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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS BRIEFING BY STEPHEN LEDOGAR  
THURSDAY, JULY 15, 1971, 3:13 P.M.

MR. LEDOGAR: Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. In furtherance to our continued efforts to probe and seek clarification of the most recent proposals of the other side, today Ambassador Bruce answered some of the questions that they had asked us about our initial reaction last week, and he posed some specific questions of our own. In reply, they chose to avoid clarifying their proposals in any way. They seem to prefer insisting on our acceptance of their basic demands as a preliminary requirement to negotiation. That is obviously not reasonable, but we will continue to seek a more considered reaction from them here.

I will try to answer any questions you have.

Q Could you give us the sequence of the discussion after the statements?

A The Communist side spoke in the morning and after lunch Ambassador Lam spoke, followed by some additional remarks in rebuttal of the morning speeches. Then Ambassador Bruce spoke. Ambassador Bruce was followed by brief additional remarks by Madame Binh, Yuan Thuy, Ambassador Lam and again Madame Binh.

Q Steve, would you say that today marked the beginning of some kind of dialogue in that there was an exchange of questions asked last week and answered this week, and new questions?

A I wish I could, but if you add last week and this week together, you have both sides asking questions and only one side answering them. The response of the other side was, both to refuse to answer the questions which we asked, and to refuse clarifying in any way their proposals.

You know, I am sure, Bernard, having been here for a long time, they continue to insist on not just on answers, but on what they call "serious" answers, that is to say, answers that they find satisfying. So, any time we say something that they don't find satisfying, they say that we have not answered.

Q In fact, Mr. Ledogar, some of the answers are in the form of questions, isn't that right?

A Some of our answers?

Q Yes. As I read them, they seem to be.

A Well, they include questions. "Yes, we are willing to take your proposal as a basis for negotiation, but not as the only basis. Are you willing to

include our proposal also as a basis for negotiation?"

Yes, part of that is a question.

Q Does that set a new tone. I mean, here the Ambassador is saying, regretting that there aren't private talks, and then saying exactly what would have happened if there had been a private meeting. That seems to mark a new departure or set a new tone. Do you agree with that?

A I'm afraid not, Pat. We have got to distinguish private from restricted sessions. The Ambassador refers in the beginning of his speech to a request last week for restricted sessions. But we can lump them all together in the field of "a more discreet forum." They have left us nothing but these plenary sessions. We have to do whatever we can, so we chose this week to try to answer their questions.

The dialogue obviously would be -- the dialogue, if there were one -- could be more meaningful, in my opinion, if it could take place in a more discreet forum.

Q Is it implying when you say they have left us with nothing but the plenary forum, are you

implying that they refused to hold private conversations?

A I don't respond on the subject of private talks.

Q Two questions. First, you do not believe that by Ambassador Bruce's remarks today in answer to those four questions, which last week you were saying why you couldn't, that we have in a sense tossed the ball to the other court for the first time in a long time?

A Well, I agree, in a sense, we have tossed the ball to the other court. I don't know whether that analogy serves us here or not, but, yes, that is true, we have answered their questions. We would have been delighted,-- even if they didn't find our answers satisfactory, if they would give us the same type of answers about our questions, We would at least have something.

Q The other question was, would you clarify Ambassador Bruce's remark when he left about "I have not resigned?"

A Yes. Well, you, I am sure, have seen the report of what the White House said yesterday, wherein they confirmed Ambassador Bruce would be leaving his position here next month, although the precise date has

not yet been determined, because of a problem connected with a circulatory ailment. The White House pointed out that the Ambassador had informed the President of this problem last May 26th while Ambassador Bruce was in Washington for consultations, and he, at that time, asked to be relieved of his post. Mr. Nixon asked him to stay on in Paris as long as he could, and the Ambassador accordingly extended his tour six to eight weeks.

Now, the charge I am sure you have seen, the erroneous charge, has come about that there is some difference between Ambassador Bruce and the Administration. That is totally false. There has also been an erroneous charge that during this period between now and some time in August that he is some sort of a "lame duck" leader of the Delegation. That also is false. And those charges he was trying to dispel by pointing out to you that technically he has not resigned.

Q Why is that distinction made, though, Steve? It seems that that form of words was rather strange.

A Why? I don't find it strange.

Q Well, he could have said, "I have not resigned, but I am leaving," or something. But he made a very specific statement there.

A Well, I just don't see what the problem is, Pat.

Q The problem is he didn't use the word "technically" or any other explanation you have just given. He just said, "I have not resigned."

A Well, I assume that he was taking the question as though the questioner was thinking of this allegation that there was some policy difference, which there is certainly not.

Q Steve, you are not suggesting what the White House said is wrong?

A No. It is exactly in accord with what the White House said.

Q What form does it take? Does the Ambassador write a letter of resignation at some point?

A I presume so, when the date of his departure is determined.

Q When he asks to leave, doesn't he confirm it by letter?

A Well, I don't think the technicality of when the letter is actually written is of any importance. The important thing is, he is in charge here. He is leaving because of personal reasons, and that is the only reason for his departure. And until that departure, he remains in charge here, fully empowered to negotiate.

Q Steve, do you have any reaction to the news that the Australian brought back about the interest of China in a new Indochina conference, a Geneva conference?

A That subject was addressed by the State Department spokesman yesterday, and I will refer you to his answer, which, in summary, was: he pointed out that Point 2 of our five-point proposal of last October called for a wider conference, and he quoted from it. The only thing I would add is that we have frequently said that on the subject of the details and modalities, the composition, - who would participate, where, etc., of any wider conference -- we are flexible. We are ready to work those out. We don't go into the subject of a wider conference with any preconditions. We are willing to examine favorably any proposal that offers a chance of attacking this problem.

Q What would be the next practical step towards planning such a conference?

A Well, obviously we need some response from Hanoi.

Q Will that be brought up here?

A Well, we brought it up last October. We just haven't had any response yet. We have referred to our five proposals, I imagine, just about every week since. We just have not had any response yet.

Q don't you consider Point 7 of the seven points, an indirect response?

A It could, but you see, Tony, that is an example of how -- there is no point in the seven-point plan that is totally clear and unambiguous -- all the terms in these seven points have to be defined. We have to have some idea of what they mean. That is what is so unreasonable. Madame Binh says, "Tell us which points you find unacceptable and which ones you find acceptable." And we say, "Tell us what they mean and then we will be delighted to answer your questions." We don't know what Point 7 means. If I could sit down and define the terms, then, yes, we could probably determine that it

is somewhat responsive to the proposal for a wider Indochina conference.

Obviously, they have got to define the terms. What do they mean by "withdrawal?" What do they mean by "prisoners?" Prisoners taken in what "war?" And so on and so forth.... All the questions that we have been asking.

Q How would you explain the difference in the attitude of the American Delegate to the seven-point proposal this week as opposed to last week, where last week there was no attempt to answer it, and you aren't posing any new questions in that sense?

A Well, the thrust of our attempt last week was to get them into restricted sessions. And we still believe that the procedure that we reluctantly had to adopt this week would have been better in a restricted session, as the Ambassador said in the opening paragraph of his presentation.

Q But how do you explain the different attitude this week?

A I thought I just did. I tried to. It isn't a different attitude. We first tried to get to the question of organizing a dialogue in more

privileged forum, where we don't have to be talking over our shoulders to the crowds. That was the thrust of our attempt last week. You saw that all four additional remarks last week were back on the same theme: "Why don't you respond to my request for a restricted session?" And then, "Why do you respond the way you do, so negatively. Your excuses, your reasons, for rejecting this make no sense. Let me point out what I mean by restricted sessions." etc., etc. That was, if you will, the "game plan" of last week's session.

Q Steve, would you have been satisfied if today's proceedings were in a restricted session?

A Yes, sir.

Q Why?

A Because I am sure they would be different than they turned out to be.

Q Well, in view of the unsatisfactory answers here in the plenary session, unsatisfactory by your evaluation, to the questions posed by Ambassador Bruce, how come you didn't speak the second time?

A Well, they made it very clear in their response, and Bruce was followed by Madame Binh and Xuan Thuy, both of whom refused to give any answers, that what

they wanted were "affirmative, serious" answers to the preconditions that they posed to their overall program.

Q Mr. Ledogar, Ambassador Bruce, under the response of paragraph three, said, "The answer is that we have long been ready to negotiate a timetable for complete withdrawals as a part of an overall settlement." Should we take that as indicating the Delegation, the American Delegation, is not prepared to negotiate the issue of withdrawals and the release of prisoners separately, not as part of an over-all settlement?

A Well, first of all, the words are directly out of October 7th. They are not new and original, and they are not designed directly in response to the proposals put forward two weeks ago. Second of all, no one has ever proposed that the military and the political issues could be separate.

Q The other side has said --

A Here, at this conference, no, sir, they have not. They have said it in press reports, but not in this conference, and they haven't defined the terms of their proposals so that it is clear that the military and the political could be separate.

Q Well, could we ask you now, directly, is

the United States, assuming that the other side was prepared to say here what it has said in press reports, that that question is negotiable separately, is the United States willing and ready to negotiate it separately?

A This is a very important question and I have what I think is an important answer to it. What you raise there is exactly what we have had, what we have been faced with, for most of the past two years. What they say here is: "Here is our proposal, take it or leave it. No, we will not define its terms. No, we will not clarify the ambiguities. There it is, react to it." In the meantime, they have had a series of interviews with colleagues of yours, with public figures, in the United States and elsewhere, in which they hint at flexibility, in which they give a suggestion that there is some sort of a reasonableness somewhere in their program which they are not bound by because they haven't put it on the record here. And therefore your question is a hypothetical one, because it poses a situation which is not the real one. You are asking me what would be our policy if their policy were different from the way they have set it forth here.

Q Perhaps I could ask a further question, Mr. Ledogar, about what you describe as the hypothetical one. If in fact you regard the press statements as only suggestions rather than direct statements, why doesn't Ambassador Bruce ask that, "You have been quoted in the press as saying that the military prisoner question is separable from the politics," is that correct?

A Well, we have returned to that theme several times recently, and you will see that in this week's statement we returned to it again. Look at our point on cease-fire -- I will read it.

"Spokesmen for your side have recently given the impression that military and political questions could be dealt with separately. This is not apparent in your seven points," etc.

Q Yes. Steve, this lumps together all military questions and all political questions for a response.

A No, I am not saying that it lumps them together. I am saying that we need clarification of the

seven points to know whether it is possible to do business with them, separate or not.

Q Well Bruce's statement, his fifth point in his statement, lumps together all military and all political questions, and then raises questions as to whether they are really separate or not. But what they are saying is not that all military questions are separable from all political questions. They are saying simply that the question of withdrawal of American troops and the release of American prisoners, that this specific military question is separable from all other questions and negotiations.

A Let me point to, in trying to respond to your question, another part in the Ambassador's speech, because you bring up again a very vital consideration; and, if you will, permit me to make an observation about your profession collectively. Every news story that I have seen since this seven-point proposal came out has come out with an over-simplification -- what in my view is an over-simplification, because you cannot cram all seven points into one sentence and try to say what it is you are about to comment on -- to the effect that what they have offered

is, all prisoners in exchange for U.S. withdrawal to begin and to end at the same time. We don't know whether that is what they have offered or not.

I point to the part in Ambassador Bruce's speech where he said, "You have advertised your proposals as a simple trade which would result in release of prisoners of war concurrently with the total withdrawal of American and Allied forces, yet it appears that you have yourselves applied far-reaching and self-serving conditions to prisoner release which are as harsh and comprehensive as anything you have previously insisted upon."

So you have got to look at Point One, and you have got to try to decide, well, would it be possible -- if hypothetically we were willing to deal on this basis -- to deal on just the subject of U.S. withdrawal against prisoners? Or -- even though they might make an apparent separation of the political from the military, on those two issues from all the others, if you will -- do they not possibly define withdrawal in a way that all the political goals are brought right back in? What do

they mean by "cessation of Vietnamization?" What do they mean by "disarmament or taking apart all of the bases and taking out all U.S. military equipment?"

What do they mean by -- etc. For example, one of the questions we asked today was, "What do you mean by prisoners, military and civilian, of this war? Do you mean the ones that were captured by you or your puppets in Laos and Cambodia?" Answer? No answer.

Now, how can we ask the American people to even have a judgment on Point One, no less a judgment on the over-simplification that the news stories necessarily resort to, unless we know what it means?

Q Steve, is that exhaustive now? Does this cover all the far-reaching, self-serving, harsh and comprehensive conditions that Bruce referred to?

A No, no, no.

Q What does that mean, those other phrases?

A I can't go through the -- last week, we gave an initial reaction. This week, we gave our considered reaction. You can't ask me, for a second time today, to give another considered reaction to the whole thing.

We pointed out certain things that appear on the face. When they say, "You must do withdrawal,"

without saying what withdrawal is, "without posing any conditions whatsoever," and they refuse to clarify that; and they refuse to indicate whether their program and our program could be compared and both together form the basis for a negotiation, and they refuse to indicate what prisoners they are talking about -- in fact, they refuse to answer any of our questions, then we have certain problems.

Q Does that mean, then, that the seven points are not comprehensive and flexible enough to form the basis for negotiations for these sessions?

A I have no idea. We stand, two weeks after they were promulgated, not knowing the answer to your question.

Q Mr. Ledogar, do you see any time problem in this negotiation? There is an election coming up in South Viet-Nam. Does the United States feel that if these questions cannot get into a real negotiation before October, that an opportunity will have been missed?

A We feel that these problems, which were identified by the parties here two and a half years ago, could have been addressed by the parties both with a spirit of negotiation, with neither one having a

spirit of take-it-or-leave-it, and that, yes, time is a factor. Two and a half years have gone by and there has been a lot of killing and a lot of disruption of all sorts. We feel that one way to prevent time from continuing to be a factor would be if the parties could first agree on a cease-fire now, to be effective immediately. What more natural way can you think of to end armed hostilities than to first have a cease-fire; then you can try to get, in an atmosphere of less violence, to the thorny problems? That is the way conflicts of the last hundred years, with the exception of World War II, have usually been resolved.

Yet, the other side's position is, "first of all, you must, without any negotiation, concede our political demands, then we will talk cease-fire."

Q That is our view of the seven points, what you have just said, first we must concede all the political demands.

A That is the way it seems, as it stands unexplained.

Q But Stephen, would you agree that -- I mean, if this were so, there is one precondition to negotiations which they leave intact. Once upon a time, they had two preconditions. Now, on the basis of the seven points, do they have still two preconditions or just one precondition, the date?

A I don't know the answer to the question, because they would not answer it. Depending upon how the terms in Point One eventually are defined by them, they could have either one or two. If they have any preconditions to negotiation, it is unacceptable.

Q Since they have refused to hold restricted sessions, has any thought been given to holding these sessions more frequently?

A Yes, there has been thought.

Q Has anybody proposed it?

A Well, as you recall, there were times in the past when both sides have said, "Now here is a proposal. If you are willing to do business on this one item, let's do it tomorrow. Let's do it this afternoon, even, etc." and in all cases, the response has been --

Q But that was when everything was totally deadlocked. I mean, here we have had a sequence in the past two weeks in which Mrs. Binh put her questions, which were obviously curve-ball questions, which the Ambassador did not want to respond to immediately, and chose to respond to them this week. He wanted time to think. They have now done the same thing. They don't want to do it this week, and they will probably come back next week with some sort of response, satisfactory or otherwise, and the question is put to them. Don't you think that meeting more frequently might expedite that?

A Yes. That is one of the things we are always considering. No decision has been reached. In principle, we don't have any fixed ideas on how frequently the meetings should be, but the frequency of meetings has no relationship to the possibility of progress, really. You can have a daily dry propaganda session, one in the morning and one in the evening.

Q Could you say, wholly apart from what has been proposed at this conference, whether the United States Government has a position, no matter what it is,

on this proposal that has been advanced by many people, not just Hanoi or the Viet Cong, but by Senators and others, that American troops be withdrawn if the prisoners could be released simultaneously. Does the U.S. Government have a position?

A What do you mean by --. Yes, I would be glad to give you the position if you tell me what you mean by "withdrawal" and what do you mean by "Prisoners."

Q Well, I think the proposal made in the Senate has been that all American troops and military personnel be withdrawn from Viet-Nam in exchange for a proportionate, simultaneous release of all American prisoners of war in the hands of the Communists in Viet-Nam.

A In Viet-Nam.

Q Since Laos and Cambodia would have to be settled separately, presumably those prisoners would be released in the settlement there, but this would be a Viet-Nam settlement.

A But that is not what the Mansfield amendment said.

Q But there have been various proposals.

But in either form, either all of Indochina or Viet-Nam alone, is there a U.S. Government position?

A In other words, you are asking me, is there a U.S. Government position on "withdrawal," and you really don't say what is meant by "withdrawal" except to say "all", as opposed to "prisoners," and you say, well, "just the ones held in Viet-Nam?" Well, what ones are held in Viet-Nam? How can the American public, how can the public's representatives in Congress make a judgment on that when they don't know what prisoners they are talking about?

Q Let's say all.

A Well, what is all? Where is all?

Q That includes Laos and Cambodia.

A Well, who is there? How many? Do you really expect the Government to have a position on just "prisoners," without knowing who is involved? Or how many they will keep behind? What is the position of a wife of a man missing in Laos vis-a-vis the seven points?

Q Well, let us say all the prisoners that we believe to be in their hands?

A We don't know. We don't have a basis to even know how many they have, other than the

339 names that they have admitted to.

Q Surely underneath this, there is a principle, though. I don't wish to quibble, but there is a principle which Mr. Kleiman is trying to bring out. Surely there are difficulties, as you mentioned, of defining "withdrawal" and defining "prisoners."

A Yes, sir. And that is why negotiations are necessary. That is why this is not susceptible, as I said last week, to being dealt with in a public forum, shouting back and forth bids and demands.

Q But I think the question Mr. Kleiman was trying to put was, if those difficulties of definition can be overcome, do we find something attractive in the general principle of exchanging withdrawal for a return of prisoners apart from the question of the political future of South Viet-Nam.

A I can't answer because I don't know how that is going to be determined.

Q If they could be determined -- well, I suppose you have answered.

A Yes. If you will let me determine, define all the nouns and all the verbs in the ten-point plan,

the eight-point plan, and the seven-point plan, we could have done business on any one of them.

Q Would we be prepared to negotiate on the principle that total U.S. withdrawal will be exchanged for total U.S. prisoner release? Would we negotiate the details of these two?

A I have just tried to tell you, that is totally hypothetical, because unless you can tell me what "withdrawal" means and what "prisoners" mean, we can't answer.

Q But doesn't that amount to our putting a precondition? The question just asked was whether we --

A I didn't say, "No, we wouldn't." I said, "Let us know what the terms are and then we can make a judgment as to whether or not they are acceptable. I think that is very reasonable.

Q Steve, the response to the question about the prisoners and withdrawal left the impression that there would be no possibility for determining the basis for the prisoner release negotiations.

If you insist that we can't know how many prisoners are there -- and you are in a much better

position to know that -- then there is no real use in pursuing that line of reasoning. Is that what you meant?

A No, I say that in an effort to try to point out that the proposals and the dilemma that they pose to the Administration are not susceptible of summation in one sentence. You can't say, "Would you be willing to deal on the basis of U.S. withdrawal in exchange for prisoners?" and expect anybody to answer, any responsible person to answer, without defining "withdrawal" and without defining "prisoners."

Q But the question was -- I think it is fair -- after all, there are no details to be added to an absolute. If you say, "all" "prisoners returned in response for total withdrawal.

A "All prisoners captured in the war," is the wording.

Q Make it three wars.

A They said here last week, one of their spokesmen said, and in a newspaper interview a week before that, another spokesman indicated, that probably for the ones held in Laos and the ones held in Cambodia, there would be a separate quid pro quo.

Q We are trying to find out about the attitude in principle.

A Well, we just cannot talk about what the U.S. negotiating position would be, in principle, if the proposal of the other side was more or less like that.

Q But, in effect, if I understand you, you are saying that we are not prepared to negotiate on this question until certain conditions are met; namely, that "withdrawal" and "prisoners" are defined.

A I am just not doing a good job of explaining myself if that is the impression you have got from the last twelve answers. I'm sorry.

Q Could you just tell us, in this case, how many prisoners you consider detained in Laos and how many in Cambodia?

A We don't know.

Q Well, it is your side. You should know --

A We know how many people we have lost in those two countries.

Q -- how many prisoners you have lost.

A We know how many men we lost in those two countries, but we have no idea how many of them are alive in captivity nor do we have any idea where they are held.

Q Well, in this case, if Hanoi tells you, "We have about 1,500 men detained in all those three countries," and if by your side you consider 200 are missing, what are you going to do, if you were ready to accept any kind of negotiations on the basis of the withdrawal for an exchange or the return of prisoners?

A The ability to be able to form an opinion on this whole package will be greatly advanced if we knew who they were talking about, the numbers and the names.

Q Steve, while it is quite clear that they

have turned down secret meetings at the conference, has Le Duc Tho turned down a meeting with Ambassador Bruce personally?

A No comment.

Q There was talk about the future of Viet-Nam. Has the Hanoi Delegation conceded to the U.S. Delegation that they are willing to discuss the future of Viet-Nam with the United States?

A No. That is another ambiguity in their plan.

Q Steve, may I repeat this question, because I think maybe there was one word there that escaped you when I asked it the first time. The question is not whether the United States is prepared to deal or make an agreement, the question is, is the United States prepared to negotiate on the principle of a total U.S. withdrawal in return for a total release of American prisoners, the negotiation obviously to decide what is "total withdrawal" and what is "prisoners?" Are we prepared to negotiate on that basis?

A Let me try to answer it again, more clearly than obviously I have before. We do not have

any preconditions to the negotiations that say, "We will only deal with military problems. We will not even participate in political problems." Or, "We will only deal with the two of them together. We will not deal with either one of them separately." We do not have any preconditions under those terms. Point Number One.

Point Number Two. You are asking me, what would we do in principle if we were faced with this situation? We are not faced with that situation, therefore, there is no decision yet. We are not faced with that situation because it is an unreal question, because neither of the nouns in that two-part question are defined. When we have definitions, better ideas, then we can make a judgment as to whether or not we could reasonably go ahead.

For example, going back to a series of questions we had here now a half hour ago, in defining "withdrawal," as I tried to point out to you, we could very well find that despite the apparent division between political and military, you could define "withdrawal" in a way that would bring about political ends. Therefore, they were not separate.

Therefore, the question that you ask is not a

real one. It is not susceptible of an answer. And I can't be any clearer than that.

Q May I sum it up. You say there is no decision on this question that I have asked because no such proposal has clearly been made to you by the other side.

A That is right. We don't know what -- They haven't even talked about separability in this conference and they haven't defined any of their terms.

Q One last thing that takes it all the way upside-down, we have been arguing here, everybody, and also in the conference, mainly about Points One, Two and Three, which are obviously the most controversial. The end points seem to be taken, a lot of them, from the Geneva declaration, and also things which people have subscribed in the past, everybody has subscribed in the past, real nouns are relative.

Two years ago, there was an effort made to approach this thing from finding the points of agreement first and then moving on to the tougher ones. Do you see any point -- is the Delegation thinking perhaps of proceeding along those lines now, again? I mean,

it has been asked, which do you like and which do you not like? Obviously some bother you more than others.

A "It is not the points themselves. It is a non-question that she asked that. None of them can be dealt with. You can't come up with any kind of an answer because each one of them is obscure. It depends on what they mean.

Now, you ask me, what are we going to do? Obviously I can't share with you what we are going to do.

You point out accurately, however, that last May, June and July, that is, two years ago, 1969, when they came out with their ten-point proposal, and we had our May 14th speech which set forth our position, that what we tried to do, was say, "All right, look, obviously your plan on its face poses problems. Let's try to look at it in its parts. Let's see, here is our plan; here is your plan; let's see whether we are more or less talking about the same thing; let's see where there is common ground; let's take the areas where there is difficulty, separate those, deal with them later, etc."

And they said, "No, you don't understand, we certainly don't talk about your plan. Our plan is the only plan, and we don't talk about our plan until you first accept two principles upon which it is based, and those principles are posed to you, sir, as preconditions to the beginning of the discussions about our plan, and we are only going to talk about our plan."

We therefore found, after knocking our heads against the stonewall for more than a year, that there was just nothing we could do. They were not willing to even clarify their own position.

We have not found that to be absolutely true yet about the new plan. But what they had to say today was certainly disappointing and tending in that direction.

I think I really have taken too much time.

[The briefing terminated at 3:50 P.M.]