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White House Defends AF Flights Of Classified Material to Nixon

By Jules Witcover
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The White House yesterday defended as "custom" the dispatch of special Air Force jets to California every week to take classified National Security Council briefings on foreign policy to former President Nixon.

Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, justified the flights, which the White House military office said cost about \$6,500 per round trip, as "a custom that has been followed with other former Presidents."

Nessen described the data as "a weekly classified summary of international political, economic and military developments" of from 10 to 20 pages, which goes to Mr. Nixon on an average of every seven to 10 days. Nessen indicated the flights were specifically to deliver the summary. "The purpose of the flight is to fly the documents out there," he said.

Special flights are required rather than using mail or commercial flights, he said, because "these materials are classified and the law forbids the transmission of classified documents through the mails or on commercial airlines."

The law was passed "during the rash of hijackings."

Nessen said there was no time limit on the dispatch of the summaries to Mr. Nixon and he noted that former President Johnson had received them with about the same frequency "until the time of his death."

The planes, eight-passenger Jetstars, are part of the Special Air Mission based at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. They fly the documents to El Toro Marine Air Station in Southern California, Nessen said.

Last Friday, John W. Hushen, the deputy White House press secretary, confirmed that Julie Nixon Eisenhower, the former President's daughter, had hitched a ride on one of the courier planes to visit her father.

Yesterday, Nessen, in response to questions, said he did not know whether Nixon family members were being charged for the flights, whether costs were being deducted from the former President's transition allotment, or if Nixon family members were traveling free. He said he would check.

On Friday, Hushen called it "long-standing policy" to make

space available to former Presidents' family members on courier planes "traveling to the location of the former President" to deliver briefing documents. Hushen said that "the Trumans took advantage of this, and the Johnson daughters, so it is nothing unusual."

Nessen said he knew nothing of plans for a face-to-face briefing of Mr. Nixon by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger.

A reporter observed that former President Johnson in writing his memoirs had "unilaterally declassified" information given to him. Nessen said he knew of no understanding with Mr. Nixon giving him the same latitude.

The President had breakfast yesterday on Capitol Hill with two Republican congressional social groups and returned to the White House to greet President and Mrs. Giovanni Leone of Italy in a ceremony on the South Lawn. He met with members of his new Clemency Review Board on draft resisters and with Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, and hosted a formal state dinner at the White House last night for the Leones.