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Dr. Rice Previews President's Trip to Mexico

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

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DR. RICE: Happy New Year. On Monday, the President and the First Lady will travel to Monterrey, Mexico for the Special Summit of the Americas. There, the President will meet with the other democratically elected leaders from the region to build on the progress we've made in strengthening democracy and promoting greater prosperity in the hemisphere.

The leaders will discuss their commitment and support to economic growth, especially as it pertains to the private sector and small businesses; ways to reduce the level of poverty in the hemisphere; how to improve the lives of citizens, specifically focusing on education; and also, how to address critical health issues, such as the pandemic of AIDS.

In a hemisphere where only one country, Cuba, remains uncommitted to the principles of democracy, President Bush will have an opportunity to remind his fellow leaders of the benefit of free and open markets and open societies, and the importance of transparent elections. He will also emphasize the need for countries to fight corruption and to consider concrete actions against those corrupt individuals who seek safe haven in their countries. Efforts to fight corruption will help strengthen democracy in the hemisphere.

The President will begin the official work of the summit by a meeting with President Vicente Fox of Mexico. Among other topics, I expect that they will discuss immigration, initiatives to make our borders more secure, and the economic relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Following the meeting with President Fox, the President will meet President Lagos of Chile, and then attend the inauguration ceremony of the Special Summit. At the inauguration ceremony, the President will deliver remarks addressing the strategic areas that I've outlined above. The inauguration ceremony will be followed by a plenary session. And later in the day, the President will meet with President Lula of Brazil. That evening, the President and Mrs. Fox will attend a dinner hosted by President and Mrs. Fox.

Tuesday morning, the President will have a breakfast meeting with the Prime Minister of Canada, Prime Minister Martin. The President looks forward to his first meeting with the Prime Minister and to discussing a wide range of issues important to both our countries. The President will attend the second plenary session on

Tuesday morning, and will later meet with President Kirchner of Argentina.

The President will conclude his work in Monterrey with a final plenary session and a meeting with President Mesa of Bolivia. The President and Mrs. Bush will then depart Monterrey for Washington, D.C.

Now I'm happy to take your questions.

Q The meeting with the President of Mexico, could you describe how you -- the state of relations between the President and President Fox now, after the strains over Iraq and tensions over immigration? Do you think that this is a meeting to repair relations?

DR. RICE: Oh, Terry, I think we're well past that. They've had a couple of very good conversations, including one just the other day. Obviously, we went through a difficult time about Iraq, but the relationship with Mexico is one of our most important, one of our closest. We are cooperating daily on border matters, on fighting narcotics, on fighting to make the borders more secure. We've just had an extraordinary period of cooperation in this period of heightened threat with Mexican officials. I think Tom Ridge meets very often with his Mexican counterpart.

And, of course, they will have an opportunity to talk about the President's immigration proposals for a temporary worker program, which I think fulfills many of the principles that they first enunciated when they first met here in Washington a couple of years ago. The President said then -- in fact, they had talked when they were both governors about the importance of recognizing the economic contribution of these people. The President believes that it is a proposal that makes economic sense for the United States and that is also humane.

So we have a big agenda with Mexico. Of course, NAFTA has been an organizing principle for not just the relationship with Mexico, but also a trilateral relationship with Canada and Mexico. And so we have a lot of work to do. The relations are good, and I expect the meeting to be as fulsome as their meetings have been in the past.

Q What can you tell us about the reception that the Mexicans have given to the immigration proposal? We know what you're saying about it. It was not clear to the extent to which they thought it was a workable solution and would meet their concerns, aside from the humanitarian aspect, which seems to be fairly apparent.

DR. RICE: What the President is doing with this proposal --and we all have to remember that there is -- most of this has to be worked out with the Congress. This is not something that the executive branch does by fiat. And the Congress will have views. There are lots of proposals on the Hill that people will be working with, and so we also have to work with Congress. But we do have to work with the Mexican government, as well, to make something like this work.

But the -- it is a very sound and feasible and reasonable proposal that finally addresses what has been a festering problem in the United States for a very long time. And the President comes to this, I think, with the understanding of a border governor, as governor of Texas, of how corrosive this kind of problem can be. He comes to it with an understanding that the American economy, in effect, has been helped by these people, and that if you can match willing workers with willing employers, that you are both doing a good thing for the employee, but also for the employer, because these are jobs that Americans have not been willing to take.

And, finally, with the Mexicans, the broader discussion always has to be about why people are risking life and limb in the way that they are to come to the United States. And that's why the progress made in something like NAFTA is so important, because, ultimately, these people who are clearly ambitious and want to feed their families ought to be able to feed their families in Mexico as that economy improves. And so the growth of the Mexican economy, the ability for Mexico to keep its own workers home, the ability for people to circulate in the meantime between the Mexican and American economies -- these are all things that I think they share in common. And so we've gotten good response from the Mexicans, and obviously, there's a lot to work on to make it work.

Q Argentina still hasn't exactly taken the advice of the IMF, in terms of restructuring its debt. Is the administration satisfied with the pace of reforms in Argentina and its efforts to restructure debt?

DR. RICE: Well, we are in constant discussion with Argentina about the need to be very careful to meet the terms that it had signed on with the IMF for and that they're now working on this second letter of agreement. I believe that there's a good chance they will get there, because everybody wants to see the Argentine economy recover; everybody wants to see Argentina deal with the very difficult debt overhang that it has. But there have to be some difficult decisions and some difficult steps taken by Argentina. And the President will say that again when he meets with President Kirchner.

But there are ongoing negotiations between the IMF and the World Bank -- I'm sorry, the IMF and Argentina, and we are monitoring them. But I don't want to comment specifically about them, they are between Argentina and the IMF. What we're doing is encouraging Argentina to take the difficult decisions that it needs to take.

Q Dr. Rice, the Canadian government was unhappy when the list of countries that were eligible for the prime contracts in Iraq came out, and then the former Prime Minister, Mr. Chretien, said that when he spoke to the President, he was told not to worry, leading to the impression that this somehow would be changed. Do you see any progress or change on that front when the President meets with the new Prime Minister?

DR. RICE: There are several aspects of the contracting that is going to -- there will be about \$5 billion let -- \$5 billion let in contracts very soon. And that will go with the list that is there. But, of course, subcontracts, which will undoubtedly make up a good part of that, are open to everyone.

Moreover, not everything is going to be let at once, and as further contracts are let, as further funds are released over the next several months, then we can review in some detail the circumstances and the changed circumstances for different countries. And I think that we will talk to the Canadians about this. I think there's some understanding of where we're going.

Q There is criticism that the President's plan for temporary immigration aids employers more than workers, and that it's merely a means of deporting millions of foreign workers after three years. How do you think the Congress will deal with this plan?

DR. RICE: Well, first of all, remember that this is expected to be a status that is renewable; as long as you have a job, it would be renewable. We would fully expect that eventually people will want to go home. People tend to want to do that. The President has talked about letting people be able to keep some of their own money so that that can be a reality.

And I can't think of anything better for a worker who has worked under these circumstances, kind of in the shadows in the United States, to finally have a way to come out of the shadows, to have certain protections

that are not there now because they're having to live in the shadows, to have recognized that they are an important part of a strong American economy, and to get that kind of status.

Now, the important thing about this is that it strikes an important balance, because there are some who talk about amnesty -- the President simply believes that an automatic path to citizenship out of illegal behavior is not appropriate, but to recognize these people's status, to give them a way to come out of the shadows, to give them a way to play a role in the American economy, and most importantly then, making a living for themselves, and the dignity -- of themselves and their families -- and then the dignity that goes with that, I think it's a great opportunity for the workers and, of course, it benefits the American economy, as well.

Q Dr. Rice, is one part of your agenda with President Fox talking about dealing with or preventing a rush of illegal immigration in anticipation of this opportunity? And, also, do you mind elaborating on what the President will ask other leaders to do, as far as fighting corruption?

DR. RICE: On fighting corruption -- which, by the way, I think it's the World Bank that has called corruption a tax on economic growth, and therefore, a tax on the poor. I mean, the fact is when you have the kind of situation in which things are being skimmed off, you really are taxing economic growth. And so good governance has been a part of the President's agenda for development and growth, and he will talk to people about that.

It really means having a strong ethic of that at home for all of these countries, having laws and means of enforcement that are important, shining a light on corruption where it takes place, cooperating when there is information to be had about corruption, making clear that it is simply not acceptable to be corrupt and to be in leadership in business or in government.

And they've had these discussions before, and what this summit will do is to move that agenda forward and to continue to talk about these issues. But I think that people understand that good governance is at the core of economic development and growth. And, of course, when the President put up the Millennium Challenge Account as a different way of thinking about development assistance, along with, over the next three years, a 50 percent increase in American development assistance, it was to use development assistance to reward good governance, not just as a reward, but as a recognition that unless you have good governance, you will not grow.

Q On Argentina, there have been some tensions between Argentina and the United States on several fronts, not only Cuba, recently, but also immunity for American soldiers, and economics. How would you characterize today the relationship between the two countries? And what do you expect of the meeting between Bush and Kirchner?

DR. RICE: I think that we have had a really very good relationship with Argentina, particularly recognizing that Argentina has been through some extremely difficult economic times in the last couple of years, and that the United States has been very supportive of trying to help Argentina emerge from those difficulties.

Of course, Argentina would benefit greatly in terms of its growth when we make movement forward on a free trade agreement for the Americas. And so it's not the easiest thing to do, but it is something that I think that we should discuss and keep moving forward on.

In any relationship there are policy differences. But it does not get in the way of the fact that Argentina is an important country in Latin America; it's a country that emerged from a very dark past of authoritarianism and

oppression, to emerge as a democracy. And that's a great story that the President celebrates with Argentina's leadership whenever he sees them. We had a very good meeting with President Kirchner here. I expect that we will have a very good meeting with him there.

And let me just say a word more broadly about the hemisphere. When you look back to the late 1970s or the early to mid-1980s, and you think of the number of juntas that were in power, the number of civil wars that were going on, economies that were collapsing completely, all over the place, and you look now at the fact that with the exception of Cuba, you have democracies in place in all of these places, and the road, at least, the road ahead for better economic growth and good governance, it's quite a remarkable story. And that's been a partnership between the United States and Latin America.

I would note that on Cuba, it is our hope that the fact that at the Organization of American States there's one empty chair, and that's because Cuba cannot fill it because of its lack of democracy, and because at the Summit of America, Cuba cannot go because it cannot hope to fulfill the democracy clause, that that is recognized and talked about. Because the people of Cuba need to know that they've not been forgotten by their hemispheric brethren.

Q Do you anticipate a new set of agreements on corruption emerging from the summit? And can you -- well, go ahead.

DR. RICE: I was just going to say, this is something that I think will be worked over time. No, I don't expect that you're going to have -- but what you do is you establish the agenda, and then over a period of time come to more concrete ways to express that.

But this is an agenda, the Summit of Americas agenda, that has been moving very effectively on a number of fronts and this is really a new element -- they've talked about it before -- but an element on which they'll place more emphasis. And I think over time, you'll see that ways of actually cooperating to combat corruption will begin to emerge.

Q And then on immigration and Mexico, do you anticipate that Mexico will take steps, itself, on its side of the border to improve border security and corruption while the U.S. is moving -- is there an anticipated level of change? Can you describe that?

DR. RICE: Yes. We will really need to have the Mexican government continue and increase its efforts in this area. And, you know, the Mexican government doesn't like to see people trying to cross the border illegally, particularly because, just in even humanitarian terms, the harshness of what faces these people when they try to walk across the Rio Grande, so to speak, is really, really awful. And it has been a problem that Mexico has identified.

We have increasing border cooperation. One of the advantages of some of the work that we've done really coming out of the September 11th period, post-September 11th period, is it has accelerated some of the ideas that were there for smart borders and for better technology on the borders which will help with some of the larger-scale problems, like some of the smuggling that goes on. It will by no means solve the problem on what is a huge border, but some of those efforts will even help. And, yes, we will, I think, need to have even better efforts on borders.

Q Dr. Rice, you have stressed that democracy is one of the main objectives of this meeting, of the summit. Venezuela is going through a very serious problem on their democracy, whether the referendums will take

place or not. Venezuela is a very important supplier of oil to the United States. I see among the five bilateral meetings that are scheduled -- with Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia; I don't see Venezuela.

What I want to ask you is, what are the present relations between Washington and Caracas? And, number two, what do you think of the role President Chavez is playing in Latin America, especially in South America?

DR. RICE: Well, President Chavez has an opportunity to demonstrate that he believes in democratic processes by allowing this recall to go through unhindered, unfettered, and then living up to the terms of it. And that's what people are asking him to do.

Venezuela -- you're right -- is going through a very tough period in terms of its own democratic development. But there are other countries that have gone through those difficult periods and emerged. I would just point to Peru a few years ago and what the Organization of American States was able to do in rallying around democratic forces in Peru to make sure that Peru did not go off the path of democracy. And now you have, of course, in President Toledo, a democratic-elected, hardworking President of Peru that is trying to do all the things for his people that any democratically-elected government would try to do.

And so, yes, Venezuela is going through a difficult period of time. We're working very closely with the Organization of American States; we're working very closely with the non-governmental organizations, like the Carter Center, that are there trying to ensure that this process goes off without interference. And the best thing that President Chavez could do at this point is to demonstrate that he believes in a democratic future for Venezuela by carrying out the wishes of his people in this regard.

Q I have a follow-up question. Mr. Chavez has a very special relationship with Fidel Castro.

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Some people think of it as an --

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q -- and he is playing roles in various countries --

DR. RICE: And not all -- there are roles that Venezuela has played that have not been very helpful. And we have talked to them about it. I think the Colombians, in particular, have had some concerns about activities that Venezuela may have been involved in. So, of course, those are the kinds of things that need to be raised with the Venezuelans, need to be raised by the neighbors with the Venezuelans, and I think will be.

And it is beyond me to understand why anybody who believes in democracy or wants people to believe that they believe in democracy would want to have anything, in that regard, to do with Fidel Castro, because that's the one truly undemocratic regime in the region.

Q Dr. Rice, a senior Syrian military intelligence official says that Iraq moved weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological, into Syria in February and March of last year, before the war started. He has documentation and cites three sites within the country, says he has maps and proof that it's there. Does the U.S. know that to be true? Does the U.S. believe that to be true?

DR. RICE: We're going to follow every lead on what may have happened here. I don't think we are at the point that we can make a judgment on this issue. There hasn't been any hard evidence that such a thing

happened. But obviously we're going to follow up every lead, and it would be a serious problem if that, in fact, did happen.

Q Can you press Syria to let you look at the sites?

DR. RICE: We have a number of issues that we'd like to talk to -- that we talk to the Syrians about, including the borders with Iraq and what may have happened in the past there and what may be continuing to happen there; Syrian support for terrorism in Damascus, particularly support for Hezbollah and Hamas, and their relationship with Lebanon in that regard.

And, clearly, any indication that something like that happened would be a very serious matter. But I want to be very clear, we don't, at this point, have any indications that I would consider credible and firm that that has taken place, but we will tie down every lead.

Q But you wouldn't dismiss it, either?

DR. RICE: I can't dismiss anything that we haven't had an opportunity to fully assess.

Q A couple of weeks after the President took office, when he went to Mexico and met with President Fox, he said that good foreign policy begins with good relations with your neighbors. Three years later, a lot of these leaders have been disappointed with the pace of the FTAA talks, a lot of other issues, there were strains over Iraq that have been brought up. Does the President have a sense that this is part of the price that had to be paid for the post-9/11 adjustment? Will he express that in any way to these leaders?

DR. RICE: I think that there's a perception or a line of argument out there that somehow after 9/11 the United States lost interest in anything that didn't relate to terrorism and 9/11. It's just not true. If you look at the President's agenda, you look at the fact that he was able to get trade promotion authority so that for the first time in five years the President of the United States actually had the ability to make trade agreements with a trade partner without -- in a way that was going to make it possible, so that you didn't have Congress trying to vote on every aspect of a trade agreement.

If you look at the fact that we have signed a trade agreement with Chile, we've finished negotiating a trade agreement with the Central Americans; if you look at the fact that the Andean initiative has been renewed and continues -- the Andean Preferences Initiative; if you look at the fact that on -- that the Millennium Challenge Account, which is a -- really, there's so much talk was always made about how important development assistance was, but it was this President who made the commitment to increase American development assistance by 50 percent in exchange for good governance, that that Millennium Challenge Account is likely to benefit some of the countries of this region.

If you look at the fact that the President's AIDS initiative includes countries -- a couple of countries from the Caribbean, which are suffering just as the Africans are doing. If you look at the fact that our NAFTA relationship with Mexico and with Canada has both broadened and deepened, and that, in fact, the -- some of the border things that we did out of 9/11 have given us better means of cooperation and coordination -- yes, on terrorism, but also on drug traffickings, also on problems of immigration. If you look at the fact that we have supported a new strategy in Columbia, a much tougher strategy toward the FARC that is making inroads there.

This President has had a broad, deep, and intensive engagement with Latin America, and a lot has gotten done. One of the best things that will happen to this region is the recovery of the American economy. Because,

as the American economy recovers, so, too, will the economies of Latin America.

So the President came in saying that he was going to put an emphasis on the neighborhood. He has come with an agenda that has done exactly that. And the Summit of the Americas will be an opportunity to celebrate that.

Q Can I ask you a follow up on Cuba? Secretary Powell yesterday portrayed Cuba as a real threat to the hemisphere. What is the government of the United States afraid of the government of Fidel Castro right now? And second question, you are talking why is not the free trade of the Americas in the agenda for this summit?

DR. RICE: First of all, there is plenty of talk going on about the free trade agreement of the Americas. You know there was just recently a ministerial in Miami and that relationship continues on on another course.

This special summit was called to do some specific things and they're mostly around issues of governance and issues having to do with economic development, with good governance, with education. There's a pretty full agenda for a day-and-a-half-plus. But to be very clear, there continues to be work on the free trade area of the Americas. It's not easy. There are a lot of interests to be considered when you talk about an area that's big and you talk about variations between extremely small countries of the CARICOM versus very large countries of the southern cone. So there's a lot of work to be done. But it is an agenda that is still very active. Bob Zoellick is in constant discussion with his colleagues.

As to Cuba, there are really two kinds of problems with Cuba. One is that Cuba does continue with the very limited resources that it has. Because if you look at the level of life for the Cuban citizen, you have to wonder what in the world Cuba is doing trying to stir up difficulty in other parts of the region that shouldn't be a Cuban interest, frankly. Cuba ought to be focused on its own people. But Cuba can't focus on its own people because it is an oppressive, nondemocratic state that is an anachronism in the Western Hemisphere. It belongs to another era. And what the President has done is to shine a spotlight on that.

You know, more than a year ago, the President had what he called the New Cuba Initiative, and he went out and he said, all right, we can even begin to change the nature of the relationship with Fidel Castro there, if Fidel Castro is prepared to allow his people some democratic exercise, for instance, in the parliamentary elections.

And how did Castro respond to that? He responded with an even greater crackdown against dissidents, a crackdown that has earned him the criticism of Europe and of Latin America and countries worldwide for the kind of crackdown he's been -- Cuba is an anachronism, and it's a sad thing that the proud people of Cuba are the only ones who have, at this point, no hope for a democratic future. But the President appointed, a couple of months ago, a commission to look into what the United States government could do, both to help stimulate democratic development in Cuba, and to prepare for the day when there will be a post-Castro Cuba that is democratic. And that day will come.

Thank you very much.

END 1:23 P.M. EST