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THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary

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PRESS BRIEFING  
BY  
LARRY SPEAKES

January 28, 1986

The Briefing Room

1:55 P.M. EST

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary

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PRESS BRIEFING  
BY  
LARRY SPEAKES

January 28, 1986

The Briefing Room

1:53 P.M. EST

MR. SPEAKES: Due to the tragedy of space shuttle mission 51L, the President, in consultation with the leadership of Congress, has decided to postpone the State of the Union address that was scheduled for this evening. He will address the Congress and the American people on next Tuesday.

The President, in addition, has asked the Vice President to go immediately to Cape Canaveral's Kennedy Space Center along with the acting NASA Director, Bill Graham. The Vice President will carry with him the President's personal concern for those courageous Americans who were aboard the space shuttle.

In addition, the President will speak to the American people from the Oval Office later this evening regarding this tragedy. The President, since learning of the tragedy shortly before noon, has conferred with Don Regan, who, in turn, consulted with Speaker Tip O'Neill and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole. They concurred in the President's decision to delay his State of the Union.

A few moments ago the President met in the Oval Office with NASA Director Graham and instructed him to fly to the Cape with the Vice President to begin an effort to find out the cause of this tragedy. And then, the President said to go forward with the nation's space program. The President said -- and I quote -- "These people were dedicated to the exploration of space. We could do no more to honor them -- these courageous Americans -- than to go forward with the program."

Q Can you tell us some of the reasoning in the decision to postpone since, as you know, the President's first reaction was to go ahead with tonight's speech?

MR. SPEAKES: I think the President, like all Americans, has seen this tragedy unfold on television and has felt keenly what those family members must have felt watching that shuttle go into the air at the Cape -- first pride and then, second, horror. The President feels that these same emotions are being experienced by people all over this nation at this moment. And with the consultation of Congress that's taken place in the last hour or so, the President thought it was entirely appropriate that his State of the Union be deferred until -- and let him address the American people on what's happening here.

Q Larry, did Administrator Graham tell him, finally, what happened? Does he have information -- confirmation about --

MR. SPEAKES: No. The -- NASA has issued a statement indicating, simply, that there was an explosion aboard the space shuttle shortly after it lifted off from the Cape this morning and that a search and rescue mission is underway. That is continuing at this hour and will continue until all efforts to find out what the situation in there are exhausted.

Q Does the President believe --

MR. SPEAKES: Wait -- Drake?

Q Larry, is the President also going to cancel his State of the Union activities for the balance of the week and what time is the -- are the remarks tonight?

MR. SPEAKES: The President will, for the balance of the week, continue on his previously announced schedule with the exception of those activities which were designed as a follow-up to the State of the Union. They will be rescheduled for next week.

The time of the address to the nation has not been determined, pending definite word from NASA about the situation.

Q HHS, Treasury and the high school he is not going to visit now?

MR. SPEAKES: That's right.

Q Larry, to follow --

Q Larry?

Q Larry, can you tell us --

MR. SPEAKES: One at a time --

Q -- does the President have any plans to travel -- attend any memorial service for the --

MR. SPEAKES: At the moment, they're -- the -- NASA is still conducting its search mission there and, of course, there's been no memorial service set. The Vice President does go with the personal expression on the part of the President of his concern to those families there and no travel plans are set as yet.

Q Larry?

Q Larry, two questions. First of all, I know you haven't had any official word, but is the White House operating on the basis that all of the people on the shuttle are dead?

MR. SPEAKES: Chris, like every American, we hope. And until we find out otherwise, that hope will continue.

Q And secondly, to follow up on an earlier question, we were told by the President a few moments ago that he intended to go ahead with the State of the Union. In fact, said while it would cast a pall, the business of governing the nation must go on. What changed his mind in, really, a very short period of time?

MR. SPEAKES: As I indicated to your colleague over here just a moment ago, is that the President, like all Americans, watched this on television and is -- he felt very keenly the emotion that must be felt by the families of those down there and -- that had to watch this event in person -- and very keenly, what the American people must be feeling. He consulted with the Congressional leadership and the consensus opinion of the Executive and the Legislative Branch was that it was appropriate to postpone.

So -- Mike and then Leslie.

Q Larry, can you tell us what information the President is getting other than from television at this point?

MR. SPEAKES: As I just said, the President has conferred with the director of NASA and he brought him up-to-date, providing him with as much information as he can. There's not an extensive

body of information at the moment that exists. NASA is looking into it as quickly as they can and as I say, a search mission goes on.

Q Is there a special task force, either at the White House or somewhere that's keeping him informed or are there special communications channels set up?

MR. SPEAKES: As always, when there is an event of this nature that occurs anywhere around the world, the White House Situation Room keeps on top of the events. What happened was, as soon as this event occurred -- almost simultaneously with the television coverage of it -- the situation room was informed by NASA and has kept abreast of it with an open line to NASA at the Cape since that time.

Q Was this --

MR. SPEAKES: Leslie.

Q Well, I was going to go back again on where the idea of postponing the speech first initiated.

MR. SPEAKES: The idea --

Q Did the President initiate the idea? Not the Hill?

MR. SPEAKES: Yes. The President initiated the idea of postponing the speech.

Q Himself.

Q Larry, will the shuttle program be suspended, at least until the investigation is through?

MR. SPEAKES: Those determinations have not been made. The President indicated to Bill Graham that he should find out the

cause of it and then proceed.

Now, exactly how that dovetails with future flights will just have to be determined as a result of what NASA determines in their investigation.

Q Also, on the consideration of whether any civilians will be permitted to continue on shuttle flights, is that also a part of the investigation?

MR. SPEAKES: To echo the President's words, that all of these people were Americans, they were all interested in space, they all came, first, with courage and, second, in a spirit of volunteering for this mission. And whether that -- there'll be any change in that, I don't know. But at the moment, I don't think there's any -- any connection.

Joe.

Q Has the President attempted to contact the family members of anyone who was on the shuttle?

MR. SPEAKES: The President has not yet done that, no.

Q Is there any feeling --

MR. SPEAKES: Except to send the Vice President, in an expression of his concern.

Q Is there any feeling here that NASA was pushing too hard? There was a very ambitious program. Was it 15 launches for this year?

MR. SPEAKES: I think NASA has a very good record of safety and a very cautious human approach to space exploration and they have taken those precautions. This is a tragedy of major proportions and one that concerns us all. But for the moment, there is no finger-pointing at NASA as far as their safety record.

Q Well, if I may, the question arises, particularly because in recent launches there have been some glitches that have come up. As you know, they had a problem with the door, the hatch on this, and their drill wouldn't work and all of that. Does that not give the impression that they may be pushing too fast?

MR. SPEAKES: I can't make that judgment from here, but I think if you would look back at other space launches in the Mercury and Apollo program, you would find that there have been postponements. These not because of glitches, but because of an extensive safety program that finds these glitches before launch.

Q Can you be more specific about what the Vice President will be doing later today, specifically? And, also, does the postponement on the State of the Union push back the schedule for the budget and other things that were scheduled for next week?

MR. SPEAKES: The Vice President's schedule, once he arrives at the Cape, has not been determined, since it's just within the last few moments that the President has asked him to go down.

Q Well, what's his specific charge? I mean, when you say he carries the President's --

MR. SPEAKES: His specific charge, once again, is to express the President's concern to the families and to accompany the Director of NASA down to the Cape in order to see that the President's directions for an immediate look into the tragedy -- into the explosion is accomplished.

Q Is he overseeing an investigation into this?

MR. SPEAKES: I don't think that you can say yet, Norm. I think this matter is entirely in the hands of the NASA people at the present time. And I don't know of any -- there's no further planning beyond --

Q How about the question on the budget, too. The schedule for next week?

MR. SPEAKES: Question on the budget? That has not been determined. It would be my inclination to say that the budget will probably go up on Wednesday with the State of the Union on Tuesday. I think the Gramm-Rudman law requires that it go up by February 5th, and that they will do.

Andrea, and then I'm going to go all the way to the back and work forward.

Q Just for a follow on Norm, is it the President's view that perhaps an independent investigation, outside of NASA, is what is required on the pacing of the program and how it might have effected this --

MR. SPEAKES: I think everyone is leap-frogging well ahead of events at present. This tragedy is now only hours old. You have a series of actions taken by the President, including a charge to the Director of NASA to find out what happened. And until we do some preliminary studies, none of these questions have answers.

Pat.

Q Has the decision been made to have the President officially disclose tonight in his speech what happened? Or will we continue to get details from NASA throughout the day? Or are they going to hold for the President's speech?

MR. SPEAKES: NASA will continue to keep you abreast of everything, as they know it, as they always have through the entire history of the American space program.

John.

Q Larry, you made a point of saying early on that there would be no greater way to honor those who apparently have died in this mission than to continue on with the space program. Is this a deliberate effort to try to counteract any feelings against the program because of the tragedy?

MR. SPEAKES: John, the only deliberate effort we're making at the moment is to show our deep concern, our deep emotion, and our desire that America continue in the space program. That's our entire motive, lock, stock and barrel.

Johanna?

Q Larry, has the President expressed any rue or regret about his proposal to send civilians into space?

MR. SPEAKES: The President is obviously concerned about every person -- that he as the Chief Executive Officer of the government -- as he, as the President directs, he directs people every day, either directly or indirectly, to conduct missions on the part of the government -- the military, NASA and those. It's a fact of life when the man sits in the Oval Office he has to make these decisions and I've not heard him express any regrets -- concern, yes; deep emotion, yes; sorrow, yes; but regret is not -- it's not that. It was a decision made -- as he said, these individuals are all Americans and they're all believers in the space program and that's what's in his mind.

Walter?

Q Larry, does the President plan today to speak with any of the relatives, family of any of the --

MR. SPEAKES: That hasn't been determined, yet. No.

Frank?

Q Could you give us any indication as to what the First Lady was doing at the time this information became available and what her reaction had been?

MR. SPEAKES: I don't -- we can check with her office, if you will, and see what we can get.

Q Larry, because the Europeans are able to put up satellites with unmanned vehicles, doesn't this accident argue per se that unmanned vehicles are a preferable way to put up satellites in orbit?

MR. SPEAKES: Well, once again I have been a silent observer of the space program and not one that's actively involved and I'm not competent to answer that.

Q Larry, as you recall, the President made the decision to send a teacher into space. Can you tell us on what he based that decision and who suggested the timing and when the time was right for that mission?

MR. SPEAKES: Well, Mike, I don't want to come down hard on you but what's in the President's mind right now is to find out what happened and to show those families of those people that he's concerned and that's all that's on his mind at the moment.

Q Are you operating on the assumption that this is the result of some technological problem, or has anyone suggested the possibility it might be an act of terrorism?

MR. SPEAKES: There have been no suggestions either way.

THE PRESS: Thank you.