

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 1, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

1:28 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: We have a quick update on transition -- I know everyone's interested in what we're doing around here to make the transition operate smoothly.

Today, Mr. John Podesta, the Chief of Staff, submitted and accepted his own resignation -- (laughter) -- effective January 20, 2001, with glee.

Q Without any argument at all?

MR. SIEWERT: Without any argument. More seriously, John has been in touch with the Gore team, and is reaching out to the Bush team to discuss how we can best move forward on the background checks, on a parallel process. As you know, the Justice Department has indicated that they're willing to consider moving forward on a parallel track to make that process go more smoothly. And recognizing the unusual nature of this circumstance, we're exploring with both campaigns how we can best do that and make some progress.

As I've said before, 90 percent of the work that's done at this stage is done by the campaigns, themselves, and the transition teams and the individuals who have been selected for those jobs. But there's no reason why we couldn't begin to talk about helping make that progress move a little more smoothly. So that's something we're discussing with the Department of Justice; John is reaching out to both teams and we'll let you know how that goes.

In a brief update, for those of you interested in Nebraska, the President's schedule is firming up a bit there. Next Friday,

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we will go to the University of Nebraska where he will speak at -- in Kearney, where he'll speak to the student body there, at the invitation of former Senator Jim Exon. And I expect that will be the first in a series of speeches the President gives towards the end of his term here, to focus on some of the larger issues confronting the United States, how we've met them and how we plan to move forward. We're still finalizing the actual topic, but I think you can expect that to be a relatively serious speech about what we've done here and what the next administration can do.

He will then maybe take an opportunity to explore some of the sights around Kearney and then travel on to Omaha, where he will speak to -- take an opportunity to talk to the citizens of Omaha, and then probably attend a Democratic event there.

He will not, unfortunately be going to Carhenge, which I'm informed is an actual replica of Stonehenge, consisting of American-made vintage cars. (Laughter.)

Q He is not doing that?

MR. SIEWERT: He is not doing that.

Q Are we going to sleep in Nebraska?

MR. SIEWERT: I think we're coming back here that evening, for an event here. We are looking for a chance for him to explore the culinary delicacy called "runza," which I have a recipe for if anyone's interested. It's r-u-n-z-a, which is a delicacy enjoyed at University of Nebraska football games.

Q What is it?

MR. SIEWERT: It involves -- funny you should ask. (Laughter.) It involves bread dough, hamburger, cabbage and onions. And as I said, I've got the recipe here if anyone is interested. More Nebraska information.

Q No alcohol?

MR. SIEWERT: I think it's probably accompanied by alcohol at many football games, but I don't -- (laughter) -- in particular.

Other than that, I don't have anything off the top of my head to share with you.

Q Background checks -- could those happen as early as next week? I mean, could the FBI start doing those background

checks as early as next week?

MR. SIEWERT: No, we haven't finalized this. Obviously, in the past, these sorts of background checks have been governed by some sort of agreement between the team and -- the transition team and the Department of Justice. We probably need to explore that. That's one of the issues we're discussing. And as I said, it hasn't been finalized, but we'd like to do something to make sure that we're moving forward quickly and not getting in the way of people, if they are actually ready.

I don't think -- I don't have any indication from them yet whether they're willing to do this, but it's something we're exploring with both the teams and something we've talked to the Department of Justice about. And we're certainly open to the idea of helping that move forward quickly.

Q Has Podesta scheduled his sit-down meetings with either Mr. Card or Mr. Neel yet?

MR. SIEWERT: No, but he's talked to both of them over the past week or so and, as I said, I expect he'll be in touch with them today.

Q These speeches that the President -- the series you mentioned, the first one being in Nebraska, was it four or five are we talking about? Like one a week or something?

MR. SIEWERT: We haven't set on a particular number. I think it will probably be less than that, but it's something we've discussed doing. It's fairly traditional. I understand that President Reagan did four or five, Lyndon Johnson did a couple.

Q Kind of a farewell address-type thing, but spread out?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think actually a lot of different Presidents since World War II that we looked at have done both some sort of farewell address, which we haven't decided on one way or the other, but have also taken the opportunity to give major speeches on topics that interested them. Reagan gave one on foreign policy, one on domestic policy, one on the Presidency, one on the economy, and then also did a radio address, a farewell White House dinner, and a host of other sort of speeches and events around the end.

Q Jake, how are you responding to Iraq's halting of oil exports?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we are working with the International

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Energy Agency on a response to that. We're certainly ready for any eventuality there. We'll take action quickly, as the circumstances warrant.

Q What about tapping the SPR?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we'll work on an oil response, if necessary, that would compensate for the oil volumes, which Iraq is threatening to withdraw from the world market, and that could include draw-downs from the strategic petroleum stocks as appropriate.

Q We're reporting that they've already done that.

MR. SIEWERT: You're reporting what?

Q They've already halted -- they've announced that they're halting --

MR. SIEWERT: They've suspended loading, but that's a step that we're monitoring and we'll keep an eye on.

Q Jake, how much of the strategic petroleum reserve are you willing to draw down, for something like this?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I'm not going to get into numbers here, but we're prepared to deal with any eventuality that arises and we can, certainly working with our partners -- with Germany, Japan and other members of the International Energy Agency -- we can deal with any eventuality that arises.

Q These two land mines that were found in Bogota today, do we view that as an assassination attempt against the senator and the ambassador?

MR. SIEWERT: We don't have any information that indicates that that's what these were. Some of that reporting I think has been a little bit misleading.

Q It happened yesterday, the senators already left the country --

MR. SIEWERT: It happened yesterday and -- yes, they've left. There is no information that indicates that that was directed at those two individuals.

Q Jake, has the President issued an invitation to Europeans to restart the climate change talks before the end of the year in Europe?

MR. SIEWERT: The Europeans initiated discussion with us about how to build on some of the work that was done at The Hague. We obviously think this is a problem that's not going away and one that we need to address. But I think the initiation of some sort of further round of talks or some sort of discussion was done by the Europeans.

Obviously, the President recognizes this as a serious problem. He's committed to solving it. We had a very reasonable proposal on the table at The Hague, it was rejected by the Europeans. I don't want to speculate on why that was rejected or what all lay behind that, but we're willing to talk with people who are reasonable about moving forward to address a serious problem.

Q Is that meeting, though, going to take place?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't think anything has been finalized. I think there has been some discussion today about how we build on the work that was done at The Hague, and where we go from here.

Q Are you considering meeting with them before the end of the year?

MR. SIEWERT: We're serious about sitting down and talking about these kinds of issues with people who are willing to confront some of the tougher issues. We had a very difficult discussion at The Hague, where we thought we had a very strong compromise proposal that was put on the table. The Europeans agreed to that. But we want to see where we can go from here, and they reached out to us and we're still talking.

Q Jake, in know the President was out for World AIDS Day, but when he returned, did he listen to any of the audio portions of the Supreme Court hearing?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't think he's had a chance to yet. I know he said this morning -- he's obviously been following this closely and I think he's had a chance to read and sort of catch up on some of the arguments that are being made there in the written briefs. But I don't think he's had a chance to listen to any of the oral argument.

Q Does he think it's going to be tough, though, if the Court does side against Al Gore and --

MR. SIEWERT: I haven't heard him speculate on that one way or the other. Obviously, the decision is a little ways off and we'll watch it with the rest of you on CNN -- advertisement.

Q One other question. Apparently it was reported in Canadian papers that the President was overheard saying on Monday that if every vote in Florida would be counted, that Al Gore would win. Have you -- is that a true reflection of the President's feeling?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I wasn't there. I mean, he's had, as I've said before from this podium, he's had a number of conversations with friends in private. I expect those will remain private. I think in this case, there's a private book party that he was at for Tony Lake, and he was just chatting with a group of people about the election, and I don't have any reason -- I don't have any way of confirming whether he said exactly that or not.

I did talk to him this morning about one comment which I think was mischaracterized there, which was that there was some sort of embarrassment risk to the country, and that was simply something that someone else had said that he had noted, not something he said, himself.

Q Has the President commented at all on just the historic nature of the election going to the Supreme Court, something that's never happened before?

MR. SIEWERT: I haven't heard him specifically say that, but like any American, I mean, he's following this unique moment in our history very closely and he's had a chance to discuss it with a lot of the staff and some of his friends. But at the same time, he's been very careful publicly to avoid commenting on this. He understands that it's a matter that's before the highest court in the land and that they're the proper ones to determine how this is interpreted as a matter of federal law, as a matter of constitutional law. That's the proper role for the judiciary.

Q Congress is coming back next week. Are you doing any preparations to finish things up with them?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes. We've met internally a couple times this week -- actually, virtually every day this week, on the budget process and we're certainly hopeful that we can work together on the education initiative, particularly. There was an \$8 billion increase that we'd agreed to for education, for student loans, for elementary and secondary education, particularly for after-school care and other important initiatives.

We're hopeful that we can at the very least hammer out an agreement on that and on the other important appropriations bills. We have had some discussions, I believe, with various

congressional members. I expect we'll have some more before they actually return on Tuesday. And we hope that it's a productive session. It's an unusual session; Congress hasn't been back this late in a while -- for appropriations business, anyway -- and we hope that we can get some work done there. There's no reason why we can't use the week or two productively.

Q Does the fact that the election is still unresolved diminish the chances of quickly reaching agreement with Congress?

MR. SIEWERT: It shouldn't. I think, initially, there was some reluctance on the part of Congress to get back while this was all underway. But at the same time, time is short, and Congress has some work to do. The budget is long past overdue. They've taken a pretty extensive break now, in the wake of the election, and there's no reason why we can't get back to work and at the very least address some of the easier issues, ones where we had achieved compromise.

We recognize we may have to set aside some of the more difficult disputes we were having, and some of the thornier issues that were the subject of a lot of partisan rancor before the election. But, having said that, we think that -- particularly on education, on some of the other basic appropriations bills -- the work is relatively simple and could be wrapped up very quickly.

Q What is the President doing the rest of the day?

MR. SIEWERT: The rest of the day? That's a good question. He's here most of the afternoon. He has some phone and office time. He may be making some calls, and we'll let you know if any of them are significant. This evening I think he's attending a dinner with Mrs. Clinton, a private dinner that is held off campus. But I'll let you know the details of that when we have them.

Week ahead. Do I hear any dissenters? No?

Q Week ahead.

MR. SIEWERT: Next week. The President's weekly radio address will be broadcast live, tomorrow, Saturday, December 2nd. The President has no other public schedule for tomorrow. Expect him to be in the Washington area.

Q Subject for the radio address, are you saying at this point?

MR. SIEWERT: I think he'll take a chance to talk a bit about what he hopes Congress can achieve when they return, particularly on education. And I think we're having Secretary Riley brief those of you who are interested on the phone sometime later today. And check with our office on the details of that.

Paula, late arrival.

Q No, I've been here.

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

Q Have you written off, more or less, the Medicare give-backs and any comments at all of the tax cut --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I think we can work -- I think we need to focus on getting the budget done, simply because that work has to get done -- it's long overdue, it's been a couple months now, and we're well into the fiscal year. And as I've said before, we're starting to pay a price. I mean schools, students, people are trying to make decisions without knowing exactly what the budget they have to work with is. So we think that's one of the more critical pieces of it. Also teaching hospitals, research centers, people that rely on the NIH budget and other scientific research simply don't even know what their budget for the current fiscal year is. So we think that that's work that ought to get done quickly.

But on tax provisions, tax cuts, Medicare give-backs, we think there's no reason why we couldn't work those out -- they're relatively minor issues of dispute. We thought the tax package was a little too large, a little too weighted towards corporate special interests, and we'd like to see some tax relief that's directed more at working Americans. But we could work that out. There's no reason why we couldn't do it pretty quickly.

And the Medicare piece was also resolvable. We wanted to see more money in there for teaching hospitals, a little bit more of an emphasis on other health care providers and less of a focus on managed care. But, again, those are issues that we could work out. We're ready to do anything that's necessary to get them done quickly.

Q Sunday?

MR. SIEWERT: Sunday, 5:40 p.m. the President and First Lady will host a reception for the Kennedy Center Honors. They will make remarks, which will be covered by the in-house pool, I'm told. That includes the 2000 Kennedy Center Honorees -- that is the year 2000, I hope -- (laughter) -- members of the artist

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committee who nominate them, and the board of trustees of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The honorees this year -- is that a secret? I don't know, are the honorees a secret? I don't think so. Mikhail Baryshnikov, Chuck Berry, Placido Domingo, Clint Eastwood and Angela Lansbury. They'll then go to the gala at the Kennedy Center. That will be broadcast by CBS News, December 27th.

At 9:35 a.m. on Monday, the President will make remarks at an event at the National Geographic Museum. That will be open to the press. He has no other public schedule that day.

Tuesday, Wednesday, no public schedule. Thursday, no public schedule. I expect we'll actually be pretty busy Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, but we haven't set that up. But we've left that clear because Congress is in town and there's a lot of work to be done there and we're going to be keeping an eye on what's going on up on the Hill.

Q Isn't Nebraska Thursday?

MR. SIEWERT: Friday. And I think I went through the Nebraska schedule. We'll be going to both Kearney and Omaha, and return to Washington that evening. And then on Saturday, he will again do a weekly radio address, live. So, two in a row.

Q Is he going to do it live throughout -- until the end of the administration?

MR. SIEWERT: I expect around the holidays actually we'll be taping some of them.

Q Right. Monday's speech --

MR. CROWLEY: We have a trip briefing on Thursday morning.

MR. SIEWERT: Thursday morning, trip briefing. Mr. Berger and others, on Northern Ireland, and --

Q On Nebraska, right? (Laughter.)

Q I was asking, Monday's speech, so you have a -- National Geographic --

MR. SIEWERT: I think we'll actually try to keep that a secret until Monday, but you're welcome to guess.

Q What time is that, again?

MR. SIEWERT: Nine thirty-five a.m. at the National Geographic Museum. You can try to torture the answer out of Sarah. She knows what it is. So that's it.

Q Thank you.

MR. SIEWERT: Thank you. Have a good weekend.

END

1:47 P.M. EST

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For Immediate Release

December 4, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

12:12 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: Hello. We are ready for questions. Let's get it over with.

Q No announcements, Jake?

MR. SIEWERT: No announcements. There is a congressional meeting, which I think I spoke to most of you about this morning, that we were able to schedule over the weekend; and that will take place at 5:30 p.m. here today, no coverage planned. I expect it to be a working meeting that will focus on trying to get some of the unfinished business done that we have before us, as Congress returns to town today.

Q No pool spray at the top?

MR. SIEWERT: No.

Q Is that a reviewable or re-countable decision?

MR. SIEWERT: No.

Q Where is it taking place?

MR. SIEWERT: We want to spend -- we only have an hour or so, expect that meeting to happen in the Oval; and we wanted to use that time, the hour to focus on the work that remains to be done here, particularly education budget, which is in limbo and has affected the lives of a million Americans who are trying to make planning decisions about college, about hiring teachers for new school districts. We would like to get that work wrapped up.

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Obviously, we'll be discussing that with the bipartisan leadership that's scheduled to be down here at 5:30 p.m.

Q Since it's in the Oval, as opposed to the Cabinet Room, is it a small number of attendees who will be here?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes. Expect the Majority/Minority Leader of the Senate to be in, as well as the Speaker and the Minority Leader. I don't think anyone else is planning on being here, but I'll double check on that.

Q You didn't say the Majority Leader -- or maybe I didn't hear you. Lott will be here or not?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, the Majority and Minority Leader of the Senate, along with the Speaker and the Minority Leader of the House.

Q But not Dick Armey?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't believe so, but I'll double check on that.

Q Will you be discussing CRs and --

MR. SIEWERT: Obviously, I expect the CR to come up, because we have one that expires, I believe, tomorrow. But the main focus will be on how to get the budget work done, how to wrap up some of the unfinished business and how to move forward on an education budget that provides a significant increase for America's students and universities and colleges, as well as, obviously, a bill -- the bill that funds a lot of the research that goes on at universities, on health care and NIH.

Q Any reaction to the Supreme Court decision, just handed in?

MR. SIEWERT: No. I saw that news came out just before I walked out here. I expect that we'll leave the analysis of that to the Gore and Bush legal teams, who are well capable of doing that. Obviously, the Court said there were some ambiguities and referred the case back to the Supreme Court so that there would be some further discussions down in Florida.

Q Can I ask you a question on this coral reef announcement today?

MR. SIEWERT: Certainly.

Q Part of it says it prohibits oil, gas and mineral production. Is that exploration, as well, or is exploration involved in all this?

MR. SIEWERT: I can check on that specifically. I expect it would be hard to do production --

Q Just wanted to make sure why it would just say production.

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check. I don't know.

Q Jake, does the administration dispute Dick Cheney's assertion yesterday that we may be on the front edge of a recession?

MR. SIEWERT: We understand that Mr. Cheney has a lot of hands-on experience in big-time economic downturns -- (laughter) -- but I don't think that makes him qualified to assess the current state of our economy. This is not an issue that is subject to the usual kind of spin that we hear out of presidential campaigns. We have facts, and they're pretty clear.

The administration that Mr. Cheney was part of had an economic growth record of 1.7 percent annual GDP growth -- 1.7 percent. This administration has more than doubled that, and growth has averaged 4 percent throughout this administration. That's just a fact. This administration was left by the administration that Dick Cheney was a part of with a budget deficit of \$290 billion, and one that was headed higher. Interest costs were consuming more and more of the federal balance sheet, the federal dollar, the taxpayer dollar.

In this administration we've eliminated that deficit. We have record surpluses, the largest surpluses in history, and we're on a course to paying down the debt and lowering the portion of the federal budget that goes to the interest -- to interest payments. So that frees up money for all kinds of initiatives, leaving the new administration with a lot of flexibility about what decisions they make and how they can best allocate the resources that taxpayers send to Washington, leaving room, in fact, for a tax cut. And we've proposed one that we believe is a reasonable one.

But also, the facts are clear on a whole host of other fronts. Productivity under the Clinton administration consistently out-paced the productivity growth rate during the Reagan-Bush-Cheney years. And the unemployment rate when we took office was well over 7 percent. It's now 3.9 percent, in October

of 2000, and has really been on a path -- a much lower path throughout this administration.

And I would point out that of all the private sector economists that looked at this issue, people that are making big decisions for corporations, relying on the blue chip forecasts, not a single one, in their survey that was released November 10th, predicted anything less than 2.5 percent growth over the next year, and unemployment that was below 5 percent.

So those are the facts. That's what the private sector, the smart people, the smart money are saying about the future, and I don't think any spin coming out of that political campaign should be seen as much more than just spin. As I said, Mr. Cheney was part of the Whip Inflation Now team, and he was part of a Bush administration that had a pretty anemic growth record. But that doesn't mean that he's qualified to talk about the state of the economy today.

Q Ouch. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: So the short answer is, no. (Laughter.)

Q -- people worked on that answer for you? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: I did it all myself. You know, I used to work at the NEC, which is a creation of the Clinton administration we hope they keep around -- it seems to have played a valuable role.

Q Taking into account what the private economists said on November 10th, is there anything that the administration sees potentially troubling in some of the softer than expected holiday shopping in profit problems that major corporations are having, both in the e-commerce and some of the bricks and mortar types, and some of the polling data that suggests consumer confidence, for the first time in a good long while, is taking a slight dip down? Are there any troubling signs?

MR. SIEWERT: Consumer confidence is still at records that are extremely high. Over the last four quarters the economy has grown at over 5 percent, which is a substantially higher rate than has been typical over the past couple decades; and over the last two years, the economy has grown at about 4.7 percent; the blue chip, as I said, is projecting 2.5 percent growth in -- not a single one is projecting unemployment over 4.6 percent.

Those are all very strong numbers that any administration would be proud of. It may be best put by Bruce Steinberg, said yesterday, a Merrill Lynch economist said, the question is

whether the economy is going from great to merely good or maybe great to okay. That seems to be a fairly more succinct and credible explanation of the overall shape of the economy today than one put out by political folks.

Q So what is the President doing now? Is he keeping track of the unfolding legal developments --

MR. SIEWERT: He gets regular updates from his staff. I expect he's probably heard of the latest decision. But he's in phone and office time right now, and some meetings this afternoon.

Q What about commenting on the actual Supreme Court decision? Is there any concern that the President has that the more legal proceedings that this election requires, that time is running out -- December 12th gets closer -- and the Vice President's options might decline as the calendar goes ahead?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know if anything -- the Supreme Court said there was some ambiguity and they thought they should give the Florida Supreme Court a chance to make further rulings. So, obviously, the court wrangling will continue for a little while, and we are not in the best position to judge how to bring this all to a close or when to bring it all to a close. That's for others to sort out.

Q Is the President regularly speaking to the Vice President and Senator Lieberman about these developments? How often are they in contact?

MR. SIEWERT: I think he's talked to the Vice President -- I don't know about Senator Lieberman, but he's spoken to the Vice President about once a week since the election. So I don't know if you'd characterize that as regular, or not, but the last discussion I'm aware that they had was late last week when they met in the Oval Office. And I don't -- I'll check and see if they spoke over the weekend at all.

Q In Mexico, there is a new real opportunity for peace between -- the government and the Zapatistas. This administration was very concerned in the past about the peace talks and the process for the -- to the peace. Do you have any comments on that?

MR. SIEWERT: We regard that as an internal matter for Mexico to decide. But we welcome any efforts that are aimed at bringing about a peaceful negotiated solution to what's been a longstanding problem in Mexico.

Q Has the President talked to the new President of Mexico?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't believe he has. I know Secretary of State Albright was there, along with the President's Deputy Chief of Staff, and I know they had some good discussions and I expect at some point will follow up, but I don't know at what level.

MR. CROWLEY: The President-elect was here in October, but they haven't chatted since he took office.

Q Jake, is it still your expectation that Congress can wrap up its work in the next two weeks?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I don't know that we've set an exact time line. I know they've indicated they'd like to do this as quickly as possible. And if anything, the discussion this afternoon is aimed at trying to give them some idea of how we can move quickly to resolve some of the unfinished business, particularly the education budget. And we'll be giving them some idea of how we think we could best move forward to achieve some easy wins for both the Republican Congress and for the American people.

Q Jake, back on the economy for a second. Is it the White House position that a throttling back from, let's say, a great economy to a good or okay economy is just fine, and there's nothing else the administration would do --

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, no. And we're always striving for greatness here. But I think that was a private sector person who was just looking at the reality of what's happening in the economy today and providing a more measured view than you may hear from some political commentators and some of the pundits over the weekend. The reality is that the economy is in very strong shape.

A new administration, whoever heads up that administration, will have a great number of options that weren't available to this administration when it took office, because unemployment is very low, the budget is balanced, there is a much stronger picture, a much stronger economy to deal with. And as a result, a new administration will have lots of different options about how to proceed and how to keep the economy growing.

We obviously think that it's very important, and critical, to keep paying down the debt, because that frees up private sector capital for investment. And that's why we've put the

economy on a path to pay off the debt over the next 12 years. We think that's a critical piece of the puzzle. In the end though, there's very strong fundamentals in the economy, and the new administration will have a lot of chances to work with the strong economy and build on the success we've had.

Q On Chile, Jake, The President announced a start of a negotiation with -- next Wednesday, this Wednesday, this coming Wednesday. Brazil has reacted to the accord with Chile, rejecting the addition of Chile to Mercosur. Do you have any reaction to that?

MR. SIEWERT: I hadn't seen that. We obviously think that a bilateral negotiation between the United States and Chile could bring great benefits to both countries. Chile has an open economy, one that's one of the -- that has one of the strongest reform -- economic reform packages in South America. And we think that bilateral negotiations, if concluded, could bring a great deal of benefit, both to Chilean -- the Chilean people and to the American people.

Q Still Chile, this weekend was an action against General Pinochet. Do you have comments on that, or do you consider that's an internal matter of Chile?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check on that and get back to you.

Q Just to make sure I understand something. The ergonomics issue, now that rule is published, is that issue off the table completely, in terms of --

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I guess, in some sense, Congress has to make some decisions about that. We didn't think that the rule that -- the legislation that they put forward was wise, and we've moved forward, since the Congress ended, with a final rule. I'm not sure -- Congress could still legislate on that matter, it may be more difficult. But we think that the rule that's in place actually benefits businesses, benefits workers and we think it's a sensible rule, and ought to stay in place. That's our position.

Mr. Crowley has helpfully provided me with some guidance on Mr. Pinochet. This is a legal matter to be resolved within Chile. The Chilean justice system has made important advances in its treatment of cases of human rights abuses committed during the military government. Chile is addressing the Pinochet issue within its national context and in a manner that promotes justice and national reconciliation.

Q Can I go back to the ergonomics rule? So even though you think it's a sensible ruling and you like it -- obviously, you published it -- is it possible, still, would you still throw this into the mix if Congress comes up with some type of legislation --

MR. SIEWERT: We'll see what we have to say about that. I don't know what their appetite is for revisiting that rule. We'll have a discussion today and we'll see what they think is on the table.

Our position is pretty clear: we think the rule saves businesses money over the long run, it saves workers a great deal of personal pain. And so we think that rule is a sensible one and we'll wait and hear what the Republicans have to say about ergonomics before we make any decisions.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

12:28 P.M. EST

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Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 5, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

11:40 A.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: A couple of quick updates and then I'll take your questions. As you know, the President met with the members of the Republican and Democratic leadership of Congress yesterday, had a good meeting, lasted about an hour and a half in the Oval Office. The President went through a discussion of the major remaining issues: appropriations, immigration, taxes, Medicaid, Medicare. I think all sides are willing to discuss how we best move forward, how we can wrap up some of the unfinished business, and everyone pledged to use the next couple of days to discuss with their own team, their own side, how we can pull together agreements and get things wrapped up within the week.

We agreed to sign a continuing resolution that would keep the government agencies that have not yet received final funding functioning through midnight Thursday, and both sides are conferring with their caucuses today. John Podesta has been on the Hill to talk to the Democrats, and we will regroup shortly as early as tomorrow. No final decisions were made in that meeting, but it was a productive one and one that we're following up on even today.

On the trip Friday, I told you yesterday this would be the first of a series of speeches that the President will make, take an opportunity to talk about where America has been over the last eight years, the kinds of strategic decisions we made and where we'll go in the future.

The trip at the University of Nebraska at Kearney on Friday will specifically focus on foreign policy. And the President will address the role that America has played in the world over the last several years and the principles that have guided his administration's foreign policy path we should take in the

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future.

I expect that speech will be discussing how a foreign policy for the global age was shaped in this administration and how the kind of principles that guided that foreign policy can help shape future decisions that America will make about its role in the world.

He obviously, speaking from the heartland, the President will talk about the importance of America remaining engaged in the world and the importance that the decisions that we make here in the United States have throughout the world and beyond our borders.

Q Did he meet with Gore today?

MR. SIEWERT: No. The Vice President has been at his house this morning. He may come by this afternoon. I expect him to be here sometime this afternoon, but they don't have anything planned. As I said before, they occasionally drop in on each other, and that may happen. We'll let you know if it does.

Yesterday, the transition team met as well, on Monday for about 45 minutes in the Roosevelt Room. That meeting was chaired by Deputy Chief of Staff Maria Echaveste and attended by representatives from GSA, OPM, FBI, other agencies. The agencies were able to provide an update on the progress they've made preparing for the transition and those efforts are well underway and we are on track.

The group plans to meet again in two weeks. On background checks, specifically, the FBI continues to work with both teams to make sure they understand what kind of material they need to prepare and how they can move forward and process their application for background checks in a timely manner. We are working through Counsel's Office and expect memoranda of understanding to be signed with both teams shortly so that the FBI can begin receiving and processing applications by the end of this week for either transition team.

Q What do you mean "on track" in terms of transition? What has to be done?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we are preparing briefing materials for the new --

Q From all the agencies?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, from all the agencies around the government. We are also working with the FBI and the Department

of Justice to begin a parallel process of receiving and beginning the FBI background checks that enable people to get the security clearances they need to do their jobs.

Q Are names submitted?

MR. SIEWERT: No. We are working on finalizing a memorandum of understanding between each transition team and the Department of Justice, so that those can begin as early as this week, by the end of this week. And then finally, on disbursement of funds, we are limited in what we can do there, because of the GSA, in consultation with Justice, has concluded that the Presidential Transition Act does not allow us to proceed by giving funds to both camps. If Congress wants to explore changing that, that's certainly something that we're willing to do. In fact, the President has made clear that he thought that was a better course of action, but one that was prevented by the clear intent of the statute, and Congress has deliberations on that.

Q That would only be if someone conceded that that could be the --

MR. SIEWERT: We'd need to see some more clarity. The law of Congress was very clear when it passed that law that we couldn't disburse funds to just one campaign while the outcome of the election was in any way in doubt.

Q In what respect, Jake, is the election still in doubt from a White House point of view? What has to happen that hasn't happened?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't think it's really from our point of view, but I think that both sides have made it clear that they are going to be before the Florida Supreme Court, litigating a number of issues, and many people see that as an effort to resolve some of the issues that were left unresolved by the U.S. Supreme Court yesterday. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court sent that case back to the Florida Supreme Court, and asked them to reconsider what they had done. So, given that the highest court in the land has spoken on that, there obviously needs to be some more work done before the Florida Supreme Court. At the same time, there was a case yesterday decided, well-known to all of you, that is also -- seems to be on its way to the Florida Supreme Court. So, there's clearly another round of action at the Florida Supreme Court, and we will wait, like the rest of you, to hear the outcome of that.

Q Does the White House consider that the last round, the very last --

MR. SIEWERT: It's not really for us to decide. These are issues that are being litigated by both teams and they are making the decisions on this and making their case; we think that's appropriate.

Q The GSA is part of your administration. It does take its cues, at least, from the White House as it considers whether or not we have reached clarity on the new president.

MR. SIEWERT: It think they are governed by a statute that provides -- and they received a thorough look at that statute from the Department of Justice, from the office of legal counsel there, which makes pretty clear that at this point, they have no option but to -- not to disburse the taxpayer money.

At the same time, if Congress were willing to -- this could be relatively easily addressed -- I know there is a lot of concern in Congress about the statute, but it's a law that Congress passed. If they want to revisit that, we're willing to explore a way in which we could provide funds to both campaigns; but, unfortunately, the law that's on the books today doesn't allow that.

Q But do you need one side to do a formal concession? Do you need the electors to meet on the 18th? What is the formal --

MR. SIEWERT: We're not -- I'm not going to address all those hypotheticals here from this podium. I'm not in the best position to bring this to closure here. There is obviously litigation underway, and I don't think it's appropriate while this litigation is underway, something that the U.S. Supreme Court envisioned, for me to try to forejudge -- prejudice what the outcome of all that will be.

Q But is there anything in the statute which would guide that?

MR. SIEWERT: We've had a pretty extensive discussion of this statute here. It makes pretty clear from the floor debate that if there is any doubt about the outcome of the election, that the money is not to be disbursed.

Q Jake, any reaction to Chairman Greenspan's speech from the White House? He says, in periods of transition from unsustainable to more modest rates of growth, an economy is obviously at risk of untoward events. So he seems to be raising some concern that there may be a possibility that the slowdown will get out of hand.

MR. SIEWERT: I saw the Chairman also noted that we dealt

with some difficult periods in 1998 and the economy was able to withstand those; in fact, grew much faster in 1999 and 2000 than anyone expected.

So the economy -- what's important for us is that we keep our eye on the fundamentals; that's what we've done throughout this administration. That is why we made a strategic decision in 1993 to begin eliminating the deficit and to target and to targeted smart investments in education and training.

That's why we've remained committed throughout this administration to an open trading system that expands opportunities around the globe. And that's why it's important that any future decision-makers here keep in mind the importance of paying off the debt, getting our balance sheet in order and leaving the private sector capital free to invest and grow the economy.

Q What is the President's view on the courts' decisions yesterday, the two courts?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know; I didn't hear him express any particular view on that. I mean, he's obviously, as I've said, following this very closely and, like everyone else, twists and turns are fascinating. But I don't think that it's useful for us here to give the President's perspective on these court decisions.

Q Why not?

MR. SIEWERT: Because there are cases that are being litigated by the two campaigns. There are critical decisions that are being made by judges, and judges are the best ones to decide what the law means, not observers, however fascinated they might be.

Q Jake, on the budget, is the President now willing to accept less funding for his education initiative than he originally was with the agreement a month ago?

MR. SIEWERT: I think it's important that all sides show flexibility as we approach the final round of negotiations on this budget. We have indicated to the members of Congress that we're flexible about how to resolve this and we want to ensure that we can resolve the differences that remain in the shortest order possible. I don't want to get into dollars and cents here, but I think we indicated that we were flexible about how to move forward.

At the same time, this talk of putting off these decisions

for another three or four months and taking us halfway into the fiscal year without resolution of these issues amounts to a real cut in education, a real cut in student loans, a real cut in programs that help hire new teachers, a real cut in programs that universities and schools around the country are relying on.

And we don't think that that's an acceptable outcome. We think that will have a real-life impact on people who are trying to make decisions about where to send their kids to college and how much money to allocate for the schools. It also has impacts for people who are dealing with the heating crunch caused by cold weather. There's a significant increase in LIHEAP money in that budget. There is a significant increase in medical research in that budget. And we think that it's important to lock in some of those increases, but we're flexible about how exactly we do that.

Q Jake, you mentioned that -- Medicaid in your list of things that are on the agenda. Is it true that you've added this Kennedy-Grassley bill that would allow children with disabilities to keep their Medicaid if their parents went to work as part of the mix, on BBR?

MR. SIEWERT: We discussed a number of different options about how to move forward on the particular balanced budget bill, on the BBRA. And we're willing to discuss in more particular detail how we could work through some of the differences we had on that bill. Chris Jennings is ready to go to the Hill at a moment's notice, to discuss those. He had some technical discussions with people during the recess, and that's one of a number of options that we have looked at to helping make this easier to resolve.

Q But the administration does support that legislation, does it not?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, but I want to be careful about how we characterize what we see as being in final form. We floated a number of ideas yesterday, but we didn't make any final decisions, and we're looking to hear back from the bipartisan leadership about how we can best go forward from here. And, as I said, we want to maintain maximum flexibility, given that we have a short time frame in which to resolve these differences.

Q Are you going to get Hastert and Lott back up here tomorrow, is that what he's saying?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we'd indicated to them yesterday that we thought after they talked to their caucus, a lot of members were just filtering back into town over the last couple days, that it would be good to sit down again, as early as tomorrow, and figure

out where we go from here.

But there's important work to be done. There's no reason why we can't tackle some of that work and take it off -- take it off the books for the next administration, get some of that work locked in. And it's particularly important because we're in the third fiscal month of a year -- the third month of a new fiscal year, and a lot of these institutions that rely on government money, whether it's for low income energy assistance or for education, are in limbo now, because they don't know exactly what their bottom line is.

Q Did the President indicate to the leaders yesterday that despite the flexibility that you're talking about today, that he would not accept a long-term CR --

MR. SIEWERT: I think we clearly stated our overwhelming preference is to get this work done, and to focus on the unfinished business -- the work that could be done in relatively short order. And we didn't take anything off the table in terms of that work. We said that we'd be willing to work on taxes, on the tax cut package. We'd be willing to work on health care reimbursements. We'd be willing to work on the budget initiatives that remain left.

Q Did the leaders come with any proposals, or basically it was you that sketched out some ideas about --

MR. SIEWERT: I think the meeting was constructive all the way around, but they obviously need to consult with their caucuses before they decide how they want to proceed. But we made very clear that we want to resolve some of these differences quickly, and give everyone an opportunity to go home.

Q Jake, you said that the President was going to be giving a series of speeches, talk about where things have been over the last eight years. Is he going to do one on economics, and his economic policy?

MR. SIEWERT: Hard to imagine that we'd leave that topic undiscussed. I think particularly the speeches that the President gave at Davos and in Geneva were important in laying the groundwork for his vision of how we can proceed to make globalization work for American families, American businesses, and I expect he'll have some discussion of how to insure that the American economy benefits, as it has, continues to benefit from globalization and --

Q How many speeches, and where, and --

MR. SIEWERT: That's something we're still discussing.

Q -- any foreign travel beyond Ireland?

MR. SIEWERT: We haven't made any further decisions on foreign travel beyond Ireland. As you know, the President is still contemplating the importance and advisability of a trip to North Korea. That's something that will depend ultimately upon whether we think such a trip would be helpful in advancing some of the goals that we have to achieve working with the Koreans, both the South and the North Koreans. We have nothing further planned at this point, but he will give some more speeches. Relatively few major speeches, but we're still discussing exactly which topics and where. But the first one will be Friday.

Q Jake, should we view these speeches as an effort by the President to cast his legacy?

MR. SIEWERT: I think you should view them however you'd like to characterize them. What they are is they're an effort, as other presidents have done, to lay out what's been accomplished over the last eight years, and to look a bit in to the future and lay out the President's vision of the future challenges the country faces. But this is something, that as I pointed out, President Reagan did. He gave three or four major speeches. And presidents dating all the way back to Truman have given important speeches as they left.

Q What are these? Farewell addresses?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I think there's a farewell address that's a very distinct issue, which is typically given in January.

Q He will give one in January?

MR. SIEWERT: We haven't made a decision on that at all; but I know many of the Presidents have left by saying something.

Q Does he have to do a State of the Union at all?

MR. SIEWERT: That's another decision -- I think, technically, you have to at least deliver a State of the Union, it can be written or given in person. But that's not a decision that we've made at all. It's a long ways off.

Q It's not a long ways off. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, depending on how far January seems from today.

Q Does the White House have any reaction to the resignation of Ambassador J. Stapleton Roy?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll refer you to the State Department on that. I know that they've taken some measures to deal with security lapses there and they're giving the employees an opportunity to respond to the decisions they made. So I think that's best answered by the State Department. But, obviously, we support the efforts of Secretary Albright to deal with security lapses there. She said this is a serious problem and needs a high level of attention and she's certainly given it that.

Q Jake, has the President come close to a decision on whether he'll grant clemency or a stay or something in the Garza case?

MR. SIEWERT: We have a deadline of next week on that. The President takes that responsibility very seriously, but we don't make a habit of commenting on clemency petitions as they're being reviewed; but he promises to look at it very closely and make a judgment on the facts. But we won't comment on it until we have a final decision.

Q Is he reading all of those letters coming in from the coalition of famous people?

MR. SIEWERT: We usually take an opportunity to let him know about what views the public has expressed on any particular issue. But I think in the end, this is going to be determined based on his analysis of the facts and of the petition, and recommendations by his advisors.

Q Has he met or reached out in any way with any of those folks who were writing him about the Garza case?

MR. SIEWERT: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q Has he received any formal recommendation from Justice on this case yet?

MR. SIEWERT: Let me check and see where that is in the process. I know that we've gone -- we consult with the Justice Department as we move forward, and I'm not sure exactly whether it's in our court here now or on its way over.

Q Has the President spoken to President Fox of Mexico?

MR. SIEWERT: He has not; Secretary of State Albright was there and Maria Echaveste. He's gotten a report from their trip there. They had good discussions with the new President and, as

you know, he talked to him before the inauguration and we'll let you know if he has any personal contact with him again, shortly.

Q Jake, China has decided to abstain in the Security Council vote on the new sanctions that the United States and Russia would like to apply to Afghanistan, particularly to the Taliban. Could you react to that decision by the Chinese government and explain what the U.S. government hopes to achieve with these sanctions?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we expect that resolution will be introduced shortly and that we will press for its passage. This is an important piece of our strategy, to ensure that the Taliban complies with U.N. Resolution 1267, and we're going to keep pressing them to do that. As I told you last week, this is designed in part to ensure that the Taliban treat the citizens of Afghanistan better; in part to ensure that they close their terrorist camps; and in part to ensure that Osama bin Laden is brought to justice. But I don't have any specific comment on the decision of other Security Council members and how they voted.

Q Jake, back on the budget stuff. Are the President's proposals related to Hispanic immigration going to be subject to negotiation as well?

MR. SIEWERT: We indicated a willingness to negotiate across all fronts. We think it's very important to wrap up this budget work. And I'm not going to negotiate from this podium, but we indicated a general flexibility in our discussions yesterday with the leadership, and Maria Echaveste and others are ready to discuss how we can move forward on that issue, as other teams are ready to discuss taxes or Medicare or Medicaid and the other initiatives that are before the Congress.

Q And on the BBA give-backs, is the President willing to consider allocating a greater percentage of that money to HMOs than he had been previously?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, in any negotiation there's some give and take. We're not -- I'm not prejudging the outcome of those negotiations, but we said that we'd like to see some effort made to reimburse health care providers that are in difficult straits, and we will sit down and discuss how best we do that anytime soon. We didn't like the package that came before us earlier, but we're willing to figure out how best to make progress, and that's going to depend a lot on the overall mix on what gets done.

Q Do you have any details on this dinner the President is doing tonight for the Senate, and is this his first official

outing as a Senate spouse?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I mean, the dinner is held at the Supreme Court. I think there are about 250 members -- attendees at the dinner. I know that -- I expect it, yes, it probably is his first official event as the spouse of the Senator-elect, although he obviously had a chance last night to see some of the newly elected members of Congress, some of the new senators, and he was greeting them more in his capacity as President than as a spouse of a senator-elect. But that topic certainly came up.

Q -- Mrs. Clinton be the First Lady or the senator?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, I think she can be both. I don't see any reason why not. She served as host last night, and had a chance to also discuss with some of the new members of the Senate -- she was doing the receiving line -- the work they hope to do together there in an informal way.

Q How is he taking to his new role, Jake?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, as you know, he's very much looking forward to it. He said that on a number of occasions. He's looking forward to heading out into the private sector and earning a living and supporting, as he said, the new senator in the family.

Q Who is hosting this dinner tonight? Trent Lott?

MR. SIEWERT: Excuse me? I think Trent Lott speaks at the dinner. I don't know if he is the official host.

Q One who wants lightning to strike? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I don't know about that, but there is a dinner tonight -- I think it's traditional for the new members of the Senate at the Supreme Court. And the President is very much looking forward to being there. You know, he was also on the Capitol last Friday for dinner, but I think that was much more informal -- a dinner that was hosted by Senator Moynihan and his wife.

Q Jake, last evening at the party, did the President take the opportunity in his conversations with any Democratic members to lobby them to stay on the Gore side as his legal battle continues?

MR. SIEWERT: I didn't get a chance to hear all his conversations, but let me tell you, he spent several hours in

line with Mrs. Clinton, shaking hands with members of Congress and staff and members of the White House and the staff. And I don't think there was a lot of opportunity for private conversation there. It looked a little bit more like -- it was a group event and not conducive to those kinds of discussions. So he spent hours doing handshakes and chit-chatting with people, but I don't think it was anything that serious or momentous as that.

Q Is he going to spend hours shaking our hands and chit-chatting with us, too?

MR. SIEWERT: We'll see. Last year he was sick. We're hoping that he'll be healthy this year for the 10th. We don't want to -- go ahead.

Q There's speculation in some of the New York papers that the First Family intends to sell its residence in Chappaqua and moving to Manhattan.

MR. SIEWERT: Yes -- that's not true. That is not true at all. I've checked that out with the President. He loves the house in Chappaqua. They're still in the process of fixing it up and making it perfect. And as any homeowner knows, that's an endless process. So they have no plans to sell the place in Chappaqua.

Q Any news on their new residence in Washington?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I don't know anything about that. I'm sure that come January 20th, they'll probably need a place to stay here. But I haven't heard anything specific on that.

Q Can you tell us a little bit about the talks going on today on the Hill? Is Jack Lew over there or --

MR. SIEWERT: I'll have to check. I know that Jack was ready to go up and talk about appropriations. Gene and Larry were ready to talk about taxes. Chris was ready to talk about Medicare, health care related issues. And we had other people on stand-by if the need arose. But I don't know at this point who's up, who's not up, and frankly, everyone is going to meet with their caucuses and decide how best to move forward from there.

Q What's wrong with his Chappaqua house that it so badly needs fixing?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, no, there's nothing wrong with it. It didn't come with furniture, I don't believe, so --

Q Is the President aware that the support for Plan Colombia and the region is falling apart, and that some countries like Ecuador is requesting \$150 million to the U.S. trying to fight the trouble with the people who have been moving from Colombia to their territory because of narco-traffic fights and the civil war in Colombia?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we've always envisioned our counternarcotics plan down there to cover more than just Colombia itself, and we've always had a concerted effort working with Colombia's neighbors to ensure that there's as strong as possible network of countries in the region committed to countering the flow of narcotics. And there was money in, as you know, what's called Plan Colombia for some of the neighboring countries to continue to work with them on what we can do to stop the flow of drugs in the region.

And as you know, it's an inevitable consequence that if you have some success in one place stopping narcotics, that dealers and traffickers will look to other places in the area. But that's something that I think Director McCaffrey had a chance to discuss with some of his counterparts and some of our allies in the region, around the Fox inauguration, something we'll continue to work on.

Q But a country like Brazil and Venezuela, they say that \$190 million from Plan Colombia for that region is not enough. Is there any possibility the President will ask Congress for more money for that purpose?

MR. SIEWERT: I think we're very focused now on wrapping up some work that was not done this year. I'll check and see if there's any plans to submit any additional budget requests. But that seems like it would be something that would probably be more likely to come up in the next administration.

Q Jake, is it accurate that the senior staff is scared to broach the subject with the President of where he's going to go on Inauguration Day, after the new President is inaugurated?

MR. SIEWERT: It doesn't seem to me a very -- a bunch that's afraid to do anything. They've been through a lot, and they're pretty fearless.

Q Where's he going to go?

MR. SIEWERT: I actually don't know, but I'll check on that. It may be a decision that the family is making amongst themselves. But I'll let you know if I hear.

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THE PRESS: Thank you.

MR. SIEWERT: Thank you.

END

12:09 P.M. EST

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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 6, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

12:05 P.M.

MR. SIEWERT: I have no particular announcements, so I will take your questions.

Q Does the President see a purpose in the Vice President continuing his fight in the Florida courts, particularly if the Supreme Court in Florida ruled against him? Should the Vice President continue to wait for the results of the Seminole and Martin County cases?

MR. SIEWERT: I think the Vice President is capable of making those decisions on his own, with his team, and doesn't need much guidance from the President on this. The President has tried to stay out of this. He obviously has his opinions about it; he shared those with some people privately. But I think, as President, he's focused on doing his job and letting the Vice President and Governor Bush pursue their cases in court.

Q Is he taking any role at all in keeping Democratic support behind the Vice President?

MR. SIEWERT: No. I mean, this is a topic that comes up from time to time when he speaks with members of Congress. He was on the Hill last night, meeting with some of the new senators and some of the senators who have been there, so I'm sure it has come up from time to time. But he's not part of any organized effort by the Vice President's team. They have a perfectly capable team in place doing that.

Q What do you make of Congressman DeLay's comments on the budget, that the Congress should force the President to shut the government down?

MR. SIEWERT: I think that it's unfortunate; the work of the Congress could be wrapped up pretty quickly. We have important

work on education, as I've said the last couple days here. There are many people out in the real world who are trying to make decisions about their lives, many people who are expecting services from the government, who are being hit pretty hard right now because we're in a state of limbo. And it's not right to just say that we can kick this problem down the road three or four months when Congress is already a couple of months late in its work.

So right now, just yesterday, the Social Security Agency pointed out that its case work is being delayed because, essentially, their budget has been flat-lined by the continuing resolution, and that many agencies -- the National Institutes of Health, the Education Department -- need the increases that are built into the budget agreement that we worked out in the fall to continue their work.

So we think that Senator Lott has indicated an interest in getting this done, the Speaker has indicated an interest in getting this done, and that we ought to work together over the next couple of days to wrap this up pretty quickly.

Q Were you surprised by these comments in light of these discussions that you've been having?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I don't think he was a part of that discussion yesterday in the Oval Office. What we heard from the members of Congress that were in the meeting was a willingness to try to finish up this work to ensure that we can secure a strong education budget and to wrap up some of the work that Congress is a couple of months late in getting done.

Q There are rumors that things were going to be settled perhaps as early as Thursday night. Any possibility?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, there's no reason why the work couldn't be done in fairly short order. We're trying to arrange -- we've invited the leadership down later today, and we're waiting to hear back from them on scheduling. But I think that -- we think that we ought to be able to sit down again and get some of this work done.

There's also important work to do to help health care providers who have been hit hard by some of the cutbacks that were envisioned in the 1997 budget accord. There is also important tax work that can be done. And we've indicated a great deal of flexibility in addressing specific issues that were the subject of some partisan division before the election. We've said we're willing to negotiate and make this easy, but we need cooperation from all sides.

Q What do you think about the language that DeLay is

using? He's raising the prospect of a government shutdown and saying it would be the President's fault -- "If he wants to shut down the government, that's his problem, not ours."

MR. SIEWERT: That language is hardly unusual coming from that particular office, so I wouldn't find it at all surprising.

Q Is there any scenario, though, where you would see a possible government shutdown?

MR. SIEWERT: No. We think that there is work to be done and we are intent upon getting it done. And I might point out that there's a lot of talk about bipartisanship up on the Hill, in the wake of the election and the closeness of the House up there. And we think -- the President believes it's important that that spirit of bipartisanship pervade this new session that we're dealing with, this unusual lame duck session, and that we get some work done, especially when we have consensus on the major issues.

We have a consensus on the rough shape of an education package. We have consensus on a bill that would fund the Treasury and Postal Department. We have consensus around a U.N. funding arrangement in a bill that also funds the Commerce and Justice Department. And there's no reason why we couldn't put aside some of our differences -- and we've indicated that we'll be flexible as we confront those differences and get that budget work done and get it done in short order.

Q Does that mean the administration is willing to sign continuing resolutions all through December and into January?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we think that the two-day time frame looks about right and we'd be willing to consider another one.

Q And ones after that?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we'll continue to work with Congress. We don't know yet how long it will take them to wrap up their work. A lot of the membership that was down here, the leadership that was down here the other day indicated an interest in getting this done quickly. The Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Ted Stevens, said there is no reason why this couldn't be done very quickly. An influential Republican voice up there, the Majority Leader of the Senate also said he wanted to get this work done. And there's no reason for a lot of divisive rhetoric. We ought to focus on getting our work done.

Q One of the more influential voices in the country, though, Alan Greenspan, yesterday indicated that he foresees a

possible serious downturn in the economy, which would, of course, affect the next administration, more than likely. How is that playing? Is that playing in any of this at all?

MR. SIEWERT: We don't comment on the Fed's particular moves. I think what the Chairman said is that the economy is fundamentally strong and he is always on the lookout, as are we, for trouble spots. He said yesterday that the economy was in no -- that the dangers to the economy were actually more substantial in 1998, when we worked very closely with the Federal Reserve, with the Treasury Department, with the IMF and with the World Bank to head off what could have been a very serious financial crisis. That crisis was well-managed by this administration, well-managed by policy-makers at the Federal Reserve, and we were able to put the economy on a strong footing going into 1999 and 2000. And there's no reason why, if we're all vigilant, if we continue to pay down the debt and make the right economic policy decision-makings in the government, that the economy shouldn't continue to move along at what, in 1992, would have been considered a very strong pace.

As I pointed out here the other day, the economy has grown throughout the Clinton administration at a roughly 4 percent average, which is more than double that of the previous administration. So when we talk about moving from 4 percent down to 2.5 percent or 2 percent -- and most private economists expect the economy will continue to grow somewhere around 2.5 percent over the next year -- that's better than the economy that we inherited when we took office here.

Q Jake, I just want to clarify. You said that because of Congress' inactions some government agencies are suffering, and you specifically mentioned the Social Security Administration. But if you're willing to continue to sign continuing resolutions, you are part and parcel of that pain that's being inflicted. At what point does the administration say it's not going to sign any more CRSs?

MR. SIEWERT: There's no reason why we shouldn't do the work that we should have gotten done before the election and wrap up this work and sign some of these budgets into law, so that people know what they're working with, so that they know what their bottom line is, so that they know how they can operate. But it's very hard to operate over a sustained period of time in an era of uncertainty about what your budget is, what your fiscal outlook is for the year. I mean, you wouldn't go about trying to make decisions about your own family's finances if you didn't know what you were going to earn this year. And, yet, many government agencies are in precisely that position.

So it is not our preference to have a budget that is essentially flat-lined from last year that provides no certainty to government agencies; we would like to get this work done and pass the budget. Congress has to play a role there, and we expect them to get that work done and we're willing to work with them. And so, we don't want to take a route that would lead us toward more confrontation. We want to work with members of Congress who were in here just the other day to get that budget signed into law and get it done.

Q But you're still not answering the question. At what point do you stop signing CRs and say the work has to be done now, we're into the next year --

MR. SIEWERT: Aside from the comments that were raised here in the briefing, there's been a generally cooperative tone from the Majority Leader and the Speaker's Office, and we would like to work with them to get our work done. We're looking forward to hearing from them today -- hopefully, can meet this afternoon and wrap up some of this work.

But there's generally a willingness to work in the wake of the election and the closeness of the new Congress. I think members of Congress have indicated a willingness to confront some of these problems and get some of the unfinished business done so that they can have a fresh start next year. In fact, they used that very same language.

Q So you're not concerned by these comments? I mean, he runs the floor of the House, DeLay.

MR. SIEWERT: I don't think they're particularly surprising, given his track record here. But I think Congress has a choice. They can choose bipartisanship and a businesslike atmosphere that would allow us to get this work done. But I think that choice, the choice of confrontation, will just lead to more uncertainty, deterioration in government services, and some real cuts in programs -- real cuts in education, real cuts in the administration of Social Security, real cuts in the administration of the Justice Department. And there are consequences for that. The FBI estimates now that it has a number of vacancies, several hundred, and if they continue to operate at this year's budget levels, they're going to have to make further additional cuts or not be able to fill vacancies as they arise. And that's problematic.

Q So given your concerns like that, and you're talking about the need to get everything done, does the President regret vetoing the Treasury-Postal bill, which also set things back, or publishing the ergonomics rule, which helped scuttle the Labor-H

deal?

MR. SIEWERT: We've indicated a willingness on the ergonomics rule to talk to the leadership about a delay in enforcement of that. We signaled some flexibility on that. We think, by the way, that the ergonomics rule is critical to help worker safety. When it comes to some of these riders, we need to hear a little bit more clarity from Congress about what is it that they're concerned about, about this ergonomics rule, specifically. They've said they want to look at it and take a closer look at the impact it would have.

I saw in Business Week just last week -- there were a lot of business people asked about this rule -- they said that the rule, in fact, was working very effectively. Ford Motor Company said it was very much in line with what they're already doing. So we're willing to delay enforcement, give the new administration a chance to look at that; but we think that's valuable and important business.

Q There is some discussion on the Hill of trying to put through the bankruptcy reform bill in the lame duck session. Is that still something the President would veto?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes. We think that balanced bankruptcy reform is very important, that we ought to have new rules governing this, but that that bill is flawed. It creates a very high, really unlimited exemption for homesteads that would allow some of the wealthiest debtors to shield very valuable assets. So it lacks -- well, it squeezes middle and lower-income debtors very hard, and we want more balance in that. It also did not contain the work that Senator Schumer did to ensure that people who break the law, violent offenders who threaten abortion clinics are not exempt from this rule, as well. There are other problems with that bill, but we want to see a balanced bill.

Q Jake, anything new on the immigration between the White House and Congress?

MR. SIEWERT: Again, we've had some discussions. John Podesta and Maria Echaveste have been in contact with some of the key members on the Hill on that bill. We think, again, that we have signaled some flexibility. We know that time is short and that we're not going to get a perfect provision there, but we think it's important to make some progress so that we can begin to right some of the inequities of the current system.

Q Do you have a response to the Pope conviction?

MR. SIEWERT: We believe that the conviction was unjustified

and wrong. We have seen no evidence that Mr. Pope is guilty of the charges that were before that court. We think now the important thing is that there is strong humanitarian grounds for releasing Mr. Pope and allowing him to come home. His widow, today, indicated that there were new concerns about his health. He's very sick. His wife, I'm sorry. Sorry. His wife was there, and indicated fresh concerns about his health. And we think that he hasn't had proper medical care there and that it's important that the Russian government recognize, on humanitarian grounds, that he should be allowed to return to the United States and receive proper medical care and the attention he deserves.

Q What are you going to do about that, though, in response to --

MR. SIEWERT: We've raised this at a number of levels. As you know, the President spoke to Prime Minister Putin about this in -- President Putin in Brunei, and it has been raised at various levels since then, both by the Secretary of State and by our Ambassador in Moscow.

Q Jake, if there's no evidence that he's guilty of these charges, why are you pressing for his release on humanitarian grounds, as opposed to that he didn't do it?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we think there's a strong humanitarian case. We think that the Russian government should recognize that he needs medical care. He's sick, and should be returned home so that he can receive that care. We think that that's vitally important.

Q Would we be willing to do something in return?

MR. SIEWERT: We think that there's a strong case on the merits for the humanitarian relief that we've requested and that we've pressed for at various levels throughout the government.

Q Do you believe that this could dramatically or in some way alter U.S.-Russian relations, specifically as Congress views continued either financial or military cooperation with the Russian Federation?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, there's no doubt this has cast a shadow over U.S.-Russian relations. The President has expressed his concern about Mr. Pope. As we've said at a number of different levels, we've seen no evidence that he's guilty of the crimes under which he's been charged. We think that we've continued to stress throughout our meetings with the Russians and the Russian government that he ought to be released.

At the same time, our overall relationship with Russia is based on our own national interests, and we have a strong national interest in promoting democracy there, in seeing fewer nuclear weapons in Russia. And we will continue to pursue multifaceted relationship with Russia, based on what we think is in America's long-term strategic interests.

Q Secretary Cheney was up on the Hill yesterday, meeting with some Senate Republicans who have urged him to aggressively pursue overturning a number of executive orders the President has recently gone ahead and done. And they're calling it a midnight binge. Is the President trying to get some things through before he leaves office, as the Republicans claim?

MR. SIEWERT: We're working on a number of different regulations that would promote worker safety, that would protect the environment. It's no secret what those regulations are. The rule that would protect forests from new roads was something that we announced more than a year ago, and we've been working on that rule. There's been ample time for the public to weigh in, for interest groups to weigh in.

The rule on medical privacy is even a more stark example of how Congress actually delegated us the authority to act on this provision to protect medical privacy. They gave themselves three years to address that issue and they didn't do it. And they said, if we haven't done this in three years, then the administration ought to act. And so we're acting. We proposed an interim rule. We did that publicly; everyone can read where we are on this and comment on it. So that work is proceeding in the light of day and, I might point out, very differently than a lot of the same special interests that are urging him to overturn these rules, which are tucked in rider after rider in these legislative appropriations bills -- in the middle of the night, sometimes, no one has even read them before they vote on the bill -- that would undo these to help special interests on the Hill.

So we think that we're going to pursue our work, we're going to pursue it in the light of day. But it's important work. It's on pace with what another administration not too long ago did in its final year in office, the Bush administration in 1992. In fact, at this point, we've issued fewer regulations, major regulations, than the Bush administration did in 1992. But it's important work and we're going to continue it.

Q Jake, is there heightened concern here about avoiding a government shutdown, given that it would add to the uncertainty in the country that already exists because of Florida?

MR. SIEWERT: There's no need for this talk of a government

shutdown.

Q But there is --

MR. SIEWERT: There's no need for it. And there's no need for us to address that. The work can be done. The Majority Leader, the Speaker have indicated an interest in getting this work done, and so we ought to avoid the divisive rhetoric and get to work.

Q But what I'm wondering is, doesn't it make it tougher for you to veto these CRs, because if there is a shutdown, there's already uncertainty that exists in the country because of Florida, makes it tough for you to veto the CRs?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't see whether that should play any role. We allowed Congress to take a couple weeks off to do -- while the election, post-election played out. But we think that there's a willingness on the part of Congress to work, and we see no reason not to get that work done now.

Q Jake, any indication that the President will meet with the Vice President today? And did they meet yesterday?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't believe they talked yesterday, but I can double-check on that. And there's nothing planned for today. The President actually has a pretty busy afternoon in the office.

Q Jake, will there be coverage at the top of the meeting with congressional leaders?

MR. SIEWERT: We're still trying to firm up that meeting, but I don't expect so. I expect it will be a working meeting.

Q What time --

MR. SIEWERT: At 4:45 p.m. is when we're looking at, but I don't think it has been locked down. Most of the members can make it at that time, but it's not clear that everyone can.

Q Same group as last time?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we've invited the Speaker and the Majority Leader down, and the Minority Leader of the House and Minority Leader of the Senator -- or the Majority/Minority Leader of the Senate or -- the leaders of the Senate.

Q Any word on whether they'll come to the stakeout after?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I haven't heard one way or the other.

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Q Jake, did you nail down whether the Justice Department has sent over its recommendation in the Juan Garza matter?

MR. SIEWERT: They have not yet, but we are continuing to consult with them on that matter. There has been some discussion back and forth. As I told some of you yesterday, this is work that the President takes very seriously. He has indicated in the past some concern about the geographic disparities in the administration of the federal death penalty. But on the whole, as a supporter of capital punishment, he believes he has a special obligation to ensure that it's administered fairly and effectively in the federal system. We're going to look at that individual case and, at the same time, we've asked the Department of Justice to take a broader look at some of the geographic disparities and what could be done to remedy that.

Q Jake, yesterday the Vice President voiced at least tacit support for these cases that are going on in Florida court right now -- Seminole and Martin Counties. Does the President see that as inconsistent with the Vice President's longstanding philosophy of counting every vote in Florida?

MR. SIEWERT: I haven't heard him express a view on that specific comment. The Vice President just made a passing comment yesterday afternoon; I haven't heard the President talk about that, at all.

All right, thank you.

END

12:25 P.M. EST

#23-12/06

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

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PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

2:42 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: I'm told that while Sandy's briefing -- since Sandy's briefing began, the last CR expired. (Laughter.)

On other humorous notes, it was pointed out in our staff meeting today that, yesterday, the Senate passed a bill that should be coming to the President by unanimous consent which provides chimpanzees with new rights -- some sort of patients' -- chimpanzees' bill of rights.

Q For the retired chimpanzees?

MR. SIEWERT: Retired chimpanzees -- so, interesting that Congress could do that and not find time to work on the patients' bill of rights that would have provided some of those same protections for Americans. But then again, it's been an unusual year all the way around. But the President is looking forward to signing that bill into law, and Elliot made me promise that I would say that it was a laudable public policy to protect chimpanzees when they retire.

Having done that, I am free to answer your questions.

Q Is there a budget update?

MR. SIEWERT: They're still meeting. I just checked. It's been going on for close to an hour. And we are focused on trying to get some little good out of -- something, some little good out of this session, particularly on education. We think that it's critical that we move into the next year with a strong education budget.

Many school districts are trying to make budget decisions. Students are trying to make decisions about college and about how

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they're going to pay for their education and they need some clarity about what we're going to provide. We had an agreement earlier this year that provided a substantial increase in the education budget.

We understand that Congress may want to cut that back a little bit. We are serious about trying to ensure that we have a substantial increase in education funding because we think it's warranted and necessary.

Q How much of a cut-back on that education funding would you be --

MR. SIEWERT: Well, they are still discussing the entire array of budget issues in the Oval Office now. I'm not going to prejudge the outcome of those discussions, or conduct negotiations on a parallel process here.

Q Does it cost them?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. We have heard various reports about what Republicans were prepared to offer, but the actual negotiation in the room is still ongoing. But we think -- obviously Tom DeLay said the other day that he was prepared to flat-line education spending this year, which amounts to a real cut. That's just not an acceptable solution. Cutting education is not the way this Congress will get off to a fresh start.

Q How does the President feel about the demise of the tax package until the next president?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we think that there is still some room for a tax cut this year. There is some legislation that had very broad bipartisan support; pieces of that tax package, including the pension piece that we had worked with Congress on, and also the piece that would help New Markets and community development, that was the outgrowth of work we did with Speaker Hastert and some of his staff, and with some Republican senators in the Senate.

So, the President will make the point today, is making the point in the Oval Office, that tax relief of some sort should never be ruled out, particularly when there is broad bipartisan consensus around it. I know the House had very much wanted to move forward on a tax cut package. And the President will make the point that there may be a piece or two, particularly the pension reform and pension savings that were envisioned by Portman-Cardin and also the New Markets piece. On the minimum wage, it's unfortunate that Congress found time to raise its own pay, and didn't make an effort, has not made an effort to take that piece of the bill and pass that separately. We think that is well worth doing.

Q Is there still some help for that?

MR. SIEWERT: Minimum wage? We think there's no reason. It's not complicated legislation. It can literally be written on a page or two. And there's no reason why we couldn't pass that bill as we continue the work that's going on there. But that's something the President will make in the meeting there. Ultimately, Congress will have to make a decision about how they want to end the -- end this year and start the new one. Do they want to end this year by cutting education and not raising the minimum wage, at a time that they've found time to raise their own pay, or do they want to go home with some achievements under their belt?

Q Did they bring a deal down here Jake?

MR. SIEWERT: You'll have to ask them. My understanding was they were coming down with a set of ideas about how to build on some of the ideas the President had raised with them in the meeting earlier this week.

We had talked on Monday about some flexibility in terms of some of the more controversial riders on immigration, on ergonomics, about finding some way to resolve some of those differences, and we were willing even to talk about funding levels, about decreasing -- cutting back a little bit on some of the agreements that have been made earlier in the year. But you'll have to ask them specifically what they put on the table.

Q Any plans for a stakeout after the meeting?

MR. SIEWERT: That's up to the members. We were uncertain when they went into the meeting how they felt, and we hope it's a cooperative meeting. The reality is that the people in the Oval Office, the Speaker and the Senate Majority Leader, did indicate to us -- an interest to us on Monday in working together, and trying to resolve these differences. And I think there are a lot of members on the Hill, on both sides of the isle, who would like to get some work done, and allow the next administration and the next Congress to get off to a fresh start next year. And I think the people in that room have indicated an interest in trying to wrap up this work and get the budget done and not kick these problems down the road.

Q What's the longest CR that you would sign? Would you sign a week-long CR?

MR. SIEWERT: We've thought that the shorter-term Crs, one and two days, tend to focus the mind and get -- produce a little bit more work, a little bit more energy on the Hill, so that's what we've tended to state a preference for. I'm sure that's the

preference that's being stated in the Oval Office today.

Frankly, these week-long Crs have usually led to five-day weekends, and so there hasn't been as much of an impetus towards getting the work done, but that's something I'm not going to prejudge.

If there is a cooperative sense that we can wrap up some of these problems and begin to finish up the education budget, finish up the appropriations bill, then there's obviously -- we can be a little more flexible on this.

Q Democratic leaders in there as well?

Q Joe, it looks like the Senate is going to pass the bankruptcy reform bill this afternoon. Do you have any indication whether there would be changes to make it acceptable to the White House?

MR. SIEWERT: We haven't -- we believe that bill is still deeply flawed and the President has no choice but to veto it. It includes some special interest provisions that we had objected to a long time ago, and it fundamentally lacks the balance that's necessary in a bill that would reform the system.

We think that there is a lot -- it's unfortunate, because there is a lot of good work done on a bill, but in the end this bill includes these vast homestead exemptions, allows vast homestead exemptions that create very wide room for the most well off to hide their assets, and then punishes people in the lower end of the income scale who are caught up in some sort of credit trap.

Q Are Daschle and Gephardt in there as well?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, they are.

Q Jake, in The Rolling Stone interview, the President found fault of two elements of the criminal justice system in this country -- one dealing with marijuana and one dealing with the disparity and punishment of crack cocaine and powder cocaine. My question is, did he just come upon these particular opinions? And if not, why didn't he do more during his presidency to change the way the American criminal justice system deals with these two issues?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think his overall point was that we need to look at ways to treat particularly nonviolent drug offenders. There are a lot of them in prison, oftentimes getting very little treatment, and oftentimes getting very little help as they exit prison and reenter the work force.

And I think that that's something that we tried to work with Congress on, and there is some funding for drug courts and drug treatment in the 1994 Crime Bill that was passed, and some of that work has actually proved very fruitful.

On the disparity issue, that is something that the President's mentioned from time to time before, but as he indicated, Congress was not willing to go along with the more substantive changes that some had envisioned.

We had -- there is an honest debate about that disparity. Some people say that, as the President said, that people using hard cocaine, crack cocaine are more likely to be violent. So we have an honest disagreement with that, but that's something that the President's noted before.

Q Jake, earlier, Mr. Berger said that Osama bin Laden will be tried in a U.S. court. I'm asking you --

MR. CROWLEY: He said he was indicted.

Q Right. But there will be a trial. Now, the trial means without him or do they have plans to bring him here, or --

MR. SIEWERT: That's not the way our justice system works. But we've said for some time that we are working with countries in the region to bring Osama bin Laden to justice.

Q Do you have any guidance on when we're going to get a Garza announcement?

MR. SIEWERT: It's very possible that we will wrap that work up on that before Tuesday and I'll let you know. The Justice Department has been working on a recommendation, should get that here at the White House today, I would expect.

I don't think we'll discuss that. We typically don't discuss the recommendation that's forwarded by the Justice Department in any detail. But at the same time, I can say that the President has conferred with his advisors on this. He's met with Mr. Podesta, his Chief of Staff, he's spoken with his counsel, Beth Nolan, and he's spoken to the Attorney General about this.

So, he is well aware of the parameters of the case. He's spoken publicly about some of his concerns about racial and geographic disparities. And as I said yesterday, he thinks he has a special obligation as a supporter of the death penalty to ensure that it's administered fairly. But he's spent some time thinking about this, thinking about the issues that were raised in the clemency petition, thinking about the broader issue of geographic

and racial disparities. And so he may -- his thinking is pretty far along on this. We're awaiting the final recommendation, and we'll let you know when we have something to say on that.

Q Not as early as tomorrow, you wouldn't think?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not going to try to predict the time line right here, but as I expect -- I say that we'll get that recommendation probably today from the Justice Department. That was my understanding this morning. And we'll certainly let you know when we get it. But I'm not going to discuss the actual recommendation; we don't typically do that. But the President has spent some time thinking about this, and may confer with his advisors shortly after receiving their recommendation.

Q Jake, what did the President plan to say today on Medicare give-backs?

MR. SIEWERT: We still -- again, we think that there's ample room to work on this legislation, and that we ought to wrap the work up pretty quickly. There should be some way to increase coverage for the most vulnerable citizens in the context of doing something for the health care providers, and we're willing to be flexible about how we do that. But we thought that there would be some way to work within the context of the discussion here to increase coverage for people who were at the lowest end of the income spectrum.

Q Based on conversations so far, is the President optimistic this will be wrapped up before he leaves for Ireland?

MR. SIEWERT: On the budget? We would have no way of knowing. I mean, the work is not substantial. There are relatively narrow differences. There is a broad commitment by the leadership to finish the work up. But there are obviously some elements in Congress that would rather drag this thing out and maybe slow down the progress that we've made.

Q Jake, on gays in the military, when did the President decide that don't ask don't tell was a dumb ass thing to do?

MR. SIEWERT: Actually -- did Sandy take a question on this? No, okay. We're having -- well, it's my privilege then. I was in that interview, and I actually read the transcript again. And that phrase, which I won't repeat here, doesn't appear in our transcript, which we released to you I think this morning. And it doesn't appear -- I don't remember him uttering that word, per se. But we'll check -- we don't have a tape of it, honestly. The tape was taped over. But I am told --

Q Oh. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: -- scandal. But I am told by the stenographers

--

Q That was a dumb ass thing -- (laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: There you go.

Q -- dumb ass did that?

MR. SIEWERT: This is a lot of -- (laughter) -- we're going to have to edit this transcript. But I checked with our talented stenographers, who think that the phrase, "don't ask" may have been misunderstood as that phrase. (Laughter.)

Q That was a "don't ask" thing to do?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm willing to consider more evidence in this and decide what the -- reassess. But I don't remember hearing it, it's not in our transcript, and I have no reason to think that the stenographers would have made a mistake of such monstrous proportions.

Q Back to the substance, though, when did he --

MR. SIEWERT: I'm sorry, I got a little carried away in the lexicon. I think the President expressed -- was just speaking very honestly about what he felt was a very unfortunate situation at the beginning of his term over an issue that no one had really had a lot time to think about and reflect upon and sort through; a very difficult issue, one that he thought needed some time to gel and some time to really be thought over. It kind of got rushed through the public process machine here in Washington.

I think he says he never meant to bring this up so early in his term and his hand was forced by people in Congress who wanted to do it. And as a result, he got a policy that he think is far from perfect. I think he's said that before.

He appreciates the efforts that Secretary Cohen has made to do a better job creating a more conducive atmosphere for enforcing the policy. There have been some abuses of that. Secretary Cohen has taken very seriously how to ensure that there aren't unintended consequences from a policy that is well intentioned but flawed in some of its details.

Q Is your position on the education package, just to be clear, all or nothing?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, no. In fact, the President said on Monday he was willing to negotiate. He was willing to be flexible about how we did this funding and the exact levels. But I don't think that a flat-lining education -- which amounts to a real cut when you factor in inflation is the right way to go.

There are just too many universities, too many students, too many schools, too many institutions, from the NIH to universities all across the country, that are relying on some sort of increase for education.

So, I'm not going to figure out exactly here, while there is a discussion in the Oval Office, what the exact funding levels would be. But I don't think cutting education is the way to get off to fresh start in this new Congress.

Q On Medicare give-backs, are you saying that as long as there is some way to find room for funding for vulnerable populations that you wouldn't object to the amount that's in there for HMOs?

MR. SIEWERT: I think it's a lot more detailed negotiation that's going on, on that. Chris Jennings has been discussing this on a technical level with a lot folks on the Hill. But I don't want to -- I'm just trying to give a general sense that as we're increasing payments to some of the larger health organizations that we ought to do a little bit of something to help the people most vulnerable, the people that lack coverage today.

Q Is that a shift? Because before you used to say -- emphasize how there was just too much, just way too much in there.

MR. SIEWERT: No, no, we never thought that the actual level of funding in the Balanced Budget Reimbursement Act itself was a problem. What we felt was that it was disproportionately allocated to managed care providers. And at particularly a time when Congress was failing to move forward on ways to make managed care outfits more responsible and more responsive to the needs of the populations they serve.

At a time when Congress wasn't moving forward on a patients' bill of rights and was essentially giving the managed care industry a free ride, it seems odd to reward them and not take care of teaching hospitals, not take care of some of the more vulnerable populations. So, still hashing out a lot of those details now. But we're flexible about getting that done. We understand a lot of members want to see something wrapped up this year.

Q Is the Kennedy-Grassley proposal on disability, is that one of the essential elements of BBRA?

MR. SIEWERT: That's something that's on the table and I don't want to try to sort out those negotiations here. But that's something that has been raised and has bipartisan support. Something we think is valuable.

Q What does the President hope to accomplish in this trip to Nebraska tomorrow, other than just setting foot in the last of 50 states?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, he's giving an important speech there on an important topic. Sandy talked a little bit about it, I assume. But he wants to not only complete the cycle and finish -- not finish up his domestic travel, but touch base in the 50th state, but to use the opportunity to speak in the heartland about a topic that is near and dear to his heart, which is America's engagement in the world and the importance of engaging beyond our borders.

And particularly in the last six or seven years, I think there is a renewed sense in the agricultural community and in the manufacturing community, the importance of expanding trade and looking beyond our borders. I mean, some of the strongest support we had for the IMF package, which was very controversial, actually came from farmers and people in the Midwest.

But he is also looking forward just to seeing another state and being there. I think Nebraskans need not fear that being 50th will mean they go unnoticed. In fact, I dare you -- is Knoller in the room? No -- I dare you to name the 49th state the President visited. I don't think --

Q Mississippi?

MR. SIEWERT: That's right. (Laughter.) You studied, obviously, on this. But I don't think there's any doubt that being 50th doesn't mean that you're last in public notice.

Q Have you assigned the dates and venues for the other exit speeches the President is going to make?

MR. SIEWERT: I think one of those speeches will be in England, when we're there, the speech on globalization. I don't know if Sandy talked to any length about that.

Okay. And then the other ones we are still looking at. We'll probably do something that harkens back to the themes that the President laid out in his New Covenant speeches in 1991, which were given at Georgetown. But we haven't set a location for those. But I think the President very much wants to harken back to the discussion he had in '91 with the American people about the new direction he wanted to take the country in, in a series of speeches

he delivered at Georgetown that fall.

Q Jake, the First Lady was on the Hill the other day and she got a warm welcome. Now, she's already famous there, as a Senator. What role do you think she will play at the foreign policy, and how different she will be as a Senator?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, I don't know. I mean, she's been deeply engaged in her Vital Voices project, and has traveled a great deal around the world, particularly engaged in issues about empowering women and providing younger women with educational opportunity. But I don't know. I mean, that's really for her to decide, her to address.

Q Has the White House invited Senator Kerrey to join the President on his Nebraska journey?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check, I believe so. He'll be there, right?

Q He'll be there?

MR. SIEWERT: I think we invited the entire congressional delegation to join us at one point or another. So I assume we invited Senator Kerrey and Senator Hagel.

Q I'm working for French television. People outside the United States don't -- almost don't know what's happening in this country at this moment and the image of democracy you're giving. How does the President feel about that?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think the President thinks that there's an orderly process under way. It may not always seem that way to the outside world, but we have a Constitutional process. We have legal processes that are under way, and the work of the United States is ongoing.

The President is still President until January. He's very focused on his business and on ensuring that the American ship of state is steered correctly through these somewhat uncharted waters. But we are still hard at work. We have until January 20th to sort this out, and no one, I think -- Major looks shocked.

I don't think anyone expects that it will take quite that long, but I think that the President told the rest of the -- would like to tell the rest of the world what he's told Americans, that they ought to relax, take a deep breath, let the process play itself out, and let's make sure we get a full accounting of what's going on down in Florida. And we'll await the decision of the courts here.

11

THE PRESS: Thank you.

MR. SIEWERT: Thank you.

END

3:02 P.M. EST

12/07-#24

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 18, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING
BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

1:20 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: Two quick -- I don't know about announcements, but I was asked by a number of you whether, and which meetings were happening today regarding transition. At 10:00 a.m. this morning, Mark Lindsay and Maria Echaveste, the head of administration and the deputy chief of staff, who is charged with coordinating transition matters here, met with their counterparts from the President-elect's team here at the White House. At 11:00 a.m. this morning we held a transition council meeting, that's an internal group that was created by executive order to review the status of our preparations for the transition.

At the same time, the First Lady, as you saw, met with Laura Bush. And this afternoon, Sandy Berger will be meeting with Condi Rice, who President-elect Bush has designated as his National Security Advisor.

That is the sum total of the meetings that are expected today. As you know, the President has invited President-elect Bush tomorrow to come by; we expect him here around mid-day. They'll be meeting one-on-one, probably in the Oval Office, and then again in the --

Q What is mid-day?

MR. SIEWERT: Eleven-thirty, I think he's expected to arrive. He'll probably be here for about an hour and a half.

Q Is that going to be a lunch?

MR. SIEWERT: I think they will have a short meeting in the Oval Office, maybe with their chiefs of staff. And then after

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that, they'll have lunch in the Residence. And we are working to make some part of that trip available to the press, open to the press, so that you can --

Q What is the meeting all about? Is the President going to tell them all the secret documents he's signed and directives and future --

MR. SIEWERT: Well, if they were secret, I certainly wouldn't be discussing them here. But the President will -- he'll run through, obviously, what he has learned in the last eight years; but, more importantly, what challenges face the new administration, particularly around the world.

I expect the primary focus of that meeting to be on national security matters and the importance of some of the outstanding challenges that we're looking at and working on today.

There will obviously be discussion about how we can best facilitate the transition and make sure that they have all the tools they need to complete that transition in as most effective way possible. John Podesta will meet separately, with his counterpart, Andy Card, to run through the status of those preparations, what we can do to help.

Q Is he going to ask the President-elect's permission to go to Korea?

MR. SIEWERT: No, certainly not. We will make an assessment on whether or not to travel to North Korea before the holiday, sometime before the Christmas holiday. The President will make that decision based on the national interests and his assessment of the usefulness of such a trip.

We have been consulting with --

Q This week -- it's got to be this week, right?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, this week, probably -- before next Monday. And I think the President will make that assessment based on -- make that decision based on his own assessment of whether a trip will be useful in advancing America's national interests.

We're consulting and have been consulting with the President-elect's team on this and those consultations will continue. I would be surprised if it didn't come up this afternoon, when Sandy Berger meets with his counterpart. I imagine the President will discuss this tomorrow. But our decision will be made based on our own assessment of America's

national interests.

Q Jake, one of the key campaign promises that George Bush ran on during his campaign was his pledge to restore honor and dignity to the Oval Office. Do you think the President will be asking what he meant by that?

MR. SIEWERT: I doubt it. I don't think that would come up. He'll probably ask them whether -- plan to bring that up, but I expect this to be a cordial meeting that will be focused on national security and focused on the importance of an effective transition. I think everyone has been getting along, cooperating well to date, and I expect that will continue.

Q And there will be coverage of this --

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we've suggested and have recommended, I think, waiting to hear back finally, but I think that the idea is to have this meeting -- at least the Oval Office meeting available to the pool, so that we have some sort of opportunity -- you have some sort of opportunity to see them.

Q -- sign the papers yet, with the transition team, so that you can --

MR. SIEWERT: There are two separate memorandums of understanding. One has been signed, that is the memorandum between the President-elect's team and the Attorney General, which enables the background checks to go forward. The other one should be signed today, which is one that governs a broader array of issues. That should be signed this afternoon sometime, by Chief of Staff John Podesta and Andy Card, his counterpart.

Q And that means he can start -- they can start getting --

MR. SIEWERT: That establishes contact points between the agencies and the transition team, so that that work can go forward.

Q Is the President buying a new house?

MR. SIEWERT: He is interested in buying a new house --

Q In Washington?

MR. SIEWERT: -- and they have been looking at some places in the area.

Q Four million dollars?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I don't have any particular news for you on that. But I think that the President -- Mrs. Clinton obviously needs a place to hang her hat here in Washington, and we will be letting you know as that search for a house develops.

Q They're going to focus on a house to buy or rent?

MR. SIEWERT: I actually don't know whether there's one particular place that -- I saw the story, too. I don't know if there's one particular place that has emerged as the front runner yet, but I'll let you know when I know more.

Q But there's no deal yet?

MR. SIEWERT: As far as I know, there has not been a deal. But, obviously, this could move along pretty quickly. I'll let you know if there are any new developments.

Q Along the same line, Powell the other day, he said that the national missile defense would be an important priority of theirs. Does that change any of the calculations or any decision making for this White House, preparing for that White House to go forward with the NMD?

MR. SIEWERT: I think the President has spoken to that. He's essentially addressed the issue this past fall, in the speech he gave at Georgetown. And I don't expect that we'll have anything new to say on that before we -- before the end of the term. Although, obviously, the President and his team have been in consultations with the South Koreans and North Koreans about how best we proceed on the offer that the North Koreans have put on the table. Whether that plays into or doesn't play into the debate about NMD is something that the next administration will have to judge.

Q But at this point, there's no decisions on President Clinton's table for the next few weeks that would in any affect Bush's decision to go forward with NMD?

MR. SIEWERT: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q Jake, Powell also said that a review of troop performance in the Balkans would be part of an overall global review. Would the President be expected tomorrow to make the case to the President-elect on the need to retain U.S. troops in the Balkans?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we believe that -- it's no secret, we believe that the U.S. presence in Kosovo and in Bosnia is critical to ensuring a more stable transition back to -- to both

those countries; and that U.S. troops have been critical in helping keep the peace there and keeping the temperature low.

That mission is one that President Clinton believes is absolutely critical, but we recognize that a future administration will make their own decisions about that. But it's something, obviously, the President thinks has been helpful in restoring some stability to southeastern Europe and it's one that he believes has been important. American troops have done a terrific job there in helping maintain some stability and bringing some peace to a country that has been torn about.

Q Well, is he concerned?

Q The house thing again. The Washington Times is reporting today that the Clintons are putting up their Chappaqua home for sale. Is that true?

MR. SIEWERT: That is not true; not true. I've addressed that a couple of different times, I don't have anything new to say, other than that they plan to keep the house. They're still redecorating it, and as I've said before, that is an ongoing process, not one that many people undertake before they sell.

Q Jake, on the Middle East, is there any serious belief the parties would reach any agreement with such transition, both here and in Israel?

MR. SIEWERT: Excuse me?

Q On the Middle East, is there --

MR. SIEWERT: On the mid-East, we have discussions this week in Washington underway. The United States will be hosting discussions, talking to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. I believe they're due in tomorrow sometime for those talks, and Dennis Ross will be working with both Mr. Erekat and Mr. Ben Ami on how we take the next steps forward to help ensure more peaceful state of play on the ground and how we can move closer to some sort of agreement.

Q Well, what incentive is there for them to reach any sort of peace accord, with this administration leaving and the Israelis --

MR. SIEWERT: That's up to them. That's a question that's best addressed by the Palestinians and the Israelis. We're working with a time table that they've set; we can only move forward if there's consensus between those two parties. But if they are willing to move forward, if they think it's useful to

move forward, we are ready to help. The President said that in the Oval Office today.

Q Is the President leaving town tonight and coming back early in the morning, is that it?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes. He is leaving to New York this afternoon. He has a dinner at Ambassador Holbrooke's residence there, in honor of Mrs. Clinton. And he'll be back pretty early tomorrow morning, around 10:30 a.m. or so.

Q And Christmas will be here?

MR. SIEWERT: I expect that they will be in Washington for Christmas. We'll let you know more about the details of their holiday plans when we get a little bit closer to the end of the week.

Q Jake, Nawaz Sharif is free man in Saudi Arabia. If and what role President may have played for his release and also, U.K. have opened the door for him to come there -- if the U.S. doors are open for him to come to the United States?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, the President obviously pressed General Musharraf when we were in Pakistan about the importance of doing something to alleviate the situation that Mr. Sharif was in. And that was something that we've pressed at all levels. So in the sense -- in that sense, we welcome the move by them to provide him with a new place to go. I don't know of any statements we've made about the United States as a haven for Mr. Sharif.

MR. CROWLEY: -- in touch with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Sharif family, and welcome the resolution. We have no information about Mr. Sharif's travel plans.

Q -- to Pakistan, until his release. Did President -- in his case directly or indirectly with the Pakistan --

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, certainly indirectly through Ambassador Indefurth and others, we have been pressing the case that it is important to find a resolution to that dilemma. We raised our objections to the way in which his trial went forward, and obviously we welcome the move to resolve this now.

Q Jake, what time is the Berger-Rice meeting scheduled for?

MR. SIEWERT: Approximately 2:30 p.m.

Q Jake, on today's meetings, is the President prepared to

agree to tighter regulations of GMOs?

MR. SIEWERT: I expect that topic will come up, but I don't believe that we are prepared to announce anything new at this point. It is something we've been discussing with the Europeans for some time now, along with a variety of other trade issues that are before the countries. I expect also the disputes over beef and bananas will come up. Those are issues that have just been unresolved for much too long, and something we'd like to wrap up before the new administration has to deal with them.

Q Will you do a readout on that briefing?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we'll find some way. The lunch should be ending any minute now, and we'll provide some way of giving you -- I think Tony Blinken and others will be down here on background -- so now that you know who they are -- to summarize the state of those meetings.

Q Jake, what does the President think of the First Lady's enormous book deal?

MR. SIEWERT: He's pleased by it.

Q Does he have a --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I think, obviously, everyone wants their spouse to do as well as possible, and the President is no exception to that rule.

Q Did he get the same deal?

MR. SIEWERT: No. I know he has said, several times, that he plans to write a book or two when he leaves office, but I don't believe that he has made any sort of deal.

Q Better get them well they're hot. Don't wait too long. (Laughter.)

Q Jake, when Newt Gingrich accepted a \$4.5 million book deal, roughly half of the size of Mrs. Clinton's, there was such pressure put upon him that he eventually declined to accept it. Do you see these two situations --

MR. SIEWERT: I believe that was governed by some particular rules in the House -- the House Ethics Committee -- that had some -- that he ran afoul of the rules that were governing book contracts by House members. I think that was the main thrust of the complaint people had with him. There was also some question about whether his story was really worth \$4.5 million.

(Laughter.) Whereas no one doubts that Mrs. Clinton's story is worth any amount of money.

Q His was a validly fiction -- (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: It will be interesting to go back a look and see how Mr. Gingrich's book eventually sold and see whether it was, indeed, netted the publishing company \$4.5 million. I don't believe it did. And we'll see how this one goes.

Q Jake, tomorrow when the President meets with President-elect George Bush, do you expect that he might introduce him to this White House corps here on this podium?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I wouldn't expect that. We may get a chance to meet some of you in the Oval Office, but I don't think we'll come down. This is probably best kept secret for him now. He may be disappointed when he sees the shabby state of repair that it's in at the moment.

Q Jake, the Congress late last week passed a small stand-alone tax bill having to do with accounting measures for small businesses, tax relief for small businesses. Does he have plans to sign that bill?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check. It's separate from the omnibus bill? I'll check, I have no idea. We obviously welcome the passage of the New Markets bill, which the President pressed for for some time, and we particularly want to thank Speaker Hastert for his hard work in making that happen.

Q Plans to sign that bill?

MR. SIEWERT: Later this week. I think the CR expires on Thursday, which probably gives us until Friday sometime to actually sign the new bill. But we'll let you know as plans develop.

Q How alarming does the White House, President Clinton view the new CIA threat assessment report?

MR. SIEWERT: I think that, in general, that report is very thoughtful and follows something that the President outlined last week in his speech in England, which is to look at national security not just in the context of the old-fashioned Cold War approach, but to look at it in a way that's more comprehensive and integrated.

So the President said last week in England that it's important to assess not just national security in terms of

weapons, but also in terms of longer-term trends: climate change, infectious diseases all play a role in national security these days, which is why we've tried to treat them and elevate them on a different level.

So we think those trends that we're studying for a new administration, they're obviously -- the President has made no secret of the fact that he thinks both the spread of infectious diseases -- TB, malaria, AIDS -- and the problem of climate change are ones that should, and demand, immediate action. And those are trends that need assessing from a future administration. We hope they'll take a look at it.

Q The report also paints a very ominous picture of the next several years, in terms of biological weapons, chemical weapons, that level of threat. How concerned is the White House about that, and do they agree with the assessment?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll have to check on the particulars of whether we agree with this particular assessment. But that's something that we obviously have devoted an enormous amount of attention to here. We have a unit within the NSC now that deals with trans-national threats, that deals with the problems of biological and chemical warfare, and it's something the President has addressed a number of different times.

Q The report also says that the United States would maintain its preeminent role in the world through 2050. It's not as ominous as --

Q Do you accept any major foreign policy change from the new administration?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think that best put to them. We are obviously in a position to state what our own national security priorities are, in our last 33, 34 days, however you count it. But I think you should ask them whether they plan to change in any way the direction we've taken.

Q What are the President's priorities until January 20, in terms of his work?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, he's very pleased that we wrapped up Congress -- this session of Congress in the way we did. We actually, despite a very partisan atmosphere, we were able to work together to achieve a lot of progress, particularly on trade, and on education. We passed the Africa bill, the trade bill, which is a very important piece of legislation that should put our relations with Africa on a new footing, one that stresses trade and aid, but puts a new emphasis on helping emerging

economies strengthen there.

We also passed the China trade bill, which is one of the most significant pieces of legislation we've seen in our eight years here. We also were able to eliminate the earnings test on Social Security.

And the final budget deal was enormously important. It put a new priority on education, one that culminates eight years of dedication the President had to that. But this is a really dramatic increase in the federal role in education across the board. We passed the New Markets legislation, which was important. We also were able to work together, in a bipartisan way, on debt relief for third world nations.

So he thought the congressional year, while it could have been more productive, was enormously important. And having wrapped that up, I think the President will focus a bit on what he can do now, through his own executive power, to complete some of the work that's been going on over the last couple years, work that we're undertaking -- I don't think it's any secret -- to protect the environment, to protect the safety and privacy of Americans. I think he'll obviously remain focused, as he said, on some of the areas around the world that have been at the center of his own activity for the last year or so.

He's still very focused on the mid-East. He spoke to Chairman Arafat a couple days ago, and looking forward to maybe seeing the negotiators when they're here in town. And he's going to obviously make an assessment on whether or not it makes sense to go forward with a trip to North Korea. But we also think that there's a lot of valuable work that's been done on that over the last several months. And we're going to stay on top of that. And I think he'll have a little time, also, to spend with his family, over the holidays, and enjoy his remaining days at the White House.

And he also wants to thank the staff, all of us, for having done a terrific job. (Laughter.)

Q Is he doing Renaissance Weekend this year?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll double check, but I have not heard any talk of that. I expect he'll be in Washington and its environs for the holidays.

Q What about the real millennium? Is he going to celebrate that?

MR. SIEWERT: I will be celebrating it. Where are you going

to be, Mark?

Q Oh, I'll be there. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Okay.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

1:40 P.M. EST

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 19, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:54 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: A quick piece of business and then I'll give you a little update on the transition, and then we can take your questions. The President today will not return the Bankruptcy Reform Act of 2000 to the Hill, which means that it's, in essence, pocket-vetoed. That's the fourth time we've done that in this administration.

As we have said repeatedly, we would have like to have seen Congress complete a bill that was balanced, that made sense, that would reform the bankruptcy system and update it. But instead we got a bill that was badly flawed, punished some creditors and not others, punished some debtors and not others, and lacked the balance that the President said was critical to being something that he could sign.

So we made a good-faith effort to reach out and reach agreement on this bill, but unfortunately, some of the compromises we had reached on that bill were not included in the final agreement. So the President had no choice but to ensure that it did not become law.

On the transition, as you know, the President-elect just left. The President and he had a very good meeting, a very serious meeting. They spent about an hour in the Oval Office talking about a host of different issues, and then they retired to the Old Family Dining Room upstairs, where they had lunch and continued their discussion for about an hour, hour and 10 minutes.

Q Just the two of them?

MR. SIEWERT: Just the two of them. Throughout -- they briefly met in the Oval Office with the Chief of Staff John Podesta and the Chief of Staff-designate Andy Card. But then there were parallel meetings in John Podesta's office and a

parallel lunch, where the staff members -- the Deputy Chiefs of Staff and the Chiefs of Staff sat down and discussed some operational issues about how the White House worked, a couple substantive issues. But the President and the President-elect met alone in the Oval Office, and then alone over in the Old Family Dining Room.

Q What did they talk about?

MR. SIEWERT: I think they -- the President told me that they covered primarily foreign policy. He talked about some of the hot spots around the world and some of the challenges the new administration will face, and the state of play in some of those places that make headlines in the news here in America. But the President said it was a good, thorough discussion, primarily focused on foreign policy, although he did spend a little bit of time talking about the operation of the White House and how to run an effective operation here, some of the lessons we had learned over the last eight years.

There was not much of a discussion of domestic policy. Although I know that came up in the questioning, that was not anything where there was a great deal of time spent.

Q Will they meet again before Inauguration Day?

MR. SIEWERT: We're certainly willing to meet. I don't know that that came up, but we're certainly available and willing to meet, if there's a -- if they want to come in and talk again.

Q Jake, were there any signals from the Bush folks on either Middle East or North Korea about how they'd like you to proceed in the next 30 days?

MR. SIEWERT: I think they -- I'll let them speak to that. They've obviously spoken publicly a little bit today in the papers, but we are making our own decision on that. The President will make his own decision based on what he thinks is in the national interest, and whether he thinks a trip to North Korea would help advance the goals of closing down or shutting down some of the more dangerous components of their missile system.

Q Decision today on North Korea?

MR. SIEWERT: I would not expect a decision today on that. But I'll let you know if we have any next steps over the next day or so.

Q Will he be taking a tour of South Korea through North Korea, as well?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, since we haven't announced any travel, I won't get into the itinerary yet. But we obviously are working very closely with the South Koreans in this whole initiative. And the President met with Kim Dae Jung when he was in Brunei to discuss the state of play, and how we could move forward on the offer that President Kim laid on the table on missiles.

Q Did the President do all the talking?

MR. SIEWERT: I think -- no, it was an exchange, and obviously, the President said that it was a very frank exchange of views. But both of them, obviously, had something to contribute.

Q Is that to say, Jake, that there was disagreement about elements of foreign policy or anything --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I don't think -- I wouldn't know. I would not say that. It was a discussion, and like any discussion, both sides had a bit to offer. But I'm not going to really get into any of the specifics of that discussion. It was a private talk that I think you'll understand between two people -- one who has a lot of responsibility, and one who is about to assume a great deal of responsibility. And they wanted to have a frank, off-the-record conversation. That's why there were no aides involved, and why I probably won't divulge most of the information here today.

Q Did the President offer any advice on foreign policy?

MR. SIEWERT: He certainly offered the insights that we've gleaned over the past eight years about some of what's happening in the world and some of what is important in the hot spots around the world. But I'm not going to actually pass those on.

Q Did the President urge Mr. Bush to retain the troops in Kosovo and Bosnia?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know if that specific topic came up, but I know that we've been perfectly clear in our discussions with the Bush team that we think there's some value to having U.S. troops there. They've played a critical role in helping stem genocide and restore stability to Southeastern Europe. We think they play a vital role in helping restore some civil society there. But I don't know that that specifically came up

between them, but our views on that are pretty well-known.

Q And, Jake, has the President spoken to you at all about the particular challenges that the new President faces, coming as a governor to become President? Is that something that he's talked to you guys at all about, and some of the challenges that Bush might face coming as a governor?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, no -- yes, he's said that there's, in some sense, a similarity in that they've run state governments -- it's an entirely different enterprise to run the federal government and to be the person who's making the final call on a lot of critical issues. But I haven't heard him elaborate on that theme much.

Q Jake, was the President surprised at all by the President-elect? Was it the same guy he expected to see? Was he --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I think -- he said they had a good serious discussion. I think he told Dan Rather last night in an interview that he had known the Governor a bit, the President-elect, some; knew his brother a little bit better; but always had good relations with them. And I think it was a pretty frank and open discussion.

Q Was there any discussion, Jake, of the events that have transpired since the election or what brought them to --

MR. SIEWERT: No, I don't think they spent any time on that. The President didn't mention that, at least, when I talked to him.

Q On a bit of a different question, the President supposedly is a strong supporter of voting rights for the District and for statehood. There's a new license plate, says, "Taxation Without Representation." And I was wondering if the President is going to get his and put it on his car before January 20th. As you know, the new President is against any form of congressional representation. Many people feel that the President has not spoken out as clearly as he should on an issue which supposedly he supports. Will he do this, will he put this plate on the limousine before January 20th?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check. I know, actually, we did ask him that once and he asked his Chief of Staff to look into it, and I'll see if there's been any progress made on that.

Q So you'll get back to me -- so by January 20th he very well might put this on the car? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: It's not out of the question. I don't know if he could use that particular one. It looks like it belongs to someone else. (Laughter.) And if it doesn't, you probably have some explaining to do to the Secret Service. (Laughter.)

Q What screwdriver would he use? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Exactly. I'm not sure he'll personally install it. But I'll ask him that. Actually --

Q -- inaugural parade on January 20th, the President's limousine very well might have this license plate?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I guess that may be a question that involves the transfer of power. I honestly don't know whose call it is on January 20th what license plate is on the car. But I'll check and find out. We asked him this once and he said, I'm a strong supporter of D.C. statehood, and let me know what the state of play is. And we were going to check it out on a staff level. I haven't actually heard back yet.

Q Will you let me know?

MR. SIEWERT: I will.

Q Did the President and the President-elect revisit any of the harsh words they had about each other during the campaign?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I don't think so. I think this was a pretty serious and substantive discussion. It was very much focused on policy and not on the past.

Q Can I ask you on another subject, Jake, there is a summit going on regarding electricity shortage and high electricity prices on the West Coast. Is the President planning any steps related to that? Has he asked the Energy Secretary to pursue this, or what does the federal government think is going on?

MR. SIEWERT: We've been working with Secretary Richardson on this topic. There have been a number of National Economic Council meetings on the topic regularly that Gene Sperling has chaired. I know last week Secretary Richardson

issued an emergency order that would require generators to provide electricity to California, if needed, to keep the lights on. And Secretary Richardson has been in touch -- I know some of the Western governors are meeting; we'll have some sort of presence at that meeting to discuss this problem. Governor Davis may not be there -- I think they're meeting in Denver -- but the President has asked his staff to stay in touch with them and to keep on top of it.

I don't know of any new steps that have been announced, but I know that the FERC is meeting with some of the Western governors and Secretary Richardson will be there and Governor Davis may join them by phone.

Q Jake, does President Clinton have any additional personal role in the transition planning at this point, or is that largely at this point for the staff?

MR. SIEWERT: I think most of the transition is engineered and run by the staff. I mean, that's only natural. And I know that John had a good discussion with Andy Card about how the policy councils work, how the White House itself functions. They're obviously very familiar with the White House; most of the folks here today from the President-elect team have been through this White House in one way, shape or form in the past, so they know their way around. But the world's changed a bit.

There are some new -- there's a new National Economic Council, there's some new operations here that we ran through with them, and spent a little bit of time detailing how this place has functioned over the last eight years. There also obviously are some -- a couple policy issues that were just brought up more on the order of a heads-up than anything else. And we let them know that we're moving forward on a couple of issues, a couple regulations that are pretty widely known, publicly, I think, but just to let them know that that was coming down the pike.

Q Did they react to that at all?

MR. SIEWERT: I think they just took it in, and they made clear that they understood that the President had all the powers of the presidency until January 20th, and they understood that full well.

Q -- regulations?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think we just notified them that, obviously, we have some rules that are under consideration here that are moving forward. And whether its medical privacy or the effort to protect the forests from new road building, there are some things that we're moving forward. There's also some trade initiatives underway that are being negotiated now. I talked a little bit about those. Obviously, we're pursuing a free trade agreement with Chile and also with Singapore. Not clear whether those will be completed by January 20th, but work is ongoing, and there's no reason why negotiations can't move forward. Those are both modeled in large part on the Jordan agreement.

Q Jake, has the President sent any kind of message to political appointees stressing the need for them to be cooperative with the incoming administration, despite the fact that it's a different political party coming into power and there may be some resentment on a personal basis?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't think -- I'm not aware that we've sent a message from the President, but certainly that's something that John Podesta has emphasized in his briefings with the Cabinet, in the memos that we've sent out, and I think the meeting today should help set a good tone for the transition work as we go forward.

Q How many people are going to lose their jobs in this administration? Do you have a rough idea?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think there are roughly somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 full-time positions that are political appointees. I expect most of those people will be finding new work come January 20th. There are another 3,000 or so that are appointed by the President, but are much more part-time or ceremonial positions. But the number of political appointees is roughly the same as it was, somewhat smaller, when we took office, which is somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 appointees. And they actually spent a fair amount of time in the staff meeting discussing some of those issues and what personnel were involved. Obviously, some people stay on for a little while.

Q Career people will stay on.

MR. SIEWERT: Yes. But as you know, the White House is predominantly made up of political appointees, almost exclusively, and most of those people are --

Q Back to the District, does the Mayor plan to -- there was talk that the Mayor would -- excuse me, that the

President -- I've been to too many mayors press conferences -- that the President would go --

MR. SIEWERT: There's been some talk of the President as mayor, which I think we've put to rest.

Q -- that the President would go to the re-opening of the Wilson Building, which is the District's City Hall.

MR. SIEWERT: The downtown City Hall.

Q -- before January 20th. I was wondering if he's planning to do any District event before January 20th, and if he's planning to do that exact event.

MR. SIEWERT: I'll check. I don't know if a date's been set for that, but I know that Karen Tramontano, who used to work with the city, has been talking to them about some of these issues. But I don't think we have anything scheduled yet for January, and he's certainly not doing anything between now and the end of the year that's related directly to the governance of the District.

Q Jake, do you know when the First Family is physically moving out of the White House?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I think it's an ongoing process, but January 20th, we'll pack up and leave. (Laughter.) But I think that actually a lot of the moving and packing has begun, in the sense that they've moved a lot of their personal belongings, a lot of the furniture and the like, to Chappaqua over the last year or so.

Q Are they here until the morning of the 20th?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, yes, I think we'll stick around until the last possible minute. (Laughter.)

Q What is he doing for the rest of the week? Anything highlighted --

MR. SIEWERT: We may have an announcement tomorrow of some sort. I'll check back and see where we are on that. But we have some work planned between now and the end of the week. Although, I think towards the end of the week, the President is moving into holiday mode.

Q An announcement on an issue, or did --

MR. SIEWERT: Well, it's newsworthy, so we're going to try to save it.

Q Like what? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Like some of the other news we cook up around here. (Laughter.) I'll tell you tomorrow.

Q Like a news conference?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I don't think we have that planned. That would be a surprise to Ms. Engebretsen, she would not be prepared.

Q What time is newsworthy enough.

MR. SIEWERT: What time is it? I don't know. Is that a secret, too?

MS. CHITRE: Yes.

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, it's a secret; I'm sorry.

Q The AP has reported that, I believe, Harry Thomason, was going around to TV studios, approaching them about doing a show with the President. Has the President -- did he bring this up last night at a dinner, or has he talked to people about hosting a television show?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I think there was some reporting on this and some people approached him about it last night. I didn't get a chance to hear from him in any detail on that. But we actually discussed it yesterday before he left, and he said he had no plans to do such a show. I don't know whether -- I can't detail for you whether anyone approached anyone about such a show, but that's not anything he's planning on.

Q Jake, have you heard the President on comment on how he feels about being preceded by a Bush and then succeeded by a Bush?

MR. SIEWERT: Not really, other than -- he's talked a little bit about the parallels to John Quincy Adams, but I haven't heard him express any personal feelings on that.

Q Back on the trip to Korea -- if it happens, will this happen after the inauguration or before?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, no, to the extent that we're discussing a trip to North Korea, we are discussing a trip as President to North Korea. I don't think we have anything coming up next week, but we have a full month in January and we'll let you know if we have a final decision on that sometime soon.

Q And he's going to spend Christmas here?

MR. SIEWERT: Here. Here. Right here in the briefing room. No, he'll be in Washington. They may at some point go to Camp David, but I don't know exactly when. I think the day of Christmas they'll spend at the White House.

Q And he'll shop at the last minute before Christmas, right?

MR. SIEWERT: Presumably. We do a study to determine when we can best tie up Georgetown traffic -- (laughter) -- and then we hit the maximum point of confusion and commotion. (Laughter.) Maybe we'll do some more on-line, take a little of the burden off the last-minute shoppers.

Ken? No? (Laughter.) I guess he's just trying to get out of here. That's all right.

Q Jake, has the President narrowed, to your knowledge, in any way, his plans for after the presidency?

MR. SIEWERT: Every day we rule something out, yes. If we ask enough questions -- he's not going to seek the mayor's seat in New York City.

Q What about a book, what about his memoirs?

MR. SIEWERT: He has said that he plans to write a book at some point, but I don't think he's finalized that. He's told people, actually in interviews, that he may write a book or two. But I don't think he's concluded that plan yet. He obviously has said very explicitly that he hopes to maintain some level of public service. But he wants to do it in a way that wouldn't intrude upon the next President's ability to do their own business.

Q President of Harvard?

MR. SIEWERT: Haven't heard that discussed, other than in the press, where all these things are routinely discussed. Chancellor of Oxford, president of Harvard, mayor of New York.

Any more suggestions? TV host.

Q Dreamworks.

MR. SIEWERT: Dreamworks, yes. I've heard it all.

Q The New Markets legislation, do you know if that's going to be signed yet, either Thursday or Friday?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know, but we will do it one of those two days. We will not do it tomorrow, as far as I can tell.

Q Is that the omnibus?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, omnibus bill. Although, I guess it's technically not an omnibus, but we'll sign it the end of the week.

Thank you.

END

2:14 P.M. EST

#26-12/19

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 21, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:08 P.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: For those of you who missed it, PJ Crowley's CSPAN appearance will be replayed over and over and over again through the Christmas holidays. (Laughter.) We'll try to get this wrapped up, so those of you who want to follow the MSNBC's live proceedings of the Madonna christening-arrival and wedding can get back to that. (Laughter.)

Q All news.

MR. SIEWERT: All news, all the time. I don't know what tomorrow's briefing plans are, but we'll try to arrange it so we don't interfere with that coverage. (Laughter.)

Reading the papers, as you know, is pretty critical on most days, and we don't hesitate to point out things that we find wrong, misguided, misleading. But once in a while we stumble upon something that's just so accurate and so true that we cut it out of our own paper, post it on the wall and sometimes even commend people from the podium -- today we had such an event. One of the regulars here in the White House press corps, Richard Breed, from Annapolis, offered some helpful hints in the Washington Post today, for those of you who missed it, on how to clean your microwave.

So we'll be conducting some tests in the back room later today and we'll put Richard Breed's suggestions up against anyone's. But for those of you who missed it, it's page C-11 in the Washington Post today -- hints from Heloise. (Laughter.) Thanks to the Reuters' crew for pointing that out. Richard, congratulations. You're in print. We'll expect a Martha Stewart appearance any minute.

On a more serious note, the President will sign the

MORE

#27-12/21

omnibus budget legislation today. And that includes, as you know, a significant increase in education spending, which will be the focus of his remarks. But he'll also use that opportunity to comment on the new rules that were put out today by the EPA to clean the air. Those rules have been a long time in the making, and he will commend Carol Browner and her team for coming up with a reasonable balanced solution to help implement the Clean Air Act amendments that were signed during the Bush administration.

He'll do that at the top, and then go on to comment on all the good that this budget bill does from the New Markets legislation to the education budget in Presidential Hall after that.

Also this morning, the President spoke briefly to President Mubarak for about 10 minutes to assess the state of play in the Mideast peace discussions that are going on here at Bolling Air Base. President Mubarak had recently met with Chairman Arafat and the President wanted to bring him up to date on what was going on here and to share their assessment on how to move the process forward.

We'll let you know if there are any further calls on that front. And that's it. I'll take your questions.

Q Mandela?

MR. SIEWERT: He also spoke briefly to President Mandela, but that was essentially a private call to chat, friend to friend.

Q Will the President, in his remarks, have anything to say about the sagging economy and the comments made about the economy by the President-elect?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't expect that he will do that in the statement. As you know, our national economic team has been out a little bit on that topic recently. And I think it's important that a new administration, however different their own economic policy may be, to learn some of the lessons that we've learned here over the last seven or eight years, and we've had a pretty good track record, I think, not one that we're the least bit ashamed about or worried about.

But it is important to be guarded and measured in what we say about the economy. That's something that Secretary Rubin believed very forcefully, Secretary Bentsen before him, and Secretary Summers after that. And we've always tried to be very

careful and measured in what we say about the state of the economy. And particularly when there is a rough spot we talk about how to deal with it, how to move forward, how to address the problem and how to ensure that Americans can succeed in the economy and not to worry and fret and pine about the dangers that are out there.

There are always dangers lurking in any -- in a world economy that's moving more quickly than it ever has. But what an administration should do is focus on what the facts are and what you can do about them to address those challenges. That's something we've been saying for a long time now.

And even today, there's new economic numbers that show that the economy grew 2.2 percent over the summer quarter. That's lower than 5 percent, which it had been growing, but most people thought that 5 percent rate of growth was not sustainable over the long run. The 2.2 percent is higher than the average rate of growth during the last Bush administration, one in which Secretary Chaney spoke, and most private sector economists are projecting growth of about 2.5 percent over the next year.

If the new Vice President and the President were still in the private sector, they would turn to a private economist, and say -- or their investment bankers, and say, what are you expecting next year? And their Wall Street economists would tell them 2.5 percent growth, roughly. And that's how they'd plan about the future. And they wouldn't turn to a more political prognosis, they'd look at what the facts are, and make their judgments based on that.

Q You talked about Rubin and Summers and even the President being guarded. Why is it important to be guarded in those kind of public comments?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, there's a huge difference in what you say as a private sector commentator on the economy, where with rare exceptions your views don't have much influence over the way in which people think about the market and the economy itself. But it's important for the people who are in leadership in the -- an economic team that's part of the government to be very careful about what they say, and to make sure that their prescriptions for the economy are in line with the facts. Because people take those views very seriously, they take those comments very seriously, and it's important to try to instill a degree of confidence wherever it's appropriate in the way in which people assess the state of the American economy and what the future holds.

The reality is that most private sector economists, 49 out of 50, project the economy to grow about 2.5 percent next year. As I said, that's stronger than the average growth rate of the previous administration, and it's a solid rate of growth. That's what you should be looking at.

Obviously, everyone wants to be vigilant and wants to be careful, and we always have here. The reality is, the new administration will have a lot of new tools to deal with any problems that might arise. I mean, there's a federal budget surplus, the debt is a much smaller percentage, the federal national debt is a much smaller percentage of the economy now, so they have a lot more flexibility in dealing with problems as they arise. That's something that this administration didn't have when it came in. There was a huge federal deficit, there was very high unemployment. Unemployment's much lower now, the federal budget is in balance, and so they have an array of options and abilities to deal with problems as they crop up. And that's something that we expect they will do to the best of their ability.

Q But is it right for the outgoing administration to be trying to muzzle the next administration?

MR. SIEWERT: No, I just think that there are some -- we're not trying to muzzle anyone. I think we're just urging a measured tone, one that is in line with the facts.

Q Are you suggesting that in tamping down the political expectations, there is a real danger that you actually create the problem in your warning?

MR. SIEWERT: Your words, as someone who is in the government, have a greater significance and are taken seriously, and so it's important to keep those words and those pronouncements in line with what's actually going on in the real world out there.

The President has always tried to look at the economy as a place of opportunity, a place where people can build better lives, better futures for themselves, and that businesses could make good judgments about the future and plan for the future in such a way. It's always talked about in a way that takes some recognition of dangers that are out there, but tries to provide solutions and not just blame and finger-pointing.

Q Jake, there are reports that at yesterday's meeting, President Clinton laid out parameters for Middle East

peace, set sort of a wish date of January 10th for some progress to be made, and may or may not have scheduled or tried -- sought a meeting here tomorrow. Do you have any comments about any of that?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not going to discuss the specific issues involved in the peace process from this podium. The President did have a good 45-minute discussion with both of the teams yesterday. The Secretary of State's meeting with him this evening around 6:30 p.m., I believe. But he reviewed with them what's at stake, how important it was to reach an agreement and how important it is to proceed. But while we covered the full range of the issues that are on the table there within the peace process, I'm not going to provide a running commentary on those.

As to future meetings, we'll take this day by day, but there's nothing scheduled at the moment. But the President is willing and ready to help, if it's necessary. Ultimately, these decisions are in the hands of the negotiators from both sides.

Q I've been asking this for a few days. I still don't understand what their incentive is to reach an agreement now, with this administration leaving and with the Israelis up for election.

MR. SIEWERT: Well, I'm not going to assess what their motivations are. I just don't think that's very productive. We think, obviously, that both sides have a long-term interest in addressing the problems that divide them, in trying to find a way to live together in peace. And long-term problems have to be dealt with some day, and we're hopeful that they can deal with them in the shorter-term rather than the longer-term.

Q What's the President's involvement in the EPA regulations that are being put out today? Did he really approve the regulations yesterday, or what's been his involvement?

MR. SIEWERT: He certainly approves of those regulations and thinks that they're important. There's a process here that's run through OMB that involved meetings with the President's Chief of Staff and others who are involved in the process. I'll refer you to OMB for the specifics of how that process works, but ultimately this is something that the President thinks is important to implement the Clean Air Act amendments that were passed early in the last decade.

He was kept apprised and reviewed these regulations through his Chief of Staff, John Podesta, who is very intimately

involved in the final rules that were put out today by Carol Browner.

Q Did the President take some action on this yesterday, as far as you know?

MR. SIEWERT: I'll have to check on that and see whether there was any specific paper or briefing that went to him yesterday.

Q Jake, are we likely to get some presidential action on the pardons today or tomorrow, before Christmas?

MR. SIEWERT: I would not expect anything today, but I certainly wouldn't rule it out for tomorrow. That's not a definite, but I think it's -- nothing will come today, but it's very possible there will be something tomorrow.

Q Will they all be in one group, or this maybe as a partial, and there would be another announcement later?

Q They will all be in one group, or would this maybe is a partial and there would be another announcement later?

MR. SIEWERT: The President has offered to review as many of these cases as he can in his last days in office, and he will take the opportunity tomorrow or sometime before the Christmas holiday probably to take some of them out of the inbox. But I don't think that would be the end of it. I think he's going to try to do as many -- review as many of these as he can. And I expect that they will be, in some sense, a rolling process that continues right up through the end of his term.

Q Are they going to be issued by Justice, or will we get them here, as well?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm working with our Counsel's Office here, and I'll let you know as we get closer. Typically, the actual piece of paper comes from Justice, but we'll try to find some way of letting people know here.

Q Do you know if Jonathan Pollard is on the list?

MR. SIEWERT: I wouldn't expect anything new on that. I don't think there is anything new on that.

Q Did he ever get a report from -- it was former White House Counsel Charles Ruff, who was coordinating the

process for getting a recommendation on Pollard. Did the President ever get a report on that?

MR. SIEWERT: I believe there's a report here --

MR. CROWLEY: The review has been completed.

MR. SIEWERT: The review has been completed, but I wouldn't -- there's nothing new on that today.

Q Did it recommend against any kind of clemency for him?

MR. SIEWERT: Would don't discuss typically the recommendations that his Counsel's Office prepares for him, just because it constitutes a waive of the attorney-client privilege.

Q Has there been any discussion at the White House recently about what to do, if anything, about the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge before the President leaves?

MR. SIEWERT: I think that our focus on Alaska has been on the impact that the roadless rule might have on Tongass National Forest and how we can best protect the wildlife in Southeastern Alaska and the national resources there. I know that that's an idea that's been floated by some in the environmental community and elsewhere.

The President actually did address this in an interview not too long that he did with the Discovery Channel in which he said he was looking at the issue, but that he was uncertain at this point whether a monument status would protect it any further than it already is protected and might actually be counterproductive in some way, and that it might create some political controversy. It could be counterproductive.

So our focus has been on what we can do to protect the Tongass under the roadless rule. But he has looked at this issue, he's had something to say about it publicly, and if there's anything new I'll let you know. I know that any effort to drill in the ANWR would require legislative action. We've always opposed such legislation and will continue to do so.

Q Do you have anything to release about the President's consideration of a possible visit to North Korea?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't have anything new on that to share with you today, and I don't expect we will. The President

obviously is going to make a judgment based on whether he thinks such a trip would be helpful in advancing the process of curtailing the missile program that North Korea has.

Q When is he going to make that judgment, Jake?

MR. SIEWERT: When is he likely to make the trip or the decision? As soon as we can. As soon as we can.

Q He wouldn't travel through the holiday period.

MR. SIEWERT: No, that's extraordinarily unlikely, if not -- let's just say, no. (Laughter.) That's safe, yes.

Q Just one more on the Middle East. The parties aren't asking the President to provide any guarantees or anything, are they, at this stage?

MR. SIEWERT: We're not dictating the terms of this agreement and we're not going to discuss them here from the podium. The parties, themselves, have to reach this agreement and we are ready to do whatever it is, though, that we can to be helpful in --

Q And after he leaves office, would Bill Clinton be willing to help out with those Middle East and Northern Ireland?

MR. SIEWERT: He's addressed that himself a number of times. He obviously cares very deeply about the peace process in the Middle East and about the peace process in Northern Ireland. But he also wants to make sure that the next president, President Bush, has a chance to address these matters himself and make his own judgments about how best they can move the process forward in both those areas. The President's willing to help, but he understands that it's a new administration here, one that will have its own ideas about how to proceed.

Q Is the President done with his Christmas shopping?

MR. SIEWERT: Unfortunately, no.

Q Today?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I'll check. But I expect between now and Christmas that he will probably be out and about a little bit to do some more shopping. I did check and I'll try to get you finality tomorrow on the holiday plans. But I do think he will be here at the White House for the better part of

the next week, and that we'll do everything we can to get a full lid on Christmas Day, as is traditional.

Q Will he give us any Hanukkah gifts?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know if he's in the habit of giving the press gifts.

Q Is that open to coverage today, Jake, the menorah lighting?

MR. SIEWERT: I think it's stills only.

Q Is that traditional for it to be stills?

MR. SIEWERT: It's varied a bit, year to year, but it's more often than not --

Q Usually, the President toasts Mr. Knoller at that event. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, really? Excellent. We would enjoy that.

Q And that will be lost to history if it's stills only.

Q Why is it closed?

MR. SIEWERT: I think we've actually done stills a number of years. Some years we've done -- but I think stills is a pretty good way to deal with that this year. Give you all a break.

Q First Lady going to be there?

MR. SIEWERT: I think so, yes.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

MR. SIEWERT: Thank you.

END

12:25 P.M. EST

#27-12/21

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 22, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING BY
JAKE SIEWERT

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

11:40 A.M. EST

MR. SIEWERT: We'll try to wrap this up quickly. I don't have much for you. I will tell you that the President will have some announcements later today on pardons, grants of clemency. I don't have those for you right this minute, but we're working to get those done so that you can write that story and go home.

Q Anyone we know?

MR. SIEWERT: There might be a name or two that you know. I'm not going to get into specific names up here. We'll provide those later. But any of you who want a general sense of where we're headed on that should feel free to consult with me afterwards.

As you know, the President has broad powers to grant pardons, granted by the Constitution. He's exercised that with a great deal of restraint. We've actually issued fewer of those than most Presidents in recent history. But as his term winds down he's promised to take a hard look at some of these cases. In the past, we've actually looked at a number of different cases where there are mandatory minimums that have been unduly harsh and there may be one or two cases like that today, particularly in cases where the person was involved in typically a nonviolent drug conviction, was not directly involved in the crime itself, and oftentimes other folks in the offense were treated less severely. But in any case, we have a number of those later today. I expect the vast --

Q On paper or personally?

MR. SIEWERT: We'll put them out on paper, but we'll do whatever we can to help fill in the blanks, help you understand some of the background about them. We don't typically comment on the wheres and whys of this, but we'll help you understand a

little bit about who these people are and what the general nature of their case was.

Q In the past the President is on record in various interviews as saying that he wasn't comfortable with the nonviolent crimes for crack -- for instance, 90 percent, or 95 are African Americans and they get a harsher penalty than other people who are using various forms of cocaine. Might we see some kind of a blanket use of the clemency today?

MR. SIEWERT: No. I think what we are trying to do is take these cases on a case-by-case basis. Some of them have worked their way through the system; the President has addressed some of these cases where a mandatory minimum caught someone in a much deeper prison sentence than some of the people that were involved in that very same offense.

So we're looking at some of those cases. We may have one or two like that today. But I think we'll review them on a case-by-case basis. It's very important that as we review these cases we know the details of the offenses and the actual facts of the case. So the Counsel's Office here at the White House, working and consulting with the Office of the Pardon Attorney at the Department of Justice tries to gather all the facts and make these judgments on the merits of the individual case.

Q Do any involve deaths, or any death penalties involved?

MR. SIEWERT: I wouldn't expect anything like that today.

Q Jake, do we need to go over to Justice to get these, or will you give them out?

MR. SIEWERT: The paper is put out at the Department of Justice, but we will get copies here and make them available. And Elliot, Nanda and Sarah and I will do everything we can to fill in the blanks, let you understand a little bit of the background of these cases.

Q What do you think of the Ashcroft nomination?

MR. SIEWERT: We haven't been commenting on the individual Cabinet choices that the President-elect has made, and I don't think we'll start today.

Q Jake, just to follow up on what John was asking, does the President believe the laws, the statutes need to be changed on mandatory minimums, or is it just that there are some isolated cases where they were unfair, or is there a systemic problem?

MR. SIEWERT: No, we have actually suggested some changes, particularly on the disparity case we suggested some changes. We supported a provision that would have reduced the disparity. And we've also tried to direct prosecutorial resources at the federal level toward serious crack cocaine and powder cocaine dealers and try to keep the focus off lower-level offenders.

But as we review individual cases we have to look at the facts of the individual case and see whether that particular person deserves clemency. So the President does think -- he said in a recent interview that he thinks that this whole issue needs some review, and we've tried to find a more just solution in cases where there is some injustice under the current guidelines. But he's asked for some change in the disparity between crack and powder cocaine, but ultimately, Congress has to make these decisions about sentencing guidelines.

Q Do you have a comment on a Washington Times story that the Pakistani army is fighting in Afghanistan, side by side with Osama bin Laden who is training all these armies in Afghanistan? And how can you bring Osama bin Laden to justice in this country where he is facing trial if the Pakistani army is supporting him, or they are supporting each other?

MR. SIEWERT: I hadn't seen that particular report. I do know that we worked very hard this week with the Russians at the U.N. to tighten the sanction regime against the Taliban, and we're doing everything we can to urge them to help turn Osama bin Laden over to be brought to justice and to close the terrorist camps. And that was a really unique and unparalleled effort to work with the Russian government and the rest of the Security Council to tighten up the sanctions regime so that we can begin to close down those camps and improve the way in which the Taliban treats its own people and begin to bring Osama bin Laden to justice.

Q Are you expecting a breakthrough on the Middle East?

MR. SIEWERT: We're not expecting anything other than that the parties work together over the next day or two. Secretary Albright has joined, or is joining the parties at Bolling Air Base today. The President met with them earlier this week, and we're going to keep at it, urge them to do everything they can to narrow some of their differences. But we're not going to provide -- I was saying to PJ before we came out I've seen stories saying that they were making progress, and that they

were in crisis. But we're not going to provide a running commentary on this.

Q You have an outlook, don't you?

MR. SIEWERT: Certainly we hope that the parties redouble their efforts and do everything they can to help find a way to end the violence and to narrow their differences. The President is ready and willing to help, if that's necessary. But today, the Secretary of State is there and is engaged in the talks and we hope that we can help today bring the parties a little bit closer together.

Q Jake, there was also a story that they almost -- a fight broke out among the negotiators. Is that your understanding?

MR. SIEWERT: I have no independent knowledge of that. But as I said, I'm not going to provide running commentary on what happens there. Those of you who were at Sharm el-Sheikh will remember, there were a number of stories that proved to be absolutely untrue and without any foundation in reality. So I just urge you to be cautious when reporting on --

Q Is Sandy going to the Middle East?

MR. SIEWERT: We don't have anything to announce today, at all. We are taking this day by day. We are working with the parties today at Bolling Air Base and we don't have any plans beyond today.

Q Well, that's a possibility?

MR. SIEWERT: There's not -- we're not ruling anything out entirely, but our focus is on what can happen today, what happens on the ground of the Air Base today. They're supposed to meet tomorrow, those talks will continue through Saturday. As I told some of you earlier in the day, we haven't ruled out the President will meet with them, if that is effective or if that's necessary. But we haven't scheduled such a meeting, either. And then when the talks wrap up, we'll make judgments about what to do next. But I wouldn't presume that we've planned anything at all.

Q That meeting would be tomorrow at the earliest, correct?

MR. SIEWERT: The President has no plans today to get

involved in these discussions. The Secretary of State is deeply engaged today and that's where the action is.

Q Why was the Secretary of State's visit yesterday there called off? And is there an end date by which one side or the other says they need to go home for one reason or another?

MR. SIEWERT: I believe they're planning on talking through tomorrow and that's it. But yesterday there was actually a lot of discussions on the Air Base -- Dennis Ross was involved, there were bilateral meetings, trilateral meetings and direct talks amongst the parties themselves, all of which suggests a level of work and effort that we think is important. But the Secretary of State is there today and we'll keep you updated, as we can, on the progress of the talks there today.

Q Is the President going to stay put all through Christmas?

MR. SIEWERT: Strictly speaking, there is no real week ahead, but the President will obviously be in Washington through, at least through next Wednesday or Thursday. He doesn't have any plans to go anywhere, other than around and about town.

Q Since this is your last briefing before Christmas, can you declare a lid on Christmas?

MR. SIEWERT: We're working on that. Do we have a definitive one. We're doing our best. There is always the issue of church, but we're working on that -- midnight Christmas golf is off limits. (Laughter.) I hereby decree the President will not play golf at midnight on Christmas.

Q Shopping?

MR. SIEWERT: Christmas shopping could happen at any time, even today. On-line, off-line, in person, via modem --

Q Jake, does the United States have any plans to offer an apology or any kind of statement of regret or contrition for the events at No Gun Ri during the Korean War?

MR. SIEWERT: I know that the Department of Defense -- have they wrapped up their talks with the South Koreans?

MR. CROWLEY: I think we have wrapped up the talks at the Pentagon this week. There will be further contacts with South Korea as early as next week. We haven't really finished

the report yet, so it's premature to talk about what actually will do.

Q So no decision yet?

MR. SIEWERT: No decision yet --

Q But you're not ruling out an apology?

MR. CROWLEY: I don't think we're going to talk publicly yet about what we're prepared to do.

MR. SIEWERT: PJ is explaining whether -- I won't even say it. (Laughter.) Apparently, we're not allowed to say on the record what some people in the administration have been saying, in other capacities.

Q Question again on the Middle East. What's more likely, an envoy to go to the region, or for the leaders, perhaps the principals to come here?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, I'm not going to --

Q And why was Sandy Berger named as the probable envoy on these stories? Is that a float by the negotiators and is there a problem with Madeleine Albright?

MR. CROWLEY: Speculative piece by the Washington Post.

MR. SIEWERT: Sometimes, Sandy just likes to see his name in print, even if there's nothing new. No, I don't think there is anything there that is --

MR. CROWLEY: Thanks, Jake. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: That never would have happened under the Leavy regime. (Laughter.)

I don't think there's much to that story other than we haven't ruled out any possibilities going forward. The President, himself, didn't rule out anything when he was asked about this not long ago in an interview. So we're willing to do what is necessary, but ultimately it's up to the parties to decide whether they're willing to talk to each other and to begin to bridge and narrow their differences.

MR. CROWLEY: No decisions on next steps --

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, but we don't have any decisions. . I won't expect any before these discussions in Washington wrap up.

Q A different question on pardons. You said you traditionally haven't issued as many as other people. Why is that? Is it because he's had so many investigations that politically it would have been a problem?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know that there's any particular reason for that. There's obviously -- this is something that I think all Presidents have used with a great deal of caution and discretion. But just looking at the numbers, I don't know that there's any particular reason for it. It's pretty evident the President has used this discretion with a great deal of restraint.

But at the same time, the President believes, as he said in a recent interview, the President believes that from time to time, it's important to allow people to get a fresh start, to move on with their lives, to assume the full rights of citizenship, and when it is appropriate he has not hesitated to do that.

Q How many are there?

MR. SIEWERT: More than a dozen, and less than a hundred. But as I said -- I should caution you that I wouldn't read -- as I said yesterday, I would not assume that this is the definitive list. What we're trying to do is assess these on a rolling basis. We will make some judgments today and put out that list, but there may be more. He has asked his Counsel's Office to work with the Department of Justice to take a full look at these cases as they come up, and there may be more in the next month.

Q Any blockbusters?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, that is hard -- that is absolutely impossible to say.

Q Big names?

Q If you're in jail and you get out I guess that would be a blockbuster for you.

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, sir?

Q I want to take the flip side of Eilene's question.

Has the President's experience at the hands of various investigators from the criminal branch of the government sensitized him to the plight of people that have faced unfairness in the criminal justice system?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. I'll ask him that. I mean, he's made his views pretty well-known about the ways in which some investigations have simply gone on too long. He's talked very bluntly about Whitewater and how what began as a relatively inconsequential deal spun out of control and assumed much larger proportions than anyone originally intended. So he understands how that can happen. But I don't know that that affects his judgment of any particular case. He obviously makes a decision on each case on the merits.

Q Any estimate on what time we'll get the --

MR. SIEWERT: As fast as I can make them happen. So I will -- I'm working with the Counsel's Office to -- as fast as John Podesta can make them happen.

Q Jake, does the President plan to attach the new license plates himself?

MR. SIEWERT: No. But since I haven't had a chance to do this on camera, the President -- we did ask Mr. Knoller and Mark Plotkin and others have asked us a couple of times to ask the President, and we finally got into see him and asked him whether he'd like these new plates, and he thought the slogan, "Taxation Without Representation," was a fine one. So he's asked the administration here to do that. And I expect they'll be on, if not today, then at the very earliest, next week.

But he's not going down to the DMV himself, nor do I think he will get out the screwdriver. But we'll make sure they're on, and at some point we'll make sure you get a chance to take a photograph of the new plates.

Q Do you have anything to announce about the President's -- of a possible visit to North Korea?

MR. SIEWERT: I do not have anything to announce on that today. We're obviously continuing to work on the range of issues that are associated with North Korea, but I actually would not expect an announcement anytime before early next week. Why don't you check back with us after the vacation and we'll let you know where we stand on that.

Q Is the President sensitive to concerns that he might, by going to North Korea and working some kind of a deal out, signing something, tie the hands of the President-elect?

MR. SIEWERT: No. I mean, we're obviously consulting very closely with the President-elect, but in the end this decision will be made on the merits -- whether we think it advances in some way, shape or form our agenda to make the Peninsula a safer place, and to lower the threat from the missile program that North Korea has developed. So we will make a judgment based on whether we think it would be effective in advancing our national security interests. And that's the only criteria that we will examine as the President makes decisions about how to proceed with the North Koreans.

Q He won't really go unless he can get some sort of an agreement.

MR. SIEWERT: We will proceed based on his assessment of what makes sense for our national interest. And we've consulted heavily with the President-elect team and let them know what we're thinking and what we're doing.

Q They don't have a veto, though, do they?

MR. SIEWERT: No, absolutely not.

Q So, Jake, time is running out -- you don't have a sort of deadline by the end of this year for whether or he goes or not, to decide?

MR. SIEWERT: Well, we understand that there's a limited period of time to work on this, which is why we're doing everything we can. But ultimately, this has to be driven by the substance of what we're discussing with the North Koreans and others, and we have to make a judgment about whether it will actually make a difference and make an improvement in our national security outlook overall.

Q Do you think the decision to switch the license plates should be seen as one in a series of actions the President is taking to try to tie the hands of the incoming President? (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: This is a decision that's made on the President's own views about D.C. and its statehood. But, obviously, we're not tying the hands of anyone. Screwdrivers are a dime a dozen.

Q Doesn't this force the President-elect to take the plates off, then?

MR. SIEWERT: I actually don't know that. Someone asked me, but the presidential plates are changed in any case for the inaugural. They put on the inaugural plate for the inauguration, for those of you who remember one or two of those ceremonies. And then I assume the new President can make his own decision about whether he likes this plate. But it's a nice slogan -- "Taxation Without Representation." It's one that has served this country well over time.

Q Is the President going to spend time here in D.C., when he said in that interview the other week, or a few days ago that he'd have this office for six months in D.C. -- is he planning to spend a substantial amount of time here?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know how much time he'll spend in the office, but obviously -- but there is an office that's set up --

Q What does that do, what does that office do, exactly?

MR. SIEWERT: I think it handles a lot of the paperwork and correspondence around.

Q Where is it located? Jackson Place?

MR. SIEWERT: Nearby. Nearby.

Q Jackson Place? The Federal Building?

MR. SIEWERT: Maybe. I don't know. I'll check. I think it's nearby, but essentially, this is much more of a clerical operation than anything else. I think he has said his main office will be in New York, and he is looking at some options for New York now.

Q Does that mean that the President is not leaving the city after the inauguration of the next President?

MR. SIEWERT: Oh, we've actually been -- no, we're leaving. We're leaving.

Q Where is he going?

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know. (Laughter.) I don't know.

We'll try to sort that out. We've actually had a little discussion about that, but we haven't made a final decision.

Q But he will get out of town, right?

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, we'll get in that helicopter and --

Q Temporarily.

Q Bethesda. (Laughter.)

Q Do you have any New Year's Eve plans?

MR. SIEWERT: Not yet. There's been some discussion maybe of going to Camp David, but I don't know whether that's --

Q Why is he skipping Renaissance Weekend? That's very unusual.

MR. SIEWERT: Well, he enjoys Renaissance Weekend, but as you know, last year we didn't make it because of the Millennium, and this year I think he wants to cherish his time here at the White House.

Q It's really the Millennium this year, you know. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Yes, I know. I'm well aware of your own views on that.

Q It's your Naval Observatory. Go check the clock.

MR. SIEWERT: Yes -- I don't get up there much, too many protesters. (Laughter.)

Q They're gone.

MR. SIEWERT: But I think he wants to spend some time, he and Mrs. Clinton and Chelsea want to spend some time here at the White House while they still live here.

Q Could you please give a brief assessment of the policy and concern of this administration on amnesty, and also -- there are so many cases of asylum seekers that have been in jail for many, many years, but no decisions on those asylum cases --

MR. SIEWERT: I don't know anything about that. I thought you were going to ask me about Sandy Berger's call to Mr.

Mishra.

Q Also. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: Okay, that --

Q Leading the witness. (Laughter.)

MR. SIEWERT: As part of his periodic contacts with his Indian counterpart, Mr. Berger called the National Security Advisor, Mr. Mishra, this morning to pass on the President's appreciation for Prime Minister Vajpayee's efforts to ease tensions over Kashmir, most notably, the extension of the Ramadan cease-fire through January. They also discussed the efforts by both sides to broaden and deepen the U.S.-India relationship and express the hope the relationship will continue to grow in the years ahead.

Q Are you expecting any presidential call to the Prime Minister in India, or anybody in Pakistan?

MR. SIEWERT: I'm not aware of any further calls planned at this moment. But we, obviously, have expressed through various channels our appreciation to both sides, their efforts to reduce tension in the region. It's been a bright spot in recent days.

Thank you all and have a happy holiday. We'll try to get that work done, so that you can all go home.

END

12:03 P.M. EST

#28-12/22