Remarks on Vetoing Departments of Interior, Veterans Affairs, and Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

December 18, 1995

The President. Good morning, everyone. The Republican Congress has shut down the Federal Government because they haven't passed a budget for this year and because they want to make the price of opening the Government up my acceptance of 7 long years of unacceptable cuts in health care, education, and the environment, in research and technology, cuts that are not necessary to balancing the budget and will have an adverse effect on our way of life and on the strength of our economy.

It is wrong for the Congress to shut the Government down just to make a political point the week before Christmas. It is unfair to the American people and unfair to the public employees. This is a season of peace, and it should be a season of cooperation, not rancor or threats. Congress should reopen the Government. I am ready to work with them to balance the budget in a way that reflects our values and that is consistent with the resolution to which we both agreed when the Government was reopened a few weeks ago.

So I call on Congress to reopen the Government, to come back to the negotiating table to resume discussions on finding common ground. We have to balance this budget in a way that reflects our values and our obligations to our children.

The ultimate test of any budget is what kind of world it leaves for future generations. If we balance the budget without investing in our children or protecting their environment, it means we are really borrowing from the next generation without ever paying them back. Protecting the environment is one of the most important ways to uphold this value. We want to pass on to our children the good Earth God gave us. We want to give them the opportunity we enjoy. We want to safeguard their health. Then any budget must ensure strong protection of the environment.

These science students who are with me today from Jefferson Middle School in Virginia have done a lot of work on the environment. They have helped to reduce energy use at their school. They have promoted recycling at home and at school. They know that the decisions that we make today will affect them and our Nation in the future. We owe it to them to put partisanship aside and to work in their interest to balance the budget in a way that protects the environment.

I say again, when I agreed a few weeks ago to work with the Congress to balance the budget in 7 years, Congress committed to a budget that protects the environment. These bills that I have to veto today I do because they do not meet that test. For 25 years, leaders of both parties have recognized that our country is stronger when we control pollution and protect public health. Environmental protection is not, or at least it never has been until now, a partisan issue. It's an American issue. It's an American issue outside Washington. But Republicans in this Congress have attempted to roll back decades of bipartisan environmental protection. It's wrong, and I cannot permit it to happen.

They have sent me legislation that would give our children less clean drinking water, less safe food, dirtier air. If I sign these bills, I would be condemning more than 10 million children under the age of 12 to living near toxic waste sites that might not be cleaned up for years. Therefore, in the interest of our children I am vetoing these measures because they would cripple these kinds of environmental protections.

The bill that funds the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, would cut enforcement by 25 percent and pull the cop from the pollution beat. There would be a 45 percent cut in safe-and-clean-drinking-water aid to local governments. The bill that funds the Department of the Interior would endanger some of our most precious natural resources. It would permit clearcutting in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, and it would undercut our newest national park, the Mojave National Preserve in California, the largest addition to the park system in the lower 48 States.

I'm vetoing the bills not only because of the impact they have on the environment that we leave our children but also because

of other things they do that violate our values. They completely eliminate the national service program, which has been very successful and is broadly supported by people across partisan lines and communities all across America. They cut innovative programs for economic development in our cities, the area which has been left most untouched by the economic recovery of the last 3 years. They drastically, drastically cut services for Native Americans, and they cut health care for veterans. None of these things are necessary to balance the budget.

Let me be clear: It is time to finish the job of passing a budget for this year, and I am eager to work with the Congress to reach agreement on a balanced budget plan. We should be able quickly to reach agreement on how to fund the Government for the months to come.

I have made a specific compromise offer to finish this year's budget so we can get the Government working for the people. Then we can resolve our larger differences over how best to balance the budget consistent with our values. We owe it to our children and their children to do both these things. We do need to balance the budget, and I am committed to doing it.

I would remind you that we've cut the budget deficit in half since we've been here, and I want to go all the way. But doing things that weaken our environment is not the way to balance the budget and is directly contradictory to the resolution that both the Congress and I agreed upon just a few weeks ago.

So I'm going to sign the veto messages, and then I'll answer a few of your questions.

[*At this point, the President signed the veto messages.*]

Budget Impasse

Q. Have you been in touch with the Republican leadership today, and is there a chance of any kind of a meeting and is there any chance of bringing workers back to work?

The President. Well, I expect to talk to them today, and I look forward to that. And I'm going to do what I can to make some suggestions about how we can begin our talks. And I hope that they will—they will agree to put the Government back in business. That, of course, is a decision within their domain. I think it's always a mistake to shut the Government down.

We should go back to the ordinary, constitutional way of dealing with this. I have dealt with them in good faith. I will continue to do so. I worked all weekend, continued to work all weekend, on budgetary matters. I have spent an enormous amount of my time as President trying to get rid of the deficit and invest in our future at the same time. There is no doubt—we have differences of opinion about how to do it, but there's no doubt that I want to do it. And I think that this shutting the Government down is just wrong. It's not right for the American people, it's not necessary, and it's not part of the ordinary, constitutional way of doing things around here.

Q. Mr. President, do you have a 7-year—a new 7-year proposal that balances the budget using CBO numbers?

The President. Well, I want to talk to the leadership, Mr. Blitzer [Wolf Blitzer, Cable News Network], about what we're going to say today, and then we'll be glad to answer questions after that.

Q. When do you think it will happen that you'll talk to them?

The President. Soon. Pretty soon. I've got to work out the times.

Q. Are they going to come over here do you think?

The President. I don't know.

Q. Senator Dole says that if he and you and Speaker Gingrich could just sit down together for a few hours you could work this problem out pretty rapidly.

The President. I think that is possible. It requires—all three of us have to want to. But I want to.

Q. Why not do it?

The President. But we've all got to come in, and we've got to be flexible and we've got to look at what we're doing. I mean, you know, you mentioned the CBO—one of the things that the resolution said was that there would be extensive consultation with OMB and with the private sector. This budget of theirs now predicts a recession at 7 years. Now, how in the world they could know there's going to be one in year 6 and 7 is beyond me, but I believe if we were to bal-

ance the budget, particularly if we continue to invest in education and research and technology, it would grow the economy. It would get interest rates down; it would grow the economy.

They gave us a new set of assumptions which now has higher unemployment and higher interest rates, even with low inflation. I don't know how you can predict inflation goes down and interest rates go up. So—and, you know, I realize to a lot of Americans this may sound like just haggling or numbers, or whatever, but there are people behind these numbers.

In this budget there are Native American children who won't get health care. In this budget there are serious, serious erosions in environmental protection. There are people—there are human interests here. We have to be careful as we do this. We cannot pretend that all these numbers are the same and it's just a political deal. This is not about politics; this is a very, very serious discussion. We are going to make some tough decisions, and we have to do it with a very great level of sensitivity about the impact of our decisions on people.

Q. ——your problems, some of your problems with the new CBO assumptions. Is it possible to protect your priorities and come up with a 7-year plan, according to their new forecast?

The President. Well, it depends on what kind of control mechanisms we have. It's conceivable. But I need to talk to them about that. And I intend to talk to them about it. I have no—and I'm not playing games with you. I just want to have my conversation with them first. I owe that to them. I don't want to carry on a war in the press over this. I would like it very much if we could just sit down and work through this.

But I sure think—it's Christmas week; they ought to open the Government again. That's the least we can do for the American people that have—you know, this is the only time of the year some people have to come here to Washington. And we've got a lot of Federal employees that don't need to lose a paycheck this week. They've got Christmas shopping to do; they've got things to do. I just think we ought to do it.

Q. Why do they keep saying you're not telling the truth?

The President. I don't know. You'll have to ask them that. I haven't—you know, I've tried to be very careful in this whole debate to deal with the specific facts and not to do characterizations like that. We have very different views, but if you read this—go back and read the resolution we agreed to. We agreed to strive to do our best to reach a 7-year balanced budget that the CBO would certify as balanced after consulting with OMB and with the private sector, that would protect the environment, would protect education, would protect agriculture and other things, and would invest in a way that really protected Medicare and Medicaid. And so we have certain standards to meet.

This is not easy to do; nobody ever pretended it would be easy to do. But I have been working to do it and often I've felt that I was working only with myself. But over the weekend, we worked hard. We tried to involve more of the Democrats in the effort. We tried to—Mr. Panetta went up to see that bipartisan group of Senators. And I am eager to meet and discuss this with Senator Dole and with the Speaker.

But we ought to open the Government. We owe that to the American people. It's Christmas week. We need to open the Government and then work this out. We can do it.

Q. Is the key their cutting their tax cut proposal and your coming up with additional savings on Medicare and Medicaid?

The President. Well, that may be the key from their point of view. The key from my point of view is that there's got to be—there has to be funds—funds have to go back into the Medicare and Medicaid programs and into education and the environment and research and technology.

You know, I don't want—you can burden—we would burden future generations with the debt if we don't balance the budget. But we also will burden future generations if we don't protect the environment and we don't invest in education, research, and technology. And we just—on pure human terms, we cannot have this level of health care cuts.

So we're going to have to work this out. But I think it can be done, but we don't—

they should open the Government, and I will work with them to get this done.

Speaker of the House Gingrich

Q. How do you feel about fellow Time magazine man of the year?

The President. I think he's had a big impact on events. That's the standard. That's it.

Q. Thank you.

The President. Thank you very much.

Q. Thank you. Merry Christmas. Where did you get that tie?

The President. Someone gave it to me. It's one of my Christmas ties. You know, I try to wear one every day for the last 12 days before Christmas.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:40 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1996

December 18, 1995

To the House of Representatives:

I am returning herewith without my approval H.R. 1977, the ''Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1996.''

This bill is unacceptable because it would unduly restrict our ability to protect America's natural resources and cultural heritage, promote the technology we need for long-term energy conservation and economic growth, and provide adequate health, educational, and other services to Native Americans.

First, the bill makes wrong-headed choices with regard to the management and preservation of some of our most precious assets. In the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, it would allow harmful clear-cutting, require the sale of timber at unsustainable levels, and dictate the use of an outdated forest plan for the next 2 fiscal years.

In the Columbia River basin in the Pacific Northwest, the bill would impede implementation of our comprehensive plan for managing public lands—the Columbia River Basin Ecosystem Management Project. It would do this by prohibiting publication of a final Environmental Impact Statement or Record of Decision and requiring the exclusion of information on fisheries and watersheds. The result: a potential return to legal gridlock on timber harvesting, grazing, mining, and other economically important activities.

And in the California desert, the bill undermines our designation of the Mojave National Preserve by cutting funding for the Preserve and shifting responsibility for its management from the National Park Service to the Bureau of Land Management. The Mojave is our newest national park and part of the 1994 California Desert Protection Act—the largest addition to our park system in the lower 48 States. It deserves our support.

Moreover, the bill would impose a misguided moratorium on future listings and critical habitat designations under the Endangered Species Act. And in the case of one endangered species, the marbled murrelet, it would eliminate the normal flexibility for both the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to use new scientific information in managing our forests.

Second, the bill slashes funding for the Department of Energy's energy conservation programs. This is short-sighted and unwise. Investment in the technology of energy conservation is important for our Nation's long-term economic strength and environmental health. We should be doing all we can to maintain and sharpen our competitive edge, not back off.

Third, this bill fails to honor our historic obligations toward Native Americans. It provides inadequate funding for the Indian Health Service and our Indian Education programs. And the cuts targeted at key programs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs are crippling—including programs that support child welfare; adult vocational training; law enforcement and detention services; community fire protection; and general assistance to low-income Indian individuals and families. Moreover, the bill would unfairly single out certain self-governance tribes in Washington State for punitive treatment. Specifically, it would penalize these tribes financially for