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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
PRESS CONFERENCE  
OF  
WILLIAM M. LUKASH  
PHYSICIAN TO THE PRESIDENT

THE BRIEFING ROOM

2:05 P.M. EST

MR. NESSEN: Before I put Dr. Lukash on, let me tell you one or two things about this afternoon.

The President is working with various staff people this afternoon. Tomorrow, Dr. Kissinger will come to the White House at 4:00 to report to the President on his trip. If anybody cares to come and take pictures of that, they can.

Q Is he coming straight here from Andrews?

MR. NESSEN: No. I am not sure when he is coming back.

Then, you all have the details, I think, about tomorrow night's trip to the Kennedy Center by the President. Whether the President goes to church or not in the morning has not been decided yet, but will be by the end of the afternoon.

Q Is Chris Evert coming for dinner tomorrow night?

MR. NESSEN: I have no idea.

The plan is that Dr. Lukash will give you a general report on the President's check-up this morning, and then in a few days, or a week or so, a more detailed written report.

So, I will give you now Dr. William Lukash.

DR. LUKASH: What I plan to do is basically review the President's health during 1975 and then give the preliminary findings of the physical exam that we completed this morning at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

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To start with, during 1975 the President, obviously, continued to be blessed with excellent health, and I think he had no problem handling the long hours and extensive travel.

However, last September, as you recall, within a period of three weeks, two deplorable and seemingly senseless assassinations attempts were directed at his life, and fortunately there were no physical or emotional ill effects.

At no time following the incidents did he appear preoccupied. He talked freely about the incidents. He continued to sleep well, and, under my observations, I felt that at no time was his activity affected in subsequent days.

Then, in October, like so many of us, the President had his first heavy cold, and this was complicated by a sinus infection. As a result, I restricted his activity in his living quarters for three days. He responded to treatment, and has had no ill effects since.

Early this December, he noted a small wart on his left upper lid. This was removed in my office and was found to be completely benign and has healed without effect.

I guess we must mention the President's famous football knees. For those of you that don't know, both knees had cartilage surgery over the years and, considering his activity, they presented no real problem, particularly during the last year.

This Christmas in Vail he skied and felt as strong as he has ever been. Occasionally, at the end of the day, he noted slight swelling, but in no way did they develop into a real problem.

The President's weight is excellent. I can say that when he assumed the Presidency, he weighed 210. This morning he was 194. Along with this, he has continued with his rather rigid program of exercise. As you know, he awakens between 5:30 and 5:45 every morning. He then goes into his exercise program, which precisely includes lifting weights with his knees to insure the stability of his knees.

He lifts approximately 35 pounds with each leg about 35 times each. He then follows with about ten minutes of routine calisthenics, and then ends with a half-mile bicycle ride on a stationary exercycle.

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I would like to take the time to acknowledge those citizens who, by their contributions, made a swimming pool available for the President in the White House. I might add that the President was reluctant to use the pool during the winter months because of his concern about energy conservation.

I spoke to him about this and felt it was to his advantage to have the use of this pool because I thought it would be an improvement in his sense of well-being and make him more conducive to his feeling better the next day.

The addition of a solar pool blanket helped in conserving energy. We found that the use of this plastic mat on the surface of the pool conserved at least 30 percent of the energy expenditure necessary to keep his pool about 85 degrees.

The President swims approximately 24 lengths of the pool, which adds up to about a quarter of a mile, and he does this in about 14 minutes.

It is my opinion that the last three to four months have been the most arduous of the President's whole tour as President. His work days have averaged from 14 to 15 hours a day, and he has worked seven days a week. This opportunity, after a day like this, to take his swim has not only been invigorating, but it relaxes him, it helps him sleep better, and I know he awakens the next morning more fully refreshed.

Regarding the physical examination, in my judgment, the President has maintained his excellent health and should have no difficulty for any of the responsibilities this coming year. His cardiac and vascular system remain excellent, as shown by his slow pulse rate of about 60 beats per minute; has excellent blood pressure in the range of 120 over 70 and, actually, these findings are that generally seen in conditioned athletes.

His X-rays were perfectly normal. There are some minor degenerative changes in both knees that can be expected with someone who has had the kind of surgery he has had. His other laboratory tests are normal. His cholesterol is well within the limits of normal for his age.

I would also like to give a report on Mrs. Ford.

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She had her four-month cancer check-up yesterday in my office, and I can say that her health has also been good, although following the Christmas vacation she had a bout of intestinal flu, but she is fully recovered and has remained active.

Her cancer examination again revealed that there is no evidence of any cancer recurrence, and I can say that since her cancer was first detected in September of 1974, that at this stage -- nearly 18 months later without any recurrency -- that she has, I think, conquered her confrontation with cancer.

Finally, it is most satisfying, being a family physician, to report on the good health of the Ford family. I know that they are all eagerly looking forward to an active participation celebrating the 200 years of the country during this Bicentennial year.

If there are any questions, I will take them at this point.

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Q The swelling in the knees, did that occur only when he was doing the vigorous exercise or has that occurred at other times as well?

DR. LUKASH: No, the only time he notices any swelling at all is after skiing, and this usually results two or three days after he comes home and assumes his routine exercise.

Q It has not occurred after the bicycling or swimming?

DR. LUKASH: No, it is never associated with his golfing or other exercises he performs in his study.

Q Did you give Mr. Ford a stress test today?

DR. LUKASH: No. Our cardiologist and myself, we did not feel it was indicated since his cardiovascular history is so essentially normal.

Q Could you run down just what tests you did give him today?

DR. LUKASH: Basically, it is not anything other than you would expect from your own physician, including routine X-rays, electrocardiogram, laboratory tests, to include blood chemistries, blood lipids and fats. The X-rays would, obviously, be directed at the chest. We had X-rays of his sinuses since he had a sinus infection this last year and X-rays of his knees.

Q Was there a proctoscopic examination?

DR. LUKASH: Yes.

Q How long did the examination take?

DR. LUKASH: About three and one-half hours.

Q You mentioned the cholesterol before. Could you give the number on that, please?

DR. LUKASH: I think I will wait until I get all my studies together and that will be in the conclusive report.

Q I just had the impression you know it so it did not seem it would hurt to give it to us now.

DR. LUKASH: Our normal values are 190 to 310. His value was 275 milligrams.

Q Dr. Lukash, I think I heard something a moment ago out of context. Did you say Mrs. Ford has conquered her confrontation with cancer or did you have some proviso on that?

DR. LUKASH: Yes, I think basically every period in examination we get further out from her initial cancer, we come closer to say she has a cure.

Q A lot of laymen such as myself always thought there had to be a five-year period before you are considered cured.

DR. LUKASH: Yes, but I think the incidence factors of cure gradually improve the further away we get. So, we are close to the two-year mark. At two years, she will have finished her course of chemotherapy and if, at that time, there is still no recurrence, the odds in favor of a complete cure are that much higher.

Q I just want to make sure I have the quote correct. Is it correct to say she has conquered her confrontation with cancer, or are you saying she apparently has?

DR. LUKASH: Apparently, that is right. I will say that although Mrs. Ford wants to and expects to play an active role in campaigning and traveling, there are times when -- you know the President's pace -- that I will probably restrict some of her activities.

Q Did you say she is still on chemotherapy?

DR. LUKASH: Yes, that is a two-year course, Bob.

Q Did she ever show any ill effects from that?

DR. LUKASH: No, she has not. It is not unusual initially for some patients to have a slight nausea, but at no time has she had any difficulty.

Q In the President's physical, were there any palpable organs?

DR. LUKASH: Enlarged organs?

Q Yes.

DR. LUKASH: No.

Q Prostate?

DR. LUKASH: No.

Q What about an eye examination?

DR. LUKASH: Yes, he did have an eye examination.

Q What is his vision?

DR. LUKASH: As you know, he is near-sighted. He requires glasses only for distance vision. He has not required any glasses for near vision or reading. I also, obviously, had the otolaryngologist check him to re-evaluate this problem of his sinus infection he had, and that was completely clear.

Q Did you make any recommendations on his pipe smoking, Doctor?

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DR. LUKASH: No, he limits his pipe smoking to six or seven pipeloads a day. I am against smoking, obviously, but it was a trade-off I had with him. It affords enough relaxation for him. He does not overdo it. He has had no pulmonary complications. There has been no sign of any irritation in his mouth that would indicate a strong contraindication for it.

Q Bill, the last time I think you said you were unhappy with the fact that he did not get as much exercise as you thought he ought to get, and you seem to have modified that now.

DR. LUKASH: I don't recall that, Bob. He has been very cooperative. The President, in fact, mentioned this to Dr. Brown, that this physical fitness and awareness about one's health is the best insurance you have to enjoying a productive life, and there has never been a problem with the President after we first discussed his exercise program or his diet. He has followed it to a "T".

Q Sir, you have said in the past -- and you were quoted by one of the wire services yesterday as being somewhat uncomfortable in a position of a physician in giving out detailed information that is usually regarded as confidential about your patient's physical condition. Can you outline some of your feelings on this, how you have modified this and what you think should be the role of a physician and how much information should be given out to the public about the physical and mental health of people running for office, in 25 words or less?

DR. LUKASH: I guess the crux of that is, does the electorate really reserve the right to know the health of a potential candidate, and is the physician obligated to release this information.

It is a little of a dilemma. I think, as I have said before, it could be a precedent that might affect the confidentiality of one's health. I feel strongly that the privacy of what the patient tells his doctor is important to that individual.

There is a certain dignity and self-respect about your health that many citizens look forward to in their meeting with the doctor, and I am concerned about that.

I think one should be discreet about the private aspects of an individual's health and perhaps a full laying out of a physical examination in all its details, and warts and all, as some people say is not necessary, and perhaps is an overview by competent doctors, should suffice.

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I think physicians are held in high esteem by their patients, and I would like to preserve that, and I think the confidentiality of one's medical history falls into that realm.

Q Are you out here against your better judgment?

DR. LUKASH: No. I feel it is important. I have gone on record in talking to some of you. I think the public should be aware of the President's ability to carry on the high responsibilities of his office, and I have always said that if there is anything that affects, that I will make it known, and I have always answered any questions off-the-record in reference to little questions, and I think the President agrees with that.

But, this business of laying out a comprehensive physical examination, there are so many subtleties, there are so many undefined aspects of one's health that need qualification, that can create some controversy regarding an individual's ability to perform, and it opens up a peculiar bag.

I think there are many individuals who are not blessed with excellent health, that have some minor disability, that can still carry on the high responsibilities of any high office. We have seen it in athletes. We have seen it in public figures. We have seen it in musicians that have disabilities, yet they make up for it in those undefined qualities that I can't measure, like the cholesterol or doing an EKG.

They have that kind of courage, that determination and inspiration to be leaders in wherever their field is. This is the kind of area that I am concerned about. Many of these individuals are going to get a bad break. I know I was called in and asked by Governor Wallace's wife to attend his surgery, when he had the assassination attempt on his life.

It is obvious that Governor Wallace has had a serious injury, yet he carries on, he is dedicated, he is devoted and inspired and who is to say whether he should be disqualified for high office?

Certainly, President Roosevelt, who developed poliø at the age of 39 and became President at 49, with this kind of disability, was one of our outstanding Presidents.

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Q What would you have done if you were in the position of his doctors in Bethesda Naval Hospital before he ran for the fourth term and found out he had disabilities that might have disqualified for the Presidency?

DR. LUKASH: I think in that instance it should have been made public.

Q This question is directed to you or Ron, or both of you. What is it that we are going to get next week? For example, are we going to get the specific gravity in one test? Are we going to get that kind of detailed breakdown?

DR. LUKASH: After I finish the President's comprehensive medical report, I will go over this with him in detail so he knows in total the aspects of his health and all the laboratory tests and let him make the decision of how he would like this released.

I know he has gone on record to release this. I don't know the magnitude of the total release or not.

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Q I don't quite understand his past medical history. I know the President has said he wants to have his past medical history open to the public. For all I know, it is available now and some of us have just not gone over to your office or some place and gotten it. Is that available now or is that something that is going to be released at a future date?

MR. NESSEN: His past medical record up through October of 1974 is in the hearings of his confirmation. Bill has put out reports each time he has had a medical test since then. What you will get next week is merely the updating of where he stands since his last medical examination a year ago.

Q We will get the readings on the blood tests and things like that? Is that what you are talking about?

DR. LUKASH: I am going to present those to the President and he will decide the magnitude of all the details that will be released.

Q Bill, that is what I did not understand. This minor controversy that arose, as I understand it, you did not favor releasing his past medical history. It was my impression his past medical history is already public.

DR. LUKASH: I think there has never been another public figure that has had his whole history, medical and whatever, scrutinized as much as the President, and I think Vice President Rockefeller had, before further confirmation.

Q Where does the difference lie, between your philosophy and the President's, over how specific one should be? That is what I don't understand.

DR. LUKASH: Yes, I think, as Ron mentioned, the depth and scope of all the details of his comprehensive physical examination. We are talking about five or six pages -- all the reports. You know the findings of the sigmoidoscopy.

Q I thought you said it was normal, the sigmoidoscopy.

DR. LUKASH: I said it was normal.

Q In other words, you are talking about your going beyond your saying it was normal and giving the medical details, whatever they may be, that are in the report that lead you and any other doctor who should read that report in future years to come to the conclusion that it was normal. Is that the difference you are talking about?

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DR. LUKASH: I am talking about the subtleties that I have to put in my comprehensive medical report that another physician who needs that record to provide ongoing care needs to know.

Q I want to say, it has been said several times in the past that the President's past history is in those confirmation hearings for the Vice Presidency. I went back and read both of them last week from cover to cover and there is not a word of it. I don't know where they are, but they are not in those two hearings.

MR. NESSEN: They were certainly given to both committees.

Q It may have been given to the committees, but it was not published. I called the committee people and they said if they got it they did not publish it because it was not there. Possibly that could be included in that report next week because it certainly is not in the hearings. All I know about the President's past medical history from reading everything is that he had two knee operations.

DR. LUKASH: He has hemorrhoidal surgery so his proctoscopy is going to be normal in reference to having had hemorrhoidal surgery, which may not be normal if he had not had the hemorrhoidal. These are the kind of innuendos that are confusing unless they are fully qualified. Just like his knees are normal. They are normal post-operative knees.

Q Was there a pulmonary function test done today?

DR. LUKASH: No.

Q I don't understand how this test can be predictive of coronary artery disease if no pulmonary function test was done and no stress test was done.

DR. LUKASH: He does not have any of the risk factors involved in cardiac disease. We know that, and his exercise tolerance is well-established by all of his activity. For that reason, I did not think a stress electrocardiogram was indicated.

Q His ocular fundi, was that clear, normal?

DR. LUKASH: Yes.

Q Precisely what was the pathologist report on that wart you were talking about?

DR. LUKASH: It was a suberic keratosis. This will come out in the subsequent reports.

Q Bill, in view of the comments that you made earlier about releasing information to the public, are you saying that you would not release any information about the President's health if he asked you not to?

MR. NESSEN: Dick, come on, we are supposed to be getting a report on the President's medical examination today and the promise that as soon as it is completed, more details are going to be put out. I don't know that the exploration of Bill's philosophy really adds much. He has told you why he has some qualms and how they have been resolved. The if this or if that question, I don't think, gets us much on a Saturday afternoon so why don't we wrap it up with some questions.

Q Will you let him answer the question? I am not trying to embarrass him in any way.

MR. NESSEN: You asked if the President did this. I don't see how an if question can be answered. The President indicated on the record publicly he is going to release more detailed medical reports and he is.

Q Some people in the past have expressed doubts about the total veracity of medical reports on Presidents and all I am trying to establish here is that Bill is making available all the information that he has and that if there were information that the President did not want released, that he would take a position one way or the other on it.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think that is a question that can be answered -- "if."

What else do we have?

Q This is a question that may have been asked before. I came in the middle. What is your normal arrangement with the President in terms of daily examinations or tests or blood pressure or so on?

DR. LUKASH: I check with the President on a non-medical nature when he goes to and from the office. If he has any particular problem that comes up, I will respond to it, but otherwise I do an annual physical examination every January and an interval six-month examination in July.

Q But there are no daily measurements?

DR. LUKASH: No.

Q I understand you said that the cholesterol is the normal range. Do you have the numbers on that?

DR. LUKASH: I said 190 to 310.

Q That is normal?

DR. LUKASH: His is 275.

Q Were there any murmurs, non-functional or otherwise?

DR. LUKASH: No.

Thank you very much.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

(2:30 P.M. EST)