 people last year?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of, but you ought to ask at HEW what the reason for that is.

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Q What is the President's reaction to all this fuss that erupted over the Republican platform? The conservatives complained about it.

MR. NESSEN: I was unaware of any fuss that had erupted over the Republican platform.

Q Apparently Jesse Helms and others are leading a conservative drive and the whole thing that is being talked about is a whitewash and that they are not going to go along with it and will try to take it all the way and try to get some definitive --

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. Bill Greener is out in Kansas City and John Carlson will be there in a couple of hours. They are certainly on top of the situation, Phil.

Q Do you know whether or not the President is aware of what Helms has said?

MR. NESSEN: Since I was unaware of what you referred to as a fuss, I don't know how to answer the question since there is no awareness of a fuss here.

Q Maybe you wouldn't describe Jesse Helms' comments as a fuss, but is he aware of what Jesse Helms has said and that the conservatives are up in arms?

MR. NESSEN: The platform proceedings are just getting underway. I think they hold hearings and then sort of put it together later in the week, and I think it is sort of premature to comment on how it is going to turn out.

Q Is the President taking an active or passive role in the events of this week in Kansas City?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what you mean by that, John.

Q Is he keeping close track of what is happening. Is he sending word out to Bill Timmons and others out there what he wants done, or is he giving them carte blanche?

MR. NESSEN: He is keeping a close watch on what is going on out there.

Q The people know what he wants done?

MR. NESSEN: As you know, a good number of the members of the Cabinet will be testifying before the Platform Committee outlining the President's views on the issues the Platform Committee is dealing with.

Q Is he going to see any delegates this week?

MR. NESSEN: I haven't seen any delegates listed on his schedule for this week. Most of them will be out there, I guess.

Q What will the President be doing this week? Can you tell us anything about the President's schedule this week?

MR. NESSEN: Let me see the grid for this week. I didn't look at it carefully this morning.

I know he will be working on the acceptance speech.

Q Does he plan any appearances anywhere?

MR. NESSEN: Let me get a hold of this.

Q Ron, two or three years ago your predecessor, terHorst, stated that the President had also been considering a woman for the Vice President. Is a woman in the running now?

MR. NESSEN: I won't comment on any specific names, or sexes, or colors, or persuasions.

In answer to Bob's question about the schedule, there will be a lot of time spent this week working on the acceptance speech on his choice of running mate. He obviously will follow the proceedings in Kansas City. There will be some visitors coming in, but not delegates. Secretary Kissinger will report back when he gets back on Thursday, I guess. But, there is no outside event planned outside the White House.

Q How about Tuesday afternoon?

MR. NESSEN: Tuesday afternoon? What is supposed to happen Tuesday afternoon?

Q The PGA.

Q He said he was going to a reception.

MR. NESSEN: He is going over to a reception Tuesday evening on the eve of the PGA golf tournament.

Q Without mentioning any names, will he be meeting with any of the people under consideration as a running mate?

MR. NESSEN: Well, since we haven't said who is under consideration, it is hard to say.

Q Will he see John Connally tonight or in the morning?

MR. NESSEN: John Connally?

Q He is coming to town, isn't he?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of.

Q Has the White House made contact with all those that are being considered?

Q You wouldn't tell us that anyway, would you?

MR. NESSEN: I have always told when he has seen John Connally.

Q But not concurrently, would you say?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't think that is right.

Q Has the White House made contact with all those being considered for the Vice Presidency?

MR. NESSEN: There are still a few more days for recommendations to come in.

Q On the President's list, his first list?

MR. NESSEN: The ones who have been recommended and singled out by the President so far?

Q Have they been notified?

MR. NESSEN: I am told there was some problem reaching some of them on the phone, as you did, Phil. To answer the last line of your story, I think the White House switchboard did have some of the same problems you did. So, with some people, there was an effort made to contact them but they have not yet been contacted yet.

Q Ron, on this trip Kissinger has been on, his talks in Iran Connally referred to as negotiating arms for oil, and that sort of thing. Just a general sort of question. How does it square with the President's overall goals of the U.S. becoming independent on unreliable foreign sources of oil when you have Kissinger negotiating long-term deals with Iran for oil?

MR. NESSEN: As far as I know, Secretary Kissinger's talks in Iran had nothing to do with negotiating what you referred to as arms for oil.

I think some of you have written that there are those kinds of thoughts being given, but my understanding is that since the arms sales are sales by private companies and the purchases are purchases by private companies, that whatever discussions have gone on in that direction have been by private companies. It is not a Government --

Q Ron, you mean oil didn't come up at all, to your knowledge, in Kissinger's talks?

MR. NESSEN: I haven't seen the complete report on the talks.

Q Ron, it is reported that at Kansas City --

Q On this subject, one question, Les. Inasmuch as Kissinger is in Iran or plans to be there --

MR. NESSEN: No, he is gone from there now.

Q All right. Did he make any effort to try to persuade the Shah to reduce oil prices via OPEC? Has the Ford Administration ever made any effort and used its leverage, vis-a-vis the arms, to reduce oil prices?

MR. NESSEN: As I said, I haven't read the full report on what Henry talked about over there. I know the State Department was asked a very similar question the other day, and Brown talked about it at some length. But, let me look it up and see what I can find.

Q Ron, just one minute. I am perplexed by your answer that arms purchases by the Shah are strictly a matter between the Government of Iran and private companies in the United States since, as you know, and everybody knows, these require export licenses, which are Government matters.

Are you saying the United States -- that is to say, the Government -- has no role whatever in the sale of arms to Iran?

MR. NESSEN: The point I was trying to draw, Jim, was I think there was a suggestion that Henry had been there negotiating some kind of arms for oil deal, and I was pointing out arms are sold to Iran by private companies and oil is purchased by private companies. Obviously, there is the requirement for approval before arms of a certain sophistication or cost can be exported.

Now, there has been added to that the congressional veto over arms sales. So, obviously, there is a Government role.

Q Taking it even further than that, is it not the case that during this current visit by the Secretary to Iran that they negotiated and probably signed a \$50 billion trade agreement which included \$10 billion in additional U.S. arms? I think that was negotiated by the Secretary and the Shah, was it not?

MR. NESSEN: It is my understanding Henry was responding to a question in a very general way in saying that, well, over the next five or six years it could well be that the Shah might purchase another \$10 billion in arms. It was that kind of thing, not an arms agreement that was signed there.

Q Let me ask you a flat question. Did the Secretary of State and the Shah of Iran in this last visit, the visit just completed, negotiate a \$50 billion trade agreement between the United States and Iran in which \$10 billion was for military equipment?

MR. NESSEN: I am not fully briefed on the results of Henry's stop in Iran, and I can't answer the question.

Q Ron, it is reported that at Kansas City there will be 100 Ford campaign workers equipped with two-way radios to a mission control center and assigned to watch all the Ford delegates, with contingency telephone plans if the Reagan forces try to jam their radio frequencies.

Jack Anderson's weekly column says the President himself has had this done. Is this true?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. You will have to ask Bill Greener. I don't know that much about the details of Kansas City.

Q You know of no such thing? Would Bill Greener be the one to know or someone before Greener went to that post?

MR. NESSEN: I think Greener will be able to answer that question.

Q Do you know how many White House people have gone or are going to the convention and when? This week and next week?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know how many have gone, Fran.

Q Will you find out for us?

Q How many will be going?

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

Q Will you check and find out for us?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, I will.

Q What is Greener's role in this?

MR. NESSEN: Bill is the Director of Communications at the President Ford Committee. While you were away, lots of things happened.

Q Ron, in the wire service interview, the President, in response to a question, seemed to suggest that Richard Schweiker would be too extreme in the political spectrum to be a running mate. The "extreme" was the questioner's word. Yet, the President has always touted Senator Edward Brooke as a possible running mate, and I checked with COPE this morning and Schweiker and Brooke have virtually identical voting records.

I am a little curious about the inconsistency. They are only two votes off, to be exact, and I am wondering why Schweiker is too extreme and Senator Edward Brooke isn't?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I can sort that out for you, Walt.

Q Ron, in the Camp David interview, the President said, "We have been in communication with the Soviet Union on the two underground explosions in July." Was that direct communication from the President to Brezhnev?

MR. NESSEN: No, it was not.

Q Can you elaborate on the communication?

MR. NESSEN: No, I would rather not.

Q Let me ask you a little more specific question. Was it a request by the U.S. for data from the Soviets on the size of the blasts?

MR. NESSEN: I think I would rather not describe diplomatic exchanges, Russ.

Q Do you know whether either of those blasts exceeded 150?

MR. NESSEN: No, it will be a while before that number is refined any further.

Q Ron, on that general subject, may I ask one or two questions on SALT which came up earlier? You said the United States had not responded to the newest Soviet proposal. Is it still the position of the United States, or the position of the White House that the -- let me ask you first, do you have any time frame on when you might respond?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Is it still the case that the principal problems are the Bison bomber, the so-called Bison bomber, and the cruise missile?

Q It is still the Backfire, not Bison.

MR. NESSEN: I think Henry Kissinger and others in public statements have indicated that the areas of difference have been reduced to a few and Backfire and cruise are among the outstanding unresolved issues.

Q Are they the only ones?

MR. NESSEN: No, they are not the only ones.

Q Is any facet of MIRV still at issue?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I better get deeper into specifics at this point, Jim.

Q Ron, can I go back to the talks about the Vice Presidency? In the interview the President said that Nelson Rockefeller has certainly not been excluded from his consideration. I was under the impression for weeks and months before that that the President was saying that the Vice President had asked him not to consider him, that he was withdrawing and that the President was abiding by his wishes.

Was his answer in the interview a change in his position?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't think I will elaborate on any of that Vice Presidential part, Dick.

Q I don't think I am asking you to elaborate. In other words, is that consistent with the position he has taken before?

MR. NESSEN: So far as I know, it is.

Q So, in other words, Nelson Rockefeller is under consideration?

MR. NESSEN: Whatever the President said the other day.

Q Is that not different from what you and he have been saying previously?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I am aware of. He said he hadn't excluded anybody. He said that for months now, that nobody was excluded.

Q There is a difference then between being excluded and being under consideration. I suppose you could draw a fine line, but is it not that you and the President have been saying for months that the President was not considering Mr. Rockefeller because he had asked not to be considered?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I have to look up what was said, but I know there has been no change in position.

Q Then is he under consideration or isn't he?

MR. NESSEN: Whatever he said on Saturday, Dick, I am not going to go beyond it.

Q Then he is?

MR. NESSEN: Whatever he said on Saturday.

Q Ron, did the President in any way mark his second anniversary in office in any special way?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Did he fix his own muffins? (Laughter)

Q Did he have a birthday cake?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so.

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Q Ron, I missed the first part of the question about Philadelphia, but in any case did the President -- how do you explain the propriety of the President talking about a controversial political subject, in what was a non-political invitation and I understand he accepted it in the spirit of a non-political way in Philadelphia.

Can you say it was non-political and yet he did talk at what is very clearly a controversial political subject. I am wondering how you rationalize that?

MR. NESSEN: I am not familiar with the controversial political subject.

Q His remark yesterday about abortion.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think he talked about abortion, did he?

Q You deny he talked about abortion?

MR. NESSEN: I will not elaborate on the speech.

Q This is outrageous, Ron.

Q Let Cochran finish.

Q Ron, you said it was a non-political invitation.

MR. NESSEN: That is correct, John.

Q He accepted it in that spirit, too. Now everybody in that stadium, the people stood up and applauded because they thought he was talking about abortion. Anyone with an IQ above 60 would think he was talking about abortion. Now you are going to tell me he was not talking about abortion.

MR. NESSEN: John, I think -- well, let me pass on the word "controversial" and talk about 125,000 people, or however many there were, I don't know how many there were, but people that came from all over the world to attend this Eucharistic Conference. The President was invited as the President, as you know and you have seen the letter of invitation, I suppose. I think it is quite natural that if you look at the text of the speech you will see that it was in a tone and dealt with subjects and concepts that would be interesting to those 125,000 people, or however many there were attending the Eucharistic Congress.

After all, one of the themes of the Eucharistic Congress, if I understand it right, was hunger and preservation of life, and that sort of thing. The President was addressing the subjects that those people who attended are most interested in, as I think you would expect him to do in any speech.

Q What irreverence was he referring to, suicide? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I won't elaborate on the speech, but I believe you were there, John, and I think if you heard the speech in its entirety, you will know it was a speech that dealt in a tone and in words that seemed to me to be quite elevating and quite suitable for the occasion.

Q He spoke quite harshly when he spoke of irreverence for life and got a standing ovation for it. Now we can't get you or anybody from the White House to say he wasn't being applauded for what indeed he was saying. Maybe those people were applauding the wrong thing. Was he not talking about abortion?

MR. NESSEN: John, I don't think that particular remark or the speech, itself, needs any further elaboration.

Q All right. Has the President's stand on abortion changed since his last statement on abortion?

MR. NESSEN: No, it hasn't.

Q Ron, I don't see how you can stand there and tell us that in all honesty you can't say whether or not he was talking about abortion.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think the speech in that particular line needs any elaboration.

Q You say the President can speak very clearly for himself and yet he used a word he did not intend to use when he delivered the line that we are questioning.

MR. NESSEN: Yes, he did.

Q Now you had no reluctance in clarifying or correcting that error.

MR. NESSEN: I would think you would want me to, wouldn't you?

Q Well, then, we are asking you to clarify a point here.

MR. NESSEN: I don't see that it needs clarification, Dick.

Q Then you are acknowledging that he was talking about abortion, are you not? That is the general assumption in this room.

MR. NESSEN: Dick, I don't think the speech needs elaboration and I am not going to elaborate.

Q Ron, everybody in the room does now. What is Cardinal Krol going to say this afternoon when he learns from the wires that the Press Secretary, when asked repeatedly, "Did the President mean abortion," refused. What is Cardinal Krol going to think?

MR. NESSEN: You will have to check with Cardinal Krol's press secretary.

Q Will you rule out that he was talking about abortion?

MR. NESSEN: I won't elaborate on the speech, Fran.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(AT 12:28 P.M. EDT)