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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 11:12 A.M. EST

APRIL 15, 1976

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: I think that you know that this afternoon we have the signing of the legislation that provides money for the new vaccine.

We also have the swearing-in of the new head of the Community Services.

We have the meeting with the Standing Conference of American Middle Eastern Christian and Moslem Leaders.

We also have the meeting between the President and Mr. Bitsios.

Tomorrow being a holiday, we will not have a briefing. The President's plans for the weekend at this moment are somewhat up in the air. He has indicated a desire to play golf at some point over the weekend. Whether and when he will go to Camp David is simply not decided yet and probably won't be

Q Is he going to play golf on Good Friday?

MR. NESSEN: No, he would not play golf on Good Friday.

Q He won't play golf on Good Friday?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think he will play golf on Good Friday. He has some office appointments tomorrow.

Q Where will he play golf?

MR. NESSEN: That has not been decided yet.

Q Church, maybe?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, he will go to Good Friday services tomorrow.

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Q Where?

MR. NESSEN: St. John's.

Q That is a three-hour service, Ron. When is he going? Do you know what time?

MR. NESSEN: I think he is going to the 11 o'clock service.

Q It isn't at 11 o'clock. It is at 12 o'clock.

Q He is not really going to a three-hour church service, is he?

MR. NESSEN: Let me check. I know he is going to church tomorrow.

On the meeting with the Greek Foreign Minister, Dimitrios Bitsios, the Foreign Minister is here at the invitation of the United States to put the finishing touches on the principles of a new U.S.-Greek security agreement. I do expect after that meeting, which begins at 3:30, we would have probably a read-out on the meeting.

Q Can you give us some details on the nature of the American bases which we are renegotiating visas for?

MR. NESSEN: I think the State Department is going to be giving a pretty heavy load of information on this today.

Q Ron, could you tell us anything about that Middle East group that you mentioned that he is meeting with?

Q Moslems and Christians.

Q Is he going to have a little speech in there?

MR. NESSEN: This is an organization made up of both Christians and Moslems which was formed in order to speak on issues of concern to themselves publicly.

Q Are they coming in to talk about Lebanon?

MR. NESSEN: They have made public statements about the situation in Lebanon.

Q Are they Americans, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Where are they based, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Let me try to see if we have a listing of attendees. One gentleman, for instance, is the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. We have a representative of the Islamic community in the United States. We have a representative of the Maronite Catholic Diocese, a representative of the Melkite Catholic group and representative of the Islamic Center in Washington and a representative of St. George's Orthodox Church in Washington.

Q They are all clergymen?

MR. NESSEN: They are. I am not sure about the representative of the Islamic Community or the Director of the Islamic Center being ordained.

Q And they have come in to talk about Lebanon?

MR. NESSEN: Among other things, Lebanon, and one or two other small issues of interest to them.

Q Is the President going to make a little talk?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think they asked for the meeting and they are coming to express their views, primarily.

Q Will we have a read-out or will they be available?

MR. NESSEN: I would think you could probably talk to them in the driveway. We had not planned to bring them here. We could have photo coverage at the beginning of the meeting, if you would like.

At St. John's at noon on Friday, the service is broken into six 25-minute segments. The President will not, obviously, remain for all six of the 25-minute segments.

Q Are you going to cross the picket line in New York?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the situation is until I get there. I intend to go up and do the show.

Q You are going to cross it?

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Q You were quoted as saying you would cross the picket line.

MR. NESSEN: I don't know how I could be quoted. I didn't talk to anybody. I intend to do the show just as John Chancellor and Tom Brokaw and John Cochran and Russ Ward and so forth do their shows -- Mrs. Ford, Mo Udall, Hubert Humphrey, all the others who have fulfilled their commitments. I intend to do mine.

Q Can you give a little preview, Ron, or is this kind of top secret?

MR. NESSEN: No, I haven't seen what I am supposed to do yet.

Q Are you going up for rehearsal today, is that where you are going?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q You have to rehearse this? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Let's move

Q Ron, the head of the local 11th of this Union says that, unfortunately, an anti-union stance seems to be developing at the White House in view of your sentiments and those of Mr.. Ford. Do you have anything to say about that?

MR. NESSEN: I don't, Fran.

Q Ron, I am wondering why you called Congressman Snyder's news release a leak three times in the transcript when I believe you said you saw this release and when this release clearly notes his committee unanimously agreed he could make public his line of questioning. That is at the top of the release.

MR. NESSEN: That is in his release, yes.

Q Why did you call it a leak when he got unanimous consent of the committee to put it in the Congressional Record?

MR. NESSEN: I did not know then and I am not clear now on what permission he had.

Q It is right there in the news release, Ron. You missed that?

MR. NESSEN: Apparently I did, Les.

Q If he got permission, do you retract it?

MR. NESSEN: It is a partial transcript of a very long hearing.

Q Are you retracting your calling it a leak, if he had unanimous consent?

MR. NESSEN: It was a closed hearing. I don't know what arrangements he made with the committee. I know as of yesterday morning we did not have a transcript ourselves of the hearing. We scurried around and found one sort of late in the morning before I came out to brief, but at that time we had not seen what Ambassador Bunker had said in full. We had seen a few lines that the Congressman had put out in his press release.

Q Ron, have you had a chance to ask the President about the resolutions prepared by the two Budget Committees?

MR. NESSEN: I thought somebody asked him that the other night at the ASNE meeting. These budget totals are much higher than the President recommended and they also reduce the size of the tax cut that the President recommended. He would hope that Congress would stick to the budget that he proposed in the interest of holding down inflation and giving people a larger tax cut.

Q Ron, last night in Midland, Texas Ronald Reagan said the Bunker testimony "certainly does not jibe with his statements made here in Texas that he was not going to give away the Panama Canal." Is the White House aware of this and what is the comment?

MR. NESSEN: I am told -- just to go back to your previous question -- that Bunker had what he felt was an agreement with the committee that the testimony he gave would not be made public.

Q Let me follow that up, Ron, because it states -- he has it in writing, Snyder got it in writing from the chairman of the committee and it was a unanimous vote that this could be made public. Now, what more can he get to indicate that it is not a leak?

Q Would Bunker not have testified if he would have known it was going to become people's information?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. Why don't we cut away the periphery issues and get to the heart of the issue.

Q Go ahead.

MR. NESSEN: If I may-- I mean, what I conceive to be the heart of the issue. It seems to me for the past two days this so-called issue has been talked about a great deal, and there has been a great deal of political rhetoric attached to this issue.

Let's go back to the foundation of why these negotiations are being conducted. They are not being conducted in a negative or defensive way to give anything away. These negotiations are affirmative action by the United States, which grew out of a situation in 1964 in which there were riots and deaths in Panama, and I am sure that nobody dealing with this issue would want the riots and deaths to reoccur.

The negotiations are being conducted between the United States and Panama and have been pursued by three successive Presidents for the purpose, as I say, not of giving away anything, but of protecting something, of assuring the Canal remains open, of assuring that the United States has continued access to the Canal and that the United States maintains its continued interest in defending the Canal.

Now, that is why the negotiations were begun. If the negotiations had not been begun and continued, based on the experience of the 1964 riots, I think these objectives -- and these are the American interests in Panama -- the interest of the United States in Panama is to keep the Canal open, to maintain our access to it, and to continue our interest in defending the Canal.

Those are our interests. The negotiations are being conducted in order to protect and maintain our interests. What happened in 1964 indicates what could happen if these negotiations were not conducted as they have been over this period of time, then we would be in danger of losing our interest in the Canal and in the Canal zone.

The way you assure your continued access and operation of the Canal is to continue these negotiations. Now, others have indicated, used harsh language to characterize what they believe to be the leaders of Panama. Well, the fact is that every country in Latin America is -- and the hundreds of millions of people in Latin America -- united in feeling that the original Canal treaty of 1903 needs to be revised to reflect the aspirations of the Panamanian people. That is another reason why the negotiations have continued and why it is in the best interest of the United States to continue those negotiations.

All the countries of Latin America feel there needs to be a change. Now, the United States, by conducting those negotiations, is assuring that it will have continued access to the Canal, that the Canal will remain open and that we will continue our interest in defending the Canal during the usable lifetime of the Canal, which should take it into the next century somewhere between 30 and 50 years.

As I said in the beginning, I thought it was important to strip away some of these periphery issues, the very heavy load of political rhetoric that has been loaded into this issue and just try to tell you, as the President has used the expression very often, a little common sense or plain talk about why these negotiations have been going on.

Q Are you saying without these negotiations the Administration or this country runs the risk of perhaps sabotage and civil disorder at the Canal itself?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Ron, you made the statement twice that we are not giving anything away, which I agree seems to me to be the heart of the dispute, but in fact are we not giving up sovereignty to the Canal at the conclusion of this treaty?

MR. NESSEN: Bob, the question of sovereignty -- and I do want to tell Les and the others that I probably spoke too hastily on the question of sovereignty yesterday -- it is an enormously complex subject. Legal authorities have no agreement on the question of sovereignty. There have been court decisions that give various opinions on this, and it is a legal area that I would prefer to stay out of.

There is no clear-cut legal agreement on the sovereignty in the Canal zone.

Q Ron, would you expand on your answer yesterday to Walter's question about this civil disorder?

MR. NESSEN: No, I think I don't want to expand on it, Dick, other than to say look at what happened in 1964, why it happened in 1964 and look at my statement that the negotiations are the way to assure our interest in Panama, and also are the way to meet the unanimous views of the Latin American countries.

Q Ron, let me follow this up, if I could, because here is a --

MR. NESSEN: On the sovereignty question, Les--

Q It is sovereignty, right here.

MR. NESSEN: On the sovereignty question, it is a complex legal matter that I am not qualified to handle.

Q I want to tell you because you made a very significant statement here that it is complex and there is no agreement on it when the State Department -- here it is in writing -- "Canal zone is not and never has been sovereign U.S. territory. Legal scholars have been clear on this for three-quarters of a century," issued by the State Department.

Now, what about that, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: There have been a number of cases which have dealt with the sovereignty in the Canal zone and what they really boil down to is that the question of sovereignty really has depended somewhat on what issue was being resolved by the court case. There have been court cases which involved mail delivery, there were court cases which involved citizenship, import duties, the operation of foreign ports and the question of sovereignty has been resolved by the courts in each issue separately and largely dependent on the individual issue rather than an overriding judicial ruling of sovereignty overall in the Canal zone.

Q That is right, absolutely, but why does the State Department make this statement, Ron? You disagree, in other words, with the State Department?

MR. NESSEN: I would like to see the whole context of it.

Q Does the President want to modify his statement in Dallas that we would never give up operating rights?

MR. NESSEN: Helen, I don't think we need another day of what we --

Q I think we do.

MR. NESSEN: Obviously you do.

Q And a lot of people in the country think so.

MR. NESSEN: I told you yesterday, as I said, I thought this issue required a little plain talk and common sense, and I told you yesterday that my own personal view is that the President's statement there, and previously, has to be looked at in the context of the way the questions are normally asked, which has to do with negotiations and treaties.

If he didn't make clear that he said we will never -- whatever it was -- never give up our interests and so forth, what he meant to convey, and as I said yesterday he probably did not convey it with the most precision and detail -- but what he meant to convey was he would never agree to a treaty which did not maintain the continued American interest in operating and defending the Canal.

Q Ron, when you mentioned the next 30 or 50 years, were you indicating perhaps in that time span or after that time span the United States would relinquish its operating rights?

MR. NESSEN: In case you were not here yesterday, I urge you to go back and look at the historic documents, the principles on which the negotiations are being conducted. It explains why the treaty is being negotiated, why it will have a termination date, whereas the old treaty is in perpetuity and I think that question will answer itself.

Q Can you say here what will be the duration of the new treaty?

MR. NESSEN: It is a matter of negotiation.

Q The failure to follow the course the President has set in these negotiations is the reason you cite would put the United States in confrontation with Latin America?

MR. NESSEN: I think Dr. Kissinger, in a speech he gave which you may have overlooked, in Houston, Texas in March in which he spoke extensively on the Panama Canal negotiations -- the date of the speech was March 1, 1975 -- and he indicates there the fact that people of this hemisphere feel there needs to be a change in relationships.

Q Ron, you are not disputing what the historical documents that you referred to us yesterday -- you are not disputing there has been any change in what they said to eventually turn over control of the Canal to Panamanians. You are just saying when that control is turned over the United States will insist on keeping the Canal open and maintaining access to it. Isn't that what you are saying?

MR. NESSEN: What I am saying is the purpose of the negotiations is to assure that the Canal remains open and that we have access to it and that we fulfill our interest in defending the Canal. That is why we are having the negotiations. Others have cast the negotiations as an effort to give away something when the negotiations are looked upon here as an effort to maintain something which could perhaps not be maintained if we refuse to negotiate.

Q But you are not --

MR. NESSEN: Now have we deviated in any way from the eight principles, and what I think you find in the eight principles? I said yesterday that Bunker's instructions and every previous Ambassador's -- I am sorry, the principles were agreed to in 1974 -- ever since 1974 both sides have negotiated on the basis of those eight principles.

Q But what I am trying to clarify -- I think this is what you are saying -- you are not trying to say we in any way changed our objective which calls for some day turning over control of the Canal to the Panamanians. You are just saying when that is done, we will still maintain access and the Canal will remain open.

MR. NESSEN: I think that is stated in the principles.

Q That is what I am asking.

MR. NESSEN: I am not deviating from the principles.

Q From something you said earlier I gathered you want this treaty to run long enough so when the time comes, the Canal will be of no use, it will be obsolete or something?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that I would use that word, but in terms of its useful life, in terms of United States interest and so forth, 30 to 50 years is probably the extent of the useful life.

Q How are we going to get around South America at the end of 50 years? Surely you don't envision boating ending, shipping ending. What is going to end the usefulness of the Canal?

MR. NESSEN: I am not enough of an engineering expert to answer that.

Q Ron, this carries the inference there is some continuing long-range planning, which has been the case over many years, for the building of a second Canal. There have been various routes that have been studied and various ways of doing this through nuclear power and so forth and so on.

Are these studies being reopened or freshened up or taking on some new urgency in connection with these negotiations or what?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know enough about the discussions that I know that have gone on about an alternate Canal route. I don't know enough about them.

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Q Ron, I asked you a political question yesterday about --

MR. NESSEN: This has been treated as a political question and that is why I thought I would attempt to give you some views on its diplomatic and security aspects. It has been treated totally as a political issue and with the riots of 1964 very much on people's minds here I thought I would try to --

Q Is it helpful that the President of Panama be described as a tin hat, tin horn dictator?

MR. NESSEN: That is political rhetoric and I am not going to comment on political rhetoric.

Q Does the President think Reagan has been inflammatory, misleading, irresponsible, the way he has dealt with this?

MR. NESSEN: That is not a question that I should be answering or an interpretation I should be making. I am just giving you the background from which these negotiations sprang, what the prospects are, if they should be stopped or called off, and what kind of a unanimous opinion there is in the hemisphere.

Q Is the Administration slowing down these negotiations until after the election? Has there been any slowdown in the momentum of the negotiations?

MR. NESSEN: To my knowledge, there has not.

Q When do they expect the negotiations to be completed?

MR. NESSEN: That is not possible to say, Dick, because they are just underway.

Q Can you tell us how the President feels about this having been raised as a political issue this year?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to spell it out any more than I have, Walt, against the background of the riots and what could happen if the negotiations were cancelled.

Q Does the President feel what Mr. Reagan is doing is endangering the course of his negotiations?

MR. NESSEN: That is something that commentators and the press will have to judge for themselves.

Q Is the President aware of a lot of resistance to this new treaty renegotiation, that would forfeit any rights that we presently have, on Capitol Hill, and resistance on Capitol Hill?

MR. NESSEN: Well, I don't know where it stands on Capitol Hill. The Members have been consulted through the process and are being consulted and, obviously, any treaty that grew out of the negotiations would be submitted for ratification.

Q Ron, he said in Texas he believes some statements in the election campaign might mislead our friends and adversaries abroad. Is he more concerned about that now or less or still concerned?

MR. NESSEN: You mean overall or with reference to the Panama Canal?

Q Including the Panama Canal.

MR. NESSEN: I think the President's position is clear on that. I have tried to make it clear on that.

Q Ron, how many Latin American voices have asked that we evacuate Guantanamo or give independence to Puerto Rico?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, Les.

Q Do you know of any at all that have besides Cuba?

MR. NESSEN: I have not followed that subject.

Q Mr. Torrijos recently visited Castro who said just recently "the war of liberation for Panama, Guantanamo, and Puerto Rico has begun." And he was an honored guest of Castro's and I was wondering, do you have any idea what General Torrijos' views are and what does the White House think of his visiting Castro?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any view on that.

Q Has the President turned in his income taxes and when will we get to see them?

MR. NESSEN: He mailed them in about April 1st, I believe, and they are being transferred -- the figures are being transferred to the same form that the other tax information was put on and we should have it for you soon.

Q Will he get a refund, do you know?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q Ron, back to the matter of the Canal. Reagan was saying in Texas last night that the Panama Canal is as much a part of the United States as is Alaska and the Louisiana Purchase.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q What does the President think about that? Is that how he views the Panama Canal?

MR. NESSEN: It is totally wrong, Tom. I think, as I tried to explain to Les, this is a subject which has been in the courts and has been resolved without any unanimity based on the individual issues. Because it is a complex subject, I don't want to try to take you through what decisions have gone which way, but to say that this is the same as Alaska or whatever is simply totally wrong and, again, as I mentioned yesterday, I think questions about why are things like that, which are wrong, being said in the current context is something that I know that reporters will want to pursue.

Q Following your que yesterday, a number of us got from the State Department their current status on the Panama negotiations and Les quoted from it earlier and the fact is it says on Page 3, "from a legal standpoint the United States does not have sovereignty over the Canal Zone. Rather by treaty we exercise virtually complete jurisdiction over that part of the Panama territory which comprises the Canal Zone." Is that a fair reflection of what the President believes to be the status as well?

MR. NESSEN: I would have to see where that came from, Tom. Is that in the State Department document?

Q It comes from this document you referred to us, "The Department of State Current Policy, Panama Canal Treaty Negotiations, November 9, 1975, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Media Services," Page 3, lefthand column, about five lines in. "From a legal standpoint the United States does not have sovereignty." Do you see that?

MR. NESSEN: I think I have a slightly earlier edition than you do.

Q Do you want me to read?

MR. NESSEN: No. I am not going to say anything about a State Department document, obviously. I have done a little research on the legal questions and I know it is very complex and there is no question or no answer. The issue has been resolved by individual court cases depending on the specific issue.

Q Ron, just in all fairness, we keep talking about these people who say these things and why they say them. There has been some suggestion made that the President sort of misled the people down in Dallas. You are not wanting to say that he misled anybody, are you?

MR. NESSEN: Bob, I said yesterday and I say again today that if his remarks were interpreted as something other than in the context of what would happen under a new treaty or under negotiations, I think if you look at the question that was asked, you see the answer from a slightly different perspective. The question that was asked specifically referred to negotiations and the answer also began with "I think it is premature to come to any conclusion as to what might be the final resolution of the long-standing differences between the United States" -- so he was talking about it in the context of negotiations, of long-standing negotiations. But if you interpreted -- or anybody did -- what he said to mean anything other than that a treaty would never do away with so and so, then I said, as I said yesterday, that his answer could have been more precise and contain more detail.

Q Would you not suggest maybe he put a little different spin on it down in the conservative area where his opponent is very strong?

MR. NESSEN: I think this is an issue -- if you look at the riots, if you look at the prospect of what could happen -- it is an issue that is too important to treat as some kind of political football.

Q Ron, you keep talking about the riots and what could happen.

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q Isn't it a fact that in addition to the possibility of more riots you also have repeated threats from the present government down there to militarily seize the Canal? Is that another thing in the back of your mind?

MR. NESSEN: It is. And you also have the unanimous view of the Latin American countries.

Q What would be the reaction of the United States if the Government of Panama attempted to seize the Canal and the Canal Zone militarily before the conclusion of these negotiations?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to speculate on that, but clearly one of the purposes and in fact one of the reasons why the talks were initiated was because it was obvious in order to guarantee our interest there we undertook the negotiations.

Q Is there a feeling in the United States Government that this is an imminent and serious possibility?

MR. NESSEN: What?

Q The possibility of military action by the Panamanians against the Canal Zone?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to speculate on that, Jim.

Q Is Alan Greenspan a witchdoctor?

MR. NESSEN: Who said he was?

Q Hubert Humphrey.

Q Ron, have you had a chance to analyze the FEC bill?

MR. NESSEN: It is not possible to analyze the FEC bill because I am told it is not written down on paper yet. The bill has not been completed in writing, so it is difficult to get ahold of what is in it.

Q Ron, what is the President's reaction to the request of the New York group that he waive their city matching funds for a while until they get back on their financial feet?

MR. NESSEN: The Rosenbaum group?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: The President met with Rosenbaum briefly yesterday. I am not aware of all that they talked about but the President did not make any commitments.

Q Ron, has the President encouraged Secretary Kissinger to meet with the African Liberation leaders during his trip to Africa?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know whether he has encouraged him or not.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 11:45 P.M. EST)