News Conference by
Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and
General David C. Jones, USAF, Chairman, JCS
Tuesday, April 29, 1980

Secretary Brown: In order to answer some issues as they come up and get a good deal of circulation, I think it's useful for me and General Jones to take up some specific items with this group from time to time. Since this is by no means going to be the last press conference on the subject, we don't propose to cover all of the issues. Time will prevent that in any event. I've got something in fifteen minutes. But there are two points which I think deserve to be answered right away and what I'd like to do is confine the discussion to those two points. I think we can take some questions, however.

First is that the assertion has been made, Tom tells me, or the question has been asked as to whether the task force and the rescue operation was denied any equipment, or any people, or anything that they asked for. To my knowledge, nothing was denied by headquarters. General Jones --

Too bad, George, we're on the record so you don't gain anything by coming in late -- (Laughter)

Voice: He's been lurking out there for ten minutes. (Laughter.)

General Jones has called the task force commander and I'll let him speak for himself. My understanding is that the task force commander has verified that indeed everything they asked for was provided.

The second issue that has been raised is whether the recommendation to proceed with the operation after it was found that only five helicopters on the scene at the desert rendezvous were in fully operating condition. And there, again, we have reexamined the records and talked to the individual concerned and can say categorically that no such recommendation to proceed was overruled. The commander of the task force at the time that it became clear that there were not six helicopters in operable condition noted that this was as previously determined by careful examination, a basis for aborting the mission. He so recommended to General Jones who agreed with that recommendation. I recommended to the President that we terminate the preparations for the rescue and return the rescue team and the President approved that recommendation. We have since checked with each of the leaders of the elements on the scene and confirmed that all of them agreed with that conclusion. That none of them, including the commander on the scene, wished to proceed with less than the six helicopters that the plan had called for.

Now, in such a situation, it's not a matter of taking votes. There is one commander on the scene, but, for the record, we checked to see what the views were and those were the views and still are the views of the individuals concerned. Dave, do you want to add anything?

General Jones: Yes. Let me go on to the broader question implied by the first one. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, soon after the seizure of the hostages, started working on a rescue plan. We formed a task force. We went through

MORE

many, many different options. In the initial stages, we did not see an option that had a reasonable chance of success. We worked and we tried and we trained and we exercised and nothing was denied to us by anybody. I just confirmed with both the commander and deputy commander, that they share that judgment. I knew they did from our discussions all the way through as far as every time they asked for something we responded, and were a full part of the actions. But we were not denied anything by anybody in the way of force or equipment or anything such as that.

After improvements, some in use of technology, exercises, concepts, we came to the conclusion that it was militarily feasible and all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, we collectively addressed this, and concluded that we had a good chance of success. There were some risks, yes. But we thought we could be successful and that it was militarily feasible. We made the recommendation, presented the concept and the operational plan. We received the decision to proceed with the movement of forces and there were incremental decisions we all made as far as insertion and that would have been another decision. But the commander on the scene was not overruled either in the planning or in the execution of that portion of the mission. And, therefore, we want to be on record that the Joint Chiefs of Staff are the ones that take the responsibility for the plan and the exercising and the implementation. Obviously, the Secretary of Defense and, ultimately, the President has the final responsibility. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of us, after days and days and hours and hours of groping with this issue, came up and said it's militarily feasible. We gave considerable authority to the commander on the scene, rather than sit here thousands of miles away and try to draw judgments on incomplete information. Obviously, the final decision is back in Washington, but, when the commander on the scene said we should go, that was concurred on in Washington; and when the commander on the scene said we ought to extract our personnel, that was concurred in by Washington. I think that's all I have to say.

Q: One of the nagging questions in many people's mind is why couldn't you go ahead with only five helicopters? Could you address that and give us a little perspective on why the cut off was six?

Secretary Brown: I could go ahead on that at great length. We were trying to address two questions and if we start with this, which we're willing to do, it will consume the rest of the time. That will make three questions -- I don't want to dodge the issue. There were situations under which -- let's go on background now --

Q: Where does that leave it?

A: That's the question of less than six helicopters --

Q: No, I'm sorry, but who's this attributed to? Mr. Brown said so and so. Next sentence --

A: High Defense official said.

Q: If you want it that way, okay.

A: I don't care.

Q: Let's not lose time on this.

A: Leave it on the record. I'll probably say less but let's leave it on the record. Six operating helicopters were considered to be necessary to carry on the operation. Below six, there would have to be attention to the details and it

might be feasible, and it might not be feasible. And that's what people on the scene looked at, at that time. They looked at the condition of all six, including the one that wasn't operable and the five that were. That would've required a positive recommendation on their part to be concurred in as an exception by higher authority. That recommendation they never made and looking back on it they have no doubt that they arrived at the right conclusions. Dave, do you want to add anything to that?

General Jones: No, we're not trying to imply that we had automaticity of all decisions.

Secretary Brown: That's right.

General Jones: When the sixth helicopter broke, there wasn't any question with the people on the scene as to the wisdom of extraction. I have talked to the overall commander who was the guy on the scene in charge and with the assault force commander and the helicopter commander, who were subordinate at that point to the overall on scene commander, and they all say that was the wise decision to make, given the circumstances as they prevailed at that time. The conditions at Desert One, the condition of the helicopters, the time of day, all the rest of the factors. There wasn't any question about it. Maybe, hypothetically, under different circumstances, maybe you'd make some decision to go to five. There's a penalty in going with five, not only in spares, but what you can carry.

Q: Are you suggesting that there was something wrong with any of the other five?

General Jones: I'm saying the conditions there were very difficult, late in the day, with regard to the overall decisions, when that number six broke and they found they had five flyable helicopters they concurred that it was not a wise choice to proceed on.

Q: Was there anything wrong with the other five? Were all the others flyable?

Secretary Brown: They were all flyable.

General Jones: And all the crews said they'd take those airplanes forward. No question about going.

MORE

Q: Mr. Secretary, there's a report of a CIA study, which gives a worse case best case and moderate case assessment of the chances of the hostages surviving.

SECRETARY BROWN: There was no such study to my knowledge. It may be that some retired CIA clerk has communicated — who didn't know about the operation has done a study in his head and communicated it to somebody. But there was no such study.

Q: Just so we know which one we're talking about here --

A: I'm talking about the San Francisco --

Q: San Francisco, is that the one you're talking about?

A: Right.

Q: Dr. Brown, there's a report afloat also that originally the Joint Chiefs had asked for 16 helicopters or at least more than eight and --

SECRETARY BROWN: They asked for originally seven.

Q: There was never any request for more than eight then, we can just put that to rest? I mean that was never part of the plan?

GENERAL JONES: We had the full authority to send them out there. There wasn't any question if we wanted to send out more. We sent out six initially. We added two later. Quite a while back. There wasn't any question in the Joint Chiefs of Staff that we had full authority if we wanted to send additional helicopters out there we could send additional helicopters out there. So there wasn't any question about that.

Q: There's another rumor floating around to the effect that based on reports in the Israeli press the morning of the 24th of reported increased activity, C-130s, etc. in Egypt that there was thought given to delaying or scrubbing the mission?

SECRETARY BROWN: We were watching for reports of rescue missions to see whether operational security had been breached and whether the Iranian Government or those holding the hostages showed signs thereby of having been warned, thus making the rescue operation more difficult. And there were various such events. There were, some of you will recall, an article in the Washington Star on the Sunday before that concerned us. Not because there was anything to the article, but because it might, nevertheless, cause an increase in alert levels. None happened and so we started breathing again and went ahead.

A similar thing occurred with respect to the article in the Israeli press to which you referred. That was connected with something real. Namely, increased U.S. air operations in the general area. But we were unable to tell looking at the article whether they were referring to something that happened that week or three months ago. And so again, we watched to see whether it would have any effect and found none. I conclude that neither the Washington Star article nor, very probably, although one can never be sure, the article in the Israeli press referred to anything real. Certainly neither of them referred to the rescue operation that we had in mind. They may have been thinking of some other rescue operation.

Q: Mr. Brown. Why weren't the helicopters destroyed just before everyone w lifted out?

A: We are getting now, into the beginning of a five hour press conference which we will not be able to complete. I'm willing to answer questions and so is Dave, but I take it we've completely convinced you on the other two items. I think we can answer the question and I think we're going to have lots of occasions

MORE

on which to answer. Let me give a short answer. The trouble is short answers don't convince and long answers don't interest. (laughter)

Q: You're wrong on the second point.
A: You have more to type. (laughter)

The answer is, and Dave really should speak to this more than I, the fierce fires burning, ammunition in both the helicopter and the C-130 cooking off and going off and the recognition that some of that ammunition might damage the remaining C-130 in a way that would make it unable to get out. That circumscribed the time considerably. Although lots was happening. The commander on the scene took the time to make sure via motorcycle and jeep parametial survey, that everybody was accounted for. They worked speedily but carefully. And given that situation they concluded that to try to go back to the helicopters and take things out would jeopardize the extraction of the group. Dick had a question and I think it may be the last one because I have to go.

Q: General Jones, you said that when this thing first came up the military people here thought that a rescue operation was not feasible but later they changed their mind and it did become feasible. Can you tell us, sir, when you changed your mind and why?

GENERAL JONES: It was an evolutionary process. Initially insurmountable problems and then I would say in early March a growing confidence, but not to the point of saying it had a good chance of success. We finally came up in early to mid April period when we looked at it and had exercised and came down to the conclusion that it was not only militarily feasible but had a very good chance of success.

Q: Did you therefore recommend it or just say (Inaudible)
GENERAL JONES: We recommended it.

Q: Said let's do it?
GENERAL JONES: We said it was militarily feasible and we said we recommend we go and we recommended we go on the 24th of April.

Q: Who said we recommend we go?
GENERAL JONES: The Joint Chiefs of Staff. All the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended we go.

SECRETARY BROWN: Let me add that of course the Chiefs were speaking from a military point of view. They didn't have to take into account pros and cons in terms of international political factors. I think they probably did but they made a separate military recommendation. I considered the other factors as well. The consequence of failure in terms of international politics, the consequences of success, the alternative military actions and the alternative diplomatic actions. I don't want to call this one military because it is a rescue operation and has a different conotation. I considered all of those and I concluded that this was the one to go with. At the same time as we continued separate economic and diplomatic paths.

Q: May I ask this question which bears on this matter? You referred repeatedly to commander on the scene, overall commander and all the rest. This doesn't mean anything unless we know who you're talking about.
GENERAL JONES: We're not going to talk about the individuals.
SECRETARY BROWN: At this point.

MORE

Q: Well then you're going to leave it fly that Beckwith didn't like what happened? That's a question, that's not a statement.

SECRETARY BROWN: No we're not, because in fact all the responsible people and we're not saying who thay are but if you name somebody as being responsible that it applies to him. (laughter)

Q: All the responsible concurred?

SECRETARY BROWN: Believed and believe that this was the right decision.

Q: And this is without any resistance initially from the commander on the scene. Was there any questioning on his part, was there any argument about it or discussion?

SECRETARY BROWN: You mean as between him and his superiors?

Q: Yes.

SECRETARY BROWN: The answer is no. As to what, again let me say, this is not a matter on which a vote takes place but there was no challenging of a decision at higher levels. I think that's correct.

Q: Once the decision was made. But I mean before that was there any input from the on-scene commander about the decision?

SECRETARY BROWN: Yes.

Q: There's another rumor going around you might as well spike it while you're here. It might save you some time later that probably because of the secrecy but forgetting why, were the sandscreens/sand separaters neglected to be put on the helicopters and did it have any effects on the performance thereof?

GENERAL JONES: Let me answer that. Problems on helciopters were not ones of propulsion and of being able to propel the airplane or the engines to operate and so forth. Let me make a couple of comments and then we have to leave. One thing that the Joint Chiefs of Staff are very disturbed about and we just discussed it, is that the implications that people draw that on the scene that people didn't act properly or whatever, and whether it's destroying the helicopters, much of that speculation or all that speculation is by people who were not there. To sit thousands of miles away and draw judgments based on rumors, we think is doing a disservice to some very valiant men who performed very well. We all are concerned that there's any implication other than good performance. It was a very difficult helicopter ride. Talking to helicopter pilots, it was an extremely difficult ride in the sand and the rest in the middle of the night. With regard to helicopters and availability of helicopters, I'm going to point out that we have three helicopters on the Eisenhower. We sent them out weeks ago when the Eisenhower left and they're still on the Eisenhower that's replacing the Nimitz. Not because at that point, when we executed we needed more that really seven helicopters with eight being a back-up and as long as we had eight operational helicopters everybody had confidence. The crews when they launched from that carrier and I think this is a fundamental point. When they launched from the carrier, they had full confidence in their helicopters. The helicopters we were sending over we were concerned at one point it's getting warmer and if we had to delay the mission to look at adding helicopters not for additional safety factors but adding helicopters to be able to carry what was needed out of Desert I.

MORE

Q: Can't you just answer whether they had screens on or not? Because the rumor's going around town that they neglected to put the sand screens on and I would think you could answer yes or no.

GENERAL JONES: There are a number of things that are yet unconfirmed, George, rumors going around. And we're trying not to state categorically until we're sure.

SECRETARY BROWN: You have to be a lot surer of an answer than others have to be of the rumor.

Q: That's why I asked the question. You're not sure?

SECRETARY BROWN: Well, not right now. I think maybe we could find out in five minutes because this is the first time I've heard this particular one.

I want for that reason, to try again to stick to the things that have been bruted around a great deal. The denial of equipment and people is completely untrue. But the charge that the recommendation of those on the scene was overruled, completely untrue. As soon as it was determined that there would not be six --

Q: Working

SECRETARY BROWN: Yes there were six but one was broken, there was no argument about whether to go on. I think we'd better stop.

Q: Can I ask one follow up on the denial of equipment. Some people raised the question of whether the maintenance was proper on the Nimitz? Could you describe to us whether there was a special maintenance --

SECRETARY BROWN: We will describe that at great length on another occasion. There was no denial of a request for anything of that sort.

Q: You ought to deal with this "hotline" rumor that's in circulation.

SECRETARY BROWN: Which is?

Q: That the Russians detected the mission, --

SECRETARY BROWN: Ha.

Q: Now wait. You said you wanted to answer rumors. There is a member of Congress stating today that the Soviet Union told you to knock it off -- deny you didn't.

SECRETARY BROWN: That is a flat untruth. That is a flat untruth. That's one that we're able to answer as quickly as it's stated.

Q: You did not hear from Moscow at any time prior to the time you told them to come out?

SECRETARY BROWN: That is correct. The way that they found out about it was we told them.

Q: Do you expect the bodies back?

A: I don't have anything on that. I think it looks better but I'll believe it when I see it. It's clear we're going to have to have a lot more sessions like that and we will. But again. There's no way that we can give an answer as quickly as someone can raise a question.

PRESS: Thank you.

END