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No American President has ever before visited Northern Ireland while in office. No American President has ever before placed the problem of Northern Ireland high on the American agenda at a time when it seemed that there was no prospect for success. It's an easy thing to get involved in an issue when it's on the downhill side and it looks like it's going to succeed. President Clinton got involved in Northern Ireland when no one gave any chance for success.

So the answer is yes, the President's role was critical. I don't think there would have been an agreement without his leadership and participate, and it began many years ago.

NOTE: The exchange began at 2:35 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom. Senator Mitchell, chairman of the multiparty talks in Northern Ireland, referred to David Trimble, Ulster Unionist Party leader. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks on Departure for Houston, Texas, and an Exchange With Reporters

April 14, 1998

Director of the Office of Management and Budget

The President. In a few moments I am leaving for Houston to speak to the men and women of NASA, visit with America's oldest and newest space hero, Senator John Glenn, and participate tonight in an ESPN townhall on race. But first, I want to make a personnel announcement about a critical position on our economic team.

For 5½ years, our administration has brought a new vision of stewardship to our economy. We insisted on fiscal discipline, on bringing the deficit down from $290 billion on the day I took office to nearly zero today. At the same time, we were determined to invest in our people and their future, to give all Americans the chance to reap the rewards of our prosperity. This invest and grow economic strategy is clearly the right one for America.

To put this strategy into place, we have needed an able team. I have been proud to have at my side skilled and dedicated men and women, a true team of public servants who have helped to steer the economy through one of the longest peacetime expansions in our history. For the past 2 years, Frank Raines has been a key member of that team. He has served the American people with true distinction as Director of the Office of Management and Budget. He is the first Budget Director to draft and submit a balanced budget since Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon. He brought a businessman's practical sensibility to the task of safeguarding the taxpayers' hard-earned dollars.

He has earned the trust of Democratic and Republican Members of Congress alike. He has served as a key negotiator of last year's balanced budget agreement. He has shown true leadership in tackling the difficult problems of the District of Columbia. Frank Raines has been, in short, a brilliant OMB Director, a leader of this administration, a trusted adviser, an able spokesperson, and a real friend.

He has just informed me in the last couple of days that he has decided to step down as Director of OMB because of a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in the private sector. I regret his decision, but I certainly understand it. I think it's clearly the right thing for him, his wife Wendy, and their children, and I wish them all the best.

I'm also delighted to announce my intention to nominate Jack Lew to be the next OMB Director. Only a handful of people in Washington have Jack Lew's profound knowledge of the Federal budget and the legislative process; almost none of them has his ability to explain it in plain English. Just as important, very few people in Washington also have his record of idealism, commitment, and conscience.

From his days as policy director for the Speaker of the House, when he and Tip O'Neill worked to strengthen Social Security in 1983, to his days fighting to create AmeriCorps, a national service initiative that has brought the spark of service and the opportunity for a college education to the lives of tens of thousands of young Americans, to his most recent work as Deputy Director of

OMB, drafting our balanced budget, Jack Lew has been a true and dedicated public servant.

Like Frank Raines, with whom he has made a very good team, Jack works to balance the budget not just for its own sake but for the sake of the people whose interests and values he serves. He already serves as a valued member of our economic team. I look forward to his speedy confirmation as Director of OMB, and I thank him and his wonderful family for being here today and for being willing to undertake the sacrifice and rigors of public service for the honor and the reward.

Thank you very much. Now I'd like to ask Mr. Raines and Mr. Lew to make statements.

[*At this point, Mr. Raines and Mr. Lew made brief remarks.*]

NationsBank and BankAmerica Merger

Q. Mr. President, what do you think of the big bank mergers? Mr. President, do you have any ideas about them?

The President. It would be inappropriate to comment now.

Director of the Office of Management and Budget

Q. Where is Mr. Raines going—this chance of a lifetime?

Mr. Raines. Stay tuned. [*Laughter*]

The President. Shortly. That's news, unfortunately, I can't make.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:55 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House.

Remarks in a Telephone Conversation From Houston With Astronauts at Kennedy Space Center in Florida

April 14, 1998

The President. Are you ready?

Lt. Col. Richard A. Searfoss. Yes.

The President. Well, you're looking good. I hope you find out a lot of things about the human neurological system to help me, because I'm moving into those years where I'm getting dizzy and I'm having all these problems—[*laughter*]—and I expect you to come back with all the answers.

Lieutenant Colonel Searfoss. Well, thank you, Mr. President. We'll take that on board as one of the challenges that we'll try to meet. [*Laughter*]

If you'd like, Mr. President, I'll introduce my crew to you.

The President. I'd like that, and anything you want to tell me about the mission, I'd be glad to hear it.

Lieutenant Colonel Searfoss. My name is Rick Searfoss. I'm the Commander of the flight. It will be my third shuttle mission. Right next to me, my immediate right, is Scott Altman. He will be the pilot on the flight. Next to him, Kay Hire, our flight engineer. Our payload crew consists of four doctors—right next to me, Rick Linnehan, who is a DVM, veterinarian. And behind us, Drs. Buckey and Williams are medical doctors; and Jim Pawelczyk is a physiologist, a Ph.D. researcher. So, as you can see, we've got some great science expertise to do the onboard portion of this mission.

The President. Just very briefly—you know, I've got the whole national press here with me, so why don't you briefly describe what the purpose of the mission is and what some of the things you're going to be exploring are.

Lieutenant Colonel Searfoss. Absolutely. The fundamental, overriding question that is consistent across all 26 of our experiments, Mr. President, is that what happens, in a very detailed sort of way that we want to understand, to the nervous and neurological processes and systems when you take the certain variable away that we just can't take away on Earth, and that's, of course, gravity.

I'm going to turn it over just for a minute or two to Dr. Linnehan, who is our payload commander, and he can give you a few more details on that.

Rick.

Dr. Richard M. Linnehan. Yes, sir. Mr. President, we have 26 major experiments that deal all the way from the vestibular system, which is the inner ear, how we interpret balance on Earth as opposed to in space, up to neuronal plasticity, which really is just another way of saying how the brain heals or rewires itself in terms of damage or new adaptations in space.