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Press Briefing by Jake Siewert

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The James S. Brady Briefing Room

1:45 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: A couple things to start. Just wanted to detail for you the efforts that we're making in El Salvador, to help respond to the earthquake there. The President called President Flores on Sunday to express our sympathies and offer assistance as necessary. Disaster personnel from USAID were in San Salvador at the time of the earthquake, coincidentally, and so they immediately began coordinating with the National Emergency Committee, the Salvadoran Red Cross and the U.S. Embassy to assess the extent of the damage.

Teams of U.S. specialists from Costa Rica and Miami, including specialists from the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department, U.S. military personnel from the U.S. Southern Command arrived on Sunday, right away, to assist in the relief efforts. That was a USAID plane that flew down to San Salvador with the team and relief supplies.

So the combined U.S. personnel in the area are assisting the government of El Salvador in improving relief coordination, establishing a command and control system for a search and extraction, and helping the government of El Salvador institute a system to prioritize and task air lift missions.

The President spoke to President Flores. Secretary Albright has been in touch with her counterpart, too, about what we can do to help. And we are working with them on an ongoing basis to deal with this problem. The ongoing assistance at the moment is valued at about a quarter of a million dollars.

An update from the President's exam, physical exam on Friday. During that exam last Friday, January 12th, as we told you then, a lesion on his back, suspicious for skin cancer, was excised.

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The pathology results that were read this morning confirm that the lesion was a superficial, basal cell skin cancer. Pathologists noted that the margin of the lesion appeared clean, which indicates that the lesion had been totally removed.

In addition, at the time of the biopsy, the President elected to have the tissue around the lesion treated superficially with a technique called scraping and burning, in the event that the lesion was to be confirmed as skin cancer.

The risk of recurrence of basal cell skin cancer is low; but the risk of developing a new lesion in the future is increased over the rest of the population, due to the fair skin years of sun exposure. So he'll be seen again in four to six months by a dermatologist, and if there's no evidence of new lesions at that time, he'll be followed up on an annual basis.

As I think Dr. Connie, or one of the dermatologists told you on Friday, this is a relatively common form of skin cancer — 800,000 to a million cases a year. The lesion was removed, so while the President, I guess it could be said, had skin cancer, that has been removed and he no longer has it. So that is that.

We're also issuing a statement shortly on the report on Persian Gulf — the analysis of — the health consequences of the Gulf War, which will come out shortly. PJ has a copy there, that he's modeling, as well. That provides an overview of background, clinical programs, research and investigations that we've undertaken in that regard to help understand some of the consequences of health problems that have been associated with that.

And that is all I have for you.

Q: What is the President's speech about tomorrow, in Little Rock?

MR. SIEWERT: The President will talk tomorrow about — he wants to thank the people of Arkansas for supporting him over the years and talk to the legislature, in particular, about the good work that he had done with them before he left, and now as President, to help the state of Arkansas.

But, obviously, the President has a deep and abiding commitment to Arkansas — his home state and he wanted to thank the people there for helping make it possible for him to be the President of the United States and serve his country over the last eight years.

Q: Jake, to any extent does the President believe that his presidency has been a double-edged sword for the people and state of Arkansas?

MR. SIEWERT: I think the President feels as though Arkansas has benefitted tremendously during his administration. The economy of Arkansas, which was like the rest of the United States — in a bit of a slump in the late '80s and early '90s — is doing dramatically better. And more people in

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Arkansas work than ever before, the incomes have risen there and there's been a great deal of economic development. We were able to secure funding for some of the key priorities, including transportation priorities, thanks to the work that Rodney Slater has done. And a lot of the Arkansans that he brought with him to Washington — James Lee Witt, Rodney Slater and others — have excelled in their jobs here.

Q: If the presidency has been so helpful for Arkansas, what is the White House explanation of why they didn't vote for Al Gore?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not going to get back into an analysis of who voted for whom, when, but the people of Arkansas obviously made their own decisions about who they wanted to support in the election. But they overwhelmingly supported President Clinton in '92, again in '96. They elected him Governor a number of times, elected him Attorney General. He appreciates their commitment, their sticking with him throughout the years.

Q: Jake, did President Clinton act on Governor Davis's request that three natural gas firms be ordered to supply natural gas to PG&E?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not going to comment on the specifics of any proposal. The parties in the California electricity situation have at several times asked us to play a convening role, and the White House, Treasury and Energy have done that. Now the parties are looking at a proposal that's on the table. They're working through the details. It's a serious situation, and they themselves have to come up with some sort of solution. To the extent that we can facilitate that, we're available to do so, but we see this mainly as a discussion between the parties to the dispute, which I told the NSC sounds suspiciously like an answer about the Mid East peace process. (Laughter.)

Q: Speaking of which — (laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: But I think the reality is that the parties have a great deal of work to do amongst themselves. The federal government has a limited role. Obviously, the FERC has a role, but that's an independent agency, and Secretary Richardson has taken some steps to ease the crunch there. But we are basically in the role of convening the parties to come up with some sort of solution amongst themselves.

Q: So he hasn't answered the request by the Governor, asking him to intercede, or is that —

MR. SIEWERT: No, we've not.

Q: How do you see Saturday morning?

MR. SIEWERT: We're still working on some of the details with the President-elect's team, but I

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think that the President will have an opportunity to see the President-elect before the ceremony here. We'll work out some of those details, and then they'll proceed to the Capitol. The new President will be sworn in, and we'll head off into the sunset.

Q: Are you all packed?

MR. SIEWERT: I am packed. You're welcome to come up and inspect my office. I think after yesterday, I'm ahead of the curve.

Q: Have you got a job?

MR. SIEWERT: You know, thinking about it. I have some ideas, but —

Q: Which plane is he going to take from Andrews? Has that been determined yet? The big 747 or something smaller going into White Plains?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know, actually. I assume that we'll take whatever plane is traditional for ex-Presidents to take, but that's something we'll work out with the Bush team.

Q: Do you know if President Clinton will be making a live radio address on Saturday?

MR. SIEWERT: That's an issue we're still discussing. I expect he will deliver a radio address. Whether it's taped or live is something we haven't quite decided yet — on the rest of the schedule that day

Q: Does the White House have any insight into what's going on into the Congo? There have been reports that Laurent Kabila has been shot during a coup attempt.

MR. SIEWERT: We've seen those reports, but I can't confirm them. You'll have to — I can't confirm those reports. We've obviously seen them.

Q: Jake, can you give me a sense of what the meeting between George W. Bush and President Clinton will be like on Saturday morning? Where might it be, what will they be talking about?

MR. SIEWERT: I think this is traditionally a relatively — it's not a working meeting, by any measure. This is a relatively informal social event where the First Family welcomes the new First Family, and they have a chance to see each other at the White House before the ceremony itself up at the Congress. But it's not meant to be substantive in any way, shape or form. That's what the meeting that was held last month was designed to do.

Q: Will the President be going back to Arkansas when he leaves?

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MR. SIEWERT: No, I've already made pretty clear the President is going to Chappaqua that day, flying probably to JFK and then continuing from there.

Q: Is it your understanding that they drive up to the Capitol together in the same limo?

MR. SIEWERT: I understand that's the tradition.

Q: The new one?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know, actually, whether we'll get a chance to use the new limo. But I guess we've been using it already, so no reason why we shouldn't.

Q: As long as you raised the Middle East, is it your understanding that Dennis Ross won't be going back any more, and that he is pretty much off the radar screen now, in administration efforts?

MR. SIEWERT: Dennis is never off the radar screen. (Laughter.) No, we're continuing to consult with the parties, through the various channels that we have available to us. The parties, themselves, are in direct contact, and they met today to discuss both security issues and the political process. We think it's important for them to continue these discussions.

As you said, travel by Dennis Ross remains on hold. We believe it's important for the process to continue. The issues are well known by both sides, and we expect that the President's parameters that were put forward has helped narrow the differences somewhat, and narrow the debate. Although they — ultimately, they, themselves, need to decide whether they want a bridge and how to bridge those differences.

But we believe it's critical that they do so. The United States, whether under this President or the next one, will remain engaged in that process. And it's important that they do so because, ultimately, a just and comprehensive peace is critical to resolving tension in that region. And that's in the U.S. interest. The incoming team will obviously have to make it's own decisions about how to proceed, but for the moment, we remain engaged, and we'll continue to discuss with the parties — their own discussions amongst themselves.

Q: Has he been getting a lot of farewell messages, and is he going to leave his successor some sort of note?

MR. SIEWERT: I actually haven't asked him. I expect he will leave some sort of note. But he has been getting an overwhelming number of last-minute notices, gifts and a lot of heart-felt notes from his staff, people who have seen him over the years. It's making packing up even harder, because the gifts and notes keep flowing in, just as we're trying to pack them up.

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Q: What kind of gifts?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, he's got some very nice photos and things. But he's gotten a number of different things. We usually keep those fairly private.

Q: Jake, Stephen Colbert, Senior White House Correspondent for the Daily Show. Will the President be making any more statements today?

MR. SIEWERT: The President I expect will be making a statement this afternoon, and you're invited to attend that.

Q: Will he be available for one-on-ones?

MR. SIEWERT: He will not be available for a one-on-one with the Daily Show.

Q: Could you at least ask?

MR. SIEWERT: We could check. (Laughter.) I don't know — unfortunately, you know, D.C. Cable — and I'm a long-time subscriber to D.C. Cable — doesn't carry the Daily Show, as you may or may not be aware. So he may not be familiar with the show.

Q: Make sure he knows it's Stephen Colbert, not Stephen Carell, okay? That's C-o-l-b-e-r-t. He'll see me.

MR. SIEWERT: Okay.

Q: Can you talk about what exactly happens on Saturday? Is there ever a point in which the staff of both your administration and the Bush administration is here, overlaps at all? How does that work?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I don't know how many of their staff — you might want to ask Mr. Hunt or someone else who's witnessed one of these in the past. (Laughter.) It's just a factual statement, nothing intended by it. (Laughter.)

I expect that their staff — some of their staff probably comes with them for this visit, but I think it's a very limited amount. Most people will be at the Capitol. There's a very small number of staff here that will be on hand just to help with that event, and the press's interest in covering the comings and goings here that morning.

But most of the staff, of our staff, will have checked out at that point and be on their way home or out to Andrews.

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Q: You're going with the President?

MR. SIEWERT: I expect to accompany him as he leaves town.

Q: What will you do in New York, when you get there?

MR. SIEWERT: What do I do in New York? (Laughter.) That's a good question. I don't know, maybe go to the city.

Q: Get on a train.

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, come home —

Q: Does he go anywhere — from JFK, does he go directly to Chappaqua?

MR. SIEWERT: I expect that he will go directly from New York to Chappaqua.

Q: From the airport, or is he going into Manhattan to do any —

MR. SIEWERT: I think he's planning on just going straight — we'll let you know all the final details. But the plans at the moment call for him to go from JFK to Chappaqua, directly.

Q: Could I ask you, also, on pardons, that issue is still up in the air. Do you anticipate now, as we get closer — have you gotten a better idea of what he's going to do, in terms of pardons? Are there a lot of pardons he's going to — is he going to put it until the very last minute? What can we expect?

MR. SIEWERT: I think he's looked at a lot of pardons, at a lot of petitions. Whether we actually grant a number of them and what number we grant is something that I'll have to leave until we actually make the announcement. I would not expect anything today, but it could come at any time after that, up until Friday.

Q: Has he ruled out pardons for the Whitewater figures, specifically?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not going to comment on any of the specific cases until we make a final decision.

Q: What about monuments?

MR. SIEWERT: We are reviewing a number of monuments that were recommended by Secretary Babbitt, including Pompeys Pillar, in Montana; one in Arizona; a couple in the Virgin Islands. Most prominently, the Missouri Breaks, which figured very importantly in the Lewis and Clark expedition.

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So I think we'll have something to say on that before we leave. It could be any day now, but I wouldn't expect that we'll announce that officially today.

Q: The staff that he's taking, will they go into the Washington office, or New York?

MR. SIEWERT: The President will have an office in Washington for just a short transition period, over on Jackson Place, as President Reagan did. He will also have a staff in New York. I expect that there will be some people in both offices, but we have not signed on the dotted line on office space in New York. So in the short-term, people will probably be working out of Washington. Although, they're trying to arrange some temporary space in New York.

Q: A lot has been written about the President's environmental legacy. And some recent reports have sort of suggested that early on in his administration he wasn't as engaged on that issue. Do you acknowledge that and what can explain sort of his —

MR. SIEWERT: I think anyone who looked at — I mean, first of all, the President has from day one spent a lot of time with Vice President Gore talking about issues that were critical on the environment. The speech he gave at the State Department, early on in this administration, about climate change was a very thoughtful speech and one he could have given today, it's worth looking at. He made that remark to an event that Ted Turner sponsored, I believe, in late '93 or early '94. And it's worthwhile to look back at that, because it's some of the same challenges we're talking about today.

Also, he, from the very beginning of this administration — whether it was the work out in the spotted owl and the very difficult work that went around — that summit that we had out in Oregon, has been committed to finding a way to protect the environment and protect economic growth. That was something he talked about throughout the campaign and something we worked very hard on in the early days, particularly around the northwest forest plan.

Q: The employees that former President Clinton will have, will they all be employees that he will get as a result of — that a certain amount of staff that a former President gets? Or does he plan to form a company of his own and just employ them personally?

MR. SIEWERT: Actually, I'll refer you to his new team on that when they get in place. But I think that you can expect that there will be some people who work at the library, which is a separate entity, some people will work at the office of the former President and some people may work for him in different capacities one way or the other.

Q: Can I ask you about the procedure on Saturday? Is he actually going to leave from the White House to the airport? Or what is he —

MR. SIEWERT: No, he attends the inaugural ceremony.

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Q: From there to —

MR. SIEWERT: He leaves from the Capitol, traditionally, and then proceeds to Andrews for his final flight.

Q: He's not coming back to the White House?

MR. SIEWERT: No, after he leaves it's not — it's really his to occupy.

Q: How long does he stay in New York?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, he lives there now, so I assume he'll stay as long as he wants. (Laughter.) No, he expects to take up residence there, and live there. That will be his permanent residence, and after that, you'll have to check with someone else about his comings and goings. But I'm not in a position to comment on those now.

Q: Jake, anything you can tell us about his sayonara message on Thursday, and has a final press conference been ruled out and, if so, why?

MR. SIEWERT: I think the address on Thursday night will be relatively short. The draft I looked at ran about six or seven minutes. He wanted to take this opportunity to thank the American people for their support over the years, for helping him become the first Democrat since FDR to serve two terms, and for giving him a chance to serve the country. And he'll comment on some of the good work that he's been able to do, along with the American people.

He'll also take an opportunity to look a little bit forward, some of the challenges we face in the new globalized world, one that really has become more interdependent in the last 10 years, and probably comment a bit on the importance of America remaining engaged in the world and continuing to play a leadership role.

Q: And a press conference is ruled out?

MR. SIEWERT: A press conference. We had kicked around the idea of a press conference, but the President is awfully busy — it's a huge commitment of time. And he's been regularly available, here and there, including last week. I think he took about 10 questions, more than I would have liked, behind the Oval. But we did not really have the time, given that he's packing up, trying to do a lot of meetings, and trying to finish up some work.

Q: Jake, if I could just return to the Middle East one last time. Are you saying that the clock has now run out on even the prospect of a framework signing?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, the parties — in the end, the parties will make a decision about what they

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want to agree with — agree to or not to agree to, on their own time frame. They continue to talk, and I'm not going to rule anything out, as long as they continue to talk. But that's up to them to make that decision. We remain available to help them in the process, and we continue to talk to them about the President's parameters, and what we could do to narrow the differences between the parties.

But they're focused on their discussions right now, and we'll do — I'm not going to try to limit those discussions in any way. But obviously, there's a very short timetable, and that makes it exceedingly difficult. But, ultimately, that's their decision, not ours.

Q: Will there be anything resembling a State of the Union in these final days, a message?

MR. SIEWERT: I would not expect a State of the Union.

Q: There's no obligation to send one up?

MR. SIEWERT: There's no obligation in the Constitution. I believe it says from time to time that the President shall provide information. He's obviously not planning a full-scale address, and I don't know of any written address that's in the works.

Q: Jake, the spokesman for the President-elect George Bush has said that any final days deal the President signs — executive orders or makes any deals — will be under — will be reviewed by the new administration — under the law legally or politically can be possible?

MR. SIEWERT: Sure, they can review everything that we did, but the reality is I think that they'll find that there's a good public policy underlying most of the decisions we've made here over the last couple of years, some of which were finalized in the last month or so.

But whether it's the rule to protect workers in the work place or the rules to protect national forests from new road building, we think that those are worthy public policy objectives, and should be allowed to stand on the merits.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END 2:07 P.M. EST