

News Digest

By The Associated Press

Reporter access to Reagan restricted

WASHINGTON — The White House has quietly taken another, small step to reduce the opportunity for reporters to question the president on whatever issue may be burning on a given day.

Without fanfare or announcement, members of the staff stopped permitting reporters to accompany still photographers into brief photo sessions at which President Reagan poses with his guests. Reporters now are restricted to seeing the president — and asking their questions — on those occasions when the White House staff permits television cameras to record Reagan welcoming a visitor, receiving a report or signing a bill.

By itself, the new restriction seems hardly worthy of mention to outsiders. But it is part of a pattern that in recent years has sharply reduced those times when Reagan can be asked about issues of the moment.

"We are being literally trampled by television," presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said this week in explaining his most recent rule governing

access to the president.

The new restriction doesn't affect television coverage. But it does cut by about half the time that reporters are in a position to observe the president.

And it helps ensure that the few moments left for coverage on any given day will be marked by the frenzy of reporters vying for the president's attention. Clips from such sessions, always over in a minute or two, often make the television news that night and invariably give the impression the president spends his time being harangued by self-appointed interrogators.

The frequency of such photo sessions has been dramatically reduced in recent years as the White House has sought tighter control over what Reagan will be seen talking about on a particular day.

"I think a lot of mornings, we get in the Roosevelt Room here at 8 o'clock (for the meeting of Reagan's senior staff); and we say, 'All right, this is a bad story out here; we don't want to be talking about it; we want to emphasize

Contra aid today, not whatever it might be' not Marcos, for example," Speakes said in an unusually candid interview. "On the other end of the street here in the four network offices, the guys are sitting around saying, 'Hey, we've got to get him on camera on Marcos. We're going to lead with that tonight.' And so thereby sets a conflict."

"We don't make any apologies for having to deal with television," the spokesman said. "We're going to do it on our terms; they're going to try to do it on their terms."

But he acknowledged that "sheer numbers and the overwhelming presence of TV have caused us to continue to have to make adjustments" in the rules governing access to the president.

"We have always felt that the one-question, one-answer press conference didn't do anybody any favors," Speakes said. "It was not a way for the press to learn about policy, and it was certainly not a way for the president to state policy because it was so easily misunderstood."

Astronaut autopsy agreement met

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A county medical examiner said Wednesday that NASA had agreed to let his staff observe autopsies of Challenger's astronauts, ending the threat of legal action in a dispute over jurisdiction of the bodies.

The agreement came as searchers located a piece of solid rocket booster that a Navy spokeswoman said could be from the segment of the right booster believed responsible for the shuttle explosion.

The wreckage, found 32 miles offshore in 600 feet of water by the

manned submersible Sea-Link 2, "could well be from the right SRB," she said.

The salvage ship Preserver, meanwhile, dropped divers overboard in another part of the search area in an effort to retrieve more astronaut remains and debris from the crew cabin.

Soruces had said the medical examiner's office might seek a court order unless the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and Air Force turned over the remains in accordance with state law, which requires the local medical examiner to conduct an auto-

psy on any person who is slain or dies by accident.

The statutes apply even if deaths occur on federal property, or, as in the case of the Challenger accident, they occur away from any jurisdiction but are brought into one.

Some remains of the astronauts killed when Challenger exploded 73 seconds after launch on Jan. 28 were brought ashore secretly Saturday night and were taken to nearby Patrick Air Force Base for examination by forensic experts, sources said.

Congressman wants retirement ban

WASHINGTON — Rep. Claude Pepper, a vigorous 85-year-old who declares that "agism is as odious as sexism and racism" sought to enlist public support Wednesday for his proposal to outlaw mandatory retirement of American workers at any age.

Presiding at a televised House hearing, Pepper said the bill he has introduced with 50 House co-sponsors is intended to extend to every American — with a few exceptions — the right enjoyed by federal employees to "be as old as Methuselah and continue to work, if you can do the job."

Pepper, D-Fla., said he probably would be dead today if he had been forced to retire at age 65, three years

after he was first elected to the House in 1962 following a Senate career that began nearly a half-century ago.

Despite two hearing aids, triple-focus glasses, a pacemaker in his chest and two plastic valves in his heart, Pepper said he enjoys the daily challenges he encounters as chairman of the House Rules Committee and subcommittee chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging.

"I can't run 10 miles in the afternoon, like I did in college, but I have a good car to take me there," he told a joint hearing of his subcommittee on health and long-term care and the House Education and Labor subcom-

mittee on employment opportunities.

Pepper's bill would eliminate the mandatory retirement age of 70 which is allowed for employees in private business. That same requirement was lifted for federal workers under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1978. Thirteen states forbid mandatory retirement for employees at any age.

He estimated his bill would affect more than 20 million workers who otherwise would be forced to retire simply because of their age. A recent Labor Department study, however, indicates that only about 195,000 workers over 70 would choose to remain on the job if mandatory retirement was abolished.

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Nicaragua Reagan dispatches envoy to Central America

WASHINGTON — President Reagan, trying to bolster his case for military aid for Nicaraguan rebels, sent special envoy Philip Habib to Central America on Wednesday and said critics who claim the United States is not interested in a negotiated settlement "are making ridiculous noises."

Habib's three-nation itinerary does not include a stop in Nicaragua. "You don't go where you're not invited," Reagan said.

The Nicaraguan embassy in Washington, however, said Habib was welcome in Managua "if the administration honestly wants to negotiate."

Reagan said Habib has the authority to visit Nicaragua for talks with the Sandinista regime "if anything comes up that would show that there might be any prospect or any profit in doing that."

At this point, the administration says it faces an uphill fight to win the money. The Democratic-control-

Republican-led Senate is tentatively scheduled to vote the next day. There was renewed talk on Capitol

Aid an election issue

WASHINGTON — When politicians sense they have found an issue that may shape the debate in future elections, the rhetoric often turns hot. That seems to be what is happening on the question of aid to the anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua.

President Reagan is putting the choice this way: "History will soon record whether the United States Congress, faced with a powerful Soviet bloc challenge to capture Nicaragua and spread communism throughout Central America, stood by and watched or had the courage to stand up for freedom and America's security."

Opponents of the president's request for \$100 million in aid to the rebels seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government define the issue in equally stark terms.

"Give \$100 million and our boys would be in there," said House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., D-Mass. "That is what I'm fighting against all the way."

By Tuesday it seemed clear a compromise was in the works based on a proposal by Sen. James Sasser, D-Tenn., that would approve the funds but hold them back for a period of time to see if the congressional approval is enough to bring concessions from the Sandinistas.

Opponents of the Sasser proposal describe it at best as a face-saving device to break the current confrontation.

led House is scheduled to vote March 19 on the package, while the

Hill about a compromise on the package. However, presidential

In Brief

Radon tests

LINCOLN — State Health Department officials on Wednesday started screening 100 Nebraska residences for radon, a carcinogenic by-product of decaying uranium, the department announced.

The first houses to be tested are in Lincoln. The rest are located in Crawford, Chadron, Scottsbluff, Grand Island, North Platte and Omaha.

Homeowners will be advised of how to rid their residences of radon by Division of Radiological Health representatives. Usually, an increased air flow can reduce the amount of radon. Once outside, the gas is dispersed and doesn't pose a health threat, officials said.

Health Department Director Dr. Gregg Wright said that "Crawford and Chadron were included in the study because they are situated over an area known to be high in uranium deposits."

Wright said the other locations were chosen because of their proximity to the North Platte River, which he said carries a number of naturally occurring radioactive elements, primarily uranium.

"Anyone who lives in a home where someone has or had lung cancer but was never a smoker should contact the state Health Department," Wright said.

'Hail, Mary'

DETROIT — Food collected as admission to the film "Hail, Mary" won't be going to a Roman Catholic Capuchin soup kitchen as originally planned since the group said it would refuse donations connected with the movie.

The Archdiocese of Detroit has condemned the film, a version of Jesus Christ's birth with Joseph pictured as a cab driver and Mary as a service station attendant who appears nude in some scenes.

Admission for the three showings of the film, sponsored by The Cinema Guild at Wayne State University, is \$2 or \$1 and a can of food. Originally, the food was to have gone to the kitchen on Detroit's east side, but now they will go to two other kitchens.

"We need food but we cannot accept this," Capuchin kitchen general manager Louis Hickson said Monday.

The film was canceled from UNL's Sheldon Film Theater roster in January.

Piano craze

PEKING — A piano craze is sweeping China and Chinese piano makers will have to quadruple their output over the next five years to meet demands, the China Daily newspaper said Wednesday.

Pianos have been out of reach of most Chinese until only recently because of their high prices, according to the official newspaper.

Light Industry Ministry officials say they expect annual piano production to increase fourfold to 80,000 by 1990, the English-language paper said.

The China Daily quoted the manager of a Peking musical instrument shop as saying he sold more than 200 pianos last year for an average price of about \$800 and has a waiting list of more than 1,000.



Popsicles for one

ENGLEWOOD, N.J. — The two-stick Popsicle won't be in supermarkets much longer, its maker says. Popsicle Industries is pulling the two-stick frozen treats from grocery stores to meet consumer preference, it said Wednesday. Marketing studies showed mothers didn't like to buy the two-stick Popsicle because it was too big for their children to handle and too messy.

The company created the two-stick treat more than 50 years ago so that two friends could split it. It will introduce a smaller one-stick pop in freezer cases this spring.