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NEWS CONFERENCE

#131

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:08 P.M. EST

JANUARY 24, 1975

FRIDAY

MR. NESSEN: It is a slow day, here, at the White House.

The President came in to work at 7:50 a.m. and held his usual meetings in the morning with members of his staff. His only appointment today is at 4:30 p.m., when he will go over to Room 450 of the EOB to speak to about 150 radio and TV news directors, who have come to Washington for a series of briefings on the President's energy and economic programs. These are members of the Radio and TV News Directors' Association, and they are receiving briefings today from Bill Simon, Bill Seidman, Alan Greenspan, Frank Zarb and Secretary Lynn.

The President will, as I say, go there at 4:30 p.m., and if you want to go over and watch the President speak at 4:30, you can go.

Q Will there be a prepared text?

MR. NESSEN: There will be a prepared text.

You might have to stand up, but we will have a prepared text. We will take a poll over beforehand.

Q What time, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: What time will we have the prepared text? Bill just got it a few minutes ago.

Q Can we do sound?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, you can do sound and film, if you want to.

Q Questions and answers?

MR. NESSEN: No, it is a little talk he is making to them.

MORE

#131

Q He is not going to take questions? They seem to feel he is.

MR. NESSEN: It is hard to tell with him. (Laughter.) He might. I don't know. There can hardly be anything left to ask.

You can film the briefing, and if you only want to film the President, you still have to be in there early. If you want to film all the briefings that go before the President gets there, you can do that, or if you want to film only the President, you can do that, but in either case, you need to have your cameras and sound equipment set up by 1:30 p.m.

You can start setting up now. The reason for that is that you need to set up before the briefing starts so you do not disrupt the meeting. The White House Press Pass will get you in, and if you do not have one, you can call Jerry Warren's office for clearance, which is 456-2863 -- the Seventeenth Street entrance.

The text should be ready by 2 o'clock.

Now, as we told you before, the President is going to Bethesda Naval Hospital tomorrow for his annual physical checkup. We will have a protective travel pool to go out and back. If you are on the pool, you should be here at 7 o'clock in the morning.

Q Do you have the pool?

MR. NESSEN: I have it. It is AP, UPI, AP Photos, UPI Photos -- and Phil, the good news is (Laughter) -- CBS correspondent and CBS camera crew and sound technician, Time Magazine and the Baltimore Sun.

He is going to leave here about 7:30 a.m. or a little after 7:00 a.m.

Q Is he driving?

MR. NESSEN: Sure. The examination is expected to take about three hours. When we get back here -- we hope, shortly after getting back here, we will have a preliminary statement on the results of his examination. Dr. Lukash will do the examination, with the help of the hospital staff. If it seems necessary, we would have Dr. Lukash here tomorrow afternoon to take your questions.

The President's other plan for tomorrow is to go to a dinner at the Alfalfa Club, which is at the Statler Hilton Hotel. The President has been a member for some time. There will also be a protective travel pool for that, and the President will be leaving the South Grounds by car at about 9:20 tomorrow evening, so the pool should be here at 9 o'clock.

Q Will he speak there?

MR. NESSEN: He will have some very brief remarks, which are mostly humorous in nature, but I suppose that depends on your -- humor is in the eye of the beholder, I guess. (Laughter.)

Q Is that a closed-door coverage thing?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, sir; there is no coverage of that.

Q What is the Alfalfa Club?

MR. NESSEN: It is a group of 150 members from the government, the judiciary system, the military and the business world.

The pool for that is AP and UPI and AP Photos and UPI Photos, again, CBS for the correspondent and camera crew, U. S. News and World Report and the Washington Star News.

Those are the plans tomorrow.

MORE

Q What time will he go to that?

MR. NESSEN: He leaves the South Grounds at 9:20. He will not be going to the dinner, incidentally. He will arrive at about the time dessert is served and say a few words, and he will probably be there about a total of an hour or an hour and 15 minutes.

You have a little packet of material on some appointments -- a Deputy Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, reappointment of a Marshal and a District Judge -- and that is about it.

Q Do you have any announcements on travel?

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

Q Do you have anything you can tell us about the President's plans to go out and mobilize public support for his program?

MR. NESSEN: As I said that day, he will probably go out around the country and make a couple of speeches, but I don't have any --

Q You say a couple. There are reports there might be as many as eight over a period of time.

MR. NESSEN: Over a period of time, I think he might make as many as eight speeches, but I don't see that many in the immediate future.

Q What about next week, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: There has been nothing locked up yet.

Q Can you confirm Atlanta? Can you confirm that?

MR. NESSEN: I can confirm he is considering a trip to Atlanta.

Q For what group?

MR. NESSEN: For a group called the OIC, which is the Opportunities Investment Corporation. If you remember, some of you, when he was Vice President, he went to Philadelphia to visit a similar group. It is a well-organized black self-help organization.

Q It is an industrial group.

MR. NESSEN: Opportunities Industrial Corporation, that is right.

Q And the date on that is what?

MR. NESSEN: The dates under consideration are early in February.

Q How many divisions are we sending to the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: I am surprised that anybody asked me about that this morning.

Q And where?

Q Ron, can I just ask you one thing on travel? Can you give us the Sunday travel plans before you get into this?

MR. NESSEN: Sunday travel? He has a couple of social things in the evening. I don't have the exact plans for him.

Q What time is he going to be at the National Press Club?

MR. NESSEN: I think he is going over there around --

Q What happened to those divisions?

MR. NESSEN: We will get to the divisions.

Q First things first. What is he doing at the Press Club?

MR. NESSEN: He would arrive at the Press Club at 6:23 on Sunday and stay for about 35 minutes and then go to the Kennedy Center, where he will watch a movie called, "Washington, a City Out of the Wilderness," and back again. (Laughter)

Anyhow, we will have more details of Sunday on Saturday.

Q You do not know the travel pools for Sunday?

MR. NESSEN: No, we have not worked any of that out, yet.

Q It should be CBS. (Laughter)

Q Will there be church on Sunday?

MR. NESSEN: There will be church on Sunday.

Let me get to the three divisions. I talked to Secretary Schlesinger as well as others, including the President this morning, and Secretary Schlesinger's word for this was "bunkum."

Q How do you spell that?

MR. NESSEN: B-U-N-K-U-M.

Q What does that mean?

MR. NESSEN: It means the same thing as another word with a "b" that some people around here use, too.

Seriously, the United States is not creating any Middle East expeditionary force, is not putting together three divisions to send to the Middle East, and the United States has no plans to develop any Army divisions to send to the Middle East.

Q Just so there is no semantic misunderstanding --

MR. NESSEN: Let me just say there is no semantic difference. There is no sliding around of words on this one. I want to be firm when I say this.

Q Ron, then can you say the United States is not going to send three already existing divisions to the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: For what?

Q For anything.

MR. NESSEN: There certainly are no plans to send any three divisions to the Middle East.

Q Why didn't the President say that last night?

Q Or to Europe or to overseas?

MR. NESSEN: I certainly do not know of any, Sarah.

Q How about training for desert warfare, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I am aware of.

Q Ron, you mean there are no troops at Twentynine Palms, California?

MR. NESSEN: I have no knowledge of that.

Q Ron, is the United States creating three new divisions?

MR. NESSEN: Let me just back up a minute before we get into our great semantic debate here. There is nothing tricky or -- we are not trying to slip through any semantic loopholes on this. This is a clear, firm, hard answer.

Q Is the United States creating three new divisions?

MR. NESSEN: I am told that some divisions, whose primary function now is support, are being improved or upgraded which may account for the misunderstanding about this.

Q Is this because the Army said about a year ago it was going to add three divisions to its numbers? Is that the reason this got started?

MR. NESSEN: I think how it got started is what I told John, which is that three divisions primarily concerned with support are being upgraded, and improved, and I think probably that is how this started.

Q I don't think that is what I am talking about. The Army did announce about a year ago it had to have three more divisions in its original set-up. Now they are doing that, aren't they?

MR. NESSEN: The Army has currently 13 divisions, as you know, and the Army would like three divisions created out of these support activities, and I think that is really the foundation of how this got started.

Q Secretary Schlesinger said this about a year ago, they would go up from the 13 to 16 by cutting down the number of logistics and headquarters and support groups.

MR. NESSEN: That is what I am trying to say.

Q Why didn't the President put this down last night, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Let's get into that question, if we may, and let me just give you a little history of this episode.

The January 18 issue of The New Republic carries an article by Earl C. Ravenol, who apparently is a professorial lecturer at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, in which he says -- which I don't quite understand -- "It may not be for nothing that Army planners are cranking up a three-division Middle East expeditionary force."

Now, Chancellor told the President last night, "We called the Pentagon and we got a confirmation on that." I asked John after the show who he had talked to at the Pentagon. He said that he had not really called the Pentagon, that, as he put it, a young man in his office called the Pentagon.

I said, "Who did he talk to over there," and he said, "He talked to some Major." I said, "How did the Major confirm this," and John said, "Well, he did not actually confirm it, but he did not deny it either."

Now, with that little bit of history, John told the President last night that this had been confirmed and the President and John also talked about, "It is a little unclear as to whether this is a contingency plan."

Now, the President had never heard of any three Army division expeditionary forces being created to send to the Middle East. He did not hear about it because there are not any. When John used the words "contingency plans" the President, as is the practice here and at the Pentagon and at the State Department, there is never talk or discussion of contingency plans, so he answered in that way.

What I am saying today is that I want everybody to be very sure that you understand that we are saying very firmly that there is no Middle East expeditionary force being created and no three divisions are being created to send to the Middle East.

Q Ron, are these divisions getting desert training?

MR. NESSEN: You have to talk to the Pentagon. I don't even know if they have been created yet or where they stand or anything else.

Q Ron, is this the first President to give a rationale for the United States going into another country and having conquest of that country?

MR. NESSEN: I don't understand that exactly.

Q Is this the first President -- the first one I can remember -- who has ever given a reason and discourse on how the United States might go into another country and take its resources away from it by conquest?

MR. NESSEN: You know, I and Secretary --

MORE

Q That is what I understand his talk about strangulation to mean. Now, am I wrong?

MR. NESSEN: Sarah, I have, and the President and Secretary Kissinger, at every opportunity, have tried to deal with what seems to be an oversimplification that won't go away. And I have been asked privately, on a number of occasions, why does the President keep talking about this hypothetical possibility, and my answer is, "Why do reporters keep asking him about this hypothetical possibility?"

Q This is more than hypothetical because he, himself, said it was not just hypothetical. He said, "If it happens, we will do it."

MR. NESSEN: The President said -- and I think he just urged this over and over again -- to look at the precise words that these men are using. The precise words he used were, "If it was a matter of the United States living or dying."

Now, the President and all officials of the government take an oath to uphold, defend and protect the Constitution and the country, and when it comes to a question of the United States dying, he indicated, last night, that he would feel that it was his obligation to take some action.

Q Now, this is my point; this is going beyond defense. Those other previous Presidents --

MR. NESSEN: It does go beyond defense, Sarah. It goes --

Q It says in the Constitution --

MR. NESSEN: Sarah, do you want an answer, or do you want --

Q Well, I want to explain my point before you interrupt me. I want to tell you, this is different from just defense.

MR. NESSEN: It certainly is. It is survival.

Q This is survival, and it is by conquest, the United States going into another country.

MR. NESSEN: The President said it last night, Secretary Kissinger said it and I have said it, and nobody can quite seem to understand the distinction, or read the words carefully enough, without oversimplifying them. The President said that, when it came to a question of survival, of the United States dying, that he would take what action he thought was necessary for the United States to survive.

Q Ron, I think it is a matter of record, already, but what is the percentage of our dependence on Arab oil right now? And I ask that question only to set up the question, how can we even be talking about strangulation --

MR. NESSEN: We are not talking about strangulation. That is why I say I am asked over and over again, why do we keep talking about this.

Q The President used the word "strangulation." That is why we keep talking about it.

Q Kissinger used the word first. It was not used by reporters, Ron.

MR. NESSEN: But why does the question keep getting asked?

Q Because it is a very serious matter. I would like to ask how could the U. S. be strangled by a loss of what I would call 15 percent of its oil that we now waste?

MR. NESSEN: Kissinger gives the same answer every time he is asked the question. The President gives the same answer, and I give the same answer, and the same answer is also going to be given because it is the fact of the matter. And I suppose that every reporter that has a chance to talk to the President can ask the same question and will ask the same question and will get the same answer.

Now, the amount of oil that comes from the Arab countries -- this is as of November, and it has gone up somewhat since then. America's imported oil is 6 million barrels a day. Sixty-three percent of that comes from the OPEC countries; that is 3,760,000 barrels of oil. The 37 percent of the imported oil comes from non-OPEC countries, amounting to 2,240,000 barrels of oil a day.

MORE

Q I am not trying to belabor anything, but I am asking seriously, if you take this total as against our total oil consumption per day, the percentage is not all that high, and the question becomes, how can we even discuss the possibility of the U.S. fate hanging on this percentage of oil?

MR. NESSEN: How can reporters who realize what the percentage is ask the question, Steve?

Q It was not asked by any of us in the first place, but Kissinger --

MR. NESSEN: I am asked here again today.

Q Let's say something else that is not meant facetiously. What if the Japanese were threatening to cut off all car imports?

MR. NESSEN: Look, Steve, we are dealing and we have dealt from the very first Kissinger interview with what he has clearly labeled as a hypothetical situation which he does not expect to take place. The President has described it in the same way I have. I do not know how we can make the story go away.

Q Ron, the point Steve was trying to make in his question and which I certainly would be interested to hear about is hypothetically or any other way, how is it possible to discuss strangulation in the terms the President used last night on something like as small a percentage of oil as we get from the OPEC countries or even as we get from the OPEC countries plus Canada?

MR. NESSEN: I think it really brings us back to the President's energy program because if the current trend continues, within two more years we will be importing half of our oil and, as you know, the key purpose of the energy program is to get us out of a position where we do depend on half of our oil from outside countries, so we cannot be put in a position of being vulnerable.

Q To try one more time, even if it were half, if we lost half of our oil, it certainly would be a problem, and it might even be called strangulation, but could it possibly in any stretch be called whether the United States lives or dies, which were the words the President used last night?

MR. NESSEN: Wait a minute now. Let's just remember another thing that the President and Kissinger have said, and the President has said this twice recently. He was asked specifically if we had another embargo like 1973, would that be strangulation, and he indicated he did not think that would amount to strangulation.

Phil?

Q You gave percentages here. What is our total consumption?

MR. NESSEN: Seventeen million barrels a day, roughly.

Q Ron, Secretary Kissinger is going to make a speech today on foreign policy.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Has the President seen that speech, and does he concur with what is in it, and two, has he sent any kind of a special message to Nixon?

MR. NESSEN: Who?

Q The President, through Kissinger, who will be seeing Nixon.

MR. NESSEN: Not that I am aware of.

Q And how about the speech?

MR. NESSEN: I have not seen the speech.

Q Has the President seen it?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of.

Q So, whatever Kissinger says, I mean we can still come back and say, "Does the President agree with it?"

MR. NESSEN: If you want to.

Q Ron, yesterday morning you said the imposition of each additional dollar on import fees would mean a penny a gallon increase at the pump.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q The President last night estimated it would bring two to three cents.

MR. NESSEN: Well, obviously, one or the other of us has to be wrong. (Laughter)

Q Obviously, it is you. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I am even more embarrassed to say it is not me. (Laughter)

The President -- I told him I was going to say this -- and he says, "See you, Ron." He had his figures just a bit mixed. When he said three cents, he meant that when the full three dollar increase in the import fees gets on it would be three cents a gallon.

Q Ron, would the President veto a debt ceiling bill if it carried a postponement of his import fees?

MR. NESSEN: That is if they tied the postponement of the import fees to the bill that raises the debt ceiling?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Well, the President feels on this that the issues we are dealing with here should be addressed directly, as important issues, very important issues, and that the normal kind of politics or parliamentary maneuvering as usual is really inappropriate in this case and that to deal with these issues in that sort of old-fashioned political way he thinks is truly beneath the magnitude of these issues.

He believes that these issues are too important to become tangled in old-fashioned parliamentary maneuvering and politics.

Q So, what is the answer to the question?

MR. NESSEN: I think I will just leave it the way it is.

Q Oh, no, that is not the way he is going to get it. He is not going to get it in that grandiose way you described. He is going to get it as an amendment on the debt ceiling bill.

MR. NESSEN: Are you sure?

Q That is what the Congressmen say, and they know what is going on, so what is your answer to the question?

MR. NESSEN: I think if a bill ever comes here tied together like that, in a way that the President does not truly think is responsible, we will deal with it, but meanwhile, the President hopes that Congress will be more responsible than to do that.

Q Ron, just informationally, if the debt ceiling is exceeded because of a bill like that being vetoed, what happens then legally?

MR. NESSEN: It causes serious problems. The government would have to stop spending. Government workers would not get their salaries. The government could not pay its bills, could not refinance its --

Q What is the President doing to try to forestall this action? Is he meeting with the leaders?

MR. NESSEN: We have a Congressional liaison staff here that is conveying what I have told you to the members involved.

Q Ron, several days ago I asked if you could give a figure for the latest annual figure for total U.S. aid and support to Israel. Do you have that figure?

MR. NESSEN: It is \$647 million for the current fiscal year. It is about half military and half economic, but maybe a little more military.

Q Does that include all those weapons, all that replenishment material listed in the Times today? Does this include all, direct and indirect?

MR. NESSEN: This is the appropriation for fiscal 1975--authorization for fiscal 1975.

Q Does that include purchases? This is just aid you are talking about?

MR. NESSEN: This would be foreign assistance, not cash purchases.

Q Do you have a comparative figure for fiscal 1974?

MR. NESSEN: The State Department, which deals with that, probably could give you that number.

Q How are they paying for this? This is what we are giving them or this is what --

MR. NESSEN: This is foreign assistance.

Q -- or is this what we are loaning them? What do you mean by foreign assistance? It can come several ways. Is this a loan or a giveaway, or a long-term loan or what?

MR. NESSEN: I am told most of this is grant money, military credit --

Q This is giveaway, then?

MR. NESSEN: Not all of it, but you really should contact the State Department, Sarah, where they have the people who can deal in more detail with this.

Fran?

Q Ron, is the President planning to ask for additional appropriations for Cambodian aid?

MR. NESSEN: I think the President has already indicated, when he signed the foreign assistance bill, that he felt that the Cambodian figure was too low, and he is considering asking for additional funds for Cambodia.

Q How much?

MR. NESSEN: He has not settled on a figure yet that we can announce.

Q Ron, do you have equivalent figures for U.S. assistance to other countries in the Middle East?

MR. NESSEN: The State Department does. I was asked to get that one by Steve, and I did, but you know, I really think that is properly a State Department question.

Q Ron, last night in his interview, the President, in talking about the Middle East, seemed to put out a little more optimistic note about the prospects of Kissinger's step-by-step program accomplishing something. Is there anything that you can tell us, any development that would lead to, if I am correct, a more optimistic feeling on his part?

MR. NESSEN: You know, the President keeps saying that this is a period of quiet diplomacy, and if you start talking about how the negotiations are going, it is no longer a period of quiet diplomacy, and I think I would just leave it with what the President said.

Q When the President told the Soviet journalists that he expected to see Brezhnev this summer, does he base that on his Vladivostok talks or has he had any contacts that things are getting into motion for this meeting, summit?

MR. NESSEN: As you know, the tradition now of the American President visiting the Soviet Union one year and the Soviet leader coming to the United States the next year is fairly well-established now, and it has been planned that way, and there has been no change in the plans.

Q Ron, I had asked you some time ago, or a few days ago, about the decision on food aid based on what Kissinger had said, that they had gone for the higher option, the highest of the three options. Do you have a figure to give us now?

MR. NESSEN: I don't, Jim. It is still being worked on. Some parts of the decision have not been completed yet.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 12:45 P.M. EST)