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THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
JOSEPH LUNS
SECRETARY GENERAL OF NATO

THE BRIEFING ROOM

12:00 NOON EDT

MR. NESSEN: The President met this morning with the North Atlantic Council, consisting of the permanent representatives to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Brussels, and we have with us this morning the Secretary General of NATO, Mr. Joseph Luns, and I think he spoke to you last year and described his meeting with the President at that time and would like to report to you this morning on the meeting he has just concluded. The meeting lasted about one hour.

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: Gentlemen, as you just heard, in my capacity as President of the NATO Council and Secretary General of the organization, we had the privilege to have a meeting with the President, which lasted an hour.

The Council went to Norfolk, Virginia, first, on Sunday, and is proceeding tonight to Halifax, Canada, to return on Friday to Brussels.

It is always a very good thing that members of the Council do get directly into contact with the leaders, political and military, of their greatest ally.

Let me say what I am not going to do. I was warned by an aide of the White House. They said, "You are not expected to formally endorse President Ford in the coming election," and so I am not doing that.

But, having made that rather flippant remark, I would say that we covered quite a few subjects. First of all, the situation of the United States itself, all of the allies have noted the improvement in the economic posture of the United States, which well compares to nearly all of the allies.

Secondly, if I may use the word, the recovery from the sense of disaffection which you felt two or three years ago in the United States and the fact that the Bicentennial was such a signal of success and this country has regained its unity of purpose.

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Then, of course, the voices which were so loud two or three years ago about withdrawing troops of the United States from Europe have become very muted indeed, and the United States' commitment to the defense of the United States and the whole Alliance on the first line in Europe has been underlined by the fact that two combat brigades have been added to the strength of the allied troops in Germany.

Then, of course, there was some talk about events which have occurred in China. I won't say much about it. The mission of the Secretary of State to Africa was also discussed.

We talked about the Southern flank, the Middle East situation, and Lebanon, Spain, and developments in Portugal. And, having indicated the subjects, I would say that I suggest you now put questions to me because, first of all, you have not too much time and neither have I, and secondly, it is the best way to get what you expect to hear.

Q Mr. Secretary General, you have outlined six or seven topics that you discussed in one hour with the President --

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: Well, we had an hour with Helmut Sonnenfeldt to start with.

Q I wanted to find out how you can explore in depth with the President of the United States any one of these, let alone six or eight of them in one hour -- a mission in the Middle East, developments in Portugal with the Soares Government. Just how far did you go? Did you just fly low over these?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: Let me say with due modesty, the members of the Council are aware and know, by the consultative process which takes place every week in the Atlantic Council, of the developments, so we start from the last situation and we don't have to go into a whole lecture on China's politics or on the situation in the Middle East.

We were informed of the last developments, how, for instance, the SALT conversations might be solved or not. In other words, first there is the discussion at the State Department, which will be continued at luncheon at the State Department, and then with the President. That was between a number of people who were absolutely conversant with all of the details of the various problems, and here and there an Ambassador would shed a special light on the position of his own country; for instance, as in Spain, where we all know how things are. That is my reply.

Q What is the situation about Spain being admitted to NATO?

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SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: May I say that all of the countries of NATO applaud the bilateral agreement between the United States and Spain, which they all see as a strengthening of the defensive power of the allies -- indirectly, of course. Secondly, all of the countries of the Alliance have welcomed and are happy with the changes which occurred in Spain after the disappearance of Generalissimo Franco. Thirdly, quite a few members of the Alliance would now be ready to discuss special links between Spain and NATO membership of Spain with NATO, as well as with the European community.

But the consensus is still lacking. There are also countries who in principle are ready to admit Spain, but think that the process of democratization must be pursued further, especially to see when and how the situation will be after the general elections.

That is the present situation. You see, I said that in exactly one minute and a half.

Q Earlier this year there was a lot of concern in NATO about Italy and the Italian elections and the resultant Communists in the government. Did you discuss Italy at all today and are you relieved that the Communist participation isn't what has been feared?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: No, we did not discuss Italy, because it was discussed quite deeply before. When you talked about satisfaction, there is of course satisfaction that there is now a new democratic government under Senor Andreotti. As to future developments, it is anybody's guess.

Q Was there any discussion with the President about Jimmy Carter's statements about thoughts of withdrawal of American troops from overseas?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: No. I think both the President and members of the Council felt that we should not go into what the other candidate might or might not have been saying.

Q Was there some discussion of the reliability of America's commitment to having troops overseas in Europe?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: No, apart from the fact that we took note of the voices which were rather loud, as I say, and which were in favor of withdrawal of part of the American troops, they have become muted and, on the contrary, the presence of American combat troops in Western Europe has been increased.

Q Is it still 300,000?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: Yes.

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Q Has there been any inhibitions on the part of the Europeans and members of NATO in purchasing American arms due to the Lockheed scandals and such dealings, sir?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: No. Well, I may sound cynical, but generally it is not assumed that Lockheed or, for that matter, only American companies, have had a custom to try to get orders by some means which are not altogether admirable. So, the situation is still as it was before, I would say. But, of course, we all hope that those practices about which you know will cease little by little.

Q You didn't mention the SALT negotiations among the subjects discussed. Does this mean that the SALT negotiations are not the subject of burning issue?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: It was discussed. I mentioned it in passing. It was discussed.

Q Have you got the impression that the SALT agreement could be completed before the end of the year?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: If the Soviet Union did all it could to reach an agreement, certainly it could be done. But, I doubt whether it will be done, and I think it will not. I think the Soviet Union is waiting for the elections.

Q In your estimation, Mr. Secretary General, has the Soviet threat to Western Europe increased or decreased or is it about the same as it was when NATO was founded?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: When NATO was founded --

Q Or any kind of comparison that you want to use.

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: When NATO was founded, NATO was very weak in conventional arms and the Soviets were very strong. But, there was an immense advantage in the monopoly of the atomic arsenal by the United States of America which was an absolute deterrent. Still, I would say that, ladies and gentlemen, it is the uncertainty of whether or not the United States will use strategic nuclear arms in a conflict that gives the guarantees for peace. There is that uncertainty.

In the military field, the Soviets have increased substantially their conventional forces, but, due to the defection with China, their conventional forces in Europe have not increased as much as they could have. There are nearly one million men in Asia near the frontiers of China, and very strong ballistic forces, too.

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The Soviet Union in the naval sphere is the most dangerous development, because the Soviet Union, being a land power and being in the fortunate position that it does not need any imports overseas in time of crisis or war but for a small amount of bauxite -- and I submit you can go on living without a small amount of bauxite -- the Soviet Union's fleet is in essence an offensive weapon and it is expendable.

Q Compared to a few years ago, three years ago or five years ago, could you assess the Soviet threat or can you compare it?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: There are worrying points and there are good points as in all situations. The Soviet Union's intentions, as we see it, are not to commit aggression to Western Europe but intentions can change rather quickly. The capability is there and there may be changes in government and there may exist crises and they may make a mistake as Hitler did, as you know, in 1939, and we have to take into account the capability.

In the conventional as well as in the field of nuclear weapons, there has been an increase in the Soviet arsenal. There is a rather favorable development.

The great schism between China and the Soviet Union does not seem to have abated. The agricultural position of the Soviet Union, even if this year's crop will be rather good -- and it seems that it will be rather good -- remains shaky, and the Soviet Union relies heavily upon imports. That, of course, is not inducive to aggression, if you have to feed your population with grain from other countries.

Finally, the Soviet Union has had some setbacks -- I am thinking of the Middle East -- and also they have had some successes -- I am thinking of Angola. So, as long as the Alliance remains and retains its cohesion, as long as the European Alliance and the United States remain united in the transatlantic field, I feel fairly confident that we shall not have a crisis which might lead to war in the foreseeable future.

Q Did the President give you an assessment of Dr. Kissinger's trip to South Africa and the potential there for his success?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: I can say this: The President explained the situation in Rhodesia and Southwest Africa has become so explosive that the United States felt that they had to make at least an effort to try to diffuse this situation, and he could not say at this moment whether the mission of Dr. Kissinger would succeed.

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He said that not only the United States but the other allies should continue their endeavors to try to find a formula under which a frightful situation might be avoided in that part of the world while maintaining, of course, the overall stand of the United States with regard to the rights of the African majority in South Africa and the necessity for Southwest Africa to become independent as soon as possible. In that respect, there has been progress, because Namibia will become independent within two years.

Q Are the NATO countries willing to contribute to a safety net fund?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: It is a little too early to be able to discuss that.

Q It hasn't been discussed in NATO?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: Not in the Council yet, but there have been bilateral approaches.

Q To all of the NATO members?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: I don't think to all, but to some of them. But it might come before the Council.

Q When might it come before the Council? At the next meeting of the Council?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: I don't think so. That meeting is scheduled for next week, on Wednesday.

Q What is your present assessment of the chances of Mr. Kissinger to succeed?

SECRETARY GENERAL LUNS: First of all, it is not very important what my personal assessment is. We are too much aware of all of the pitfalls and all of the difficulties to dare to give now an assessment that he will succeed. But, if ever a man could succeed, then it is our considered opinion that the present Secretary of State is the man to succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen, it was my pleasure. As you know, I am going to Halifax and then I will be in Northern Norway Saturday-next.

So, join NATO and see the world -- the worthwhile part of the world, I should say.

END (AT 12:25 P.M. EDT)