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THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
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AND
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SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS
CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG, NORTH CAROLINA

THE BRIEFING ROOM

12:54 P.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: You requested that after the President's meeting with the educational leaders concerning busing that we bring some of the leaders down to talk to you and that is what we are doing, so let me introduce them and then you can ask your questions.

There was some interest in talking to Arch Moore when he left after his meeting with the President, and I will come and let you know when that meeting is over.

First of all, let me introduce you to John W. Porter, who is the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Michigan. He also is the President-elect of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Wilson Riles, who I think many of you know -- well-known State Superintendent of Public Education Instruction in California.

We also have Dr. Raymond Shelton, who is the Superintendent of Schools in Tampa, Florida.

We have Mrs. Ursula Pinero, who is an elementary principal in Rochester, New York.

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Now I don't know whether you had anything prepared to say in advance or whether you want to just merely go straight to the questions.

MR. RILES: Questions are fine with me. I don't know about you. Mrs. Pinero?

MRS. PINERO: Questions.

MR. PORTER: I would just say that the purpose of the meeting with the President and with Secretary Mathews and Secretary (Attorney General) Levi was to discuss the two proposals that the Secretaries have presented to the President.

Secretary Mathews' proposal is to establish some type of a national leadership forum in relationship to busing and Secretary (Attorney General) Levi's proposal, which would be legislation that would try to clarify and put some time limits on court orders. That is what we were discussing and expressing practical points of view from the local school building and from the State level.

Q Is there any consensus of opinion among all of you or many different views?

MR. PORTER: Well, I think my colleague, Wilson, might speak to that. The point that I made, which I think most of the educators agreed with, was that there is a need for national leadership, there is a need for communities to have a citizens group that can support the School Board and the School Superintendent before busing reaches the crisis stage.

Now there were some concerns about the legislation and I think most of us indicated that there needed to be a relationship between that legislation by Secretary (Attorney General) Levi and the need for quality education in many schools and I think my colleagues could speak more to that.

Q Excuse me. Could you identify yourself for those of us who have radio tape and need to identify voices?

MR. PORTER: I am John Porter, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Michigan, President-elect of the Chief State School Officers.

Q All of you have had to deal with busing in one way or another in your local jurisdictions, is that right? The President preferred to ask you how things were going.

MR. PORTER: I am under court order right now in the Detroit desegregation case as State Superintendent.

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Q And are you opposed to carrying out this order or --

MR. PORTER: I don't know.

MR. SHELTON: I am Dr. Raymond Shelton, Superintendent of Schools in Tampa, which is Hillsborough County in Florida.

This is our fifth year for a completely desegregated school system affecting 115,000 pupils in a geographical area the size of the State of Rhode Island and we are 80 percent white, 20 percent black and every school is racially balanced, trying to go 100 -- 80 to 20 percent racial situation. Our staffs are the same way and have been for years.

I think the President and the Secretaries were interested in discussing how this had worked there and we have been given credit for having made it work successfully and calmly and though we are now about in the business of instruction but we do cross-bus very, very extensively and they wanted to know why. I think one of the reasons we are successful is we do have a county system, we don't have a city-suburban situation. We do have a county, there is no white flight possibilities. We work very hard. We worked with a large citizens group to get our plan formed and I think that is one reason we are interested in the plan possibilities that Secretary Mathews has presented, that getting people involved in the community, try to solve the problems locally and be flexible, and it may fit, whatever those problems might be, and I think that's a good idea.

I am concerned about how much authority such a committee would have because it can get in the way of a Superintendent sooner or later but the involvement of the community is an extremely high part of whatever problem is to be solved, in this case the desegregation of the schools.

Q Did you act under court order or did you do it on a voluntary basis? Is it five years now that you have had --

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MR. SHELTON: This is our fifth year of a completely desegregated plan. Prior to that time, we had been under various different kinds of plans, depending on whatever the recent court decisions have been. I think they went back for some 13 years under court order or one kind or another.

I have only been Superintendent of Schools -- starting my tenth year in July. We went through pre-hearing, we went through this voluntary, you know, re-enrollment and this sort of thing, the majority of the minority transfers, but we have been a completely racially balanced situation. This is the fifth year, beginning in September of 1971.

We went through some problems, certainly, but not like you hear -- Boston, okay, say it -- and we think our problems are well toward being solved and we are educating young people and not worrying so much about the race, but we are continually balancing the schools.

Q Now, this was a typical group from Boston that might have been invited. Do you know why the Boston people were not invited?

MR. SHELTON: I think you want to talk to the other side of the issue today.

MR. RILES: I am Wilson Riles, State Superintendent from California. I thought it was a very amicable meeting, and I saw sincerity on everyone's part to try to get this problem behind us. I mean, we have been wrestling with it for 22 years.

My input was to the effect that you cannot solve the integration issue, in my view, unless you address the issue of quality schools for everyone, and I am very disturbed that in many cases, if not most throughout the country, everyone centers on the question of busing or some racial thing without realizing that whether a parent is black or white their concern is whether they are going to have good schools to which to send their children.

We in education -- and I think the nation -- must address that problem concurrently with integration. It simply boils down to the fact that no one wishes to put their youngster at a disadvantage, and if you ask anyone to send their youngster to a school that they view as inadequate, you have trouble.

I believe if we can address the problem of quality, then we can have maximum integration and it is just as simple as that.

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One other aspect of this is that we need some kind of incentives in our States and in our districts so that people will move to solutions before there is a crisis situation where all rationality goes out. If the legislation can provide some preplanning and give people an opportunity to get their communities together, then I think the trauma of what we have faced in some districts might be averted.

Q When you say quality schools, what do you mean?

MR. RILES: I mean good schools.

Q Do you mean more Federal money to build schools? Is that what you mean?

MR. RILES: No, I do not mean that. As an educator, let me put it to you very straight, and I am not going to give you gobbledygook and try to complicate it. I could give you all the means and medians and all of that, but when I first moved to Sacramento, I asked the people in the Department of Education which were the best junior high schools and senior high schools in Sacramento because I planned to move my family out and they told me this is a good junior high school and this is a good senior high school.

I think everyone knows what a good high school means. It is a school where youngsters are achieving, where the teachers are concerned and where they are coming out reading, writing and computing, and that is what I mean.

Q Mr. Riles, the thorough public impression is that the President is looking for some way to get rid of busing, just to end it. Was that the general impression of your meeting?

MR. RILES: Not at all. I personally had concerns about this whole issue, and I was assured that the President was concerned about finding some answers to this problem. In my view -- and the other people can speak for themselves -- it was an honest approach to see if solutions can be found, and I was pleased to contribute. I think it is a national problem, and I think the President should give some leadership to it.

Q Mr. Riles, do you think that perhaps the issue has been a little muddied in the political waters this year? Does that concern you?

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MR. RILES: I tell you, I am a nonpartisan, elected official in California, and I think the public may view this this way, but the fact of the matter is we are in the process of educating youngsters and if we are going to wait until there is not an election or some other appropriate time, I think we all fail to do our duties.

So, no, I think at any time we must address these problems and keep on addressing them regardless of the politics.

Q You don't feel anyone has tried to exploit the issue unduly?

MR. RILES: No. I hope not. I sent a wire to each Presidential candidate in California prior to our primary asking that the issue not be exacerbated, and I think most of the candidates observed that. It was not an issue in our primary.

So, it is too important to exploit in that way, and we must find answers and I want to emphasize that I did not get the impression today at all that anyone here was trying to exploit the issue.

Q You are not against busing as such a remedy?

MR. RILES: I am for integration, let's state it that way, and in my view there are many ways to achieve it. We bus 800,000 youngsters every day in California, and I might add at a cost of \$100 million. No one is against busing. The issue is whether you are going to bus your youngster to a quality school or to a lousy school, and if you are going to bus them to a quality school, everyone wants their youngsters in that school. If it is a bad school, they want them out. So, the issue really is not busing.

Q Mr. Riles, let me ask you one question. You have been pretty strong in your comments about the impracticality of busing in your views. You have been a pretty strong critic of busing, as a matter of fact. What do you think of Mr. Ford's proposals on geographic and time limits on busing, as he apparently is inferring in his legislation? A five-year limit on busing would mean the geographical impact and so on.

MR. RILES: The Attorney General explained this in legal terms, and not being a lawyer --

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Q The general idea.

MR. RILES: You know, I am really not up-to-date.

Q Is there a need for some kind of limits?

MR. RILES: What he seemed to have been saying was that the courts have a right to require illegal acts to be remedied, and once they are remedied, then the court should back out of it.

I certainly agree that illegal acts must be remedied. I am not sure about these time limits and time frames.

Q You don't know enough about it?

MR. RILES: I don't know enough about that part of it.

Q Gentlemen, and lady, can I ask you, are you unanimous in your feeling of what the President is doing, his treatment of this busing problem is good for the country? You may disagree with the five-year limitation on busing or some specifics, but the tenor of his handling of the problem is good for the nation and he is not inflaming passions or anything of that sort? Would that be correct to say? Can we get your views?

MR. SHELTON: Not knowing all the specifics of what is proposed at the present time, I think the fact that he is involved and had us here and other people -- different feelings and different philosophies -- is very, very good.

This is the way I think it can be attacked by community involvement and from the people who have been there, have been through it, have been facing it for a long period of time.

We appreciate very much the opportunity to let him know how we feel and what has worked and what may or may not work.

Q You all think the President has taken the high road on busing, is that right?

MR. RILES: I have talked too much, but I just want to say the President is trying, and I think he ought to be given credit for trying. Now, whether you come up with answers, that is another question.

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Q There have been three or four references here to the need for national leadership. Along this same line, are you convinced that President Ford is showing this national leadership?

MRS. PINERO: I am Ursula Pinero from Rochester City School District, and I am a school principal.

I do believe that the President is trying to demonstrate that leadership, and he was very strong in his statement that he has a commitment to support the court orders that are coming through and that his attempt right now is to try to resolve the problems that arise out of those court orders through Secretary Mathews' plan and through Attorney General Levi's legislation.

Q Is Mr. Jones here?

MR. JONES: Yes, right here.

MR. SCHRECK: Could I comment on that, also?

I am Bob Schreck. I am also a principal, New Haven, Connecticut, Lee High School.

You have to appreciate that we are awed to be in the White House. The fact is that the conversation today obviously has political undertones, it is obviously an attempt from my view to present a moderate position. The President has not really retreated from the national commitment to encourage integration of our society, but he is trying obviously to moderate the influence of judges to decide what will happen educationally in various communities throughout this nation.

It was indicated to us that there are 600 communities at this time throughout the nation that have these kinds of problems. I think there was an attempt both on the part of the Secretary of HEW and the Attorney General to move toward a decentralized approach.

The problem as I see it -- I come from a school that has been integrated for all ten years of its existence -- our problem is the lack of resources. Integrated education is working at our school but resources have dwindled.

For example, in the past five years we have increased our student population by 350 students and our teaching complement has been reduced by 14. I urged the President to provide incentives and I am talking about monetary incentives not only to those schools that are considering moving toward an integrated quality education, but also to those schools that have experienced some success in that area.

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Now obviously we are all -- I am speaking for myself. I am greatly impressed that the President would even know that I exist or that --

Q Why are you? I mean, isn't this a democracy? Why should you be so impressed?

MR. SCHRECK: It is a democracy, but there are 200 million people out there and when they randomly select you just don't expect to be --

Q Why did he pick you?

MR. SCHRECK: That is a good question. I was told that I was chosen because I had come to the attention of the U.S. Office of Education, and I am a principal of a large integrated school. I am also from a majority-minority school district, and I did have a chance to speak to the unique kinds of problems.

Every one of us could say our situations were unique. I think that what was universal was our concern for education for all young people and, of course, we are all suffering from the retrenchment, the reactionary approach to education, dwindling resources and increasingly complex kinds of problems.

I think we also made the point that education cannot be considered in a vacuum, that job opportunities, social situations definitely contribute to the overall problem that we experience in public education.

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Q Mr. Schreck, was there a feeling in the group this morning that some courts around the country have been acting too hastily in recommending busing as a remedy, that they have not been seeking out alternative means?

MR. SCHRECK: I think there was a sense that in some situations that Federal judges were acting almost arbitrarily in the absence of wide-scale community involvement and that is why I think all of us were heartened by the Secretary's point that there should be a greater involvement of a larger constituency in making these kinds of decisions.

Q Do you share that feeling? In Boston, for example, do you feel the judge acted too hastily in calling for busing?

MR. SCHRECK: Well, you know, I have difficulty in running Lee High School. I am in no position to evaluate the decisions of Judge Garrity.

Q From a neighboring State you must be closely or very familiar with the Boston situation.

MR. SCHRECK: You're a good newsman and you want to pin me and no way am I going to be pinned on that one.

Q You have not been pinned yet.

Let me go back first to Frank's original question. We are trying to get a view of was there a real mix, was there any conflict? All of you seem to have come out with the same idea that busing is a sort of a last alternative. I mean that is what I am getting.

MR. SCHRECK: No, I don't think I heard anyone preceding me and I certainly didn't say that the busing was not a method of bringing about a certain kind of quality education program and we are not even talking when we say that -- I believe 3 percent of the Nation's youth are involved in busing programs to equalize educational opportunity where a 45 percent --

Q All of you support the busing legislative proposals?

MR. SCHRECK: No. No, it is pretty difficult to support a legislative proposal that you have not read and so I think what we were saying in principle it makes more sense to approach the problem on a decentralized regional community basis than to try to approach it with all encompassing national legislation, and I think that that was the one thing in the legislation that I tended to applaud.

My concern was that we need additional resources also for those districts that have already undertaken this process and now find that the resources are not there to support a continuance of what we were already doing.

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Q Could I ask Mr. Jones a question?

MR. JONES: Yes.

Q You are Roland Jones from North Carolina?

MR. JONES: Yes, Roland Jones.

Q Mr. Jones, you have had busing for what, five years approximately? Five or six years?

MR. JONES: We have had it since 1969.

Q As I understand Mr. Ford's proposed legislation, busing ends after five years. What would that do to the desegregated nature of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system? Wouldn't you be able to maintain a desegregated system? What impact would it have?

MR. JONES: I have not seen the legislation. I have been a lawyer in the past as well as Superintendent at the present time and I find it very difficult to pass judgment on legislation before I have a chance to read it so I am not really sure what this legislation would say.

Q Well, busing would end in desegregation in Charlotte, wouldn't it, for the students?

MR. JONES: If busing for the purposes of desegregation were to end in Charlotte, then undoubtedly the schools would re-segregate.

At the time that the schools in Charlotte were desegregated, we did have unequal opportunities in the schools, unequal resources and unequal quality of education from school to school. Largely the quality was higher in the white schools, particularly in the White suburban schools, and lower in the minority schools. I would suspect that with re-segregation there would be a gradual return to that condition.

Q Did you tell the President that?

MR. JONES: Yes, I did.

Q And what did he say? Can you recall?

MR. JONES: Well, I think the purpose of the President holding these series of meetings was so he could listen and I appreciate the opportunity to express these feelings but he made no qualitative value judgments about the statements.

Q This seemed to be a step backwards?

MR. JONES: To end desegregation of the schools, yes.

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Q The President has had some rough things to say about some Federal judges. He is never very clear about which Federal judges he means but the judge down in Charlotte, Judge McMillan, issued an historic all-encompassing busing order down there and I gather he has been somewhat of a social pariah in the community because of that. I just wonder about yourself as an educator who is also interested in maintaining law and order which is a problem within the school system, how do you feel when you hear the President of the United States criticizing Federal judges, and you certainly have one in Charlotte who is controversial?

MR. JONES: Well, he is in a better position to criticize him than I am.

And I can only speak from the standpoint of the judges I have known personally. I know Jim McMillan personally, our judge. I knew Bill Doyle in Denver. I have the greatest admiration for them as individual people and for their legal background and judgment.

During my tenure in Charlotte, I have found Jim McMillan to be the kind of judge who listens to all sides, who is terribly concerned that he protects the constitutional rights of both the plaintiff and the defendant in any case that comes before him. He had such an open ear during the course of his deliberations that he listened to people, both in the court and outside the court, had numerous luncheons with people -- did many of the same kinds of things the President is doing now, listening to different people, both those who are anti-busing as well as those who are in favor of it.

When he realized that there was good faith on the part of the Board of Education, our school administration and the parents in the community in working together in community involvement, a plan very much like the one Secretary Mathews was proposing, he accepted the joint plan, we call it, which was a joint plan of the Board, the administration and the citizens of the community. He said he would give it a try on a three-year basis. After we got into it the one year he said that he was so impressed with the good faith on the part of all parties that he wrote his final order and I assume it has to be a final order because he wrote, "This is a final order," eleven times in the course of that order.

So we are not presently under court order.

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Q Were you involved in that case in Mecklenburg?

MR. JONES: Not in the early stages. I came in after the original court order was established and they had their first plan, what they called the Finger Plan when they had Dr. Finger come down and draft up a plan for them.

During my tenure we evolved the Feeder Plan and then modified it with the joint plan with citizen involvement. At the time I came in in 1972, the school system was still rife with disorder. I had a security radio in my car and I could have flipped a coin any day and gone to a half a dozen different schools where there were disturbances. We were going through everything that Boston went through at that time.

I liken it very much to medicine that you have to take on a doctor's prescription. None of us like to take medicine. Some pills are pretty bitter to take and it was a bitter pill at that time but after the original side effects and having achieved quality education, the index for quality education for us is that we have had a return of white flight, we have not had a disturbance in our schools in the last two years, test scores have improved in both reading and math the last two years, we have a greater percentage than the average in the Nation, getting over 500 in college board examinations.

I think all of these are part of that index of quality education that we feel so important, plus we have a lot more community support generally throughout the community than we had in 1969 or in 1972 when I came.

Q Mr. Jones, let me review just one point you made. Did I understand you correctly to say that an end to busing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg would result in a resegregation of schools there and a consequential drop-off in quality education?

MR. JONES: In general, yes. You are saying if we end busing for the purposes of desegregating the schools, this would mean a resegregation of the schools, and if there was a resegregation of the schools, the same condition would exist that existed when the judge got in the case. He got in the case not simply because we had all black and all white schools, but because he felt that the quality of education was lower in the minority schools.

They had less equipment, the equipment was older and in some cases obsolete. The programs were not as effective. It could very well be that we would return to that condition.

Q Mr. Jones, is Charlotte-Mecklenburg unique in this or is it your feeling this would be the result nationwide?

Q Were you the first busing case?

MR. JONES: No, but we were the classic case.

Q Sir, when we were asking you earlier -- I asked are you folks unanimous in approving the way the President is handling this and Mr. Ford stated very forthrightly that he wants to minimize busing and it seems to me that you didn't speak up earlier and now it seems to me that you are actually disagreeing with the President on busing. Am I misreading you?

MR. JONES: I am saying that I agree with the process the President is using in listening to people. I think over the last ten days or so he has listened to civil rights leaders, he has listened to people who are anti-busing, he has listened to the academics on the theories of desegregation, today he listened to those who are knee deep in the nitty-gritty who work with it day-to-day on a regular basis. I think the fact that he is listening and that he gave us all full opportunity to express ourselves is the important thing. I think process is important.

He did also tell us very forthrightly that he supported the maintenance of the constitutional rights of individuals and an integrated society. There was a presentation of two concepts. One concept was by Secretary Mathews which was basically that of community involvement and in theory as a concept without having seen anything in writing I think that concept is fantastic. I think it has a lot of potential.

I think the other concept might have potential. I am not sure what is meant by the Attorney General's proposal. I would have to analyze that paragraph by paragraph before I would make any comments. I was reacting to a statement made to me here rather than to Attorney General Levi's proposal which I suspect might be a little different because I recall him talking about having mediation processes when local school systems run into problems in the development of a pupil assignment plan.

That aspect of his proposal sounds good to me. What he meant by his three or four year plan I am not sure was a proposal to end busing. If it means what has happened in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, that the judge gets out of the case, that might not mean the end of busing. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg the judge is out of the case. We are now operating as a moral commitment to have integrated schools and to maintain quality education while we have those schools.

So it may well be that the President's proposal might not mean what any of us are assuming that it means right now. I can't talk to specific legislation, only to a direct question.

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Q The purpose of all these meetings, you do understand, is to minimize busing. The President was very clear about that. Now do you agree with that goal?

MR. JONES: I think all the alternatives to busing need to be examined in the integration of a school system. We have attempted to implement the magnet school concept, for instance, in Mecklenburg. This is one of the alternatives. It may be a marvelous solution in some communities. It is not the total solution in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, it is a partial solution. We have some optional schools. We have eight optional schools, some of them are magnet schools where students opt outside the framework of the pupil assignment policy.

It may be the total solution in some communities, it is not in ours. We could not desegregate our school satisfactorily without busing as one of the medicines.

THE PRESS: Thank you very much.

MR. JONES: Thank you for the opportunity.

END (AT 1:27 P.M. EDT)