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NEWS CONFERENCE #556

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:51 A.M. EDT

AUGUST 10, 1976

TUESDAY

MR. NESSEN: Let me give you two quick announcements. One is, the President has invited the President of Liberia, His Excellency William R. Tolbert, to make a State visit to the United States. President Tolbert has accepted and will arrive in Washington on September 22. Mrs. Tolbert will accompany him as will other officials of the Liberian Government. There will be a meeting with the President and there will be a dinner given by the President and Mrs. Ford.

This is more than a month away, so I don't have the remainder of the details. They are being worked out now. This is the first State visit to the United States by President Tolbert. He was here on a private visit in November of 1974 at which time he did meet with President Ford.

He is, I believe, the first African leader to pay a State visit to the United States during the Bicentennial, which is appropriate in view of the close and historic ties between Liberia and the United States.

The second announcement is OFF THE RECORD.

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Q Does the President have any view of changing his timing of the announcement of his Vice Presidential running mate in view of the coaxing by Sears and so forth and since tomorrow is the deadline, I guess for all the suggestions --

MR. NESSEN: Is tomorrow the 11th?

Q Yes.

Q Can you tell how many letters you have gotten?

MR. NESSEN: Let me check on those.

Q Is there any idea to change --

MR. NESSEN: No, the President plans, as we have said now for a while, to announce his recommendation for Vice Presidential candidate in the traditional manner, which is after his own nomination.

Q Ron, Senator Percy yesterday was asked to submit certain personal, physical, health and other data since he was informed he was under consideration. I wonder if you could tell us what form this request takes? Let me put it this way: Governor Carter had a questionnaire for all his people. Can you tell me what the physical arrangements are for getting this data? Is it a telephone call? Is there a questionnaire or what?

MR. NESSEN: Yesterday, I indicated that there was no formal questionnaire, but that the questions were drawn from two documents: One, a questionnaire that is required of all people under consideration for top level Presidential appointments in the Government, and, secondly, a lengthy memo from the Office of White House Counsel, which goes to all potential appointees.

Some of the questions, obviously, are inappropriate for people who are under consideration for Vice President. But basically, those are the questions. Some people asked me for that yesterday and I gave them Xerox copies which, I guess, you can have also.

Now, as for the mechanism, the mechanism, as we indicated last week for this phase anyhow, is to notify the people by telephone that they have been recommended and do they wish to be considered. If they wish to be considered, then they are asked to not submit the data at this point, but to compile it and to make two commitments: One, to commit themselves to allow their qualifications and so forth to be checked out and, secondly, if chosen, if nominated to be Vice President, to commit in advance to publish three reports:

One on their health, one on their liabilities and assets and one on figures from their income tax. So that is where it stands now. That is what is being done and when we get on the next phase, I will let you know.

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Q Ron, is there any reason why we can't have the list of those who have been asked to submit this material?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, there is. The President, as I think you know, indicated he wanted this to be done, at least at this phase, in a confidential manner.

Q In view of the fact that several of them have already announced they were solicited --

MR. NESSEN: I know.

Q -- and in view of the fact that one prominent man who is very much mentioned for Vice President--namely, John B. Connally--has said he hasn't been asked, can you tell us why Connally was not asked?

MR. NESSEN: I just read a story signed by Helen Thomas that said he was asked.

Q I was just going by what he said. Of course, maybe he told Helen something else. (Laughter)

Q What numbers from the income taxes are being sought? Bottom line stuff, or what?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think what we indicated at the time we announced what the process was, was that the President wanted them to commit themselves to publish those three items in the same detail as he published his own, and that included tax figures.

Q Has the President's lawyer, Mr. Buchen, met in the last few days with Leon Jaworski to get his opinion on Connally?

MR. NESSEN: Mr. Buchen has not checked out the qualifications of any candidate or potential candidate with Leon Jaworski.

Q Have they met?

MR. NESSEN: They were at the Atlanta meeting of the ABA together. They were on the platform together. They went to social events together. I don't know what chance or casual meetings they had, but I do know Mr. Buchen did not check out any qualifications of any candidate with Mr. Jaworski.

Q There was a Wall Street Journal story that Mr. Buchen would indeed ask Mr. Jaworski for an opinion. Was that story in error?

MR. NESSEN: I don't want to lable any story one way or the other. I am simply telling you the fact, which is that Mr. Buchen did not check out with Mr. Jaworski the qualifications of any potential Vice Presidential candidate.

Q Did he ask Mr. Jaworski to check it out? Can you tell us one way or the other?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure I see the distinction there.

Q You said he hasn't checked with Mr. Jaworski on any qualifications. But, did he ask Mr. Jaworski to check out Connally for the White House?

MR. NESSEN: Not to my knowledge. The reason I sound somewhat hesitant there is that I think for the next -- however long it is, now less than a week, it is not right for me to talk about what process is being set up to check out this candidate and what process to check out that candidate.

I will talk about the process being used to check out all the potential candidates when we reach that stage, but I don't think it is right to say here is how we will check out this one and here is how we will check out that one, and I am not going to do it, other than to say -- because it is a matter of interest these days, in answer to Tom's question -- that Buchen did not check out anybody's qualifications with Jaworski.

Q You cannot tell us whether he asked --

MR. NESSEN: He did not, to my knowledge,

Q He did not, to your knowledge, ask him to check out Connally?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct, not to my knowledge.

Q The Preisident indicated in his interview he wasn't going to do that.

MR. NESSEN: I looked it up this morning because somebody else asked that question and I didn't find that in there. He was asked, have you checked with Mr. Jaworski, and the answer was no.

Q Then he was asked if he would. He said the answers would come from the candidates themselves. The suggestion was that he did not intend to do that.

MR. NESSEN: As I say, I am not going to discuss the process for checking an individual candidate. I will tell you the process to be followed for all of them. They will all be treated equally.

Q Ron, can you tell us if Buchen has had any conversations with Jaworski about Mr. Connally?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, they were there and they were on the platform together at different times, and I guess they must have met at social events at different times. I don't know each and every word they said to each other. I do know that Buchen did not check out with Jaworski the qualifications and--I think to satisfy Bob's question--did not, to my knowledge, ask Jaworski to check out any candidate.

Q I am trying to make that careful distinction. I am trying to find out if they had any conversation at all about Connally.

MR. NESSEN: Not to my knowledge, they didn't.

Q Did the President talk to Connally at all while he has been in town or seen him?

MR. NESSEN: Not to my knowledge. I know he didn't see him.

Q Ron, does the President look on this naming of a Vice President who might become President, does the President look on this as his own private preserve and that the American people, who are so vitally involved, have no right to be party to this?

MR. NESSEN: No, he doesn't. I think you realize, I think you understand, what an important post he considers the Vice Presidential candidate to be.

Q Then I can't understand why he doesn't let us know whom he is considering, especially in view of the fact he is sending out all these requests for information.

MR. NESSEN: That is right, and that is why 5,000 or so or maybe more people have had an opportunity to give their views to the President, the Convention will have an opportunity to nominate and the public will have an opportunity to judge.

Q But we are not told whom he is inviting.

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Can I ask if you are planning to brief next week in Kansas City under any circumstances; that is to say, if there were a world development, or are you just going to make yourself available or will there be briefings?

MR. NESSEN: My intention at this time is to have a regularly scheduled briefing, probably late in the morning, maybe a little earlier than this briefing, maybe at 11:00.

Q Greener is saying 10:30.

MR. NESSEN: We have kicked around 10:30 or 11:00. It all depends on what the President's morning schedule is and when I can assemble all the material I need to brief from. But, I think that will be the plan, is to brief.

Q Will that be a joint briefing, you and Greener together?

MR. NESSEN: Possibly, or possibly a series of guest stars. (Laughter)

Q Ron, how many replies has the President gotten to his request to the delegates so far?

MR. NESSEN: As I said over here, tomorrow is the deadline and let me check and give you some kind of final wrap-up on it.

Q What is the deadline for contacting them?

Q What are the merits of the suggestions by John Sears that the rules of the Republican National Convention be changed so that Presidential candidates name their respective running mates the day of the balloting?

MR. NESSEN: I said earlier to Helen that the President is going to name his recommendation in the traditional way, which is after his own nomination.

Q Is he going to do that even if the Convention adopts this proposed rule?

MR. NESSEN: Ed, that is pretty hypothetical because it hasn't done that, and I don't know what the outlook for it is.

Q Ron, when is it traditional in your view?

MR. NESSEN: After the President himself has been nominated.

Q I would like you to be more specific. The reason is you said it was less than a week away.

MR. NESSEN: I mean less than a week away to get into the heavy checking out phase.

Q I didn't mean to ask what the President intends to do, because I know what the President intends to do. I mean, this is a suggestion to change the rules of his party -- his party's convention. What does he think of the merits of that?

MR. NESSEN: I would rather not comment on the merits of that idea. You know, I think the President's campaign people and supporters at the Convention are operating with the intention of promoting party unity in Kansas City and that is what their main goal is, and that is the way they are conducting themselves, and that is the way they are going to be voting and dealing with the issues, in a way that will promote party unity.

Q Does that mean that if this comes to a floor fight over this, they won't resist it, but they will just accept it?

MR. NESSEN: You know there are plenty of people out in Kansas City, Ed, who can talk to you about what specific response will be made to specific actions. I can't do that from here other than to say that the overall goal is for the President's forces in Kansas City to act in a way that promotes party unity.

Q Do you foresee a press conference this week?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't.

Q Your people out there are already opposing that in the Rules Committee, which is not surprising.

MR. NESSEN: I didn't mean to leave the idea with Ed that we are not going to oppose it.

Q Is it your feeling that the Convention will not force the President to do otherwise than what he has already announced?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know from here. That is something you really need to check in Kansas City, Bob. You are right about opposing it but I don't know what the prospects are. I just don't know.

Q Aside from not going into figures of how many responses you have gotten, has it been heartening or unusually light?

MR. NESSEN: I would say there has been a good, heavy response.

Q What is the deadline for the White House contacting candidates? Is that ended? Has everyone that is going to get a call gotten a call?

MR. NESSEN: No, it can't be ended because all of the suggestions are not due in until tomorrow and the final batch may contain some names the President wants to contact. I read on the wire where Senator Weicker was contacted only today.

Q When will you give a schedule of your announcements on this?

MR. NESSEN: When will I announce the next phase?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I can't tell you when I will announce it.

Q Although you have been unwilling to tell us who has been contacted, some of these folks obviously have said they have been and some have said they are not interested.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q Does the President find that surprising? Is he disappointed by any of the statements made?

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to comment on those kinds of decisions made by other people.

Q Ron, could I ask a question about the Vice President? The last public statement that I recall the President made about Mr. Rockefeller was down at a press conference in Texas, and he said Rockefeller was not being considered -- I am paraphrasing -- Rockefeller was not being considered because he, himself, had pulled himself out of contention, much as Senator Brock has done. I assume that is still the President's last word on it, that the Vice President has removed himself from consideration.

At that time, I asked him if he was going to make any attempt to change his mind. He said in effect, no, he has already made his decision. Can we go by what the President's last public statement was?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to look up what he said, John. He said on a number of occasions nobody is excluded.

Q Why haven't you looked it up? I asked that yesterday.

Q Can I finish? I know he has said that, yet when people exclude themselves--you know, the President in effect said that Rockefeller has excluded himself from consideration. Is it fair for us to go back to his last public statement as being still his position?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what his last public statement was. I know the last public statement I recall was him saying in response to a number of questions that nobody is excluded.

I think this late in the selection process that I don't want to stand here, as I have said for about a week now, and say that one is ruled in and that one is ruled out. It is too late to do that.

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Q I assume as Vice President it would not be necessary for Rockefeller to go through what other people are going through. He went through confirmation hearings, everybody knows his financial records.

MR. NESSEN: I am just not going to answer because to do so would indicate that he was or was not under consideration.

Q Is Brock still included?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I think Senator Brock indicated publicly what his response had been when contacted.

Q Is he still included?

MR. NESSEN: He seemed to have asked not to be considered.

Q So did Rockefeller.

Q And Reagan.

MR. NESSEN: I am not going through the list and say that one is in and that is out.

Q How can you stand there and say you are not going through a list? We have had public statements by the Vice President saying he did not want to be considered, he is withdrawing, and the President said he would abide by that request. You seem to be leaving the impression here that the President is changing his mind.

MR. NESSEN: Dick, the most I can do for you today is give you a story that says the White House ruled Rockefeller in or the White House ruled Rockefeller out. Either one of those stories would be misleading, so why should we pursue it further? Those are the only two possibilities that we are driving at.

Q Why would it be misleading?

MR. NESSEN: Because I have nothing new to add on who is under consideration, who is not and where they stand and so forth. So we are playing word games that are not going to lead anywhere except to a misleading story.

Q Ron, has the President found someone to succeed Morton, to run his campaign, if he gets the nomination?

MR. NESSEN: There are no plans for Mr. Morton to leave as chairman of the campaign.

Q Do you know why Rogers Morton is speculating on John Connally as a good successor if he leaves the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that is exactly what he said. If I understand correctly, he was commenting on the talents of Mr. Connally as an organizer and campaigner.

You know, as recently as this morning there are no plans for Rogers to leave as chairman of the campaign.

Q But he is discussing the possibility, himself, of leaving. That certainly is in the Naughton story.

MR. NESSEN: He certainly has not, in my hearing around here with the President.

Q I would like to go back to what you said a little while ago when you said the President prefers to keep this a confidential matter, this question of people who are contacted as possible Vice Presidential candidates. The President prefers to keep this a confidential matter. That was your answer when you were asked to give a list of those people contacted.

The fact of the matter is a great many of these people are divulging it themselves as they are contacted.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q They are making public statements that they have been contacted and is quite easy to draw up a list, maybe an incomplete list, but, nevertheless, it is a list of those who have been contacted. Yet, your answer continues to be confidentiality when there is in fact no confidentiality.

I am wondering whether or not you or the White House staff or the President are concerned that this makes the President look foolish to make a claim of confidentiality when there is none? Are you concerned about the image this gives the President?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Why not?

MR. NESSEN: Well, he is going along, Jim, in carrying out this extensive process of sampling opinion, contacting a relatively large number of individuals and then moving on later to the checkout phase and then the announcement.

Q You know, one of the more ridiculous spectacles people go through is locking the back door after the horse has departed. This seems to be what is going on here. Why weren't you able to keep the confidentiality, number one, and now having lost it, what are you trying to do to restore an image of a man who does not have control over the situation?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think anybody has ever pretended to try to have enough fingers to stick in all the holes in a dike, Jim.

Q Ron, isn't it correct that the candidates contacted were told that they should not announce that they were contacted, but if they were asked pointblank, they should answer honestly?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I have been telling some of the candidates who have called me and asked me what to say.

Q Why don't you then go ahead and give the same response when we ask you about specific people, as we did about Connally? The candidates or people under consideration are free to do so and have been doing so quite freely.

Why are you then unable, or unwilling, I guess I should say, to do the same thing?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, this is such a small part of what is underway now that I really -- it takes up a lot of time and does not really end up anywhere.

Q Why did you mislead us on when phase two was going to start?

MR. NESSEN: How was that, Phil?

Q You said on Friday it would start that weekend. It, in fact, started Friday morning.

MR. NESSEN: What, in terms of calls?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know how precise I was in saying when it would start.

Q You said it would start tomorrow, or this weekend.

MR. NESSEN: You mean in terms of when the first call was made.

Q You said they would be notified starting this weekend.

MR. NESSEN: I was off by a few hours.

Somebody asked for a list of something. What was that?

Q What is the President doing today?

MR. NESSEN: This morning he has staff meetings. He has a couple of hours set aside again this afternoon to work on the speech. The schedule shows a couple of appointments and then, as you know, this evening he will drop in on the PGA reception before the golf tournament starts.

Q Will you set up a meeting with the black fraternal leadership for us?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think it was planned for black fraternal leaders to come out here.

Q I gather he is not going to Atlanta to the ABA Convention? He has not announced any plans for that.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think we ever indicated he would, Jim.

Q The fact is, he is not?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, that is right.

Q I would like to ask one other question that I didn't get in on the last go-around. Is the Governor of Missouri, Mr. Bond, one of those contacted as a potential Vice Presidential candidate?

MR. NESSEN: I think his press secretary indicated he was.

Q He did indeed. Now, I am asking you to confirm it.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I need to confirm what Kit Bond's press secretary said, Jim. What is the point?

Q One, we are trying to get a confirmation from the White House where these things originate.

MR. NESSEN: Why would you doubt the words of Kit Bond's press secretary? You know the veracity of press secretaries. (Laughter)

Q Ron, the President has said in the past that both women and blacks are being considered.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q In view of the fact Ed Brooke has withdrawn himself, does that statement still apply?

MR. NESSEN: Russ, I am just not going to do this -- you know, go through and say is he still there or are they still there, this group, or class, or color.

Q I am just asking if there are other blacks on the list.

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to be able to answer the question.

Q Yesterday afternoon the spokesmen for both the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as well as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said -- both said -- understood the President's statement in Philadelphia -- "deep apprehension about the increased irreverence for life" -- to mean abortion, and these officials said they didn't understand why Mr. Nessen is either unable or afraid to clarify this.

My question is, when Father McKenzie called you about this long distance from Philadelphia, why did you have him turned over to a secretary who told me she had never talked to the President about abortion and has no authority to answer questions about the President's precise meaning?

MR. NESSEN: I did spend a good deal of my afternoon yesterday, Les, on the phone with various officials from Philadelphia trying to straighten out your remarks to them, which purported to tell them what I had said.

Q I told them that you had evaded the question, Ron, and I don't like the suggestion that I told them something that is false. I don't, Ron. I don't think that anybody should have to take that.

MR. NESSEN: As I say, it took me a couple of hours yesterday --

Q You suggested that I call them, Ron, remember that? All I said was that you evaded the question.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I did talk to Father McKenzie and he asked me whether some of the things you had reported to him of my saying accurately reflected what I had said. I said why don't I start from the beginning and tell you what I said? I did, and he said, gee, that sounds fine to me. We talked for a good while and straightened it out, I think.

Q Will you tell us what you told him, Ron, so we can get in on this, too? Maybe you will answer the question if you tell us what you told the Father.

MR. NESSEN: What we ought to do is get Father McKenzie here and cut out the middle man, I think, Les, don't you?

Q Just tell us the answer to the question you were asked so many times. Fran asked it; John Cochran asked it; a lot of people asked it, Ron. Did it apply to abortion? And another question, why was there no advance text on it?

MR. NESSEN: Because the President worked on his speech Sunday morning here in the White House and by the time he finished it there was no time to have a text prepared.

Q Did it apply to abortion or not?

MR. NESSEN: Les, I will say the same thing I said yesterday, and not say any more than I said yesterday. I will not elaborate on the President's words on this speech or any speech. The people in the audience understood what he had to say, period.

Q Is that what you told the priest?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, ma'am.

Q And he was satisfied with that?

MR. NESSEN: He seemed to be.

Q He seemed to be?

MR. NESSEN: But you can check him back again, Les, and see if you can dissatisfy him again.

Q Here is what he told me, Ron. He said he told the National Catholic News Service --

MR. NESSEN: I am not interested in what he told you.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 12:20 P.M. EDT) #556