

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
ON SPACE SHUTTLE EXPLOSION

The Roosevelt Room

1:00 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Please, sit down. Well, I'm sure we all realize there's a little change in the procedures. I'd looked forward to coming in here and having a little session with you and some briefing, all very carefully sequestered until 9:00 tonight on the State of the Union, but in view of the tragedy that has befallen us, I don't think we'll do that.

I know that you're interested in keeping up with this, as I am also, to find out the extent of it and what has taken place, so I just wanted to say hello and I appreciate your coming here and maybe we can do the other thing another time.

Q Mr. President, can you give us your comments on the tragedy so that we can tell the American people your words, your thoughts?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, what can you say. It's a horrible thing that -- and all of us have witnessed it and actually seen it take place and I just can't rid myself of the thought of the sacrifice and the families that have been watching this also -- the families of those people onboard and what they must be going through at this point and I'm sure all of America is more than saddened but feels the great weight of this and wishes, as I do, that there was something we could do to make it easier for those who've suffered such a loss.

Q Mr. President, what is the latest word you've gotten? Have you gotten any definitive word on the condition --

THE PRESIDENT: Actually, no. We have no more information than you yourselves have and -- that are going down there. It's a case of having to wait.

Q Mr. President, do you want to see all systems halted until we find out explicitly what happened in this tragedy?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not a scientist. I do have confidence in the people that have been running this program and this is the first time, what is it, 50 some flights that something of this kind has happened. I certainly want everything done that can be done to find out how this could have happened and to ensure against its happening again. But there again, I have to say that I'm sure that the people that have to do with this program are determined to do that right now. And I'm quite sure also, when you look at the safety measures that sometimes those of us looking on have gotten a little impatient with when flights have been aborted and it hasn't seemed as if the situation -- well, it seems as if they were taking things too seriously. Now we know they weren't. And so I'm confident that there will be no flight until they are absolutely as certain as a human being can be that it is safe.

Q Mr. President, do you think it raises questions about having citizens aboard the Space Shuttle?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, they're all citizens and I don't think anyone's ever been on there that isn't a volunteer. I know

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reasons why they, or someone like them should be included in flights of this kind. So, no -- that is the last frontier and the most important frontier we have to say that the space program has been most successful, most effective and -- I guess, we've been so confident of it that it comes as such a tremendous shock when something of this kind happens.

Q Will you still go ahead, sir, with your message tonight?

THE PRESIDENT: What?

Q Will you go ahead with your message tonight?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I feel that we -- things like that have to go on.

Q Mr. President, are you afraid there'll be any public backlash against the space program because of this tragedy?

THE PRESIDENT: I shouldn't think so and I would certainly do everything I could to express an opinion the other way. You know, we don't -- we have accidents in every line of transportation and we don't do away with those things. They've probably got a better safety record than we have out on the highways.

Q Mr. President, will you tell us --

Q Do you think it was a mistake to put the teacher onboard?

THE PRESIDENT: What?

Q Do you think it was a mistake to put the teacher onboard?

THE PRESIDENT: No. Again, as I say, this is a thing -- and this is what the whole space program is leading towards -- is actual use.

Q Mr. President, will you tell us exactly who brought you the news and exactly what you thought and said at that point?

THE PRESIDENT: We were all sitting in there, and I was preparing myself for your questions on the State of the Union Address when the Vice President and John Poindexter came into the room. And all they could say at the time was that they had received a flash that the space shuttle had exploded. And we immediately went into the adjoining room where I have a TV set to get on this, because there was no direct word and -- except that word that had -- being made public also. And there we saw the replaying and saw the thing actually happen. And it just was -- I say -- a very traumatic experience.

Q But how does that effect your State of the Union speech tonight? I mean, we were told you were going to give an upbeat -- "the State of the Union is good," you know, optimistic speech. This has got to cast a pall on it, doesn't it?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, it sure does. And, certainly, there could be no speech without mentioning this. But you can't stop governing the nation because of a tragedy of this kind. So, yes, one will continue.

Q Mr. President --

Q -- philosophically, do you take some solace in the fact that over the years the American space program has been remarkably safe, that we've not lost as many people as we've been led to believe have been lost in the Soviet Union?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think we've all had a great pride in that. And it is a kind of -- well, it'd be something to cling to right now, although it doesn't lessen our grief at what has just taken place.

Q Mr. President, sending civilians in space is based on the assumption that it was routine to go into space, that it was now safe, even a teacher we could send up. Do you think that notion has now -- is now gone?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, what would you -- what could you say, other than that here was a program that had a 100-percent safety record? The only other fatality did not take place in a space shuttle. It took place in an old-type of capsule --

Q Mr. President --

MR. BUCHANAN: One question. One more question.

Q -- so many children have -- you know -- been a part of this particular space shuttle because of the teacher. And they're doing classrooms. Can you do something to help help them -- say something that would help them to understand --

THE PRESIDENT: I think people closer to them have got to be doing that. As I say, the world is a hazardous place, always has been, in pioneering. And we've always known that there are pioneers that give their lives out there on the frontier. And now this has happened. It probably is more of a shock to -- to all of us because of the fact that we see it happen now and -- thanks to the media -- not just hearing about it as if something that happened miles away. But I think -- I think those that have to do with them and -- must, at the same time, make it plain to them that life does go on and -- and you don't back up and quit some worthwhile endeavor because of tragedy.

Q Do you have any --

MR. BUCHANAN: -- got some folks in the Oval Office that are waiting --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh.

Q Sir, do you have any special thoughts about Christa McAuliffe, who, I think it was in this room, was named as the first teacher? What are your thoughts about her today?

THE PRESIDENT: I can't get out of my mind her husband and her children. But then that's true of the families of the others. Theirs probably more so because the families of the others had been a part of this whole program and knew that they were in a hazardous occupation. But knowing that they were there and watching, this just is -- well, your heart goes out to them.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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1:07 P.M. EST