Message on the Observance of Presidents' Day, 1995

February 16, 1995

Greetings to Americans across the country celebrating Presidents' Day, 1995. As citizens gather to reflect upon our nation's rich history, I am proud to salute our former Presidents for the legacy of leadership they have built in this nation.

From the bold example of George Washington to the timeless courage of Abraham Lincoln—the Presidents whose birthdays we commemorate today—each President, in his own way, has sought to use the power of the American government to make our country better, stronger, and truer to the ideals of its charter. Fueled by the mission of our nation's citizens, Presidents of each generation have aspired to serve the common good, recognizing that whether we Americans choose to rise or fall, move forward or backward, we will all do so together. On this special occasion, and in honor of that great tradition, I ask each of you to join in rededicating yourselves to maintaining the freedoms we hold most dear, for ourselves and for the generations to come.

Best wishes for a wonderful holiday celebration.

William J. Clinton

NOTE: This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Interview With Brian Lamb of C–SPAN

February 17, 1995

Former U.S. Presidents

Mr. Lamb. Mr. President, we're talking in and around President's Day, so I want to see if you could tell us the purpose of having this little thing on your desk that involves another President—"Dewey Defeats Truman."

The President. Well, of course, that's the famous headline from the Chicago Tribune. I got it when I was in Independence, Missouri, at the Truman Library. And I'm a big admirer of President Truman. He was my neighbor—you know, Arkansas and Missouri border each other—and I always—I like having that on my desk. It reminds me that things are not always what they seem and that it's important to keep fighting. I look at it every day; I have it right there on the desk.

Mr. Lamb. If you could talk to any past President—and I know you just got off the golf links with a couple of them—who would it be, and what would you want to talk to him about?

The President. Well, it's difficult to say which one President I would talk to. For myself, personally, I would talk to Lincoln because I admired him so much, personally, and because I believe he grew so much in the job. His personal growth in the job was extraordinary, and his ability to distill all the forces at work into clear and powerful language was so great.

But there are others. Jefferson, I would like to speak with because he carried around in his very soul the ideals of the Founders. And he found himself in the same position to some extent I find myself in, in a very different historical context, in that he believed deeply in limited Government, he didn't want Government to oppress people, but he felt that there were occasions in which the national interest demanded a level of activism.

In Jefferson's case, he purchased Louisiana, for example, which cost the equivalent of one year's Federal budget. So I think Jefferson understood the kind of complexity that we're facing today. He had a fertile, complex mind, and he understood how to reconcile the bedrock principles and apply

them to the facts of the case at hand, and I like that.

I wish I could have a long conversation with Truman, because the time we're living in today somewhat parallels the period after the Second World War in the sense that we're going through a period of transition, things are being redefined, the size of the Government is being reduced, but there's still a mission for the Federal Government to advance the cause of ordinary citizens in America. There is a new security reality in the world, and we have to adapt to that. So the times that we live in now are quite a lot like those times.

Mr. Lamb. Do you read the Presidents now, since you've been in the White House—their words?

The President. Yes, I just read—interestingly enough, I just read Benjamin Thomas' biography of Lincoln, which was written in the fifties, I think. And it's a biography I had never read. You see over there on my desk I've got a new biography of Jefferson, the Randall biography of Jefferson I'm about to get into.

I just read Doris Kearns Goodwin's magnificent biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt during the war, ''No Ordinary Time.'' It's a terrific book. So I read quite a bit about it. I read August Heckscher's biography of Woodrow Wilson last year, something which I should have read before, I guess, but I had never gotten around to reading.

Mr. Lamb. As you're reading, do you delve in and see yourself in any of those positions and learn anything that you can change, or is that another period?

The President. Of course you do. You can't help imagining how you would have done in their time, how they would do in your time, what strengths did they have that you could perhaps develop, what errors did they make that you could perhaps avoid, how different is it?

Mr. Lamb. What's the first thing you'd ask Jack Kennedy if you could talk to him today?

The President. I would ask for his advice about what we could do to restore at least a measure of the optimism and the sense of trust that existed when he became President, because he had more space, in some ways, to govern and to be President, even though there were terrific conflicts. In fact, he had much more difficulty with the Congress than I did in the 2 previous years. But there was a sense of confidence in the American people and a sense of trust in their elected leaders and a willingness to look at things in a more balanced way, I think, than exists today. And I would ask for his advice about how we could get some of that back.

Mr. Lamb. Did you change your mind at all about F.D.R. after you read Doris Kearns Goodwin's book?

The President. No, I just appreciated him more. I was sad for him in a way, personally. I was sad—I knew that his life was somewhat difficult and that Mrs. Roosevelt's was. But they had a remarkable positive impact on this country, and I'm grateful for that. But I didn't change my opinion of him. He was, in many ways, the most adroit politician who ever occupied this office. And he was a person who was fortunate enough to be there at the right time for him. The country sometimes brings us the right people for the right times, and he was, I think, really perfectly suited, temperamentally and by means of experience, to the times in which he governed.

Mr. Lamb. You know, a lot is written about the criticism of you at this point in your Presidency. When you read the history, do you find that other Presidents were hit about by their critics as much as you are?

The President. Well, they were subject to the same criticism, but it didn't—by and large, it wasn't nearly as intense or public. There wasn't as much news. And the news rules were different then; they were different.

I suppose Jefferson——

Mr. Lamb. Like what?

The President. Well, they just didn't have the—you know, Roosevelt could have off-the-record press conferences. Roosevelt could debate matters and take months deciding issues without having 100 commentarians talk about how indecisive he was.

I got tickled the other day—I read an analysis of decisionmaking and record that was done in ''The American Prospect,'' which said that I was—in which the author argued that I was much more decisive in difficult

situations than President Roosevelt had been early on in his term and that I had paid a bigger political price for it, in other words, arguing that Roosevelt was viewed as being sly and canny. But that's just—part of it is just the times, you know, the times change. And the nature of coverage of politics today and the sort of instantaneous commentary about every issue and the obsession with process over product and with politics over policy, I think these things just give a President less space. They require you to affect an almost arbitrary way of decisionmaking because of the heavy tilt in the way your decisions are characterized to the American people.

Mr. Lamb. There have been a half dozen books already written about Presidency.

The President. It's crazy.

Mr. Lamb. The latest one was the David Maraniss book.

The President. It's just crazy. I mean, how can you possibly reflect on someone—I mean, you know, I've given a lot of thought to—that's another thing, Kennedy had Arthur Schlesinger in the White House, you know. But you didn't have people out there writing books about his administration until it was over, until they had some time to reflect and get some fairness or balance in it. It's amazing now, it's sort of—it's just the difference in the time in which we live.

Mr. Lamb. Do you read any of those books?

The President. What I—normally I look at them. I don't spend a lot of time reading them just because I think that what I need to be doing is, I need to focus on today and tomorrow. I can't do anything about yesterday. And particularly if I read a little and I think, you know, somebody's got an angle and a line, and all the facts are going to fit into the angle and the line, I try to figure out what that is, and then I just go on and go about my business.

Golf Tournament With Former Presidents

Mr. Lamb. I've got the Christian Science Monitor here from Friday, and they've got a picture of you on the front page with George Bush. And then they have an editorial "Presidents and the Links," and this one line I wanted to ask you about. It says, "He at least appears as though he's enjoying the job" now. The "now" is mine, but that's the essence of what they're saying. Are you——

The President. Absolutely.

Mr. Lamb. ——enjoying it?

The President. Yes, I had a great time. And I had a great time out there playing golf with President Ford and President Bush and Bob Hope. Even though it was the worst golf game I've had in about 3 years, I still had a great time.

Q. What did you talk about?

The President. We talked about golf and what was going on. We talked a little about Bob Hope and what an amazing man he was—astonishing that he could be 92 and out there playing golf. Still has a great swing, he made some great shots that day. It was all light and friendly. I think we share some common concerns about some of the issues being debated today. But I just thought it was inappropriate to bring it up on the golf course.

Mr. Lamb. So you didn't have any——

The President. No——

Mr. Lamb. ——didn't seek any advice or——

The President. Well, I do talk to them from time to time and ask their advice about other things. But on this occasion, it just seemed like we ought to be out there having fun. And the crowd was great. There was a vast crowd there. And they were very nice to all of us, and they wanted to talk and chat and visit. So it just wasn't an appropriate thing to discuss business.

I thought they needed the day off, and I knew I did. So we all took it.

The Media

Mr. Lamb. You talk about the, you know, being difficult when people are writing books about you and you're only in here 2 years. I brought with me a Time magazine cover story in January. One of your favorite people is on the cover, Rush Limbaugh. But inside there's an article by Bob Wright about hyperdemocracy. And the headline is, "Hyperdemocracy: Washington Isn't Dangerously Disconnected From The People; The Trouble May Be It's Too Plugged In."

What about that, just that headline? Is this whole town too plugged into every moment of your life?

The President. Well, there's something to be said for that. I mean, the argument is, of course, that every decision can become the subject of instant analysis and communications and that Congress can be paralyzed by a blizzard of faxes, not F-A-C-T-S, F-A-X-E-S. And that you can just have a stampede based on the emotion of the moment. I think there's something to that.

But Andrew Jackson once said that the cure for any problem of democracy was more democracy. I mean, you know, look what we're doing here. C–SPAN is exactly the reverse. It's plugged in, but you just cover everything the way it is, and people can make their judgments about Bill Clinton or Newt Gingrich or Bob Dole or whomever they wish to evaluate. And they can hear the ideas, they can assess the people.

And I think even, you know, talk radio can be a very positive thing if it's a conversation rather than a weapon. But our—I remember, I just went today, before this interview started, as you know, to the memorial service for Senator Fulbright. And I remember 20 years ago—and he's been gone from the Senate for 20 years—coming on his last campaign he was complaining about how the Members of the Congress then, by his standard, had to travel around too much, had to be almost too accessible, didn't have the time they needed to think and absorb and then discuss with their constituents in an unhurried way what the great issues of the day were. Well, that's 10 times more true today then it was then. So what I think we need to do is not recoil from the democracy, the hyperdemocracy, but try to work through the more irrational and destructive aspects of it to have a national conversation again.

You know, when I was running for President, we had all these town hall meetings, and I just loved them. And I—particularly when I attracted no notice, I never had to worry about whether I could have a meeting with 400 people and answer 40 questions, and then if one of them turned out to be controversial question, that would then be on the evening news. And 100 million people would see that, and only 400 would have heard the regular things. So I could go around and carry on this democracy. And we just have to find ways to do more of that and to show things whole and balanced and not twisted.

Presidential Debates

Mr. Lamb. As you know, we were a part of reenacting the Lincoln-Douglas debates this last summer.

The President. It was great.

Mr. Lamb. But it was 3 hours. Could you ever see yourself, either in a conversation or in a debate, spending 3 hours with an opponent or somebody that you could go through the issues with?

The President. Oh, sure. I don't know if people would watch it that long, but I think they would watch them for an hour. Look at the Presidential debates in the election. They were watched for a long time. And I think, you know, having discussions with people, including people of different perspectives, I think it would be a very good thing. And the American people would get a good feel for it.

Mr. Lamb. Where you'd have just two people instead of a moderator?

The President. Sure, I could conceive of that. You know the—I met Lincoln and Douglas, your Lincoln and Douglas, came to Galesburg, Illinois, when I was there at Carl Sandburg Community College. And they warmed up the crowd for me. And I thought it was—you know, when they did that, they were both on an equal footing, they were both running for the Senate, and they both were speaking of issues that had both local and national impact. I think it did a great service to the country. I don't know that—as I said, I don't know how much of an audience you could get for a 3-hour debate now, but for an honest discussion, I think you could get a good hour.

Mr. Lamb. Right over your shoulder is a copy of the Lincoln-Douglas debates on your shelf over there.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Lamb. Have you every read them?

The President. I've never read the whole thing, but I've read extensive passages of them to try to understand the evolution of Lincoln's thinking, because he started with

the proposition that slavery should not expand. And even in his first Inaugural Address, he made a commitment not to try to abolish slavery. And then he, for a long time, had all kinds of legal problems about how much he could do and how far he could go.

My staff actually gave me that. You know, I collect old books about America. And in '93 for my birthday, my staff gave me the first campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln written in 1860. And then, last year, they gave me the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

The Presidency

Mr. Lamb. Based on what you've learned after being here 2 years and—assume you run again next time around, would you do something different?

There was a lot written, for instance, when you went on MTV and somebody asked you what kind of underwear you wore, and then for weeks afterwards, it was written about all the time. Are there things like that you're to avoid, or did that bother you?

The President. Oh, I think you have to avoid them. I think one of the things I would do is, I wouldn't stop doing these town meetings; I think they're important. But I would be much more careful before I do them, not to do them at a time when I'm very busy, preoccupied with other things, and maybe a little overtired. Because then, sometimes you just simply answer questions when you shouldn't or you say things you shouldn't say.

I think with the Presidency, there is a fine line which has to be walked between being really responsive to people and listening to them and not giving up the dignity and strength of the office. So I would—you know, I have a much greater appreciation now than I did before I took this office about the symbolic impact of every word you say and everything you do.

It isn't like being a Governor, for example, where people really do have a chance to see you as a whole person and evaluate your whole record, and they don't necessarily look for great, symbolic significance in everything you say or every suit you wear or, you know, that sort of stuff. When you're President, you're just so far removed, on the one hand, from the people and, on the other hand, you bear the responsibility of carrying the idea of America. So it requires a different level of care and understanding, and it's something I've learned quite a lot about, I think, in the last 2 years.

The Media

Mr. Lamb. Back to that piece in Time magazine. Bob Reich quotes a lot of Madison, and the issue is whether or not this is a representative Government or whether it's a direct democracy. And back to this theme of hyperdemocracy, is it anywhere close to being ungovernable with all this attention every day to——

The President. I wouldn't say that, but one of the frustrations is that what is going on—in a funny way, you don't have either one. Because if you had direct democracy, at least people would then want to take real time and have real debates and assume real responsibility. But what happened—what is happening often now, particularly to us in the first 2 years, where the Democrats had the Congress but not a controlling majority—that is, the Republicans could kill anything but a budget in the Senate—and I was in the Presidency, the culture of criticism took over. I mean, if the people could say anything and not have to be responsible and not even be held accountable, and very often the mainstream media even would not pay any attention to what was being said on talk radio or by my political opponents, because after all, it didn't affect decisions. But the impact of this was that the people tended to understand the criticism more than the record of what was done. It's an almost stunning disconnect between what you're actually doing and what is being talked about and understood out there.

So that's why I say the cure for this is not to try to undo it. You can't undo it. You can't go back the other way and abolish technology and abolish opportunities to communicate. We have to look at where we are now as a stop along the way, and we have to keep working through it, so that people don't just use their information as an instrument of anger and frustration and so they know when they're being manipulated by people who have an axe to grind and they have access to things they care about, to hear both sides, evaluate the facts, and then go forward.

So we just have to keep working through it, and we'll get there.

The President's Accomplishments

Mr. Lamb. This Parade Magazine—I don't know if you've had a chance to see your picture——

The President. I saw the copy. It comes out Sunday, I think.

Mr. Lamb. It does, and by the time people hear this, they will have already read it, but there was just one line in there I wanted to ask you to explain. You said, ''I think we did a good job of doing things,'' meaning your first 2 years, ''but not a very good job of communicating.'' What do you mean by that, and how can you improve that?

The President. Well, I think in some ways we did almost—you might argue we did too many things. But when I say I think we did a good job of doing things, I think it's quite obvious. You know, we passed the biggest deficit reduction package in history. We passed the biggest expansion of trade in history. We had, therefore, a major positive impact on the growth of the economy and almost 6 million new jobs.

We had, in 1994, the best year for educational opportunity in 30 years, with expansion of Head Start and apprenticeships for young people who don't go to college and more affordable college loans for millions of people. We passed the family leave bill. We passed a major crime bill. We launched a rigorous effort to reinvent Government so that we were not only creating opportunities for Americans, but we were actually downsizing the Government, reducing regulation, reducing the size and burden of Government, giving more power to the States, everything the Republicans said they were going to run on, things we did.

And along the way, 15 million American families with incomes of under $25,000 a year or less got an average tax reduction of $1,000. And people didn't know those things, and in many surveys when people were given those facts, they just refused to believe it. They said, ''That's just not true. If that had happened, I would know it.''

Mr. Lamb. How do you break through, then?

The President. I think—that doesn't mean I didn't make any mistakes, and I don't want that to be read—I mean, I think I have also made mistakes. But on balance our record was very, very strong, and it was only the third time since World War II that a Congress had enacted over 80 percent of a President's initiatives in 2 years—only happened three times since World War II. And I don't believe any American that's counter to the experience of—Americans, when they hear it they say, ''Well, why don't I know that?'' I think that when you get into the business of making decisions and taking responsibility, if you're not careful you become the captive of the language of incumbency, and you look like a defender of government even though you're trying your best to change it and warring against the forces you don't agree with. And I think when you do a lot of things, then as soon as you lay down one fight, you take up another, and there's not enough time to really impress upon the American people what has been done.

I also think that one weakness I had was that I didn't easily keep the language of my campaign in the office of the Presidency, particularly in the first year. I think I did exactly what I said I'd do, and one Presidential scholar says I've kept a higher percentage of my commitments than the last five Presidents have averaged keeping theirs.

But I think that there is an enormous obligation on the President, again, in an atmosphere of hyperdemocracy and also, quite apart from politics, hyperinformation—you think about just the blizzard of stuff coming at the average American voter every day, and the average America voter is working harder, sleeping less, more stressed out, buried in information—to get a message through there requires enormous discipline and focus and concentration. And I simply believe that I've spent massive amounts of my time and effort trying to get things done, which was my first job. But I didn't organize and deploy the resource properly to make sure that we had communicated what we had done and how it fit into the vision that I ran for President to pursue.

Then of course, when we got into the health care debate and we had all that vast array of resources against us, telling the

American people I was trying to have the Government take over the health care system and all that kind of stuff. It wasn't true, but that's what they were told. That cut against the image that I was trying to reduce the size of Government and expand opportunity while shrinking bureaucracy, which was the message I ran for President on.

Former Presidents and Reelection

Mr. Lamb. This is an amateur count, so those professional counters out there may get me on this one, but I counted last night that there have been 11 Presidents, out of 41 men, who have been elected to 2 terms and served those 2 terms. The law of averages there aren't very good, one in four.

The President. They've gotten worse here lately, I mean, in the last——

Mr. Lamb. Yes.

The President. That tends to go up and down. If you look at it, in wartime we tend to stick with the people that we've got, and that's Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt. And we tend to stick with war heroes, Grant and Eisenhower. And then when times are good, we tend to reelect when people feel good, when people feel secure; that's Kennedy, Johnson. You know, if Kennedy had lived, I believe he would have been reelected, but it's the Kennedy-Johnson thing. Truman defied the odds, because he was coming at the end of the New Deal, he was in a period of historic change when people were disoriented and looking for a new way. He did it by staying at the job, doing the task at hand, and then fighting like crazy.

But I think if you go back, Teddy Roosevelt did it by being relevant, vigorous and relevant, to the times in which he lived. He didn't serve two full terms, but you know, he did serve 7 years, virtually two terms.

So I think the lesson is, it has a lot to do with the times in which you live and a lot to do with how people feel about those times. But I can't worry about that. What I've tried to do in my public life is to help people make the most of their own lives and to deal with the challenges of the moment. And that's what I'm trying to do now.

The President's Message

Mr. Lamb. Based on your experience watching what happened over the 2 years, when does your message get through the best, at what kind of thing you do—either an Oval Office speech here, a speech out on the hustings, an appearance on a television show? What have you found?

The President. Well, the State of the Unions. There's no question they're far and away the best, because that's the only time the President has to talk about all the things that he's doing and put it into some context. So I don't think there's any question that those audiences are listening and giving you a shot and listening to you.

I like the prime time press conferences. I have talked to the Nation on occasion, as you know, on national television when we did Haiti and when I spoke in December about how I was going to try to relate to the new Congress and what kind of tax relief I would propose for the middle class, that I wanted to tie it to education so we could raise people's incomes in the long run and not just have a tax cut. But on balance, I would say the State of the Union.

I love the town hall meetings, and they're the best forum, because you have an honest dialog with people. But in candor, the difficulty with the town hall meetings is, if there are 40 questions and 38 are positive and 2 are negative and you're slightly off, the real hazard of the town hall meetings is that one then becomes the evening news story and 100 million people hear one thing and then maybe one million people hear the town hall meeting.

I like doing more of those, though, because it's good for me. It reminds me it's too easy for Presidents to get isolated and see all issues in terms of their combatants. Most Americans are not combatants, they want you to be fighting for them and so I like those.

State of the Union Address

Mr. Lamb. Did you know, by the way, that speech was going to be an hour and 21 minutes long?

The President. No, it should have been about my standard length. We thought it would be about 45 minutes, 50 minutes.

Mr. Lamb. How did it get so long?

The President. Well, for one thing, they were very nice to me. The Congress was much more receptive than I thought they'd be. I think there were 90 interruptions, and it added a little more time than I thought. And then I think I probably—at the end, I was so exuberant about all those people I probably maybe elongated it a little bit, you know, talking about the folks at the end. I wanted them to come because they symbolize what I think is important here.

You know, in this time where we've got to create more opportunity and have more responsibility, the Government can only do so much. We can expand opportunity. We can shrink bureaucracy. We can empower people to make more of their own lives. We can enhance security through being tough on crime at home and taking care of foreign policy concerns. But we need a different sort of citizen action. We need more people who are engaged and who are involved, so that the hyperdemocracy, to use your phrase, become a positive force, not a negative one. So it's not just composed of people who are either political couch potatoes on the one hand or inflamed about one issue on the other, but by people who are really trying to engage their fellow citizens, and that's why I did that at the end.

1996 Election

Mr. Lamb. Go back to when you're talking about all of the different Presidents and the different scenarios. What kind of a scenario do you think yours will be when you run again, and will people be saying, oh, he's doing the Truman strategy or he's doing the Eisenhower strategy or——

The President. I don't know, I think it would be a mistake to draw too tight an historical analogy. This time bears some relationship to Truman's time. But it is very different in many ways, too, in terms of what the issues are and the facts are and the political forces. But the larger historical fact is there, that it's still a period of great change. It depends on what happens, partly, this year. You know, I'm making a good-faith effort to work with this new Congress; I think that's what the American people want me to do. And a lot of what they want to do are things I want to do. I want to downsize the Government. I want to reduce the burden of unnecessary regulation. I want to have more discipline in the budget. So I don't have any problem with that.

But I don't want to do things that will undermine the economic recovery, undermine the ability of the President to protect the national security interests of the country. And most importantly, I don't want to do things that will undermine our responsibilities to try to give middle class people economic opportunity and educational opportunity and give poor people the opportunity to work themselves into the middle class.

So I think what happens this year will dictate, to some extent, what happens in the election. You know, I'm going to keep doing what I said I'd do when I ran in '92. I'm going to try to keep moving the country forward. I'm going to try to be less partisan. The biggest disappointment, I guess, in the first 2 years I had was how bitterly, bitterly partisan it turned out to be.

The image I think the people had was that the Democrats weren't necessarily sticking with me in the Congress. But the facts are that they voted with me more loyally than they voted for Kennedy or Johnson or Carter, something that would again, I think, based on the coverage I think would surprise people.

The Republicans opposed me more than any opposition party had opposed any President since World War II. And they were rewarded for it because of the times in which we live and maybe because I didn't make the best case I could have to the American people or maybe because of the things that happened in the congressional races.

But now, that's water under the bridge, and we've got a country to see after. We've got a people to attend to, to work with, to challenge. So I hope it'll be less partisan.

Presidential Libraries

Mr. Lamb. About out of time. Let me just ask you a couple of off-the-subject questions. The last time we were here, I asked you about Presidential libraries and whether you had thought much about that. And you said no, but since then I understand that you've had somebody out and about checking out

the other libraries. Have you got any plans yet?

The President. Well, I expect to have one, but that's all I can say about it. I mean, I like the idea of them; I think they've served the country well. I've been at President Nixon's for his service. I've been at President Carter's. I've been at President Johnson's. And I strongly support the concept.

I did talk briefly to President Ford about that at the golf course; it was, I guess, the only substantive thing. He just mentioned to me that he sure thought the Archivist ought to be somebody that supported the Presidential library system. So I like them. But I'm worried about doing this job, and then I'll worry about what's in the library when I finish the job. But I believe in the system, and it's served the country well.

Of course, I've been to the Truman Library and the Roosevelt Library, so I guess I've been to most of them.

Mr. Lamb. We're out of time, and I thank you.

The President. Thank you. I enjoyed it.

NOTE: The interview began at 12:45 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House and was embargoed for release until 12:01 a.m. on February 19. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks at a Salute to African-American Veterans

February 17, 1995

Ladies and gentlemen, Secretary Perry, Secretary Brown, General Shalikashvili, General Powell, General Davison, Admiral Gravely, Ossie Davis, Colonel Earley.

I hate to throw any cold water on this magnificent night, but I'm just sitting here thinking whether as Commander in Chief I should dismiss or simply demote whoever it was who arranged for me to speak after Colonel Earley. [*Laughter*] If ever there was an embodiment of what we came here to celebrate tonight, if ever there was evidence that this celebration is occurring at least 50 years too late, it is Colonel Earley.

Tonight we celebrate the extraordinary history of patriotism of our Nation's African-American citizens, whose courage and devotion to country helped to raise the consciousness of a nation, and through years and decades and centuries to reverse a tragic legacy of discrimination. History records their great deeds, and we have honored them tonight.

We can only marvel at the dedication that they manifested year-in and year-out, war-in and war-out, from the first days of the Republic, in spite of all that they were denied under the Constitution and laws. In spite of being treated as second-class soldiers, segregated from their peers, with second-class training, too often with rifles that jammed or misfired, sometimes shamefully harassed by comrades, still they served.

Peter Salem, who fired the shot that killed the leader of the British forces at Bunker Hill served in the Revolutionary War. Sergeant Alfred Hilton, under the withering fire outside Richmond during the Civil War, picked up the Union flag from its fallen bearer and carried it further into battle until he, too, fell, mortally wounded. You should know that today that soldier's great-grandnephew, Steve Hilton, upholds his tradition of service to the country as a Captain in the Army Reserve and a member of the White House senior staff. The 369th Infantry Regiment in France during the First World War, whose French commander said they never lost a prisoner, a trench, or a foot of ground.

But it was during World War II, as we saw tonight, when our country was forced to marshal all its resources, to call forth every ounce of its strength, that African-Americans in our Armed Forces made contributions that would literally save the world from tyranny and change the course of our Nation at home.

Time and again, from the far reaches of the Pacific to the very heart of Europe, the more than one million African-Americans in uniform distinguished themselves as P–40 fighter pilots and Navy Seabees, Sherman tank drivers, orderlies, and engineers.

You've heard the stirring story of Dorie Miller, a steward aboard the USS *Arizona* at Pearl Harbor, who saw his captain fall wounded and pulled him to safety. And then despite the fire, he manned a machine gun and downed two enemy planes.

At Iwo Jima, the African-American Marines of the 16th Field Depot, working as