

Interview With the Southern Florida Media March 13, 1993

The President. Good morning. Last August, Hurricane Andrew devastated south Florida. Essential services were wiped out, and although 6 months later basic services have been restored, the progress toward redevelopment has been minimal.

Two weeks ago I asked Secretary Cisneros to go to south Florida and assess the situation, to try to evaluate what was holding up Federal efforts, and report back to me. As a result of the initial work done by the Secretary, I have released a seven-point plan to ensure that the remainder of the Federal funds dedicated to hurricane relief can be used for long-term building efforts now needed for south Florida. That seven-point plan includes the following:

First, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will stay on the job in south Florida for as long as it takes to help the residents of south Dade. They will expedite removal of debris that litters the streets, keep the trailers in place as long as people need housing, and continue to promptly reimburse owners and assist renters.

Second, the physical and mental health of south Dade residents is critically important. The people of this community need help to cope with the problems that have loomed large in the last 6 months and that still lie ahead. Therefore, the Department of Health and Human Services will accelerate its efforts to inoculate residents against disease and, additionally, will fund crisis and counseling centers for the many children and adults now experiencing severe emotional problems as a result of the traumatic experiences they have undergone.

Third, housing continues to be the single largest need in south Dade. Thousands are homeless. Many more are living in tents, trailers, with friends and relatives, and other temporary quarters. As you know, they are under particular distress today because of the storm that is sweeping up our coast. The Department of Housing and Urban Development will put \$100 million in reprogrammed funds in the most flexible programs available, such as home and community development block grants, to rebuild housing in south Dade. Additionally, HUD will open an office in south Dade with community

development, public housing, and fair housing capabilities to ease the rebuilding efforts.

Fourth, I have requested the Department of Defense to release the \$76 million Congress appropriated to help facilitate the rebuilding of those facilities at Homestead Air Force Base that are critical to the future use of the base, to explore the possibility of joint military and civilian uses of the base, and to make sure we do everything we can in the transition period to serve the people who are in south Dade County.

Fifth, agriculture is a vital economic resource in south Florida. The Department of Agriculture will transfer several hundred million dollars to programs to assist with emergency conservation, debris removal on farmlands, and housing for migrant farm workers.

Sixth, recognizing the need to provide assistance to property owners who must comply with the Government's rebuilding requirements in flooded areas, we have made this one of our highest priorities, and we are looking for ways to address this issue.

And finally, in order to effectively coordinate our efforts, I believe we need local leadership and the Secretary does, too. As a result, Secretary Cisneros and I have asked Otis Pitts, Jr., a highly respected nonprofit developer of affordable housing in the Miami area to coordinate our efforts in south Dade. I met Otis last year on one of my many trips to the Miami area. I was very impressed with what he had done.

I think I want to emphasize to all of you that these actions, in my view, only constitute the beginning of our long-term commitment to south Florida. Through the leadership of Secretary Cisneros and Mr. Pitts and the coordinated efforts of the community, I believe we can find the resources, develop the solutions, and maintain the spirits and the commitment necessary to ensure the economic, political, social, and physical vitality of south Dade County.

I'd like now to ask the Secretary to make a few remarks and then to introduce Mr. Pitts for whatever he would like to say.

[At this point, Secretary Cisneros and Mr. Pitts made brief statements.]

The President. Let me just make one more

remark, and then we'll be available for questions. I also want to acknowledge the work of Jeff Watson, a valued member of the White House staff, who is a native of Florida and who has worked very, very hard on this with Secretary Cisneros and me. And again, I want to thank Otis for being willing to take on this task. We plan this to be a very long-term and intense effort, and I'm looking forward to producing some results.

Homestead Air Force Base

Q. Mr. President, on behalf of the people of south Florida, we all thank you for your efforts on the economic and emotional side. But there is also the perception of threat. We are going to be living with the closing of Homestead Air Force Base, closer to a Cuban military air force base than to an American Air Force base. And several years ago, a Cuban general said that the Cuban Government had a plan in case of a crisis, of attacking Turkey Point nuclear plant. Can you tell us if the Federal Government can tell the people of south Florida, yes, you are safe, yes, we're going to take care of you, that perception of threat?

The President. Yes, I can say that categorically. The Pentagon has considered very carefully what the possible threats to this country's security are and before making any of those recommendations. But let me also say one of the things that I have advocated very strongly—and just in the last couple of days I've talked to Senator Graham and Governor Chiles about this—is releasing the money that was approved last year by the Congress to rebuild Homestead for purposes that will permit us always to have access to joint use of that air base if we need it.

And let me just mention that Secretary Aspin and I had another long conversation yesterday morning about this. We want to rebuild the airstrip and make sure that it is adequate to take any kind of planes. We need to rebuild the control tower. We want the facility, during the transition period, at a minimum to be available for use for the Reserves, for the Guard, for the DEA, for any Coast Guard operations, all of the things that might make possible long-term dual use planning and would also make the base a valuable facility in the event that the community decided that they wanted to have it for some potential commercial use, or in the event that we can use it for both commercial

and Government uses. So in any case, we're going to rebuild the capacity of the air base to actually engage in operations, which I think is terribly important.

Federal Rebuilding Effort

Q. Mr. President, why do you think that the progress in the rebuilding effort has been so unsatisfactory so far? Do you think the Bush administration botched the job?

The President. I don't want to get into that. I don't know. All I know is that not long after I took office, the people I know in south Dade County reminded me of what I had seen there and talked to me about how important it was to get things moving. And I asked Secretary Cisneros to go down there and conduct a first-hand assessment of the operation. He said we needed someone on the ground who knew the community and could get things done, and that there were lots of things we could do to push the money through the pipeline that had already been approved that hadn't been done. And he came up with this plan, working with Jeff Watson, and Otis Pitts agreed to help us. So I don't want to go into what happened before, I just want to try to get things done now.

Homestead Air Force Base

Q. Mr. President, after you toured south Dade on September 3d, you said at a news conference, "It is my belief that there is a mission for Homestead. It is still the closest major airstrip to Cuba, and it still has the potential to play a major role in our effort to reduce drug trafficking." Now, do you think that your statement today and your seven-point plan is, in a sense, a fulfillment of what you had said September 3d, or do you think that in fact you would be willing to listen to Dante Fascell or people from south Florida who are going to try to tell you that Homestead should remain a functioning Air Force base?

The President. Well, let me tell you the decision I had to make on that. The series of base closings that were announced yesterday are the third of four series of base closings that will be announced. All the services did what they were required to do under the law. They assessed what they needed and what the infrastructure of the country was and what they thought ought to do done.

The Secretary of Defense then forwarded the list, after having tried to evaluate the aggregate

economic impact of the past three base closings, and something only the Secretary can do, which is to evaluate the cumulative impact of the recommendations of the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy, since they didn't review each other's recommendations before they were made.

I did not believe that I should interfere in that process. I think that I am open to any arguments anybody wants to make, and I think the base commission will be, too. Keep in mind, this is the biggest round of base closings we've ever announced. The base closing commission did make adjustments, modest adjustments in previous recommendations coming out of the Pentagon, and they may well make some this time.

But the conclusion that I reached is that at this point, I should let the services make their recommendation, the Secretary do his economic evaluation, then let the recommendations go to the commission and try to get all these arguments out in the public. But in any case, if we can get the money released and we can rebuild the airstrip itself and the control tower and some of the facilities, then we will be able to meet at least the security needs of the area and also develop what could be an immensely valuable long-term economic resource to the people of south Dade County, something that has the potential, I think, of being a far bigger economic impact even than the base was.

Q. Mr. President, in south Florida there is a feeling among some people, a sense of betrayal. They thought they had tantamount to a promise that you would restore Homestead Air Force Base in some form or fashion. Long-range, what specifically will you do to blunt the economic impact? Because what you're saying sounds like it will help a little bit, but it won't replace—

The President. I disagree with that. First of all, I also made it clear to the people of south Florida that we had a base closing commission process and a United States Congress that had roles in this, and there is no prospect whatever that the Congress would have appropriated any money to fully rebuild that base with it on the base closing list until the commission ruled on it, one way or the other. I mean, that is just not an option. There wasn't a 10 percent, a 5 percent chance that that would be done, with the Air Force saying we don't need the base and it being submitted under law to the base closing commission.

I would remind you that the Congress appropriated \$76 million to rebuild, to do rebuilding work at the base that the previous administration did not release. I support releasing the money. I'm going to aggressively work to rebuild the airstrips and to rebuild the control tower and to use the rest of that money to maximize the potential of both military and civilian uses of that airstrip. And I would say again to you, it is an enormous potential resource to south Dade County. If we handle this right, we can generate more jobs out of that facility over a period of a few years even than were presented by the Air Force.

Q. Mr. President, the joint use proposal you've talked about a number of times—not just Homestead, other bases you've mentioned—do you have something in the back of your mind, specifically, that you'd like to see there—you're talking about either a mega-airport, an industrial development zone, or something like that, or are you just waiting to hear ideas from the private sector of what could be done there? Do you have some—

The President. In the case of south Dade County, as you know, there have been people for years who thought that you could have a mega-port there, a big commercial airport, perhaps even a newer and bigger airport for passenger traffic, too. And what I think we need to do is to rebuild the infrastructure; that's what I'm saying. Try to maintain some basic functions there, the Guard function, the Reserve function, the DEA function. I hope I can get an approval to go along with that, and then see what happens as we explore possibilities with the people who live in south Dade County.

The only thing I want to point out to you is that it is an immensely valuable resource, and that one of the areas of our economy that everyone projects to grow in the next 10 years is the area of commercial aviation, not just passengers but also freight, mail, and other things. So I think that one of the things we know for sure is, if we don't rebuild the strip and we don't rebuild the control tower, nothing good can occur. We know that for sure.

We know, too, in my judgment that the Federal Government has an obligation to do that. Let me just give you—if you go back—even if let's say the whole thing were going to be shut down in 3 years under the base closing. No dual use, no nothing. Every other place in the country with a base that's about to be shut

down has a resource right now that could be turned over to the local community that's worth a lot of money.

The Homestead base is not worth what it ought to be until it's rebuilt. So what I want to do is to focus on rebuilding it so that it is a valuable asset—the airstrip and the control tower, at least, and maybe some other facilities there—and then see what we can do, see what we can do in terms of joint use, and see what the community wants to do in terms of potential uses. I do have some specific ideas, but I think, frankly, that the people down there will have better ideas than I do.

Haiti

Q. I have two foreign questions. Yesterday in Haiti, the military arrested a man who was granted asylum by the United States and was at the airport with U.S. officials. What are you going to do about that? And second, Mr. Aristide, who was going to meet you next week, is urging you to set a date for his return. Is that feasible?

The President. First of all, I'm very upset about what happened to Haiti. The man was returned by error, frankly. He should be given status in this country. And this is a very serious thing. We are actually meeting on it today to see what our options are.

Q. Would that—

The President. But we believe that, strongly that the Haitian Government should release him so that he can be brought back here, and we believe it very strongly, and we are discussing it today.

As to your second question, I think that I should leave my conversations with President Aristide until we have them. But I am committed to the restoration of democracy in Haiti. It is the only thing that will fully resolve the economic problems and the enormous social dislocation and the enormous numbers of people who are willing to risk their lives to leave the island, hundreds of whom have lost their lives trying to leave the island, and I think you will see this administration taking a more active role.

I have tried to exercise some restraint in my remarks, because I believe it's important that

what we do, we do with the Organization of the American States and with the United Nations and in tandem with the Caputo mission to Haiti. I don't think it should look as if the United States is alone dictating policy there. But the people who have power now cannot hold it inevitably. They've got to recognize that the people of Haiti voted in overwhelming numbers for a democratic government, and they're entitled to it. They are entitled, those people, to human rights protections just like everybody else. They're entitled not to be subject to violence and abuse of their own rights and existence, and I think we can work out such an arrangement, and I think we can work it out in the not-too-distant future.

All I can tell you is, I've spent a lot of time on Haiti, I'm working hard on it. And the United States will become increasingly insistent that democracy be restored.

Cuba

Q. Some in Congress, including Congressman Torricelli, are asking for the U.S. to spearhead the internationalization of the U.S. embargo against Cuba, specifically going to the United Nations and the Security Council. What is your position?

The President. Well, first I'd like to talk to Congressman Torricelli about it. I'm not sure the Security Council is open to that, but I'll be glad to talk to—he may know more about it than I do, and I'll be glad to talk to him about it. But as you know, I supported the Cuban Democracy Act when he conceived it and pushed it, and I supported it all during last year. I was pleased when it was signed, and the United States intends to honor it. But just last week, one member of the Security Council strongly disagreed with our policy there, and so I think it's highly questionable that we could get the Security Council to go along.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11 a.m. via satellite from the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jeffrey Watson, Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, and Dante Caputo, U.N./OAS Special Envoy to Haiti.