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NEWS CONFERENCE

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 6:40 P.M. EDT

APRIL 30, 1975

WEDNESDAY

MR. NESSEN: Some of you have inquired about these two letters that the South Vietnamese put out today. I read the letters, and I reviewed the public record in somewhat more detail than I reviewed it before, and I am convinced that what we said at the time still holds today, that there is nothing in the letters to Thieu that differs in substance from what was said publicly.

I do have a few more of the public statements that were made at the time that appear to me to be actually stronger than what President Nixon said to President Thieu.

For instance, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, William Sullivan, who appeared on "Meet the Press" January 28 and was asked about, "What is our commitment? What would we do if the cease-fire breaks down," replied "There are no inhibitions upon us."

Q January 28, 1973?

MR. NESSEN: 1973.

Q What was he, Ambassador to Cambodia at that time?

MR. NESSEN: No, he was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. I think later he was Ambassador to Laos.

Q This was when?

MR. NESSEN: January 28, 1973 on "Meet the Press." He was asked, "What are our commitments? What would we do if the cease-fire breaks down?" He said, "There are no inhibitions upon us."

About three days later Kissinger was interviewed by Marvin Kalb, on February 1, 1973.

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Q On TV? On CBS?

MR. NESSEN: I have to assume that is right. Kalb recalled to him Ambassador Sullivan's statement. Kalb said, "Only last Sunday Ambassador Sullivan said, 'There are no inhibitions' -- I believe were his words -- 'on the use of airpower.' Is that correct?"

"Dr. Kissinger: That is legally correct."

"Mr. Kalb: Politically and diplomatically?"

"Dr. Kissinger: We have the right to do this."

Then you have the Nixon news conference of March 15, which I believe we called to your attention before.

Q Ron, if I could maybe suggest a context for that, it was the context that it would not violate the accords if we availed ourselves of that opportunity if we wanted to.

MR. NESSEN: Well, the question was, "There are no inhibitions on the use of air power, is that correct?" "Kissinger: That is legally correct."

Nixon, at his news conference on March 15, 1973 said, "I would only suggest that based on my actions over the past four years that the North Vietnamese should not lightly disregard such expressions of concern."

Q What date was that?

MR. NESSEN: That was Nixon's news conference of March 15, 1973.

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Porter, in a speech in Grand Rapids on March 21, 1973, said, "If it continued, this infiltration could lead to serious consequences."

Elliott Richardson, you may recall, at that time was the Secretary of Defense. I would like to read you two things by Elliott Richardson from early April 1973, and then I really don't think we need to prolong this much longer because -- I have got any number of things here.

On April 2, 1973 Elliott Richardson appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

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Q This is as Secretary of Defense?

MR. NESSEN: Right, and he was asked this question, just to show you there is nothing new under the sun.

"Question: There are reports out of South Vietnam today" -- which is more than two years ago -- "that President Thieu of South Vietnam says the United States and the South Vietnamese government have an agreement that if there were an offensive, that if the North Vietnamese do come in, that the United States will come back with its airplanes and with its support. Do we have such an agreement?"

"Richardson: This is a question simply of very possible contingencies. I would not want to try to amplify on anything he said or to subtract from it."

Finally, to indicate to you that the public statements at the time appear in some cases to be stronger than these letters, Elliott Richardson the next day, on April 3, appeared before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, April 3, 1973.

Before he went in, some newsmen approached him and asked him a question. The question was, "Is it possible that we will have to bomb either North Vietnam or in support of the South Vietnamese Army again?"

Q The same day, right?

MR. NESSEN: The next day, April 3.

Richardson replied, "It certainly is something we cannot rule out at this time."

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Q Ron, were there any public remarks by Mr. Nixon at that period which are as strong as the letters?

MR. NESSEN: Of course, these are all people who are speaking for the Administration at the time. Kissinger had a news conference on May 2nd saying, "We have made clear that we mean to have the agreement observed."

Nixon, on May 3, 1973, in his foreign policy report -- we put out these before -- "We shall be vigilant concerning violations of the agreement. North Vietnam, if it violated, would risk revived confrontation with us." That is Nixon.

Also, "We will not tolerate violations by the North Vietnamese or its allies. We have told Hanoi privately and publicly that we will not tolerate violations of the agreement."

Q Ron, can I ask a question just to establish a fact? Are these letters -- you must have seen copies of the Nixon letters -- are they genuine?

MR. NESSEN: As far as we can determine, they are.

Q Are these the letters you saw?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Ron, there are quotes from other letters in here. Have you read the document that Mr. Hung put out?

MR. NESSEN: I only saw the two letters put out in full.

Q There are several -- January 17th he has a quote. The One point he makes in there is that there was a threat by Nixon to cut off aid if Thieu did not sign the agreement. I did not know that had come up before. He puts it usually in the form that Congress probably would refuse further aid.

MR. NESSEN: Yes. You know this is interesting for the historic record, Dick, but as far as the question we are dealing with here -- you mean, is this an authentic letter?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: It appears to be.

Q I have a question.

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MR. NESSEN: But let me just say all these items are interesting for the diplomatic histories, but I do want to try to keep this focused on how this question arose in the beginning.

"Were there any secret agreements or commitments?" And I think if you read the letters and if you read what was said publicly at the time, what we said is correct, that there was nothing in substance said privately that was not said publicly.

Q But there is a question of timing here. Don't the Nixon letters to Thieu constitute a secret agreement in and of themselves?

MR. NESSEN: You mean between the time he wrote the letter and the time he said the same thing publicly?

Q The dates on the letters are prior to the quotes which you gave us. That is, the earliest quote you gave us is January 28, 1973, and that was Sullivan, and Nixon was making the assurances to Thieu in private confidential letters to Thieu in November of 1972.

MR. NESSEN: You mean the agreement was secret for two or three months?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: ~~If there was ever an irrelevant story today, this is it.~~

Q Ron, isn't it relevant, though, because you told us when the issue was first raised that the extent of the President's letters was that the United States would respond vigorously and that is not --

MR. NESSEN: You are reading a wire copy story of what I said. The "responding vigorously" was in a public document.

Q The question of relevance is also important because we have the same Secretary of State who apparently was in on these private commitments and who said these private commitments did not exist.

MR. NESSEN: What private agreements?

Q The private agreements between Thieu and Nixon or Nixon to Thieu in November of 1972.

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MR. NESSEN: Look, I just think, number one, this conversation today is irrelevant. Number two, the whole thrust of this is, were there any secret agreements? Clearly, there were not. Three, what we have said from the beginning and based on these letters as compared to the public statements, there were not secret commitments given in private that were not stated publicly.

Why are we toying with semantics at this very late date?

Q Ron, may I ask, all of the statements you gave us by Richardson, by Sullivan and otherwise, do not, as I read them, allude to any agreements with South Vietnam. They are unilateral statements of what the United States might be able to do under the terms of the accord. They seem to me to not go to the question of whether or not there was an agreement. Am I reading them incorrectly or are you saying that Richardson was saying, when he said that we possibly might bomb, that he was at that point saying we had told Thieu that we possibly might bomb?

MR. NESSEN: That is what I feel misses the point of all of this. This whole thing came up with a charge that some secret commitment had been made to Thieu and what I am saying is, and what we have said from the beginning is if you review the public record, you will see that ~~nothing was promised to Thieu in private that was not said out loud.~~

Q These statements do not say anything about what we told Thieu we were going to do. They refer to what we might do on our own.

MR. NESSEN: I don't see the distinction.

Q The distinction is that these documents which were handed to us today by this South Vietnamese gentleman indicate that President Nixon promised full force, among the other things, to Thieu.

MR. NESSEN: And he went out in public and promised vigorous reaction. So, you know, maybe on another time he would have used "vigorous reaction" in the letter and "full force" in public. What is the difference?

Q Let me put it another way: Can you assure us that in the oral statements that were made to General Thieu by General Haig, by Vice President Agnew, by President Nixon, by Secretary Kissinger and others, that in those oral statements, there was not a definition given of what these terms "full force," et cetera, mean; that they might have been definitions which led Thieu to believe that certain actions would take place. Does your denial of this go to the oral memos of conversation, the possible cables as well as just to these written letters?

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MR. NESSEN: No. This is about my fourth time around on this thing and all the questions are always the same and all the answers are always the same. The record has been reviewed and the President knows of no secret agreements. Nixon has never said there were any secret agreements. Haig says there were no secret agreements. Kissinger says there were no secret agreements. Those are your leading characters.

Q I am not asking about agreements. I am asking about oral statements. Secret agreements has a technical meaning. I am also asking if your denial goes to the full record of cables and memos of conversations?

MR. NESSEN: As far as these people who are involved go -- Haig must have been aware of what he said to Thieu, don't you think? And Kissinger must have been aware. Nixon must have been aware and all those people are on the public record.

Q They take the technical definition of what is a secret agreement? At least they have in the past.

MR. NESSEN: Anyhow, I really think we are back doing what we have done about four times.

Q Can I just ask you before you quit, I think Walter's point -- the thing that troubled me from the outset -- the timing of all this. Is there any public statement that you can cite -- and you have cited quite a few.

MR. NESSEN: You have to recall that during the Paris peace negotiations there were no public statements about this because I believe Kissinger said at the time that any public statements would upset the negotiations.

You know, if you want to write a story and say, secret promises were given and kept for three months before they were made public, I guess you have a story, Dick.

Q So far as you know, there were no similar statements?

Q By the same token, there was no agreement in November.

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q So, were the letters contingent on an agreement -- and I have not read the letters -- did the letters say, "This is what will happen? This is what we promise you if you sign"?

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MR. NESSEN: You have the letters. You can read the letters yourself.

Q Is that the way you would interpret them?

Q They say, "Should you decide, as I trust you will, to go with us, you have my assurance of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force."

Q The agreement came in January and the statements started in January.

MR. NESSEN: That was January 5th, and Sullivan said there are no inhibitions on January 28th, so you have 13 days of a secret promise on your hands. That is a hell of a story.

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Q Isn't one of the questions involved whether or not the President made promises here which helped the South Vietnamese to go along and sign the agreement?

MR. NESSEN: You have the letter right in front of you, Dick. After asking for it four weeks, you have it. What more can I tell you about it? You have the living words right in your hand.

Do you want me to do an annotated commentary on it?

Q No, I just want to make sure I understand that there is a distinction between what they said --

Q Ron, why didn't you tell us the letter said he was going to use full force?

MR. NESSEN: As opposed to vigorous reaction?

Q Yes. Why didn't you tell us that?

MR. NESSEN: I said the words were different, but in substance they were the same, and they are.

Q Do you mean, "full force" is the same as "vigorous reaction"?

Q You said you did not know what "vigorous reaction" meant. You said it could have meant any number of things.

MR. NESSEN: I am not sure what full force meant, either.

You have a high official of the United States saying he isn't going to rule out bombing. To me, that is more explicit than "full force." I am telling you the public statements in many ways are stronger than the private statements.

Q There is a heck of a difference between saying you are not going to rule out bombing and promising full force.

MR. NESSEN: The war happens to be over and, as you know, whatever was said publicly and privately at the time, there was an act of Congress in August of 1973, in the summer of 1973, that took care of any intention to react in a military way, which is why I say it is irrelevant.

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Q Would you like to have Nixon tell what he meant by that?

MR. NESSEN: I work for the other guy.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 7:00 P.M. EDT)

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