

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
HUGH SCOTT
U.S. SENATOR FROM PENNSYLVANIA,
MARK O. HATFIELD,
U.S. SENATOR FROM OREGON,
JOHN J. RHODES,
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM ARIZONA,
AND
CHARLES E. WIGGINS,
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM CALIFORNIA

THE BRIEFING ROOM

9:05 A.M. EST

MR. NESSEN: As you know, the President met this morning with the Republican leaders of Congress. The primary subject of discussion was the bill to extend the life of the Federal Election Commission, so to talk about that we have the Senate Republican Leader, Senator Scott, and the House Republican Leader, Congressman Rhodes, and the two gentlemen who are managing the legislation on the Republican side, Congressman Wiggins and Senator Hatfield.

SENATOR SCOTT: I will be very brief because we had here a new bill on the Senate side as to which we had great hopes last night and it was to have been introduced by Senator Mansfield, Senator Byrd, Senator Cannon, Senator Scott, Senator Griffin and Senator Hatfield.

We think it meets many of the objections. We are very anxious to get moving with legislation but there have been voiced some objections to the bill. It was to have been filed by midnight. I do not know what the objections are, but all I can say is we will go back to the drawing board this morning and do our best to see if a compromise is not possible in the Senate.

Senator Hatfield has more details as he is managing the bill.

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CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I think it is rather interesting that the Democratic National Chairman and several of the Democratic candidates for the Presidency have asked the court to extend the life of the Commission I guess for the obvious reason that they would like to have somebody in being which can authorize payments from the Federal Treasury for candidates for the Presidency in accordance with the existing law.

I would suggest that instead of importuning the Supreme Court that they importune their own Democratic majority in the Congress to bring forth a bill which can pass and become law rather rapidly. In fact, that law, of course, or the content of that law would be a reconstitution of the Federal Election Commission in accordance with the request of the Administration.

I can't help but believe -- and I always have -- that particularly on the House side the committees are trying to deal with too many subjects at a time when the most important subject should be to reconstitute the Commission. Most of the other matters could very well await the convening of a new Congress after the election when the whole matter could be gone into with more leisure than we now have.

I would like to yield now to either Senator Hatfield or Congressman Wiggins for follow on.

SENATOR HATFIELD. I will just add the main difference at this time in the Senate seems to be between those who want to change the rules in the middle of the game and try to draft a comprehensive reform act, an act that has not yet been fully exercised through one election, and those who want to merely meet the objections of the Supreme Court to reconstitute the Election Commission.

We did have this compromise that Senator Scott mentioned which looked as though we might make it fly up until late last night which was simply a reconstituting of the Commission which included an amendment to provide for two additional independent members of the Commission to be appointed by the President and which included the Goldwater Amendment which, of course, had to be voted on -- each one of these -- on the floor on honorarium.

But this was the effort to at least float this particular kind of compromise, and if it had carried, I think, we would have had the bill settled and enacted within the next few days.

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We are now back to the drafting board which, hopefully, we can come up with a similar compromise. If not, I am sure that the public is going to have to put some kind of pressure on the Democratic majority to get some kind of action here that the President will agree to and keep the Election Commission alive.

CONGRESSMAN WIGGINS: Ladies and gentlemen, I fear that the present discussion over the Federal Election Commission is perceived by too many people as a battle for position between powerful political forces, and each is jockeying for an unconscionable advantage over the other, but I want to emphasize there are some important public interests involved. The public interest is served by elections which are honestly conducted and elections which are conducted under procedures which are fair to both sides, or to every side, I suppose I should say.

The Republicans have been trying very hard to maintain the independence of the Federal Election Commission because we see it that fairness is served by having an independent Federal Election Commission. The bills which we are confronted with, however, without any question, seriously affect the independence of that body and that is a public issue.

It is not a Republican or a Democratic issue. That is a public issue. We may or may not be successful in maintaining the independence of the FEC. That will be determined as a result of the floor action both in the House and the Senate very soon. But I do wish to suggest that that is at the bottom of this controversy.

Q Who is trying to control it? Who do they want to control it?

CONGRESSMAN WIGGINS: It is apparent to me that by granting to a partisan body, either the House or the Senate, the power to overrule decisions made by a non-partisan body would seem to me to be shifting power from an objective independent Commission to a very subjective partisan body, the House or the Senate. Now I suppose we all understand the dynamics of the accumulation and exercise of power that goes on in this town, but the public interest, I think, is going to be ill-served. And speaking as a Republican, I think that it is understandable that I would be uncomfortable if the conduct of a Federal Election and the rules under which that election will be conducted will be determined by a body dominated two to one by the other side of the political spectrum.

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SENATOR SCOTT: Could I add one thing, Chuck, because I don't think maybe it is understood what one of the problems is.

There is a hole in the present bill through which you could just about drive a small city. The bill provides for communicating with certain stockholders, employees, union employees and others. It does not cover several hundred occupations of a commercial nature, and therefore does not provide for the right to communicate on political matters with 75 million people; that is, those people who are not comprised either by union membership or stock holding.

It was an attempt, among other things, to provide some means of communicating with everybody, or on the alternative, means by which everybody could communicate with everybody else at least twice a year, in the general election and in the primaries. This is what we have been working on, and this is why we are going back to the drawing board.

But, I am sure that the First Amendment would forbid, would strike down any bill which says that everybody but 75 million people can be communicated with, and there was a general feeling that that ought to be remedied. But, I am not saying it critically.

Q When you say going back to the drawing board, what do you mean?

SENATOR SCOTT: We have a bill that was about to go in midnight last night. We are going back now to see what objections there may be to it. We are trying to do this in a spirit of good will. You will notice we are not criticizing each other on it. We know the important thing is to get a fair bill and as Congressman Wiggins said, to make sure that an independent and nonpartisan body shall have the necessary authority over elections so that that authority cannot be dangerously eroded by partisan bodies.

Q Senator Scott, what was the President's suggestion?

SENATOR SCOTT: The President urged the simple extension of the act itself to comply with the Supreme Court and felt that the sooner that could be done, the better.

Q Is there any chance of that, sir?

SENATOR SCOTT: That is what we are working on. We spent many hours yesterday. We will do our best, and the House of Representatives is doing the same thing.

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Q You mean he won't accept any additions to the bill, or any amendments?

SENATOR SCOTT: This was not a day in which the President spoke in any terms of ultimatums or ultimate action. He said, "I think that our system has these provisions in it. The court has said what you can do and what you can't do. Let's extend the bill."

Q Senator, who was it who came up with those objections before midnight last night?

SENATOR SCOTT: I am not in a position to say because I was not there. It was not myself because I was out to dinner with Senator Mansfield last night, and therefore I ought not to say where the objections came from because the mere interposition of the objection by somebody might have been for somebody else and it would not be fair.

I think you will have to sort of dig that out, and meanwhile we will try to see if there is the kind of objection which we can meet.

Q Do you think the Democrats are trying to kill the bill, who are putting in the amendments?

SENATOR SCOTT: No. I think everybody wants a bill, but I think what we have to do is work out a bill that will be satisfactory to everyone. There can be unconscionable delays here, and I believe that ought to be avoided. The best way to avoid it is a simple extension of the act in accordance with the Supreme Court decision.

The Mathias amendment is an excellent one, which added two independent members because they had not been included in the original board.

Q Do any of you gentlemen have an idea when the Congress may act and produce a bill.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The Rules Committee of the House is meeting today, and presumably some sort of rule will be granted. I understand it is a rather complicated rule, and the very nature of the legislation is such that it might take several days on the floor, but the bill has been scheduled by the majority leadership for this week. We are expecting a Friday session, so it might very well be that this bill could come up either Thursday or Friday, or perhaps both days.

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Q What happens if there is no bill? Does it mean that everything collapses and that there is no longer any dispensing of Federal funds and so forth?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: Unless there is a body which has authority to certify the legitimacy of candidates for the Presidency, there is no way the Treasury can pay out funds, so either this commission would have to be reconstituted or some other body would have to be given that authority by law so that the funds could be paid out.

That, of course, is the crush that I think is developing insofar as the Democratic Members of the House and Senate are concerned. Their candidates seem to be much more worried about the Federal payouts than the Republican candidates.

SENATOR SCOTT: We have got the bread, but we mislaid the address of the bakery.

Q Did you all discuss anything else with the President besides this?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: The stripmining bill came up for discussion. Of course, the stripmining bill has been passed once by both Houses, vetoed and now has been brought back with only very minor changes, which we think do not constitute sufficient changes to take the bill out from under the rule against reconsideration in the same session or same Congress.

I can tell you very frankly that if the rule is granted, that there will be a point of order made against the bill being considered on the floor on the basis that it constitutes reconsideration of the same bill on the same Congress.

Q Did you talk politics today, primaries, North Carolina?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, the only thing that was mentioned about primaries was there were various persons who wished the President good luck today.

Q Gentlemen, you did not get into this proposed legislation for wire tapping, did you?

SENATOR SCOTT: 11:00 for that, there is another meeting here at 11:00.

Q Are all of you coming back?

SENATOR SCOTT: I am coming back.

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CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I shall return.

Q Did the President comment at all on Secretary Kissinger's speech in Dallas last night with regard to warnings to Cuba?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, he did not.

Q Senator Scott, if the House acts Thursday or Friday, when would the Senate act?

SENATOR SCOTT: It all depends on whether the misgivings which must have occurred -- this was all a mystery to me even as I walked down here. Senator Mansfield and I did not know this at 10:00 last night. But, wherever these misgivings are, if they can be patched up, we can move with reasonable expedition.

There will be some people who will want an hour or two to talk on their amendments. Senator Allen, for example, has at least one amendment. We could act rather expeditiously somewhere between two and three days. If, however, the objections are serious, then we may well be unable to get a bill at all, so you see, it depends on our finding out when we get back to the Hill exactly what happened on the way to the forum.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 9:25 A.M. EST)