

# Nessen Spars With Reporters Regarding Vietnam

By RICHARD L. MADDEN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 1—As President Ford urged the United States once again to look to the future and not back at Vietnam, his spokesman reacted testily today to lingering questions about the nation's past involvement there.

Ron Nessen, the President's press secretary, who often starts his daily news briefing at the White House with a joke, showed up today wearing a bullet-proof vest supplied by friends in the Justice Department. He removed the vest after telling reporters: "Fire away."

But the jocularity subsided when Mr. Nessen was asked once again about the legality of the President's use of armed forces to evacuate South Vietnamese. Mr. Nessen, who had told reporters yesterday that the President had ordered the evacuation because the South Vietnamese would have been killed, and that the President was proud of the move, said Mr. Ford had agreed with the statement.

Then Mr. Nessen reminded reporters that executives of several news organizations such as NBC and CBS had approached him for help in evacuating their South Vietnamese employees from Saigon.

## President's Concern

He said he assumed that the news executives shared the President's concern about the fate of the South Vietnamese, "and were not overly concerned about the legalities" of the evacuation.

Mr. Nessen, who has spent considerable time at recent briefings contending that private assurances to the Saigon Government were substantially the same as the public statements of Nixon Administration officials, was asked if Mr. Ford was unhappy with the disclosure yesterday by a former Saigon Cabinet official of letters from President Nixon to President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam.

"I haven't heard him say he's unhappy," Mr. Nessen replied.

According to the letters, Mr. Nixon promised the Saigon Government in 1972 and 1973 that the United States would "take swift and severe retaliatory action" and would "respond with full force" if North Vietnam violated the Paris cease-fire accords.

The press secretary, prodded by reporters, then reread a series of public statements from Nixon Administration officials in early 1973 that, he contended, appeared to be "stronger" than the assurances given in the Nixon letters.

## 'The War's Over'

Finally, he said: "The war's over. The issue is academic." He noted that Congress in August, 1973, forbade the further use of United States armed forces in Indochina and that therefore the matter was "moot." He said that whether the Nixon Administration public statements about what the United States would do in case of cease-fire violations were different from the "full force" statement in the letter would

be "up to the semanticists." He added: "I'm going to stop."

The briefing ended when questions persisted on when Mr. Ford had learned of the Nixon letters and when Mr. Nessen, declining to answer, asked if there were questions on other subjects.

A short time later, Mr. Ford went to the Commerce Department to participate in the swearing-in ceremony of Rogers C. B. Morton, the former Secretary of the Interior, to be Secretary of Commerce.

"With the end of the Vietnam era, tragic as it was, it is time for America to look ahead, to move forward with a new agenda for the future — an agenda designed to solve this nation's problems as we move into its third century," the President said.

He added that "a top item on that agenda is the restoration of a dynamic and effective economy and a revitalized free enterprise system."

## Pressure Conceded

By MARTIN ARNOLD

Two executives of major news-gathering organizations acknowledged yesterday that they had brought considerable pressure on the Ford Administration to allow the evacuation from South Vietnam of the Vietnamese employees and their families.

The executives spoke after Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, discussed the requests for help and said that the news organization had not been "overly concerned about the legalities" of such evacuations.

"We finally got permission to get them and their families out on military aircraft," James Greenfield, foreign editor of The New York Times, said. "The Government [the United States] agreed to look the other way as they boarded the planes without papers [exit visas]."

Mr. Greenfield said that in the end it took the intercession of Secretary of State Kissinger to get the military to allow this extralegal operation.

Wes Gallagher, president of The Associated Press, said, "We all agreed we were going to take them out one way or another—privately, if we had to."

"I think we had a duty to get them out, if they felt they were going to be killed," he said.

## Exit Visas Sought

The first step in trying to get the South Vietnamese evacuated, according to Mr. Greenfield, was "to try to get the American Embassy in Saigon to bring pressure on the South Vietnamese Government to grant exit visas."

"This was tried unsuccessfully," he said. "The Embassy would not help."

After that, various plans were proposed by the news organizations, including the hiring of their own aircraft, but it was realized that it would be impossible to carry out the evacuation without the

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cooperation of the South Vietnamese.

Help was sought from Mr. Nessen and in the end from Mr. Kissinger, who arranged for the evacuees to be taken out on American military aircraft without the usual exit visas, Mr. Greenfield said.

Besides The Times and The Associated Press, other news organizations involved in the evacuation were NBC, CBS Inc., Time Inc. and United Press International. The effort was coordinated mainly by Richard C. Wald, president of NBC News, who was not available for comment last night.

The networks brought out more than 100 persons, including employees and their families. The Times evacuated about 25 persons.