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

#569

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 10:45 A.M. MDT

AUGUST 23, 1976

MONDAY

(Vail, Colorado)

MR. NESSEN: I think you have seen the little package of announcements that we have put out this morning. It consisted of two Ambassadorial appointments, an Assistant Secretary of HEW and some members to the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

I think you know the President had some friends of his from Vail over last evening for dinner. We posted the list, I guess, of the participants. The dinner was over about 10:15 and the President retired at 10:50.

This morning, the President got up at 7:15, went swimming, had breakfast and then had staff meetings with Cheney, Scowcroft, Nessen, Carlson, O'Donnell and Cavaney. The President is now working on paperwork.

I mentioned to you yesterday that the President directed some briefings for Senator Dole, which start today. There have been two additions to his briefing schedule. As you know, today he was being briefed by George Bush of the CIA and by Bill Hyland of the NSC, and added to that is the Deputy Defense Secretary, Robert Ellsworth.

Tomorrow he has more briefings scheduled in the morning and in the afternoon, and another briefing is being added by Secretary Kissinger.

Q Why?

MR. NESSEN: To provide him with additional information on foreign policy issues.

Q Did Secretary Speakes make this public in Washington, or will he?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so.

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Q Why isn't Mondale getting these briefings?

MR. NESSEN: My understanding is Mondale has been sitting in on the Carter briefings.

Q Did the President decide that Kissinger should brief him?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Why does Dole get so much more extensive briefings than Carter?

MR. NESSEN: If Carter wants these briefings, he can have them. He has been briefed to the extent he has requested.

The President's advisers, political advisers, who are either here or about to arrive are Stu Spencer --

Q Is he here?

MR. NESSEN: He is already here. -- Jim Baker, who is coming later today; Rog Morton, who is already here; Bob Teeter, who is already here; Dick Cheney, and Bill Greener.

Today, Dick Cheney has convened a series of staff meetings, not involving the President today, to discuss the campaign. Beginning tomorrow, the President will take part in strategy meetings throughout the rest of the week.

If you have any desire to take photos at the beginning of the strategy meeting tomorrow, I think we can arrange it, if you want it.

Q Yes.

Q What time is that?

MR. NESSEN: It will be relatively early in the morning, around 8:30.

Q We would like one of the strategists to talk to us in the afternoon.

MR. NESSEN: Senator Dole will be coming later in the week. I don't have his exact arrival time yet because his own schedule is not fully set yet. It does look like he will be making that speech to the American Legion and possibly have some other speaking engagements before he arrives here. There will be possibly others coming later in the week, but I don't have a list to give you right now.

Q Ron, when is the Seattle speech?

MR. NESSEN: Wednesday.

Q Any other arrivals to announce today?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any other arrivals to announce today.

Q There are rumors Rocky will be coming here.

MR. NESSEN: There are possibly other people coming later this week, but I don't have any announcements. There will be no one else today.

Q Is Dr. Albert Sabin here today?

MR. NESSEN: If he is, I haven't seen him.

Q On a possibility basis, who are the others?

MR. NESSEN: I will wait until we are sure who is coming and announce them at that time, Bob.

Q Have you asked Connally and Reagan and Vice President Rockefeller to brief?

MR. NESSEN: Right now it is not sure who is coming later in the week. When it is set, we will announce it.

Q Is Reagan expected?

MR. NESSEN: We don't have any plans set for later in the week. When we do, we will announce it.

Q Ron, has the decision been made as to who will handle the debate negotiations from the Ford side?

MR. NESSEN: I expect that later in the week we will probably have more information for you on the debate question.

Q In connection with that, the debates with Carter, there are several different formats. What is the one looked on with the most favor, the direct head-to-head or the panel of reporters questioning, set subjects, a wide-ranging thing? There are several different formats suggested by the LWV. Which does the White House favor now?

MR. NESSEN: We haven't really made our decision on that yet, and won't until later in the week.

Q Ron, is it accurate to say the meeting being convened today by Cheney will deal with the debate question?

MR. NESSEN: I think it is safe to say that is one of the subjects that will be discussed.

Q The dates of the debates have been set, haven't they?

MR. NESSEN: Nothing has been set on the debates -- sponsorship, formats, date, place, and so forth -- none of that has been set.

Q Perhaps in Kansas City, I don't know if you recall, but at the time you seemed to suggest the Ford camp favored questions by a panel of reporters over the other formats. Does that still hold as a matter of preference?

MR. NESSEN: There isn't any particular preference right now because we haven't had our own meetings to decide on our own ground rules.

Q What decisions is he going to make on strategy? What are the points that are going to be taken up in the meeting?

MR. NESSEN: I think the whole range of matters that need to be decided, the final decisions on which have to be made here in Vail. As you know, I mentioned the other day that some tentative decisions have been made and, of course, some of the strategy has already been -- I mean, you have seen some of it. You know, the idea that one day somebody is going to stand up here and say here is the strategy for the fall campaign, that won't happen.

Q Is he going to be doing a lot of speech-making, going around the country?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have anything on that to announce today, and I doubt if that is the kind of thing we will have an announcement about, Helen.

Q Why?

MR. NESSEN: We just won't stand up and announce our strategy to Jimmy Carter.

Q Ron, has it been determined whether Mrs. Dole will resign from the FTC? Is that being discussed today?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think that is one of the matters to be discussed. It is not one of the matters to be discussed. I will have to check and see where that stands, Rudy. I don't know what the answer to that is.

Q Is there any question about the President taking general election money from the Presidential Federal Campaign Fund? Has he already decided to do that?

MR. NESSEN: You mean the FEC money?

Q Yes, for the general election?

MR. NESSEN: I think so, but you better let me check.

Q What is the chance of getting Spencer, Morton, et al, out here to talk to us?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think there is any chance today.

Q I mean this week.

MR. NESSEN: I will ask them.

Q Ron, did the President have any comment on Dole being quoted before the nomination as saying it is a waste being here in Vail?

MR. NESSEN: The President didn't have any direct comment, but I think it would be fair to say there is going to be a lot of work done here this week, as Senator Dole will find out when he gets here.

Q Ron, there has been a report that the President offered the RNC job to John Connally, true? And Connally said no?

Q Question?

MR. NESSEN: Fred is wondering about a story in the Dallas Times Herald that quotes -- doesn't quote anybody, I guess -- suggesting that the President offered the RNC chairmanship to John Connally.

I think it is fair to say that the President discussed with John Connally in Kansas City a possible role for him in the campaign, including a possible role at the RNC. But, the fact that the President asked Mrs. Smith to stay on, I think, is an indication of how the matter was resolved.

Q What kind of role in the RNC?

Q Did the President ask Connally to be National Chairman and Connally said no?

MR. NESSEN: It was a private conversation, Fred, and I don't know exactly what transpired in the private conversation.

Q Would you ask the President?

MR. NESSEN: I think this is probably the way I would like to describe what happened there.

Q There isn't any possibility the President would ask a man of Connally's stature to take a job less than the National Chairmanship of the RNC, is there?

MR. NESSEN: It was a private meeting, and I don't have all the details.

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Q What role does he want him to play in the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: I think Connally already said he is a supporter of the President and would play a role in the campaign.

Q Ron, you said the fact that he, the President, asked Mary Louise Smith to stay on for a couple, or two, years has resolved that. Does that mean he asked Mary Louise Smith to stay on before he talked with Connally about a possible role with the RNC?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the timing was, Ted.

Q Let's do it the other way. Did he ask Mary Louise Smith to stay on only after he talked to Connally?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know what the timing was.

Q Why should it resolve it? Why would that settle anything?

MR. NESSEN: Because the RNC has a chairman and the President asked the chairman to stay on.

Q Why should that resolve it if he asked her only after he was turned down by Connally if that is, in fact, what happened?

Q Did not the President meet with Connally late Thursday afternoon and shortly after that he met with Mary Louise Smith?

MR. NESSEN: He met with Connally sometime Thursday. I don't have the exact time on it.

Q Do you expect Connally to have an official role in the campaign?

MR. NESSEN: I think, later this week, at some point, we will be announcing a line-up of campaign officials.

Q Has the President also discussed with Connally a role in the PFC?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, I don't know. It was a private meeting.

Q You do know that he talked to him about the RNC. Did he talk to him about any other position?

MR. NESSEN: It was a private meeting and I don't know exactly what was said there.

Q By a private meeting, you don't mean to say just the two men were present?

MR. NESSEN: That is right. I mean there were only two men present.

Q Jack Marsh was not present at that meeting?

MR. NESSEN: Not to my knowledge.

Q How do you know what was discussed? How can you give us half a loaf here? I mean, you say they discussed it but you won't tell us anything else.

Q Ron, what types of jobs, officials or positions, are you going to be announcing?

MR. NESSEN: I think, at some point down the line, we are going to be laying out the campaign organization.

Q Such positions as what?

MR. NESSEN: You know, all the various positions in the campaign.

Q Fundraisers and regional officials, campaign manager -- will the campaign manager be named?

MR. NESSEN: The chairman of the PFC is Rog Morton and he is staying as chairman.

Q Ron, we can't hear the questions.

MR. NESSEN: Dick says, what kind of campaign officials will we be announcing? I said, at some point down the line we will be announcing the upper levels of the campaign staff.

Q Ron, when the President met with Red this morning, did he sign off on a stop on the way back or on a trip out here; is that what that meeting was about?

MR. NESSEN: It may have been, I don't know.

Q Did you rule out a possibility Connally will arrive here later this week?

MR. NESSEN: I can't rule it in or out. I don't know either way.

Q Ron, will we be receiving campaign news from you or Bill Greener?

MR. NESSEN: What do you mean by that, Phil?

Q I mean on these strategy sessions, who will be handling that?

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure all that much news is going to come out after the strategy meetings.

Q But whatever news comes, will it all come from you or the campaign organization?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. We haven't really sorted it out, yet.

Q Ron, what is the President's current position, or what is his thinking, on initiatives with regard to the North Korean situation? Does he regard the matter as closed or what does he intend to do?

MR. NESSEN: I am told Bob Funseth has some information he is putting out at the State Department today, a little elaboration, and so forth.

Q Does the President regard that as a serious situation, a crisis situation, something to be worried about?

MR. NESSEN: I don't want to characterize it that way, Dick. I don't want to characterize it, period.

Q We gave you a series of questions yesterday, Ron --

MR. NESSEN: Yes, and most were answered almost immediately, either here, at the State Department or the Defense Department.

Q Why has the President played no role in the situation?

MR. NESSEN: I think you know the President has personally directed this situation from the very beginning, and still is.

Q Why does he have a kind of non-involvement?

MR. NESSEN: No non-involvement, Helen. It is his Pentagon, his State Department. They speak for the President in military matters. They speak for the President in diplomatic matters, on this story just as on every other story.

Q And you speak for the President, don't you?

MR. NESSEN: I certainly do.

Q Has the President been talking to Kissinger yesterday and today about this?

MR. NESSEN: He spoke to Brent this morning about it.

Q Has he talked with Rumsfeld?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know whether there was a direct conversation with Rumsfeld or not.

Q Are we clear on the fact that the President did not know of any expression of regret until after the show of military force that he ordered? Is that the case?

MR. NESSEN: The chronology put out yesterday showed that.

Q Ron, yesterday at the golf course, I believe it was, the President was asked about this Korean thing and he said, "Ask Ron Nessen." Did he really mean to say, ask Bob Funseth?

MR. NESSEN: No, he meant to ask me and I would answer what I could and refer you to the people who could answer what I couldn't.

Q Is your knowledge correct?

MR. NESSEN: What do you mean, is it correct?

Q There seems to be some question of whether it jibed with what you said earlier.

MR. NESSEN: I think you know the situation yesterday. You know I was beaten into near insensibility by demands for information I didn't have and I kept saying, "I don't have that information. Call the State Department, they have it." And nobody would call, so I made a terrible mistake, which was to guess and I will never make that mistake again. I will refer you to the people who have the information. I should have stuck with that yesterday but I didn't. I made a mistake in the course of it.

Q Are you unable yet to emerge from that insensibility? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: No, it is my normal state. (Laughter)

Q Why is it you can't get information about this?

MR. NESSEN: I can get information about anything, Helen, but as with every story, I think you should go to the people -- why should I call and get the information and put it out here when something may get lost in translation. I may not ask the correct follow-up questions, and so forth.

Q We told you for three days we have not been able to get any information from the Pentagon.

MR. NESSEN: The paper was full of it this morning. There was tons and tons of it. It filled the whole front page of one paper.

Q After you made so many mistakes, they finally had to tell us what was happening.

Q Quite apart from what the Pentagon and the State Department say, what is the President's personal reaction to the Kim il'Sung note?

MR. NESSEN: What do you mean, the personal reaction?

Q How does he personally feel about it?

MR. NESSEN: I think no apology can make up for the death of two American officers.

Q But you said it was not an apology yesterday.

MR. NESSEN: No expression of regret, no expression of regretfulness, no expression of it being a regretful incident can make up for the loss of lives of two American officers.

Q Are those your words or the President's?

MR. NESSEN: I think that reflects the President's view of the incident.

Q Ron, you used the word "apology." Are you saying you view it as an apology when the State Department says they don't?

MR. NESSEN: I won't go down that road again, Muriel, when the State Department has given you the exact words in the note. I picked upon Ralph's use of the word "apology."

Q I don't know whether this is what you meant, but you seemed to have confirmed there was in fact a note from Kim il'Sunghimself, which is something the State Department --

MR. NESSEN: Let me start all over again. I will not answer Ralph's question because it apparently contained a lot of things that have never been confirmed before.

If North Vietnam expressed regretfulness, regret, said it was anything vaguely like that, then the President feels that any such expression cannot make up for the fact that two American officers were brutally beaten to death without provocation.

Q Could you confirm that a note did indeed come from Kim il'Sung?

MR. NESSEN: I think if you ask Bob Funseth, you can get all of that, Bob.

Q Well, he wasn't confirming it yesterday.

Q Ron, in response to previous questions you haven't answered yet, what can make up for this?

MR. NESSEN: I understand that Funseth is announcing that the United States is calling a meeting of the Military Armistice Commission tomorrow.

Q And what?

MR. NESSEN: To insist upon North Korean assurances respecting the safety of American personnel in the DMZ.

Q Is there going to be a message from the President himself in that meeting?

MR. NESSEN: Not that I know of.

Q Ron, is it the President's feeling that the crisis situation as it was on Saturday had abated?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I will characterize it, Walt. First of all, I don't know where the --

Q I characterized it. All I am saying is, is it the President's feeling that the tensions and the show of force and the state of military preparedness and the state of alert which existed over the weekend has now begun to abate?

MR. NESSEN: I think what I would say would be that the United States is anxious to cooperate in the relaxation of tensions but we want to make sure there is no miscalculation concerning our firmness in that area.

Q In connection with that, are we still keeping our forces on station, the aircraft carrier, the planes nearby and --

MR. NESSEN: Alan Woods is the proper place to get whatever details are being put out on the military aspects of it.

Q That goes to the question of anxious to cooperate and relaxation of tensions and making sure that there is no miscalculation. I think the question is a proper one since it follows immediately on this, even though the Defense Department --

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any information on the Defense Department status there, but Alan Woods does.

Q Since the President did order the show of force, has there been a counterorder to stand down?

MR. NESSEN: John, I won't make the same mistake I made yesterday. Any information on the defense situation needs to come from Alan Woods.

Q Can you tell us what the President has done?

MR. NESSEN: Contact Alan Woods.

Q But the President is Commander-in-Chief.

MR. NESSEN: Contact Alan Woods.

Q If that subject is exhausted, can I go back to an earlier one?

MR. NESSEN: It is not, but I am.

Q I was not here, but I checked with a number of very reliable reporters and you seem not to have answered the question of whether John Connally was indeed offered the role of RNC Chairman. Could we get that clear?

MR. NESSEN: The meeting took place between two people, the President and John Connally. I am not privy to that two-man conversation.

Q John Connally said he was offered it. Does the White House deny it?

MR. NESSEN: I told you what I know about it and that is all I have to say about it.

Q Robert Strauss of the Democratic Party is saying today the President Ford Committee still has not paid AMTRAK for the whistle stop campaign trip across Michigan. Do you know why, if not?

MR. NESSEN: That is the first I have heard of it.

Q Is that of any concern at all, or worry, that a campaign bill from that far back has not been paid?

MR. NESSEN: Let's find out whether it is or is not, first.

Q Ron, since obviously your source on what did occur in the Connally meeting with the President, and this was a meeting between the two men, you did tell us there was conversation between them about Connally's role, obviously that came from the President.

MR. NESSEN: I said they discussed a role. I didn't say offer.

Q They discussed a role. That came from the President. Is that all the President would tell you? Did you ask him any more about it?

MR. NESSEN: This is all I am going to say about the Connally matter today.

Q When you talked to the President about that, were you aware of the wire stories and other stories saying that Connally had been offered the RNC Chairmanship?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have anything further on the Connally matter.

Q There is substantial interest here. May I make a special request that the next time you meet with the President you ask him if indeed he offered John Connally the RNC job and if indeed John Connally turned it down? Will you take my request that he answer the question?

MR. NESSEN: I will take your request.

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Q It appears to me if Mr. Connally, who was one of the participants in this meeting, did say he was offered it and since the White House won't say he was not offered it, it seems he was offered it.

MR. NESSEN: Someone told me he denied it yesterday.

Q He denied he was offered it?

MR. NESSEN: That is what somebody told me, yes.

Q I think the wire stories said he denied the story because there was -- refused the position because he felt there was no hope for victory?

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q What was the reaction of the President to the statement that Connally thinks the Republican Party camp can't win in November?

MR. NESSEN: The President thinks he will win in November.

Q What is the President's reaction?

MR. NESSEN: I will not have a reaction to the Connally statement. I will tell you what the President thinks about the outlook of the election.

Q What is the President's view on how he is doing on bringing the party back to a unified state?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. I didn't ask him about it.

Q Could I ask about Korea? The United States policy on Korea, as I understand it, is there are no plans for any reduction, any withdrawal of American troops and we have 41,000 troops there now, approximately. Is it the President's intention that those 41,000 should remain there indefinitely?

MR. NESSEN: I will check, John.

Q You said the President is going to start meeting with the political advisers tomorrow morning?

MR. NESSEN: Right.

Q And for tomorrow and the rest of the week. Will these be all-day sessions or half-day sessions, then a half-day of golf or tennis; what is the prospect?

MR. NESSEN: I would say certainly, they will take up the mornings and it is possible that there will also be meetings later in the day. I think the President is going to take some little relaxation in the middle of the day after a pretty full morning of meetings.

Q Could I follow on that, please? When we got here, I think the President's physician was quoted as saying he was tired and all that. Do you have any later word from Dr. Lukash on whether or not he is in better shape or how he feels, and so forth?

MR. NESSEN: I think he is about like the rest of us, Ted. He has gotten some sleep, some exercise, unwound a little bit and is feeling fine.

Q Will the President be having a news conference here?

MR. NESSEN: I don't expect him to, Phil.

Q Will there be any opportunity for us to ask him a question or two? We haven't had a chance to talk to him since he got the nomination.

MR. NESSEN: I thought he had been interviewed almost every day at the golf course.

Q Will he stand still for a couple of questions?

Q He was interviewed to the point of, have you had a good day or good rounds.

MR. NESSEN: That sounds like the fault lies with the questioner, not the answer.

Q At the golf course, if we asked him a question of substance, I was told this would jeopardize coverage for the rest of the week.

Q If you are suggesting that that is where we should ask him questions --

MR. NESSEN: I am certainly not suggesting that.

I will relay your interest and see what we can do.

Q How about Dole?

MR. NESSEN: I haven't gotten a full schedule of how we will handle all that.

Q If indeed you make him available at the golf course, will you see that something more than the networks --

MR. NESSEN: I don't mean to suggest we should turn the golf course arrival into a news conference. I was being a little facetious, which is something unusual for me.

Q Will you suggest a news conference to the President?

MR. NESSEN: I will relay your interest and see what we can do.

Q We have heard about Morton shifting from one position to another in the PFC.

MR. NESSEN: What is it?

Q You said something earlier that sounded like more than one shift or change in jobs in the Ford committee.

MR. NESSEN: I didn't say changing jobs.

Q I forget your exact comment, but a number of people, appointments, or changes --

MR. NESSEN: I said, somewhere down the line we would be announcing the line-up of the top campaign people.

Q This is what I don't understand. Prior to this -- I have heard about Morton moving not so much out of the job but into different duties -- who else will be changed or have different duties?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any of that to announce today, Pat.

Q You said yesterday that you were going to outline today for us a rather impressive set of activities for the rest of the week that would effectively negate any charge that time was being wasted out here. Have you already done that this morning?

MR. NESSEN: I said these people have arrived, others may arrive later in the week, and the staff will begin strategy sessions today and the President will take part in them, beginning tomorrow.

Q Will you take part?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q I believe there was something said on how these meetings will be structured and how much of the day they will consume.

Q Question?

MR. NESSEN: A little more detail is requested on the strategy meetings and I said I thought they would take up the President's full morning and then he would take a break and then maybe relax for a little golf. Whether he then takes part again for a second meeting each day, we haven't worked out yet.

Q When does he plan to be President, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: He will work that in.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END

(AT 11:15 A.M. MDT)