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## Live without Blackberry? Yes, maybe Obama can . . . maybe

JEFF ZELENY, THE NEW YORK TIMES

WASHINGTON -- Sorry, Mr. President. Please surrender your BlackBerry.

Those are seven words President-elect Barack Obama is dreading but expecting to hear, friends and advisers say, when he takes office in 65 days.

For years, like legions of other on-the-move professionals, Obama has been all but addicted to his BlackBerry, the communications device made by Waterloo-based Research In Motion.

The device has rarely been far from his side -- on most days, it was fastened to his belt -- to provide a singular conduit to the outside world as the bubble around him grew tighter and tighter throughout his campaign.

"How about that?" Obama replied to a friend's congratulatory e-mail message on the night of his victory.

But before he arrives at the White House, he will probably be forced to sign off. In addition to concerns about keeping e-mail secure, he faces the Presidential Records Act, which puts his correspondence in the official record and ultimately up for public review, and the threat of subpoenas. A final decision has not been made on whether he could go against precedent to become the first e-mailing president, but aides said that seemed doubtful.

For all the perquisites and power afforded the president, the chief executive of the United States is essentially deprived by law and by culture of some of the very tools that other chief executives depend on to survive and to thrive. Obama, however, seems intent on pulling the office at least partly into the 21st century on that score; aides said he hopes to have a laptop computer on his desk in the Oval Office, making him the first American president to do so.

Obama has not sent a farewell dispatch from the personal e-mail account he uses -- he has not changed his address in years -- but friends say the frequency of correspondence has diminished. In recent days, though, he has been seen typing his thoughts on transition matters and other items on his BlackBerry, bypassing, at least temporarily, the bureaucracy that is quickly encircling him.

A year ago, when many Democratic contributors and other observers were worried about his prospects against Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, they reached out to him directly. Obama had changed his cell phone number, so e-mail remained the most reliable way of communicating directly with him.

"His BlackBerry was constantly crackling with e-mails," said David Axelrod, the campaign's chief strategist. "People were generous with their advice -- much of it conflicting."

Obama is the second president to grapple with the idea of this self-imposed isolation. Three days before his first inauguration, George W. Bush sent a message to 42 friends and relatives that explained his predicament.

"Since I do not want my private conversations looked at by those out to embarrass, the only course of action is not to correspond in cyberspace," Bush wrote from his old address, G94B(at)aol.com. "This saddens me. I have enjoyed conversing with each of you."

But in the interceding eight years, as BlackBerrys have become ubiquitous -- and often less intrusive than a telephone, the volume of e-mail has multiplied and the role of technology has matured. Obama used e-mail to stay in constant touch with friends from the lonely confines of the road, often sending messages like "Sox!" when the Chicago White Sox won a game. He also relied on e-mail to keep abreast of the rapid whirl of events on a given campaign day.

Obama's memorandums and briefing books were seldom printed out and delivered to his house or hotel room, aides said. They were simply sent to his BlackBerry for his review. If a document was too long, he would read and respond from his laptop computer, often putting his editing changes in red type.

His messages to advisers and friends, they say, are generally crisp, properly spelled and free of symbols or emoticons. The time stamps provided a window into how much he was sleeping on a given night, with messages often being sent to staff members at 1 a.m. or as late as 3 a.m. if he was working on an important speech.

He received a scaled-down list of news clippings, with his advisers wanting to keep him from reading blogs and news updates all day long, yet aides said he still seemed to hear about nearly everything in real time. A network of friends -- some from college, others from Chicago and various chapters in his life -- promised to keep him plugged in.

Not having such a ready line to that network, staff members who spent countless hours with him say, is likely to be a challenge.

"Given how important it is for him to get unfiltered information from as many sources as possible, I can imagine he will miss that freedom," said Linda Douglass, a senior adviser who traveled on the campaign plane for months.

Obama has, for at least brief moments, been forced offline. As he sat down with a small circle of advisers to prepare for debates with Sen. John McCain, one rule was quickly established: No BlackBerrys.

Axelrod ordered everyone to put their devices in the center of a table during work sessions. Obama, who was known to sneak a peek at

his, was no exception.

In the closing stages of the campaign, as exhaustion set in and the workload increased, aides said Obama spent more time reading than responding to messages. As his transition team prepares a final judgment on whether he can keep using e-mail, perhaps even in a limited read-only fashion, several authorities in presidential communication said they believed it was highly unlikely that he would be able to do so.

Diana Owen, who leads the American Studies program at Georgetown University, said presidents were not advised to use e-mail because of security risks and fear that messages could be intercepted.

"They could come up with some bulletproof way of protecting his e-mail and digital correspondence, but anything can be hacked," said Owen, who has studied how presidents communicate in the Internet era.

"The nature of the president's job is that others can use e-mail for him."

She added: "It's a time burner. It might be easier for him to say, 'I can't be on e-mail.' "

Should Obama want to break ground and become the first president to fire off e-mail messages from the West Wing and wherever he travels, he could turn to Al Gore as a model. In the later years of his vice presidency, Democrats said, Gore used a government e-mail address and a campaign address in his race against Bush.

The president, though, faces far greater public scrutiny. And even if he does not wear a BlackBerry on his belt or carry a cell phone in his pocket, he almost certainly will not lack from a variety of new communication.

On Saturday, as Obama broadcast the weekly Democratic radio address, it came with a twist. For the first time, it was also videotaped and will be archived on YouTube.

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