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NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:40 P.M. EDT

SEPTEMBER 9, 1976

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: I think you saw the President's speech, or heard it, at the B'nai B'rith this morning.

Q Do you have an as-delivered?

MR. NESSEN: We will have. We either have or will.

Then, you know the President is meeting now with the Senate Republican Steering Committee and the House Republican Study Group.

Q No, we did not know that.

MR. NESSEN: Wasn't it on the schedule?

Q No.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know why it was not on the schedule.

Q What are they steering in the study?

MR. NESSEN: The purpose of coming down here is, at the President's invitation, to -- and eventually all the Members of, Republican Members of, the Senate and House will come to the White House -- to hear the President's campaign plans. That is the purpose of this.

Q What are they?

MR. NESSEN: As I said, as they unfold, you will see them. I mean, as they are unfolding, you are seeing them.

Q Have they been told to keep it a secret after they are told by the President?

MR. NESSEN: I am not in the meeting, so I don't know exactly what --

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Q Has anybody declined?

MR. NESSEN: To attend?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: No, two people did not come today because they are not in Washington.

Q Who is there today? Can you give us a list?

MR. NESSEN: Why don't I post it, it would be easier. There are about 15 or 20 names here.

Q Is Senator Helms on it?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, he is there today.

Q Why is he telling these people what his campaign plans are? Why is he doing that?

MR. NESSEN: Because they are fellow Republicans and he feels that they want to know. And, as I have indicated before, many of the Members of Congress have asked for an opportunity to give their views on the campaign. This is an opportunity to get their views.

Q We were told the President was coming down to the Briefing Room.

MR. NESSEN: That is what I am getting to next.

As soon as this meeting is over, the President does have a statement he is working on -- he has not quite finished writing it yet -- on the death of Mao Tse-tung. I think some of you were a little discouraged that he seemed to speak in an offhand way when he went into the hotel and many of you were not there to hear it.

It was not really his sort of formal response. It was just an offhand personal response. I would say somewhere between 30 to 45 minutes from now the President will come here, if you would like him to, to read you his formal statement.

Q Is that prepared so we can have it in our hands?

MR. NESSEN: He is working on it now and has not finished it yet.

Q Will it be live?

MR. NESSEN: What do you mean "live"?

Q Live, on the air.

MR. NESSEN: It is not up to me.

Q He has never done this before.

MR. NESSEN: What?

Q It is unhighly unprecedented, isn't it?

MR. NESSEN: What?

Q To speak on the death of a world leader personally.

MR. NESSEN: I think he has.

Q Is this just a statement or will he take questions afterwards on the same subject?

MR. NESSEN: I think he would just like to make a statement on it.

Q Is this what Secretary Kissinger is doing here now?

MR. NESSEN: I will have to check and find out.

Q Who is going to represent the U.S. at the funeral services, if anybody?

MR. NESSEN: The Chinese have indicated, I am told this morning, that they do not -- how did they word it -- that they have announced, actually, officially in Peking, the government, that no foreign delegations will be invited to memorial services for Mao.

I know you are all burning to know that the President will speak at the University of Michigan on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. Ann Arbor is on the same time as Washington time, so it is 7:30 Eastern time at the University of Michigan in the Crisler Arena. I don't have the subject of the speech to give you right now.

I think the President will be arriving on the campus early to midafternoon and he will probably have some other events on the campus before his evening speech, which I don't have to announce to you now.

He will return to Washington after the speech.

Q Is this going to be an afternoon of nostalgia, visiting old classrooms?

MR. NESSEN: That is possible.

Q Do you anticipate those other events to be public events?

MR. NESSEN: Some of them certainly will be, yes.

Q Ron, you said that when you announced this you would tell us why you were unable to announce --

MR. NESSEN: The fact that I have not come up here and given you the time and place of the speech until today -- Marilyn said how come, you promised to tell us -- I think many of you already know that the PFC gave consideration to buying television time to put this speech on the air as a campaign event, and it took a certain amount of time to look over their budget to see whether they had the money, to contact the network to see whether any time was available, whether the networks wanted to sell it, whether the PFC really wanted to do that.

So, ultimately the decision was made not to. After that decision was made, then the announcement was made. But the announcement was put off because it was not known whether the networks had time to sell and, if so, what night they had to sell it.

Q Do you know, as a matter of fact, about this?

MR. NESSEN: I don't really know. I was not that close to those negotiations. I know there was contact.

Q Is this the official kickoff of the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: I suppose the official kickoff of his campaign was in July of 1975, when he announced his -- it is his first speech since his last campaign speech. (Laughter)

Q Was the ultimate decision made by the PFC not to buy the time?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q It was not a decision by the networks not to sell the time?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Was there ever consideration to use the time bought Tuesday night for this event in Michigan?

MR. NESSEN: No. In fact, among the various reasons why this speech was not given this week or on Labor Day or close to Labor Day was that time had already been bought and arranged to put on the edited version of the acceptance speech. So, the next speech was for next week.

Q Time is not being bought for this speech?

MR. NESSEN: For the University of Michigan speech? The decision was not to, that is correct.

Q Ron, in Minneapolis, the once every three years national convention of the President's denomination, the Episcopal Church, is meeting. Since he has addressed the meeting of the Southern Baptists and the Eucharistic Congress, is the President possibly going to go to Minneapolis and speak to his own church?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of any plans to do anything but come straight back from the University of Michigan.

Q You don't know if he was invited or not?

MR. NESSEN: I really don't.

Q Is he going any place but to Ann Arbor?

MR. NESSEN: No, it is to the campus and back.

Q Will he go down and visit the football field?

MR. NESSEN: The exact plans for what to do earlier in the afternoon are not ready to announce yet.

Q Is he going to greet the University of Michigan Alumni singers?

MR. NESSEN: Aren't they any good? (Laughter)

Q How big is the Crisler Arena?

MR. NESSEN: The capacity, I think, is around 14,000.

Q Did you say what day it was?

MR. NESSEN: Wednesday.

Q Is that the only campaign appearance next week?

MR. NESSEN: I think the answer is yes.

Q Rather, is that the only travel next week?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, that is the only travel next week.

Q Ron, can you tell us why they decided not to buy the time?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. You have to ask the PFC.

Q Are you still classifying the speech today to the B'nai B'rith as non-political?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I said -- I think out in Vail -- that I just did not see how we could go through the fall saying this is political, non-political, et cetera.

Q I don't think there is an extraordinary amount of travel money involved, and I just want to know if you classify it as a political, non-political speech or what?

MR. NESSEN: I am not classifying speeches.

Q You did the other day.

MR. NESSEN: In what sense?

Q You said it was official and not political.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Then, can you say everything is going to be political from now on?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I have been reading every day.

Q Ron, is the audience next week primarily the student body?

MR. NESSEN: One hundred percent student body as far as I know. Probably some press and maybe some professors.

Q Ron, is there compulsory attendance for this?

MR. NESSEN: I think it would be very hard to get University of Michigan students to attend anything they did not want to attend.

Q What is the size of the student body?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Is this a class thing? Is it some sort of special homecoming or any sort of campus thing that inspired this?

MR. NESSEN: No. You mean, inspired him to go to the University of Michigan?

Q You said he was going to visit his alma mater. Did he have any other reason to go besides that?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q This event where he speaks, is it some kind of annual speaker they invite?

MR. NESSEN: No. He is just going to speak, and those who wish to hear him may, and those who don't can do other things.

Q The public is not invited or not permitted to come?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I will get that for you before we go.

Q The reason I asked the question is, people have been regretting invitations to the White House conferences. There is a Congressman out West who says he would not want President Ford to campaign for him. Now if there are any large number of those --

MR. NESSEN: Are there a large number of Republican Congressmen who say they don't want the President to campaign for them?

Q A half-dozen.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know of any except the one you referred to that was in the newspaper.

Now about tomorrow, as you know, the President is going to meet with the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The meeting will begin at 10:00. It will be in the Oval Office. This is the second meeting by the President at the White House with the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The first meeting took place on June 18, 1975.

Q This is the second?

MR. NESSEN: This is the second one. The first one was June 18, 1975. The subject of that meeting was primarily the world food situation, illegal aliens and the problem of Southeast Asia refugees which you recall was an important topic at that time.

The President expressed his interest at that meeting in seeing the bishops again in the future, and I think you could say that tomorrow's meeting came about as a result of mutual agreement.

Q Ron, two questions on this, if I could.

MR. NESSEN: Let me finish telling you all about it, Les, because maybe your question might even get answered.

The Archbishop of Cincinnati, the most Reverend Joseph Bernardin -- the Archbishop of Cincinnati and President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and of the United States Catholic Conference -- I am giving you the participants now. That is number one.

Also, the most Reverend John Carberry, the Archbishop of St. Louis, and the Vice President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops; the most Reverend John J. McGuire, the Archbishop of New York City --

Q No, that is Cooke.

MR. NESSEN: That is what it says here. Let's hold up on McGuire's identification.

His Eminence Terence Cardinal Cooke, the Archbishop of New York; and Bishop James W. Malone, the Bishop of Youngstown, Ohio.

What, if any, arrangements there are for the bishops to talk to you afterwards if you want to talk to them, I don't have to give you today.

Q Could I ask you a technical question? You called Cooke "Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York." Can he be Archbishop of New York and be a Cardinal, too?

Q Yes.

Q Ron, you gave us the agenda of the last meeting. Can you give us the agenda of this meeting?

MR. NESSEN: I expect a wide range of issues to come up that are of interest to the Catholic bishops and to the President, and I think they would be domestic issues and international issues. I would be very surprised, for instance, if abortion were not discussed.

Q Ron, in that connection, when the bishops visit the White House tomorrow, will Mrs. Ford join the President in welcoming them, or will she be out of town?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know where Mrs. Ford will be tomorrow, but Sheila can probably tell you.

Q Is that an hour long meeting? Can you give us some idea of what it is scheduled to run?

MR. NESSEN: We will check.

Q In connection with the bishops' visit, would the President welcome the bishops' endorsement of him on October 3 on what I understand is "Right to Life Sunday" in all the Catholic churches in America, and how does he stand on contraception? (Laughter)

Q All right. What is his position? (Laughter)

Q What are his views, his convictions on this? What are his views on contraception, Ron? This is of great concern to the Catholic Church, as you know.

MR. NESSEN: I know that. I have not ever thought to ask him that question, Les.

Q Would you think to ask him and let us know tomorrow at the briefing? You are nodding your head, Ron.

MR. NESSEN: I will ask him what his position is on contraception.

Q Ron, could you clarify his position on abortion yesterday?

MR. NESSEN: I would be very happy to talk about it, because I know that it is -- 30 minutes, but likely to run longer, Walt -- I would be happy to talk about it. I don't agree with you that the position needs to be clarified. I think what the President said yesterday is totally consistent with what he has said in the recent past and, in fact, in the far past. The President's position on abortion really has not changed at all.

Q Ron, does he favor the Right to Life Amendment that the Republican platform plank on women urges be supported?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I think one of the problems and one of the reasons Fran raises the question of, would I clarify or uses the word "clarify," is that perhaps there is some misunderstanding, and maybe copies of the platform have not been as readily available as they might, but I think everybody who is going to write about this subject ought to read what the platform says and, of course, the wording of the platform -- I will just go to the key phrase -- is that "the Republican Party favors the continuance of the public dialogue on abortion," and the key portion says, "supports the efforts of those who seek enactment of a Constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life of the unborn child."

Now that represents a consensus of the Republican Convention clearly, because they voted for it and that particular wording. And, as the President has said in the past and yesterday, without change, he supports the Republican platform, accepts it and will run on it.

I suppose if the Republican Convention had wanted to say instead of the language used here that they support a Constitutional amendment to ban abortion, it would have been worded that way, but they worded it this way because it represents a consensus of views.

Q Can you explain how you protect the right to life of an unborn child if you merely allow the States to approve or ban abortion?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I really think you have to use all the words that are in this because any of you who were in Kansas City know that this particular plank was very carefully written, a great deal of time was spent on it, and the wording was carefully done, so that it would represent a consensus of the party.

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Again, one of the things I think perhaps that was missing in considering what this meant was a consideration of, where are we today legally, and where we are today legally is that as a result of the 1973 Supreme Court decision there are no -- and then to pick up the language here -- "there are no protections of the right to life of the unborn child" -- during the first three months of pregnancy certainly, and to a large extent not during the second three months of pregnancy. So, that is why the wording "to restore protection" was used here.

In January, 1973, the Supreme Court removed the protection of the right to life in its ruling. What the platform calls for and what the President believes in is to restore what the Supreme Court took away and to restore it by giving the States the authority to put in whatever restrictions or regulations they want to on abortion.

Q How is that necessarily going to protect the rights of unborn children? In a State like New York, for instance, they already had a law allowing abortions.

MR. NESSEN: Right now the Supreme Court took away the protection. The platform calls for restoring the protection.

Q How is the States' Rights amendment going to necessarily do that?

MR. NESSEN: That is a matter for each State -- to restore whatever protection it sees fit.

Q Ron, to use your own phrase, if it was the consensus of the Republican Party in Kansas City that this protection ought to be restored by giving this power back to the States, why didn't they just say it that way?

MR. NESSEN: After all, this does represent a very carefully worked out position that does represent a consensus of the party. I would agree with what I think must be in most of your minds, which is that you could put various interpretations on this.

Q What is the President's interpretation?

MR. NESSEN: The President's interpretation -- I think that is a good question -- is that this does not conflict with his views held for a very long time that the solution of this problem and the way to restore the protection is to pass a Constitutional amendment giving the States the right to regulate abortion.

His interpretation of this is that is in line with his long-held view. I would agree with you, there are --

Q But the classic interpretation in Kansas City was that this basically was the Buckley amendment to ban abortion and that was the interpretation.

MR. NESSEN: Helen, when you say "classic interpretation" or "common wisdom" or "generally accepted," I don't agree with that. I think there are various ways to interpret what this means. I have told you what the President interprets it as meaning.

Others may have interpreted it that way, but it was written in a broad way to represent a consensus of the party.

Q In fact, a White House spokesman told us that the language was supplied by the Catholic Bishops and picked up.

MR. NESSEN: The platform plank -- for those of you who were in Kansas City -- I think you know all the various people worked on it and crafted it in a broad way. There is no denying that. It is broadly worded.

Q It is ambiguously worded according to that same spokesman. Why are we going through this charade? We both know the White House aide that came up and talked to us yesterday and he said it was purposely worded in an ambiguous way to emphasize as much support as possible.

MR. NESSEN: The only quarrel I would have with the White House person who came and talked to you yesterday is that, rather than saying "ambiguous," which perhaps has a maybe some pejorative sense to it, is that it was written in a broad way so that it would take in the views of a broad range of Republicans and others on this issue.

Q Then if that is the case, if it is broad -- and I will not yield on the "ambiguous" because that was his word -- if it is broad and if it is ambiguous and the President embraces it, isn't the President's position on abortion ergo ambiguous?

MR. NESSEN: Walt, I don't think so because the President's record is there. It is on the line.

Two months after the Supreme Court decision in 1973, the President, who was then the Republican leader of the House, was the co-sponsor of House Joint Resolution 468 introduced on March 28, 1973, the so-called Whitehurst amendment, which did exactly what the platform says.

It provided a way to restore protection by giving the States the right to regulate abortion. So, the President, exactly two months after that Supreme Court decision, took a position on March 28, 1973. He held it then, he has held it now and he has not waived one bit.

MR. NESSEN: If you leave it to the States, what happens? Does this Constitutional amendment that you are talking about require that the States restore the right to live or give them the right to "restore the right to live"? What happens -- going back to the earlier question -- in a State like New York? They have gone on record, they have a certain abortion law. Would the Constitutional amendment require New York to change it or would the President like to see States have the right to do what they wish?

MR. NESSEN: Well, you know what the President wants.

Q I don't know what the President wants. That is my point. Does he want New Jersey to have one and New York another?

MR. NESSEN: Let me answer that in two ways: Number one, his view on the mechanism for restoring protection to the rights of the unborn is to -- the word "restore" was used for a very specific reason, because before January of 1973, the States did have the right to regulate abortion.

The Supreme Court took that right away in January 1973. The President is in favor of restoring it and that is why the word "restore" is used.

Q Right to regulate or right to protect --

MR. NESSEN: To restore a mechanism for protecting the rights of the unborn.

The other part I want to say, to answer Marilyn's question, that is the legal mechanism that he favors to restore the protection for the rights of the unborn.

Q The mechanism, that is exactly what the question was.

MR. NESSEN: To go back to the way it was before the Supreme Court took it away in January of 1973 and give the States the right to regulate abortion. But now, you can't understand this position completely unless you recall the President's own personal views on this. He is against abortion on demand. He has said that repeatedly.

Q Is he prepared to tell the bishops tomorrow that he still favors abortion under certain circumstances, including rape and when the life of the mother is threatened?

Q And incest?

MR. NESSEN: He is prepared to say what he has said year after year and month after month without variation or change for years.

Q Ron, are you seriously suggesting that the Catholic Bishops are going to be satisfied with local options, because that is exactly what that is. . In New York, as they pointed out, it was unlimited.

MR. NESSEN: I would rather answer questions, Les, than argue about it. As you see, I am more than happy to answer this. I realize there is a great deal of interest in it, but I don't want to argue the issue, Les. I want to answer your questions about the President's position.

Q Ron, on CBS last night, they quoted the President as having told Walter Cronkite -- and they superimposed this on the screen -- a quote saying the President did not favor a Constitutional amendment as a way to deal with the abortion issue.

MR. NESSEN: I don't want to criticize CBS, but there was a second portion of the interview or a second sentence really that was not quoted. The quotation was -- let me pick some of the quotations from the Cronkite interview: "If there is to be a Constitutional amendment and there are some suggestions in Congress now that would permit each State on its own to --" "If there is to be one" -- meaning a Constitutional amendment -- "I think that is a preference rather than the one that is recommended by others."

Q Didn't he say before then he did not prefer using a Constitutional amendment, though?

MR. NESSEN: No. Cronkite said, "But under the Supreme Court decision that presumably would take a Constitutional amendment to let the States do that," and the President said, "That is correct."

Q Ron, does the President oppose a Constitutional amendment to ban abortion?

MR. NESSEN: I think he has said he opposes the Supreme Court decision opening up abortion on demand and he also favors a Constitutional amendment giving the States the right to regulate abortion.

Q What about a Constitutional amendment that would ban abortion?

MR. NESSEN: I am telling you what the President favors.

Q I know, but I am asking you whether he is against that or not?

MR. NESSEN: I am telling you what the President favors.

Q So you won't answer on his view of a Constitutional amendment that would ban abortion, which is what most of the people are asking?

MR. NESSEN: He has said that. He is on the record. He is in U.S. News & World Report this week. He does not favor a Constitutional amendment banning abortion. He has said that.

Q Is that a moral position he is taking, or is there some other reason?

MR. NESSEN: The President has said very often that his own personal view is that he does not favor abortion on demand.

Q Will you bring the bishops out here tomorrow to talk to us in the Briefing Room?

MR. NESSEN: The exact procedure for any news coverage afterwards has not been arranged yet.

Q On the China thing, as long as we can't ask the President a question, does the President feel that Mao's death will in any way alter the current status of U.S.-PRC relations.

MR. NESSEN: He does not see any reason why it should.

Archbishop McGuire is the Treasurer of the National Conference of Catholics, but he is from New York City.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.