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N E W S C O N F E R E N C E

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 2:45 P.M. PDT

MARCH 31, 1975

MONDAY

(Palm Springs, California)

MR. NESSEN: There is not really much, so let's do it quickly.

First of all, most of what I have is logistics. Bob Manning is going to take the cameras out to the country club in about ten minutes. There will be open coverage of three or four holes out there, and then the writers -- any who care to go -- can leave immediately after you file whatever I say here, which is not going to be much. So, cameras will go to the golf course in about ten minutes, and everybody else as soon as you finish, and you will follow him around three or four holes.

The foursome for today is President Ford, Bob Hope, Leon Parma and William Saltich, immediate past president of Gillette. The country club they are playing at is Eldorado.

In response to requests for pictures of the Reagan's tonight, we will take an expanded pool out to the President's house somewhere in the 7:00 or 7:30 area. We will get that posted for an arrival picture.

The President and Mrs. Ford will come out and greet them in the driveway, and there will be an opportunity for you to take some pictures, if you want to, and then they will go into dinner.

I don't think we will keep the pool out there for the departure. It is likely to be late, and we just won't do it.

Q Will the toasts be piped here in the press room?

MR. NESSEN: That can, and you will have advance copies; also, the exchange of gifts. (Laughter)

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Q Do you anticipate they will have a full frank discussion?

MR. NESSEN: Useful, also.

Tomorrow, the President will play golf earlier in the day than usual, 9 o'clock approximately, at the Thunderbird Country Club. I don't have the foursome on that. I will give it to you tomorrow. There will be a protective pool out to his house, and then ride to the gate of the golf course with him and then come back and see him home again.

I have not quite decided what to do about a briefing tomorrow. We may have a few routine appointments and so forth tomorrow.

Q About what time?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I am trying to decide on. I would rather say 11 o'clock and be sure of having everything. I am not sure I am going to have it all before, so if I get a good clear idea that I will have everything I need by ten, I will post tonight. I will post an announcement tonight that will move the briefing up, but let's say 11:00 for the time being.

Q I have a question about the Reagan dinner. You say the dinner will go late. That definitely means the former Governor will be leaving Palm Springs tonight?

MR. NESSEN: As far as I know, yes. He will be going back to his home tonight.

The only thing I wanted to mention was in the name of accuracy. I did want to say that the house where the President is staying does not have three swimming pools. The house has one relatively modest swimming pool, which the President has been using. It has a little basin inside the front door where goldfish swim, and it has kind of a stone basin in the garden, which, as far as I can tell, is for decorative purposes.

Q That is three pools. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: One pool, one goldfish pond and a decorative basin. (Laughter)

Q Do you know what the President's scores were yesterday, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I read in paper what it was. I know that everything I read in the paper is accurate. (Laughter)

Q Ron, there is an impression that the President is reluctant to say anything by way of a committal on Vietnam. Is that the case? He was asked at Bakersfield and except for the statement yesterday on the fall of Da Nang, we have had very little out of here.

MR. NESSEN: The President is getting full information from Washington as many facts as are available. He did voice his feelings yesterday about the refugee problem. I know, from talking to him today, that he is concerned. He feels a great deal of compassion.

He has seen the television stories and the newspaper stories about the situation there. He will be meeting later in the week with General Weyand and Secretary Kissinger, as you know. They will both be coming here.

Q Will President Ford meet with Lon Nol if he comes to the United States?

MR. NESSEN: I do not have any indication that he is coming to the United States.

Q Is he welcome to come to the United States?

MR. NESSEN: Why wouldn't he be welcome to come to the United States.

Q I am asking if he would be welcome to come.

MR. NESSEN: He is an elected leader of a foreign government. I see no reason why he would not be welcome in the United States.

Q Ron, has the President been in direct contact with General Weyand?

MR. NESSEN: He has not.

Q Has the President talked to Kissinger today?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure of that.

Q Can you explain why he ran at the airport at Bakersfield? Was he trying to avoid the questions on Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: I would not think so. I think you know him better than that.

Q What is his judgment on the survivability of the South Vietnamese government today?

MR. NESSEN: I do not have any assessment I can give you. I know he feels that the pullback of the South Vietnamese forces to a line which President Thieu feels is defensible was caused by two things: one, the violations of the Paris accords by the North Vietnamese; and secondly, by the effect on the morale of the South Vietnamese of the prospect of no further American ammunition and equipment which would enable them to fight for their own survival.

Q Would you say that once more?

MR. NESSEN: The two factors he believes account for the decision by President Thieu to pull back to lines which he considers defensible are one, the violation by the North Vietnamese of the Paris peace accords; and secondly, the effect on South Vietnamese morale of the prospect that the U.S. Congress would not approve any more aid in the way of ammunition and equipment that would enable them to fight for their own survival.

Q Will the President be discussing with Governor Reagan tonight any attempt to extract a promise for Reagan not to run in 1976?

MR. NESSEN: Has Governor Reagan indicated that he was going to run in 1976?

Q No.

MR. NESSEN: I did not think so.

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Q On the Thieu government, again, Ron, with the Communists holding more than half of the countryside currently, does he today think that President Thieu and his government can continue to maintain authority and control of the government?

MR. NESSEN: The South Vietnamese have indicated they are pulling back to lines which they feel are defensible with the equipment and ammunition they have with the uncertainty of further supplies.

Q Does he or does he not think they will be able to survive?

MR. NESSEN: As I said when you asked before, it is something I do not have to give you.

Q Is the President writing a new statement or proposal on Vietnam, which he is going to come out with this week after he talks to General Weyand, or at any time soon?

MR. NESSEN: Do you mean aside from the foreign policy speech of the 9th or 10th of April?

Q Yes. I am trying to find out, does the fact that he is really not responding to our questions, when, as you correctly point out, he normally does, mean that he is preparing some kind of statement that he is going to give us that is going to be a new statement on Vietnam?

MR. NESSEN: I am not aware of any new statement on Vietnam, but I do want to point out that he did have some reaction yesterday to the situation in Da Nang. He is having a news conference on Thursday, at which you and 20 or so of your colleagues will have 35 or 40 minutes to ask him about Vietnam.

I hardly think that is running away from the issue. I have reported to you each day his reaction to things. The President cannot stop the North Vietnamese from violating the Paris accords, and the President is hoping and pressing Congress to provide South Vietnam with the means for its own defense, and he is keeping a careful watch.

He sent the four ships over there to help with the evacuation of the refugees. He has done a number of things, Lou, so I think it is an incorrect impression to say he is not doing anything or saying anything.

Q Ron, can you tell us then exactly why the President ran at Bakersfield airport?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry, I did not see what has been described as running.

Q He ran almost as fast as the South Vietnamese army. (Laughter)

Q Can you say whether he feels a sense of frustration or helplessness at the United States not being able to currently influence the military situation?

MR. NESSEN: I think I would prefer to stick with the words that I have heard him use, which I have already given you.

Q He has not expressed any sentiments about the fact --

MR. NESSEN: As I say, he feels the two reasons for what has happened are the North Vietnamese violations and Congress' failure, so far, to give the means for their own defense, and the effect of that on morale.

Q Have we reached a point in the U.S.-South Vietnamese relations where it is now up to them, this is it, take it or leave it, Congress isn't taking any action -- is he resigned to the fact that South Vietnam can go down the drain now? Is that where we are?

MR. NESSEN: I certainly would not use anything like those words, Walt.

Q Ron, has the President learned anything in the past week about the Vietnam situation that would alter his desire to provide the South Vietnamese government with an additional \$300 million?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of, Russ.

Q Do you see any circumstances under which the situation in South Vietnam would cause him to change his plans to stay here in Palm Springs through Monday?

MR. NESSEN: I think I would prefer to put it in my own words, that I don't know of any change in his schedule.

Q Ron, can you tell us why he did not make remarks at that last stop in the oil field? We had been told that he probably would.

MR. NESSEN: I think, as he walked along, most of you heard what he was saying to the briefing officer and I relayed some additional thoughts to the pool on the plane coming back.

Q I have not seen that. Is that available?

Q Most of us have not seen or heard a thing.

Q If the President is not resigned to the fact that South Vietnam is going down the drain, what does he think is going to happen? Does he feel it is going to survive? It does not appear that way from the newscasts.

MR. NESSEN: Is that a question?

Q Yes. I said, does the President feel that South Vietnam is going to be able to survive.

MR. NESSEN: I said several times that I just don't have an assessment to give you on that other than the fact that President Thieu has decided to pull back to lines which he feels are defensible.

Q On another subject entirely, how are you going to handle the questions in San Diego? Are you going to drop names into a hat of those who want to ask questions, or what?

MR. NESSEN: This is Monday. We will get that done probably on Wednesday.

Q The sign-up list?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. Or you can just drop your own name in a hat and we will have the drawing right here at some point.

Q How many names are we permitted to drop into the hat?

MR. NESSEN: How many names do you have?

Q About three.

Q Has the President been disappointed at the small proportion of draft evaders and such that have accepted his offer of clemency?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that I would call it a small percentage.

Q One out of six.

MR. NESSEN: 13,000 out of 100,000. He feels it was a fair and equitable program that a lot of people took advantage of.

Q Will there be any readout at all from you after the dinner this evening?

MR. NESSEN: It is a private dinner, which I am not attending. There will be the two couples there.

Q Will the Parmas be there?

MR. NESSEN: The Parmas are going to dinner somewhere else.

There will be a lid except for a golf pool report, a Reagan arrival pool report, and we will post what time tomorrow morning's protective pool for golf will leave. At the moment, I will be here at 11:00 or earlier, if possible, and we will post any earlier time. Anyhow, we are all going to be around for the rest of the afternoon and morning.

Q Ron, could I have one last question? This deals with the pool report and something you mentioned here. Of the two factors which contributed to the present situation in Vietnam, does the President feel one was significantly more preponderant than the other? That is, North Vietnamese violations as opposed to Congressional failure up the way. Which was the dominant factor?

MR. NESSEN: If North Vietnam had not violated the accords, there would not have been the need to pull back and so forth.

Q Ron, I have a question about Elk Hills. At one point on that tour, just before the tour started, Congressman Ketchum told some reporters that the Administration either had or was going to accept the Melcher bill on Elk Hills. Is that right?

MR. NESSEN: For those of you who do not know what the Melcher bill is, the President has recommended in his energy program in January that Elk Hills be put into production and that some of the oil be used to top off reserves and the rest of it be sold.

Congressman Melcher has introduced a bill which would transfer control of Elk Hills from the Navy to the Interior Department. The President prefers that it remain with the Navy, but he does not have a major objection to the Melcher bill.

Q But Ketchum's statement was that the President's proposal had been incorporated into the Melcher bill, which is the only thing alive at this moment.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 3:05 P.M. PDT)