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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
LARRY SPEAKES

January 28, 1986

The Briefing Room

11:55 A.M. EST

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#1672-01/28

THE WHITE HOUSE
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PRESS BRIEFING
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LARRY SPEAKES

January 28, 1986

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MR. SPEAKES: Just want to come in for a second and relay to you that the President is deeply concerned and shocked at what he has just seen replayed on television concerning the shuttle launch. We do not have any more information than is being provided to the public at this time.

The way the President found out about it is, he was in the Oval Office with a group of senior staff preparing for some questions with a group of network correspondents and anchors that were having lunch in the White House today regarding the budget and the State of the Union.

The Vice President and the Foreign Policy Advisor, John Poindexter, came in with others and informed the President that the news had just broken. We immediately adjourned our Oval Office meeting and went into an adjoining room, the President's study, where there is a television and the President then began to review television reports of the explosion there shortly after the launch.

So, once again, the President is concerned, he is saddened, he is very anxious to have more information on it. At the moment, as I say, we are learning most of our information from what the public is getting.

Q What is your best information on the condition of the crew, Larry, at this point?

MR. SPEAKES: We don't have any more information than what is being provided the public on television. Hopefully later we will be able to get some. And that's -- the President's first priority is to find out what information that is available. We just don't --

Q Has the White House spoken with the Cape yet?

MR. SPEAKES: We just don't have any more.

No, we have not -- not from the Oval Office.

Q Will this affect in any way the plans for the State of the Union tonight?

MR. SPEAKES: I don't believe so. I'm certain that the President will feel compelled to mention this, depending on the outcome of what we learn here in a few minutes.

Q Will it affect the shuttle program, Larry?

MR. SPEAKES: That is hard to say here in fifteen or twenty minutes after an incident of this type is concerned. I'm sure it will not affect the United States' determination to consider -- to continue the exploration of space and all the benefits we've received from it.

Q Can you tell us anything else about his schedule?

MR. SPEAKES: While this is indeed tragic, it certainly will not deter the United States in its interest in space exploration.

Q Well, with all the problems that the shuttle has had, will any substantial reevaluation be done of the program itself?

MR. SPEAKES: Once again, you are very premature in asking the question concerning the future of the space program. The United States has met adversity many times before in the space program. It is one of the most effective and successful programs of that type that any country has every undertaken.

Q Larry, can you tell us anything specifically that the President said -- any quotations? And did he make any mention of the fact that the teacher -- that he suggested that the program of a teacher in space, that that teacher was onboard this flight?

MR. SPEAKES: I know that was on his mind. Quite frankly, the President stood there in almost stunned silence as he watched the television. You could certainly read the concern, the sorrow, the anxiety on his face as he watched and the group watched around him. As I say, he was -- virtually watched in silence.

Q Might anyone from the White House be leading some sort of investigating team or will it just be up to NASA to investigate this?

MR. SPEAKES: All this is very, very early and there is

just nothing we can say. Our immediate concern is the crew and all of these others questions will just have to be deferred --

Q Was anything said about --

MR. SPEAKES: -- until much later.

Q Was anything said about the fact that the teacher was on board this flight?

MR. SPEAKES: Well, it was something that was on all of our minds that we did have the first teacher in space -- really, the first civilian, so to speak, other than our members of Congress who have flown in space. And, certainly, that's on our mind.

Q Larry --

Q Are there any scientific aides who have been able to say that they could survive such an explosion --

MR. SPEAKES: Just don't have that kind of information yet.

Q Larry, you said that the Vice President and Admiral Poindexter informed the President. How did the White House learn about it?

MR. SPEAKES: I'm certain that we probably learned it from the news media, as we do many times when incidents like this occur unexpectedly.

Q Might this influence a decision about whether other civilians will be allowed on the shuttle from now on, Larry?

MR. SPEAKES: Once again, all of these questions -- our immediate concern is for the fate of the crew -- to find out exactly what has happened to those seven people aboard. All of these other questions will just have to wait until later.

Dale?

Q Will the President be making any phone calls to the families?

Q Can you tell us anything about what the President's schedule -- how the President's schedule is changing now?

MR. SPEAKES: The President's schedule has not changed. He will keep on with what he had planned today and the State of the Union tonight. And, once again, I think the only change in his schedule would be to simply be updated and try to seek the facts in this.

Q Will the President be making any phone calls to the families, Larry?

MR. SPEAKES: I just don't know.

Q Larry, you -- you didn't --

MR. SPEAKES: He customarily does, but we're going to wait until we find out what the facts are.

Q Larry, he watched in silence, but were there no quotes that you could give us?

MR. SPEAKES: Nothing. He was virtually in silence.

Q Are you going to --

Q Do you know what's being done now, Larry, in terms of searching for --

MR. SPEAKES: No. All of that information we just do not have yet.

Dale, you had one question and you want to go --

Q It's been asked.

MR. SPEAKES: Okay.

Q What are your plans about briefing the rest of the afternoon on this?

MR. SPEAKES: I think once we find out what the facts are and, particularly, what the fate of the crew is, then we'll be prepared to say something.

Q Larry, did you detect any sign of emotion as the President watched? Was he shaking his head? Were his eyes moist?

MR. SPEAKES: Concern, anxiety, silence.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

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