Remarks in a Telephone Conversation From Houston, Texas, 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.

The President. That's great. Well, we're all excited about it. We're anxious to see you get off and anxious to see you come home safely, full of information.

One of the general points that I want to make with all of you here, that I have tried to make both to the Congress and to the Nation, is that the space program has enormous potential to change life here on Earth for the better, in a health way, in a way that you're exploring, in environmental ways, and in other ways as well. So this is a particularly exciting mission to me, because I believe it will help to strengthen the support of the rank and file Americans for our NASA operations, generally. And I'm very grateful to you.

Good luck, and have a great time out there. Thank you.

Lieutenant Colonel Searfoss. Thank you very much, Mr. President; we appreciate it.

The President. Goodbye. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:25 p.m. from the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center with Lt. Col. Richard A. Searfoss, USAF, mission commander; and Dr. Richard M. Linnehan, mission specialist. During the telephone conversation, the following crewmembers were referred to: Lt. Comdr. Scott D. Altman, USN, pilot; Comdr. Kathryn P. Hire, USNR, flight engineer; Dr. Dafydd Rhys Williams, mission specialist; and Dr. Jay Clark Buckey, Jr., and James A. Pawelczyk, payload specialists. Health sciences mission STS–90 was scheduled for lift-off aboard the space shuttle *Columbia* on April 16.