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JANUARY 13, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
ROGERS C. B. MORTON

THE BRIEFING ROOM

4:18 P.M. EST

MR. NESSEN: In response to popular demand, Rog has come out to answer your questions that I couldn't quite manage this morning.

MR. MORTON: I will do the best I can with your questions. Maybe we ought to go right into it. I guess the statement was released this morning. I am going to try to help the President in his role of being President.

Q How are you going to do that?

MR. MORTON: I am going to continue to serve on both the Executive Committee of the Economic Policy Board and I am going to stay on the Energy Resources Council, and I am going to try to bring about 20 years of Government experience to him.

I think he wants people to confer with on policy issues and on political issues that he is comfortable with and that have had some experience, and I am hopeful -- I think I made a contribution in this area during the time I was in Interior and in the time I have been in Commerce, and I think I can continue to make the contribution without all of the additional pressures of the administrative side of both of those big departments, which I have been in for the last several years, as you know, and in the Cabinet five years, since January 29, 1971.

Q Is it your understanding or would you describe your political duties here at the White House as being incidental?

MR. MORTON: I think that the political duties will be a concentration of those political duties now being carried out by other members of the staff. Dick Cheney has had a running liaison communication with the campaign community -- Bo Callaway's committee. There has been a normal communication between Bob Hartmann, for example, and the National Committee.

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I think these duties would be concentrated into one shop, which I am very happy to do, and I don't think they are incidental in the sense of their importance, but I don't think they are going to be overwhelming in the sense of their consumption of time on my part.

I am not going to get into the management of the campaign. I have not thought of that. However, I think the President has to have some vehicle through which he can communicate with his campaign and also as party leader with the National Committee. I am a very logical person, having been Chairman of the National Committee and having been involved in campaigns, to do that.

Q Do you expect to do any speech making?

MR. MORTON: Yes, I hope to.

Q Political speech making?

MR. MORTON: I think good politics is good government and I think obviously I am for the President. I would certainly make speeches that would advocate his policies. I have never been the kind of partisan that has in any way tried to destroy my fellow man, but I have always felt that the people, your audience, should have a feeling that you are excited and enthusiastic about what you are trying to sell and what we are trying to sell here is the policies of the President and the President himself, and I don't think there is anything wrong with that.

If that is what a political speech is, I certainly will make them. But if I make political speeches in the sense I am going to fund raisers and that sort of thing, under the rules I have been following, the expenses and all the other travel and things pertinent thereto will not be charged to the Government.

Q How do you think he is doing in his head-to-head with Reagan?

MR. MORTON: I think he is doing very well. I drove all the way up the other day from Dade County, having met with some good political types in Dade County at a dinner. It was just a social dinner. Then I drove up. I had to go to Jacksonville and so with National Airlines on strike the most convenient way was to drive. I stopped and met with some people pretty much all day Saturday and I think he is doing well in Florida. That would be a place where you would say this is going to be the tough one, this is going to be the close one.

It is no easy thing but I think he is going to get nominated and get nominated handily but I don't think we can just do nothing about it. I think people are going to have to work.

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Q Mr. Secretary, is your taking this position evidence the President is becoming more concerned about the state of his campaign?

MR. MORTON: I don't think so. During the time Rummy was over here--Rummy and I became acquainted in the Congress. We were closely associated with Jerry Ford, the Minority Leader, and I think he is a very persuasive person. I was prepared to go back in the private sector but I think he felt there was a gap here in a kind of counseling gap, if you will, left by Rummy, and I think he felt he wanted to fill it. Also, I think he kind of wanted to get me before I got involved in the private sector, and he did. He is a pretty persuasive person.

Certainly I didn't come over here to address myself to any crises. I don't see them.

Q How is your health?

MR. MORTON: Pretty good. I am in good shape. I just went out to Stanford about six months ago and had my six-month in-depth evaluation. The doctor was pleased but not near as much as I was.

Q Sir, why should the taxpayer have to pay for a man for the President to communicate with his campaign committee?

MR. MORTON: Well, I think this is part of the American system. For example, I don't think there are any staff members of a Senatorial staff or any staff members of a Congressional staff that should not and are not involved in the Member's political activity -- the Member's effort to get re-elected. This is part of the American system.

You can't separate Government from politics and I think it would be an impingement upon the Government if the President said, "Now look, all you fellows are sterilized against any communication with the Ford For President Committee" and he had to drop the important matters of State and get on the phone with Bo Callaway or Stu Spencer and deal with the details of the campaign. I think that would be a terrible misuse of the President's time.

Q That is not the question. Why don't you just let the campaign committee pay your salary, Mr. Morton? You could still do the same service for the President.

MR. MORTON: I don't know whether you should have people working in the White House advising the President on Governmental matters that are paid by external revenue sources.

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This is the way it has always been. I am not defending it -- it is a difficult question -- but I believe that you would have more of a conflict in interest if you accepted funds from an external source whether it be the campaign committee, General Electric or anybody else.

It seems to me that the people who advise the President -- and I don't think you can separate political issues from Government issues -- shouldn't receive their funds from external sources. I think you would have a bad tug of war in terms of interests in the White House. It is a tough one.

If you could separate it cleanly, if you could say now that is political and that is Governmental, I think you could say you mustn't cross this line. But the nature of the beast in a free economy and a free society and a place where the people will establish Government through our electoral process, there is no way to separate it that way, so I think you actually would be in more of a conflict of interest position if you came in here and developed a loyalty to this institution and to the President but were paid by funds from the outside, the source of which you don't entirely know.

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Q You go along with Mr. Nessen's characterization of your job, that you are mainly here as an energy and economic adviser rather than as a political adviser?

MR. MORTON: I think I am here as an overall adviser to the President. The experience I have had in the EPB -- the Economic Policy Board -- the energy field, the resource management field and the economic development field in Government over the last five years -- previous to that on the Ways and Means Committee and other committees of the House of Representatives -- provides me with enough background to advise the President in an overall sense, and to take a matter that he can assign to me, look at it, evaluate it and give him my best judgment on whether it is a good way to go or whether it should be a different way to go or what have you.

Q Mr. Secretary, I think the problem some of us are having is, first of all, they talked about Mr. Scranton coming in here. Now he is an independently wealthy man, and I don't think there was too much talk about if he had been a political adviser, he probably wouldn't have needed the money. I don't know if you are independently wealthy or not. Maybe you do need the money.

MR. MORTON: I don't like this pay cut I am taking.

Q The fact is, all the talk around the White House and with the election committee has been that the President needed a political liaison man, not that he needed another counsellor or energy or economic adviser. He seemed to have plenty of those.

It seems this job has been created for you so that you can advise him on political matters.

MR. MORTON: I think the job -- obviously if you have a person who has had a certain kind of experience, that you would use that person in a way to maximize the values of his experience. I certainly have a very, very high evaluation and degree of admiration for Governor Scranton. I think he is a wonderful person.

I don't feel that in any way I was competing with Governor Scranton for this job. It took a lot of persuasion to get me to come here under these circumstances because I did feel that at 61 I was ready to kind of go back into the private sector and now I have had to turn that around.

I do it because I think the country is important, the President is important, and I am a loyal citizen. But, I don't feel that this has been created for me. If it has been created just for me, it is totally a waste of time because I am here to make a contribution. This is no sinecure for me.

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Q Mr. Morton, how do you feel about President Ford's present political image, the accuracy of it, the inaccuracy of it, the fact he is rated at less than 50 percent acceptance in doing his job, the fact that Ronald Reagan was polled ahead of him in the New Hampshire primary? How do you feel overall about the Ford political image as now perceived by the public?

MR. MORTON: I think the public -- as you know, national leaders have vacillated in the mathematical interpretation of their image. I have a tremendous personal admiration for this man. I just feel a strength of character and devotion to duty that he has.

I feel that he is not being accurately portrayed. I understand this. I have been in politics long enough to be a realist about it, and I am in hopes that we can shore up those areas where it is weak.

I don't think fundamentally the artists who have been painting this picture have had the man and his job just as precisely in focus perhaps as they could have or should have.

I think he has been a victim of circumstance, the circumstance being that he has come into the office under a very difficult nonelection situation. I think those of us who are loyal to him, those of us who are Republicans and who want to get him re-elected, have got our work cut out for us, and that goes for everybody.

That goes for his friends in the Congress. That goes for his friends across the Nation because, obviously, there is some work to do. But, I think we are fortunate in having President Ford in this country at this time, and when you compare him in substance with all the other offerings, you have a great sense of confidence that the best man we have for the job is in the job.

Q Sir, without questioning your expertise on economic, energy and other domestic matters, do you think you would be getting this job if it weren't also for your political expertise?

MR. MORTON: I don't know. I don't think I would want the job necessarily unless I could give him some overall advice, unless I could make a contribution to the President, that I could help him through putting an experienced, political and governmental judgment to the problems that he faces.

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Obviously, I am not speaking or going after the job. This is not anything that is being made for me to get me to the point of time when I can draw a Government pension.

So, I think it is from my overall, previous, historical relationship with the President. I know him well. I am easy for him to talk with, to consult with, to share with a problem. This is an easy thing, from that point of view, and I have had a broad experience, including a political experience.

Q Mr. Secretary, in accepting the job, when the President asked you to take it, was there any discussion about how long you would remain in this post? Is it your intention to leave, for example, after the election?

MR. MORTON: I don't know. I don't want to drive any spikes in a calendar, and I think it will depend on (a) how I feel then and (b) what kind of contribution I have been able to make. I am not looking at the election as being, "Well, that is the day I am done because that is primarily what I am here for."

I just feel at 61 I can make a contribution and still a couple of years from now I can do some other things. I don't have any page on the calendar based on the election.

Q Did you discuss this with the President? Did you say, "I will take this job, but only for a few months"?

MR. MORTON: No. I don't think I ought to burden the President with my personal plans. He asked me if I felt well enough to do it, and I do feel well. I said, "I think I can, if you really want me to do this." I finally said, "I will do it." He said, "I really want you to do it."

I think it is a matter, too, of sort of filling the gap that maybe in a personal way that maybe Rummy had here because he could talk to him about personalities in the Congress and things in the Congress and background in the Congress that I have a similar thing.

I am not here to say, "Well, I am going to get the guy elected and then I am going to go off and peddle my papers." I don't feel that way.

Q Are you going to do a lot of public speaking in the President's behalf?

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MR. MORTON: It would be hard for me not to. I get invited to a lot, and I think I would do it to the limit that it was tasteful and the limit it was effective and to the limit of time that I find I can do it. I am not one of these itinerant, back-on-the-back-of-the-wagon guys. The fact is, I just don't like to travel that much. If you are six feet six you don't like to sleep in too many strange beds.

Q What do you think of the job Callaway has done?

MR. MORTON: I am a Callaway fan. I think Bo has done a good job. I think Bo has made some mistakes, which he admits to. I think the experience of getting this thing started and bringing in good professionals, like Stu Spencer, has gotten the campaign going.

I think if you compare it to any of the other campaigns, Democratic or Republican, Mr. Reagan's or any of the Democratic candidates, I think you will say that is the best organized and the best. I think we are getting better every day, and the campaign is on the way back.

I am all for Bo, and I am going to help him and support him in every way I can. I am delighted the President has every confidence in him.

Q Didn't you wince a little bit when he revealed he called over here at the White House and asked them if it wouldn't be a nice idea to delay the Gurney retrial?

MR. MORTON: I was on vacation and didn't know about it until after it happened, so there was no point in wincing.

I don't know what the circumstances of that are. He may have had a good reason for doing that. I think he has a responsibility to explore ideas and he doesn't expect all of these ideas that are put forward to be gobbled up.

I don't think that was too good a one, but I have had some bad ideas myself and some of my editor friends around the country have, too.

Q Mr. Secretary, you described your role as an overall adviser. I was wondering inasmuch as we have talked politics here, isn't it fairly safe to say while you won't be managing the President's campaign that you will play a fairly significant role as a coordinator and as a liaison with the President's election committee and, in that sense, you will be playing within that framework a fairly significant role in the President's campaign?

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MR. MORTON: Let's put it this way: I think that is a good statement, not in his campaign. I think it is up to me and up to Dick Cheney and up to Bob Hartmann or any of us, if we see the campaign going in what we think is the wrong direction, not to bury our heads in the sand and say, "Oh, we can't do anything about that," but to talk to the President, advise with the President and then talk with the committees that are involved or the campaign, whatever is involved, and turn it around and move it in a different direction.

You know, the ultimate responsible person in a campaign is the candidate. He is the person who finally goes up or down as a result of it. I think it is up to his advisers to say, "We think you are doing good, or we think you are doing poorly."

If we think this is a good idea politically or that is a good idea politically, it is up to us to communicate this, not only to him, but after getting a sign-off to whoever the people involved are, whether it is a State group or national group.

I think your statement encompasses that.

Q Is there any political significance to you being assigned to Richard Nixon's old office? (Laughter)

MR. MORTON: I didn't realize it was that until somebody told me about it.

Q Are there no microphones there?

MR. MORTON: I don't know whether there are or not. Did you put any in there?

Q I have never been in there.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 4:40 P.M. EST)