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CREATION DATE/TIME:10-FEB-2000 13:08:20.00

SUBJECT: Lockhart Briefing 2/10

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TEXT:

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 10, 2000

PRESS BRIEFING BY  
JOE LOCKHART

The Briefing Room

11:55 A.M. EST

MR. LOCKHART: I didn't have very much this morning on the meeting that Terry asked me about, the agriculture meeting. I've got a little bit more, so let me tell you. Over in Presidential Hall at 4:00 p.m. today, John Podesta, Secretary Daley, Secretary Glickman, Ambassador Barshefsky will be meeting with farmers and ranchers and groups representing various agricultural organizations to build support for the upcoming vote on permanent normal trading relations for China. This follows a lot of consultation that's been done at the staff level and with the President as far as meeting with various groups who have an interest in this subject, and with the leadership of the Senate and the House when they were down here a couple of weeks ago.

We expect, as we move forward, that we will host a series of meetings here, including presidential meetings with members of Congress. We expect probably about four this month. In addition to senior staff here at the White House and the Cabinet, we'll be meeting one on one with groups to develop support for the upcoming vote. So that's at 4:00 p.m. and it is open to the press. I encourage you to come and watch.

Questions.

Q Joe, are you aware of U.S. warplane action in Iraq? The wires say that warplanes bombed Iraq's air defense system in the Northern no-fly zone.

MR. LOCKHART: I have not seen any specific news from today, and I'm sure the Pentagon will have something at their briefing today on that subject. I'll remind you that we take enforcing the no-fly zone seriously, and our rules of engagement are clear, and we will continue to strike back at any threat to our forces in the region.

Q On that same subject, Iraq said today that it was not going to allow U.N. weapons inspectors in.

MR. LOCKHART: We've made very clear our interest in getting a robust weapons inspection regime resumed in Iraq. Iraq has a choice to make. They have made it very clear in the international community they want to get out from under the sanctions, the crippling sanctions that they face. They know what they need to do, and standing in the way and trying to dictate the terms of engagement of any force or who will lead such a force is only going to perpetuate a situation that they publicly claim they want to get out of, which is the U.N. sanctions.

Q Couldn't this lead to further military action?

MR. LOCKHART: I'm not going to go down a speculative road here. They know what they need to do in order to rejoin the international community; it's been made very clear to them. We will continue to enforce things like the no-fly zone. We will watch closely with the best available means we have at our disposal on their abilities and what -- their weapons of mass destruction program and we'll have made it very clear that if there is evidence of activity of rebuilding that program, that we will take aggressive action.

But as far as this particular incident or any statement they've made today, I think it's very clear where the international community is and what Iraq needs to do.

Q Joe, if the bill on marriage penalty tax passes the House today and would end up making its way to the President's desk, is that something the President would definitely veto?

MR. LOCKHART: I think it's highly unlikely this will get anyplace past the House. I think all indications are that the Senate is actually going to have a more realistic process. I mean, let's take a step back and look at what they've done here. They're operating with fantasy budget numbers. They somehow think they can go back to -- after loading up the appropriations bills at the end last year, and now they can use unrealistic spending numbers -- that don't even take into account what they did last year -- and add, magically, through smoke and mirrors, \$1 trillion in surpluses. That's just not the way we got to the point of surpluses, by making the numbers up.

You know, Chairman Archer is using very unrealistic numbers, which make his bill unaffordable. We want a marriage penalty bill that's affordable; we've put forward a plan to do that, And we want one that's targeted toward the people who need the relief. The bill that Chairman Archer has put forward gives relief not only to those who are subject to the marriage penalty, but also those who are not. There are people who get a marriage bonus. And what they've done in drawing the bill, with -- when you look at the Alternative Minimum Tax, you'll find about 70 percent of married couples will get no tax relief at all.

So the bill, we think, is badly put together. It's not based on real numbers, and overall does not address the framework issues that we need to see about how the numbers add up, what we're going to be doing to extend solvency for Social Security and Medicare, issues you just can't -- again, it's like trying to eat your dessert first, and figure out the rest of the meal later. We have to figure out a realistic way to do this. And if the Republicans continue to take steps based on unrealistic numbers, wildly project inflated projects and surpluses, we're not going to be able to support that.

Q This WTO meeting at 4:00 p.m., is this the first of the outreach meetings you're going to have on building for this vote?

MR. LOCKHART: We've actually, I think, had a number of outreach meetings already. This is probably the first big one that's open for coverage. This was scheduled, I think, for last week, and there was -- we had a snow. But we've had a number of smaller meetings. I think Sandy Berger spoke to -- what was the group -- Business Roundtable this week. Steve Richetti has done the rounds, has talked to the Washington reps for a lot of different industries.

So this effort began in earnest at the beginning of the year, but I think you will find it gathering momentum here in February, particularly with the President's participation as he sits and tries to meet with members of Congress and make the case.

Q What's your assessment of where you stand in Congress on this issue?

MR. LOCKHART: I think our assessment is we've got work to do. But we think this should be a high priority for Congress, and we think when we get a chance to make the case for the benefits of opening up China's markets to American business and American families, we'll be quite persuasive.

We think the business community is behind this. There is a number of coalitions that have formed to support this; the farm community is one. And when we have a chance to go up and make the case aggressively to members of Congress, we think this effort will succeed.

Q Joe, in your discussions with congressional people, are you trying to emphasize that they should have a vote sooner rather than later? It's generally considered that the later it gets into the campaign season, China may become an issue.

MR. LOCKHART: We certainly have made the case that we should vote sooner and we should vote in the earlier part of the year and we should get this done, because it is so important to our ability to continue to open markets to American business, which if you get a chance to look at the economic report to the President today, you will find that that's a big part of this economic expansion that we enjoy.

Q Joe, are you finding or do you expect to find when you talk to people on the Hill that the recent cooperation between Russia and China in terms of sea-based military capabilities -- missiles, ships, that sort of thing. Is that an interference? Is that likely to interfere? And what's the administration's position?

MR. LOCKHART: I don't think so. I think both Russia and China have made clear that they want to work with the United States. So I don't -- I haven't heard anything on that front as a potential impediment to WTO, or our relations with Russia or China.

Q Is the administration comfortable with the way Russia is supplying China with a potential that it didn't have until now?

MR. LOCKHART: Well, I'm not going to get into, without having too many more details, the exact potential of these things. I'm not sure that all of the assessments are accurate of that. But I will say that we certainly watch these things. And we don't see anything there right now that poses a threat to the United States.

Q Joe, what's the President's position on the earnings limit on Social Security? That's another measure the GOP may be bringing up.

MR. LOCKHART: Yes, the President's position was stated quite clearly in the State of the Union of 1999. He proposed, in the overall framework, an overall framework of reform within Social Security, to abandon it, because he doesn't believe it works anymore.

I think, though, that if they are moving forward in a piecemeal fashion, that again, we're going to have trouble dealing with this, because there are other issues. There's the benefits to widows that the President put forward in his plan. There's the overall issue of solvency. I mean, I think that's where this conversation has to start -- what are you going to do to extend solvency of Social Security?

So we're not going to go down this road, in a way that's effective, that's done piecemeal. We have to look at overall, what's the overall plan. So I think, you know, we're going to work with them. But I wouldn't expect a lot of enthusiasm here about trying to do this one piece by one piece, based on where the Republicans want to go.

Q Just to follow up on that, the President has already indicated he doesn't think there will be comprehensive Social Security reform this year. So does that mean there can't be a change in the earnings limit this year? Or are you saying it would have to come as part of the tax package?

MR. LOCKHART: No, I think we may not get to some of the comprehensive -- some of the reforms in Social Security that need to be done to extend it beyond 2050, but we're not going to have a debate about Social Security that doesn't involve solvency. And that is where this debate starts, and that's where the debate ends, as far as we're concerned.

So what we're going to have to have then, has got to be in the context where we can do things on retirement, the earnings test. We can, you know, address widow poverty. But we can't do this in a way where the majority party picks out things that they believe fit their agenda at the exclusion of overall changes that need to be made.

Q Joe, it's our understanding a committee of the Arkansas Supreme Court has issued a formal complaint, an ethics complaint against the President seeking to have him disbarred. Has he received such a letter, and if so, what will his response be?

MR. LOCKHART: I have no idea.

Q In general, though, what do you think of this type of thing? Is it a continuation of a political vendetta against him?

MR. LOCKHART: I don't know anything about it. If I tried to keep track of everyone who has got a gripe, I'd spend all my time on that, so I don't know.

Q Do you know about the meeting going on today with the Hispanic leaders?

MR. LOCKHART: Yes. The President I expect to drop by a meeting that Maria Echaveste, the Deputy Chief of Staff, is hosting here to try to build some momentum behind Hispanic judges. I think for the first time in history, we have three pending judges for the circuit court that are Hispanic, and we've had some trouble getting judicial nominees through. They want to talk about what we can do to help generate support on Capitol Hill and generate some momentum for getting these judges hearings and votes.

Q Joe, does this administration believe it's had more trouble getting its judicial nominees confirmed than previous

administrations? Have you looked at the numbers?

MR. LOCKHART: The numbers aren't good. The Republican Senate, over the last three years, has moved very slowly on judicial nominees. The last year that I could go back and find a number on was 1998 where it took, on average, 230 days for a judicial nominee, which is longer than any time in recent memory. And probably more importantly, you've got an outbreak in this country of what the court systems call judicial emergencies, where they just don't have enough judges to keep up.

You've got one of the Hispanic judges that the President referred to yesterday in El Paso that fits that category, where it's a judicial emergency and the courts are asking for the Senate to move quickly, and the Senate has not moved very quickly.

We've made some progress on this; more needs to be done. I think the argument that we can't get something done because it's an election year just doesn't hold water. The Republicans in 1996 failed. They failed to fulfill their constitutional obligation by only putting through 17 judges. But if you look at what the Democratic-controlled Senate did in 1992, faced with a similar situation, they confirmed 66 judges.

In 1988, 42 judges were confirmed, and in 1984, 44 judges were confirmed. So they can do this. We have 39 judges now pending. I think that is something that, even if you look at the historical record here, that is something that's doable. They should get to work to get these judges confirmed.

Q Why are you keeping the focus on Hispanic judges today?

MR. LOCKHART: Well, we have a number of groups that are interested in working with us. They had planned some time ago to come in today, and the President thinks it's important to get this moving. But it's not just Hispanic judges. It is not based on gender or ethnic background; we've got judges, all kinds of judges, that have been slow in moving.

And it is a matter of simple fairness and simple respect to very accomplished members of the bar that when we put them forward in qualifications unprecedented over the last 40 years, that they get a vote. They get a hearing, they get an up or down; that they're just not sitting in limbo waiting to find out what they're going to do. And that's what the Senate needs to do.

Q But do you really think they're holding them because of their ethnic background, Joe?

MR. LOCKHART: Listen, I don't know why they have failed to move forward on judges. That's a question you need to ask them. But there are judges that have waited years and years for a hearing or a vote, and we think they ought to have them. Whoever they are.

Q If, as you say, this stretches across genders and different groups, why are you choosing to focus on the Hispanics in particular?

MR. LOCKHART: I think I answered your question --

Q I don't --

MR. LOCKHART: Well, let me say it again. For some time, this meeting's been on the schedule. And we think it's important because there are various elements in the Hispanic community who think it's important to get the judges confirmed, and we want to work with them. But we want to work with people to get all of our judges confirmed.

Q Just to follow up, you're not doing this to draw attention to Hispanic voters that the Congress is slow -- the Republican Congress is slow to confirm Hispanics? It's not political in any way?

MR. LOCKHART: No, I think our intent is very clear. Our intent is to get our judges confirmed. And however -- whatever message works with the United States senators -- if the fact that we're having a meeting here today works, then we'll have another meeting tomorrow.

Q Judge Sonia Sotomayor in New York was a Hispanic female judge who was confirmed, I believe, last year for a higher bench. The process seemed to work okay in that instance. Have you looked at that and said, how can we replicate it?

MR. LOCKHART: I think the way we replicate it is to get the Senate to do their constitutional job, which is -- we're not saying that they have to confirm the judges we put forward, even though the qualifications for these people are really not questioned, or not in question. We're saying that they have a constitutional obligation to have hearings and have a vote. And then they should vote their conscience. They should vote whatever way they think.

But what is unconscionable is to hold people up for four years, and to say, you can't have a hearing, you can't have a vote. And that's something that we're going to continue to press.

Q We are Argentine reporters. Since 1996, we don't have an American ambassador in Argentina. The question is, if we are receiving an American ambassador in Buenos Aires.

MR. LOCKHART: The answer is, hopefully, soon, we hope to put forward another candidate. I think, unfortunately, we found not just in Argentina, but in Brazil and other places, the Senate has sought to hold up nominations based on not the qualifications, which were impeccable of some of our candidates, but on other issues, and I wish I could find a way to explain to those who are concerned in places like Argentina why the Senate moves like this, but I can't; only that we will continue to try to find a solution to this and put forward an ambassador, because it is a very important position, a very important relationship for the President and for the United States.

Q Joe, why is there reticence here, or is there reticence here to say that the President would veto individual tax measures that come down from the Hill? If you're opposed to it and say they need to come down --

MR. LOCKHART: I think you know from watching for a while the sort of sap process, is one that sometime complicated, and as things get along, we weigh in on these things in a more formal way. Secretary Summers sent a letter on the marriage penalty last year before it -- last week before it even got to the floor, which was quite clear. So I think we've made our views known. I don't even know where this bill goes.

I don't know that it has any complimentary process in the Senate,

but we've made clear that we're going to do -- we can do this the right way, we can provide tax relief to the middle class, we can find a way to work with Republicans and Democrats, but we're not going to pass the 1999 trillion-dollar tax cut that the Republicans wanted based on unrealistic numbers in pieces. And until they can provide some sort of framework, we're not in a position where we're going to make progress.

Q The Senate, I guess, just passed the nuclear waste bill this morning, although not by enough to sustain a veto. Where are you guys on that?

MR. LOCKHART: I think we've demonstrated consistent opposition to the Senate's approach to nuclear waste in Yucca Mountain, and I expect that to continue.

Q Joe, anything on Northern Ireland? Do you expect the President to be making any calls today --

MR. LOCKHART: I don't have any information on the President's calls. The staff, at a variety of levels, remains engaged. We're obviously at a critical time here, and we continue in our role to impress on all parties the importance of fulfilling the commitments made in the Good Friday Agreement, and we'll continue to do that. But I have no wisdom to offer at this point, looking over the next few days.

Q The Irish press reported this morning that Clinton talked to Ahern yesterday or last night.

MR. LOCKHART: I'll have to check. I don't know -- I was not aware of that.

Q Joe, Senator Leahy is putting forward this capital punishment bill tomorrow that includes DNA testing on inmates on death row. Is the administration likely to be in support of that?

MR. LOCKHART: I checked on that; we haven't seen the legislation yet. Obviously, we put out a statement last month overall on the role of DNA, genetics and the judicial system, but we'd really have to take a look at what's in the Leahy bill before I made any comment on it.

Q Joe, if you want to see the overall budget picture for these tax cuts before potentially you can sign a lot of them into law, is the same true of spending bills that Congress might send down, that you would also need to see how those -- see a whole budget framework before you could accept it?

MR. LOCKHART: Listen, we'd like it if it went in the right order, where Congress passed a budget at the time they were supposed to by law, and then we went to the appropriations process. There's no reason not to do it the right way. So that's -- maybe we're naive, but maybe they will do it. Maybe they will do their jobs as instructed this year; maybe they won't. But if we get into a situation like we did last year in October, where they haven't finished their work, we will use the power we have to look at bills in the context of an overall spending framework, and not bill by bill, which is what we did last year.

Q One of the issues I guess that's going to come out at today's Democratic 2000 agenda is privacy, protecting people's medical, financial records. Daschle and the Senate, they've got this bipartisan privacy task force. It seems like a new issue coming forward on the

agenda. Let me just ask you, is this an issue that Democrats have found is really resonating with voters, and therefore, putting --

MR. LOCKHART: I'm not sure it's a new issue. I think we've been talking about privacy over the last two or three years. But it certainly is an issue that is very much on the minds of voters, whether it be financial privacy, whether it be medical privacy. We had a major event here this week on the federal government moving forward to protect federal employees' rights when it comes to the advances we're going to have in science on genetic information and potential genetic discrimination. So I think it's very important.

We had a situation where, on privacy issues, Congress had a chance to take some steps, and by the statute that they passed, couldn't meet the deadline and we've moved forward with rules, new rules on privacy. So I think as far as the politics of this, I can't predict how they'll play out, beyond that the President is very committed to this, and we've got a number of ideas and initiatives that are moving forward that we hope that the Republicans can join us and support us on.

Q Were you able to get any clarification on how many fundraisers the President is likely to do in the next few months?

MR. LOCKHART: I can only tell you what I said this morning, which is what the schedule looked like to me, glancing at it, is for the DNC. We've got half a dozen or so -- five or six per month over the next couple of months. Beyond that, I don't know that we've scheduled that far out.

Q Joe, has the DNC set a quota, or a goal for the President for the amount of money he needs to raise?

MR. LOCKHART: You'd have to ask the DNC that. I know that they are certain of the fact that they will be grossly outspent in this election year, but want to do everything they can to remain competitive, and the President is enthusiastic about helping in that effort, and will spend an appropriate amount of time both here in Washington and around the country, helping to raise the resources the Democrats will need to compete.

Q Joe, why does it necessarily follow that if you accepted some initial tax cuts piecemeal, that there would necessarily follow a trillion-dollar tax cut? Couldn't you start rejecting further tax cuts down the road?

MR. LOCKHART: We know what they want to do because I read it in fine publications like yours, that as the Speaker's press secretary said, we want to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. And Humpty Dumpty's the trillion-dollar tax cut, and that's what their leading presidential candidate wants, that's what they want to do.

I think this is a matter of whether we're going to do this responsibly, or whether we're doing to do it based on cookbooks and phony numbers. And the President's made very clear we're going to do this responsibly.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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12:20 P.M. EST

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