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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:55 P.M. EDT

JULY 31, 1976

SATURDAY

MR. NESSEN: As the President indicated to the Mississippi delegates yesterday, and then in turn passed on to you, the President is moving on with his process of consultation concerning his choice for his Vice Presidential running mate and, as part of that, a letter is being sent out to all the delegates and alternates to the 1976 Republican Convention. Here is a copy of the text of the letter which will go out.

Q How many letters are you sending out?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the exact number is there. There are 2259 delegates, and there are alternates for most of those, so you would just about double that.

Q And there are a number of other categories, too?

Q Can you confirm the number in the Post -- 4518?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the exact number of delegates and alternates for the convention is.

Q When are they going out?

MR. NESSEN: They will be going out in the next few days.

Q Are they going out from here?

MR. NESSEN: It hasn't been quite decided yet.

Q You said they will be going out in the next few days?

MR. NESSEN: Correct.

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Q They are not going out today?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know how quickly they can get them printed. It has not been exactly arranged where and how they will be printed.

Q How much is it costing and who is going to pay for it?

MR. NESSEN: The PFC obviously will pay for it.

Q Will it go out under White House stationery, do you know?

MR. NESSEN: No, it will go out under some personal stationery the President uses for personal letters. It says, "Gerald R. Ford" at the top.

Q Ron, will we ever find out what the delegates have advised the President?

MR. NESSEN: No, because if you read the letter --

Q I don't mean individuals. I mean totals.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think we will put out totals.

Q So, in other words, we don't know what the President is going to get in the way of input?

MR. NESSEN: The purpose of this is to provide advice to the President.

Q Is he under any obligation to take the advice?

MR. NESSEN: As I said yesterday, he is going to make the final choice but obviously he wants to hear the views of the delegates, the Members of Congress and other leading Republicans. Mary Louise Smith will be soliciting and reporting on the views of, for instance, the Republican National Committeeman and Committeewoman from each State, the Republican Chairman of each State and other RNC groups like the Heritage groups and the Federation of Republican Women and so forth and former Republican National Chairmen and Governors.

Q When do you expect all these views to be in hand?

MR. NESSEN: I would say the deadline set for the delegates, which is Aug 11, is the same deadline that will be true for all the categories.

Q Will he go to the convention with a nominee in mind?

MR. NESSEN: Beyond this stage of the consultation process, I can't give you a timetable for the rest of it.

Q Is this phase two?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I would like to think this is the continuation and expansion of phase one, Bob.

Q What will be required to work in full harmony with the President?

MR. NESSEN: I am not going to elaborate any further on the President's own words, Fran.

Q Ron, I am sorry, but I am not sure I heard correctly before. Were you asked if we would be told the rundown on, in effect, the straw poll and you said --

MR. NESSEN: I said I don't think so. The results -- in other words, so and so got so many ballots for first place and so forth will not be published.

Q Will this be the most influential input for the President's decision or can you break it down with other advice he is getting? How much weight will the delegates' preferences carry?

MR. NESSEN: I can't answer that question, Ann. He is soliciting the views of a wide range of people, and he has got some ideas of his own, of course. I can't give you a weighted system of who has the most influence.

Q Ron, do you know what the principles of the Republican Party are?

MR. NESSEN: I think so.

Q Can you tell me?

MR. NESSEN: Well --

Q Is he saying the Republican platform?

Q Is there a formal document?

Q Is there some place where we can go to and find out what that means?

MR. NESSEN: I think probably the RNC has some documents you could read, John, if you are interested in pursuing the principles of the Republican Party.

Q Fiscal conservatism? The President spelled out his own principles on many occasions and I wonder --

MR. NESSEN: I think we could get you or you could get yourself some documents from the RNC and read up on it.

Q Ron, I have heard some people say that this all looks to them like a public relations stunt.

MR. NESSEN: Who are they?

Q What difference does it make? I am not talking about political people.

MR. NESSEN: You are asking me to answer, and I wonder who I am answering.

Q Just general public people. I am not talking about politicians.

Q How many of them?

Q You say you can't tell us how much influence this is going to have. Is there any way you can reply to that kind of skepticism, cynicism?

MR. NESSEN: I was not aware of it until you mentioned it, Dick. Frankly, the President followed a very similar procedure of soliciting views, as you know, when he selected his Vice President previously. I don't recall that there was any skepticism then that it was a genuine effort by the President to seek a wide range of views, and until you mentioned it to me that you talked to many members of the public who have expressed skepticism, I frankly have not heard of any skepticism.

Q What I am getting at is that you have not said here how much weight this would carry or how much impact it would have. The President has some views of his own. Is there any way you can make clear that the views he is soliciting will be meaningful?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I really --

Q Why should anybody think, from the fact that he is sending out a letter, that he is going to abide by the suggestions he gets? You are not even saying that.

MR. NESSEN: I told you that the President will make the final choice and recommendation to the convention, but he is going through a genuine consultation process with a wide range of people.

Q When is he going to announce his decision?

MR. NESSEN: At the appropriate time.

Q Can you do any better than that for us?

MR. NESSEN: Not right now.

Q Will it be at the convention?

MR. NESSEN: At the appropriate time.

Q Does he hope to have his mind made up before he goes?

MR. NESSEN: I think, as I said, we will get on to phase two of this process after phase one is concluded, and I just can't spell out to you when he will be making his decision.

Q Ron, is the President aware of at least two polls that have been published showing that surveys of the delegates show they favor John Connally over any of the others mentioned?

MR. NESSEN: I saw something on TV, and I guess something in writing, that talked about of the delegates who could be contacted and of those who were contacted the ones willing to express an opinion had some views, and I assume the President read that in the paper, but this is a very widespread effort to hear the views of the delegates and the Members of Congress and the other leading Republicans.

Q Ron, when you say the President will announce his decision at the appropriate time, do you mean not to rule out that he might do it before the convention?

MR. NESSEN: I just can't be any more precise than to say that it will be done at the appropriate time.

Q So, you are leaving open the possibility that he could do the same thing Ronald Reagan has done?

MR. NESSEN: No, I am saying that he will announce his choice at the appropriate time.

Q Ron, I must say that I am one of those cynical, skeptical people that Dick mentioned. I see no evidence whatever that the President may not have already made up his mind and that we are going through a political gimmick process for public relations and that is exactly what Dick is trying to ask you.

You have not given us any assurance that this is not anything more than a public relations gimmick.

MR. NESSEN: If there is that kind of widespread cynicism and disbelief -- which I was not aware of until Dick just brought it up -- I would say, Bob, that you are questioning the President's very integrity and I know of no reason why it should be.

I don't know what he has done in the past that would lead Dick and you to question that this is a legitimate effort to consult with the leaders of his party because he believes, as the letter says, that it is one of the most critical choices that any candidate has to make. He wants to hear the views of Republicans as to who the choice should be, and after all, that person will carry the banner of the Republican Party, play a major role in governing the country for the next four years.

The representatives to the convention -- over 4000 of them -- represent grass roots of every State, district, in the country, represent a very wide cross-section of Americans.

So, why you would say today on this particular Saturday that you suddenly see the President turning away from a record of integrity and candor and honesty and suddenly becoming some kind of purveyor of gimmicks makes no sense to me, Bob.

Q Because you say the President has given no promise that he will (a) make the figures known so that we have any idea of what degree of support these various candidates have and (b) you give us no assurance that the President is going to take the advice they give him, even privately.

MR. NESSEN: He has already begun the consultation process of hearing the views of people who come in to visit him. I have heard those views and, believe me, he listens very carefully.

Secondly, why would he go to the trouble and have the PFC go to the expense of soliciting views and asking Senator Scott and Congressman Rhodes to solicit views at the Capitol and Mary Louise Smith to solicit the views of RNC committee members and State committeemen and women and State chairmen -- I find myself not -- I see Dick scribbling down every word, and I can see the lead, "The White House denied today that this is a gigantic, phony public relations gimmick," and I don't like to be put in that position, Bob, because I know of no justification for it.

Q Then why won't you give us the total figures, the total results?

MR. NESSEN: Is that what this is leading up to?

Q We would like to have some idea of whether or not the President is in fact going to take the advice that he has asked for.

MR. NESSEN: He is certainly going to receive the advice and study the advice. Now, I have already said that this is not a vote in which he will necessarily accept the majority vote. But, that will certainly be a factor in his decision on who his running mate will be.

Q Can you tell us that he has not yet made up his mind who he would like to see --

MR. NESSEN: I have been saying that I guess now for weeks, and I will certainly say it again today, if it makes you happy. The President has not decided who his running mate will be.

Q Ron, do all the other heads of the State committees and so on get similar letters to this?

MR. NESSEN: Mary Louise Smith will be soliciting them and what her method of doing so is, I can't tell you.

Q Ron, does the President have any comment on this latest HEW situation regarding boys choirs?

MR. NESSEN: I read that in the paper today and I have not had time to find out what the details are.

Q Ron, can I just make sure of one other thing? This says, "The text of a letter from the President to the delegates and alternates." Now, I am not sure I followed you before. Did you say that this will not be going to the other people that have been mentioned?

MR. NESSEN: No, he has asked Senator Scott and Congressman Rhodes to pull together and bring back to him next week the recommendations from Republican Members of Congress, the Senators and House Members. He has asked Mary Louise Smith to pull together and bring back to him before the 11th of August the views of the Republican National Committee and the State chairmen and so forth. Other views will be sent in, but this particular letter will go to the delegates and alternates only.

Q Who wrote the letter?

MR. NESSEN: The President did.

Q And you can say, then, with certainty it is not going out today?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't know how quickly it can be printed and addressed and so forth. It will go out in the next few days.

Q And the PFC is going to handle it so we can find out from them when they start sending out letters, right?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Is it going out regular mail?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, 13 cents per letter.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 1:10 P.M. EDT)