

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE

OF

ANNE ARMSTRONG, COUNSELLOR TO THE PRESIDENT;  
RHEA HAMMER, VICE CHAIRWOMAN, NATIONAL WOMEN'S POLITICAL CAUCUS;  
AND  
MARIE BOWDEN, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL FEDERATION OF  
BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S CLUBS, INC.

THE BRIEFING ROOM

1:31 P.M. EDT

MR. ROBERTS: Ladies and gentlemen, the President has just concluded a meeting with leaders of several of the major women's organizations in the Cabinet Room.

As you probably were informed, the purpose of that meeting was to discuss the President's plans for participation of women in his Administration, and also to ask for suggestions from the women's organizations as to the priority of issues that are of concern to them.

And with us this afternoon, to give us an update on the meeting and to answer your questions, we have Ms. Marie Bowden, who is President of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs; Ms. Rhea Hammer, the Vice Chairperson of the National Women's Political Caucus; and Counsellor Anne Armstrong.

I think we will let Mrs. Bowden lead off here and carry on from here.

Q How long was the meeting?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: It was about an hour. And, of course, it was supposed to be half an hour, but it went about double the time.

Q It was in the Cabinet Room?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q How many attended?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Nineteen.

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Q Will we have a list?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes; we will have a list.

Q Shortly? Some of us are making the bus.

Q It is out already.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: You have it.

MS. BOWDEN: Thank you very much, and may I first say what a pleasure it is to be asked to speak before this audience. We see you many times on television and this is certainly a thrill for us to be accorded this privilege today.

I want to say that the first thing we appreciate is that the President has opened up a very productive dialogue between his Administration and women's organizations, and we hope this will not be the first meeting of this type.

High on the list of our discussion today and of major concern to all of the women's organizations is the economic problems which face our country. Representing many women across the country, we have pledged our support to the President in helping in the economic situation in our country.

We certainly are concerned with women in the economic picture because many women are at the low rung of the ladder in the economic strata and yet women do compose almost half of the labor force.

And it is particularly difficult in inflationary times when many women are single heads of families and, therefore, they have to work and it is very difficult for them to meet the expenses.

We have pledged our support and our number one goal of many of us is the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by five more states.

The business and professional women of the United States, believing in the principles of equal rights for all people, raised over a quarter of a million dollars this last year to aid and support the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in five more states.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you. It has been a most productive day. I believe we talked on every major subject with the President. He was warm and generous and kind, and expressed his views. We have the feeling that the affairs of our country are in great hands, that he listens, but he also reasons, and he makes his decisions in the best interests of all people.

MR. ROBERTS: Mrs. Hammer of the National Women's Political Caucus.

MS. HAMMER: It is a pleasure being with you here today.

The name is Rhea Monica Hammer. I insist upon my maiden name.

We are very thrilled, the women who met here today with the President, to have the opportunity. And as Ms. Bowden just said, we hope it is not the last, but the first of many in which women can begin to make contributions to Presidents, Governors, mayors, et cetera, all the way down the line.

Some of us have had past experiences with conferences, so some of us got together for a little caucus before we arrived here today.

The League of Women Voters, National Women's Political Caucus, National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Interstate Association of Commissions on the Status of Women, and Women's Equity Action League, united in their conviction that the highest Administration priorities should be given to the economic status of women and strongly recommend that more emphasis be put on women's problems in upcoming deliberations on the state of the economy.

The groups stressed the fact that women are traditionally at the lowest rung of the economic ladder and I don't think I have to add that as a minority woman, if there is a rung below the lowest rung, that is where we are, and that we comprise almost half of the labor force. And in particular, single heads of families are among the hardest hit by today's inflationary spirals. They urge recognition of women as workers as well as housewives.

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Specifically we asked the President for increased attention to the enforcement of regulations and laws, then discrimination on the basis of sex and housing, employment, credit, education and social services.

Q Excuse me. Could you read that list a little slower?

MS. HAMMER: Increased attention to the enforcement of regulations and laws, then discrimination on the basis of sex, in housing, employment, credit, education, and social services, support of nationwide quality day care programs which are essential for the children of working women, special emphasis on increasing the upward mobility of women through more attention to women in job training programs, in negotiations with labor and industry, and within the armed services.

They also pointed out that these and other considerations should not be left to male-dominated bureaucracies and urged the inclusion of more women in the Administration and in Government policy roles.

They asked, too, for a revamping of the appointment system so that questions of competence outweigh questions of political loyalty. The group praised the President for his strong stand on the Equal Rights Amendment, and expressed the hope that he and members of his family will actively campaign for its passage in 1975.

Being from Illinois, one of the States that have not ratified the ERA, I support this strongly. They pointed out that ratification of the amendment would have a significant effect on eliminating the social and economic barriers which affect both men and women.

In addition to domestic considerations, the group asked the White House to take a more active role in shaping the activities of International Women's Year and to increase the number of women participants in the international conference.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Q Can we get a copy of that statement?

MS. HAMMER: Yes, we have them.

Q Can you tell us what the President's reaction to this was? Did he tell you in any area where he would be active and would help?

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MS. HAMMER: Yes; he talked about a task force to recruit women. Mrs. Armstrong could tell you better.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Actually the President has not read this statement.

Did you hand him a copy?

MS. HAMMER: We did.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: But several of the points mentioned in the statement were brought up, but not all, so I can't say he had a chance to respond to all the points.

I hope he will. If you haven't given him a copy of it, Rhea, I will be delighted to hand it to him.

Q Did the President have a reaction on your proposals for child care?

MS. HAMMER: Yes, he discussed one particular act five years ago that was working and that he was not particularly supportive of the subsequent child care development proposals that had been made.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: As I remember what the President said, actually, I was quite surprised that there was very little discussion on child care. Well, of all the meetings I have been in recently with the President, I think the diversity of subjects in this meeting was outstanding and I was very proud of the intelligent way in which the women discussed everything from inflation to abortion, amnesty and, very briefly, child care.

And the President said that he had supported child care in the past, that he had reservations about massive, perhaps impersonal child care systems, but it was something that he was concerned with, particularly for the working woman and that he would be looking into this matter further.

Is that a fair summation, would you say, Rhea?

MS. HAMMER: Yes.

Q What was discussed on abortion, since you brought it up?

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MRS. ARMSTRONG: There was diversity of viewpoints on abortion -- a little bit in the Ford family. But, particularly, one of the Catholic women's groups there spoke out strongly against abortion. The President reiterated his stand that he felt that it should be a matter left to the States in his view.

Others were pro what has generally been called "liberalized abortion".

Again, we did not get into an in-depth discussion of abortion. I would say the item that we spent the most time talking about was inflation. There was unanimity here that those women's leaders, representing 65 or 70 million women, wanted to enlist and help the President and the Congress in the battle against inflation.

And they asked for guidance from the President on how they could put this tremendous woman power represented there -- people power, person power -- to work in the number one problem of our time.

And the President stated that at the summit conference yesterday, a thread of conversation that had gone throughout it was: How do we enlist the patriotic urge of individual Americans to be aware of the seriousness of the problem, and then to take action against it?

And he reported to our women leaders that there is a task force working on how to make the problem understandable to our people and how to motivate our people to want to tighten our belts and, as one person put it, not only for the good of this country. I think Dorothy Height said, we are prepared to change our living habits, to conserve more energy, to exercise restraint in the purchase of other short items, to increase productivity; and, as another woman put it, not only will this help our country, but this will help the other citizens in need across the world.

Q Did the President make any commitment about their request to enlist more women in top Government decision-making roles?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes, he did. He stated it not only in this meeting but he reported to them on some prior meetings he has had with Congresswomen and top women appointees of the Administration, and said that was a top priority of his and something Mrs. Ford was interested in, too.

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Mrs. Ford did come at the beginning and greet us and then she left to get ready to go to Alabama.

Q What was discussed on International Women's Year specifically?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Actually we had gotten into that but the President was a little late because of having attended the services for General Abrams, but he did end up giving us double the time that we thought we would get.

It was supposed to be a half hour meeting but ended up being about an hour.

I didn't answer your question yet; I am being long-winded. Excuse me.

I led a discussion for all of us about International Women's Year before the President came in. There seemed to be consensus that all of them wanted to get their organizations involved in it and the President did mention it briefly in passing.

Q Did he respond to their request that they meet again with him?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Even better; he brought it up.

Q That he wanted to meet with them again?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: He said there will be subsequent meetings of this group and he is the one that announced that. I hadn't asked him about it, the women had not asked about it at the meeting and, of course, I am very pleased to hear that.

Q May I ask a question about a task force to recruit women?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Not actually a task force. It is a very informal one. The President has given me the responsibility -- about a week or ten days ago -- to work closely with Governor Scranton in recruiting or promoting women for top policy-level positions in Government. Now this is just part of the story, as was brought out today.

Yes, policy-level positions for women are vital. There have not been enough of them, but today it was emphasized correctly that all levels, beginning with hiring at the lower levels, training, upward mobility -- these things are all important and these things I will be addressing, too.

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Now Vera had one here.

Q I wanted to ask Ms. Bowden and Ms. Hammer whether the President, aside from his commitments to move women into high positions, gave any other commitments in your view?

MS. BOWDEN: Well, I think we had the complete assurance that he has this uppermost in his mind. He pointed out, of course, the position that Anne Armstrong holds on his staff, and I think he related it to a Cabinet-level position in the planning for his Administration.

We have volunteered to give to him information on outstanding women throughout the country and we did represent quite a wide, diverse group here today, and we plan to follow up on that and certainly, if he knows who the qualified people are, that he will appoint them on that basis.

He did assure us that it would be on the basis of their ability and not on the basis of their political standing.

Q I probably didn't state the question correctly. What I wanted to know was did he make commitments in any other areas aside from these appointments?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: The subject of legislation to help topple the remaining barriers to equality for women was brought up and he pointed out that the recent housing and communities bill which he had signed with its provisions against discrimination in mortgage credit for women was the kind of thing he was very much in favor of. And that this is the kind of legislation he would like to see to remove these remaining -- what would you say -- inequities.

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Q Mrs. Armstrong, absent from this group were either of the two flag-ranking women members of the Armed Services, and to date, there are fewer than 100 in total women physicians in the Armed Services of this country. My question is, is there any interest in expanding the role of the woman physician in the actual delivery of health care, either in or out of uniform, to date?

My own great-grand aunt was Mary Edward Walker, the Civil War Women's Suffragette physician, who was the only woman ever to hold the Congressional Medal of Honor in the Civil War. That is why I asked that question.

I wonder what changes we have made in 100 years.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: As to why a woman of the highest rank in the military was not present, this was not the make-up of this meeting. These were the leaders of the major women's organizations in the country. With very few exceptions, they were chosen on the basis of the size of their membership. There just isn't a big enough Cabinet Room around to get in all the women leaders the President would like to have met with.

He did make a few exceptions for some of the newer women's organizations -- the more activist women's organizations, such as the Caucus, NOW, We'll, because these were the voices, though still not large in membership, he wanted to hear.

Now, I am not familiar enough with what the Defense Department or the Services have in mind for bringing in and promoting more women in the medical professions. It is something that I would be delighted to look into and if you will give me a call, I will surely do so.

Q In regard to recruiting women for top-level Government jobs, could you tell us, is this a continuation of the operation that occurred during the Nixon Administration with Barbara Franklin? Was that operation dismantled? Is that "talent bank" still there?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: No, that talent bank is very much still there. I think what we have got here, though, as a tremendous boost to our effort, is the prestige of the President of the United States saying, shortly after he is sworn in, publicly saying to Governor Scranton, who is doing a special mission for the President, particularly at top levels, that he wants women to be a priority. So he has repeated with each group of women with whom he has met that this is something that he is intent on doing.

He has assigned me to help him carry it out, working with Governor Scranton. And as I say, we also want to work on the mid-levels, the lower levels, because we know for the long pull that is the way women get ahead because, if we don't have that pool to draw on, if they are held back at a lower level, well, we are not going to have enough women to draw from to make a real dent at the top.

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Q Mrs. Armstrong, do you recall when Lyndon Johnson became President he said he wanted to get 50 top women. Did President Ford say anything about numbers?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: No, President Ford has never mentioned any numbers. He just has said that he is determined to pare down, to cut the fat out of the Federal bureaucracy and that he will cut the overall numbers. He wants to see the proportion of women increase, nevertheless.

Q Two questions about the ERA. One, what has the President said that he wants to do specifically to seek adoption in five more States; and two, if we could have, from either of the women organizations, what are the five states that are the most likely, the best possibilities?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Why don't I answer the first part and then give your assessment. Rhea comes from one that we think is a darned good possibility.

The President was asked the question whether he would campaign for the ERA or whether Mrs. Ford might campaign for the ERA. He said he would take that under advisement. He said he hoped that the fact that he had publicly affirmed his stand for it and, of course, so has Mrs. Ford, I believe. I hope that that in itself will give a big, forward thrust to the chances for ratification.

The slogan we heard today was "Five in Seventy-five." The five remaining States for 1975. Rhea, why don't you give us your -- and, of course, may I say here, that Marie Bowden, on my right, has put tremendous time, dedication and now tremendous money into the ERA battle.

The BPW has raised \$250,000 to put into the fight for ratification of the ERA, so I think we should hear from both these women who have been in the forefront of this movement.

MS. BOWDEN: Thank you, Anne.

The business and professional women, 170,000 strong across the United States, believe so strongly in the principles of equal rights for all people that during the past year, they raised more than \$250,000 to ensure the ratification of the 38 States.

We have listed some seven or eight of the 17 remaining States that we think are possibilities. However, we are bringing to Washington in the middle of October a representative from each of the 17 States who have not yet ratified. We have asked them to bring with them specific, detailed, documented records of how the legislators voted and at that time, we will select, and then we will have a paid lobbyist, if you will, who will help us in the key States that that group selects as the most likely.

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I could name a number that seem perhaps good targets for us but, until we have that complete review, I prefer not to say which ones the five might be.

Thank you.

Q What was the date of the meeting?

MS. BOWDEN: October 12.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Would you like to add to that, Rhea?

MS. HAMMER: Only that in Illinois, we were two or three votes short of getting it out of committee.

There is a challenge to the constitution of the State -- we have a new constitution -- saying that three-fifths should not be the rule, but two-thirds. It is presently in the Judiciary, so, when we get a ruling on that, we have to strategize from there.

Q What is your assessment of what the key States might be, other than Illinois?

MS. HAMMER: They say Illinois is the key State, that if Illinois goes, so will Indiana and others around us.

MS. BOWDEN: I think we did come to one conclusion, some of us, in talking here in Washington last night and today. It is no longer a legislative battle in the Equal Rights Amendment, but it is a political battle and the information we are gathering in the 17 States will enable us to essentially, if someone is against the ERA, we expect to support their opponent. I think it is this kind of a battle. We are told that North Dakota is a very likely State, Florida certainly is, it was defeated in Florida by only two votes. However, there are changes in the legislatures and our women across the country in these States are out working for the opposition of the people who voted against the Equal Rights Amendment.

And I think when we see the results of some of that, then we will know more definitely where our States are. There is a cluster of States around the St. Louis area, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Indiana, Illinois, and those are certainly key States that we will work in.

Q Mrs. Bowden, when you ask the politicians at the national level or the State level, and then politicians of both Parties that have taken stands on the abortion issue, when you ask them why they favor it as being a matter of State's responsibility, what do they say to you?

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MS. BOWDEN: On the abortion issue, is that what you are asking?

Q Why do they think the States ought to handle that issue?

MS. BOWDEN: We have not, as an organization, taken a position on abortion. We have just recently added it as a study item on our platform and I cannot speak for that issue for my organization.

Q Anne, could you answer that question? What is the rationale for making that a State issue? Was that George McGovern's position?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: I don't know, because different individuals would have a different rationale. I guess the one I hear most often is that people in this country believe we are a Federal system and they believe that, whenever possible, Governmental decisions should be made at the State or local level. But I think it would depend on the individual to whom you were talking.

Now, on ERA, there was disagreement in the meeting on it. I guess the main argument given to the President against it was fear that it would weaken family ties and the President stated he did not believe it would weaken family ties, he believed a strong family life was extremely important in the United States and he did not think that ERA would in any way diminish it.

There was some talk of amnesty and disagreement here.

I thought it was interesting, though, that the two heads of the women's Auxiliaries of major Veterans group -- let's see, we had the American Legion and the VFW -- they stated their hope that -- let's see if I can remember the words -- well, both of them spoke, but in essence, what they ended with saying, though they had deep concern in their organizations that the sacrifices of men would not be forgotten, yet they said -- both of them said -- Mr. President, whatever your decision is, we are sure we have faith that it is going to be the right one and both of them expressed their strong, general support for the President.

Q Anne, you mean in this meeting today, there was some disagreement on ERA?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes, there was.

Q Some women's group against its passage?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: Yes.

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Q Which groups were they?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: The head of the Catholic women. What is the exact title?

Q National Council of Catholic Women.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: National Council of Catholic Women and the DAR and perhaps others who didn't have a chance to speak on it. Those were two who spoke on it.

Q And they spoke against the passage of ERA?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: They did, and they gave their fears, and in general, they were weakening of family ties or the feeling that it was not necessary, that there were better ways. Neither said that they did not feel there was no longer discrimination against women. There is discrimination against women, they said. They disagreed as to the best method to eradicate it.

Q On the amnesty issue, were you saying that the head of the two Veterans organization Auxiliaries were saying that they would support the President?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: They said that they had faith that his decision would be in the best interests of the country. They did not support in advance any specific decision. We don't know what his decision is going to be. But they did express very strong support for him in general and their faith that his decision would be the right one.

Q Is this his decision on abortion or amnesty?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: No, amnesty.

Q As the President's top woman adviser, what is your position on abortion?

MRS. ARMSTRONG: My position on abortion is that the Supreme Court has spoken. We should abide by that decision. We have had it just over a year and to my knowledge, it is working fairly well.

Q You are not concerned that, if we do let this whole abortion question wind up as a matter of States' responsibility, that we could wind up in this country with a situation in which you have a few abortion mills being run something on the order of divorce mills and that this issue would simply never die? That there would be forces rise up in the abortion mills State to try to strike it down, that this situation would be just an endless turmoil?

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MRS. ARMSTRONG: I won't try to prophesy on that because realistically, I think the Supreme Court decision is going to stand.

I think we had better end up now.

Thank you.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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(AT 2:00 P.M. EDT)