110,000 grassroots members from across the United States and the Island of Puerto Rico, I thank you. I particularly want to thank you also on behalf of the State director of the State of Arkansas, Mr. Ben Rodriguez——

The President. My long-time friend.

Ms. Robles. ——and the membership of your native State.

The President. Thank you. Tell him I said hello. Bless you.

Ms. Robles. He's here in the audience, sir. He's listening to you.

The President. Hello, Ben. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:12 a.m. by satellite from Room 459 of the Old Executive Office Building to the meeting in California. In his remarks, he referred to Belen Robles, president, and Mickie Luna, district director, San Bernardino; and Hector Flores, vice president, Southwest, League of United Latin American Citizens.

Remarks on Signing the Drug-Free Communities Act of 1997 and an Exchange With Reporters

June 27, 1997

The President. Let me, first of all, say to you, Congressman Portman, and to Congressman Levin and Congressman Hastert and, in his absence, Congressman Rangel, and to the Senators who worked on this, this is a very important day for this legislation because it does reflect our commitment in Washington to behave in the way that people in communities behave when they do what works in fighting the drug problem, and I cannot thank you enough.

This is—the fact that we did this in a bipartisan fashion, and we did it, to use Congressman Portman's words, based on trying to legislate nationally a system not only to empower people to do what we know works in some communities today already but to give them the incentive to do more of it, is, I think, a great thing. So I thank the Congressmen for being here. I thank the members of the Cabinet for their support. I thank Jim Kopple, the president of the Community Antidrug Coalitions of America; Dick Bonnette, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America; and all the rest of you who are here.

Now, before I sign this bill, I have to make a couple of comments about—this has been a very interesting week of momentous decisions by the Supreme Court. Today the Supreme Court issued a ruling on the Brady bill. And since I have been so heavily identified with that for several years now, I'd like to make a few comments.

The decision struck down the requirement that local police officers conduct background checks but left intact the Brady bill's 5-day waiting period. Since the Brady bill passed, 250,000 felons, fugitives, and mentally unstable persons have been stopped from purchasing handguns. I don't think anyone can seriously question that it has made a major contribution to increasing the safety of the American people. And I'm going to do everything I can to make sure that we continue to keep guns out of the hands of people who should not have them.

These criminal background checks make good sense; they save lives. Now 27 States, 9 more than when the Brady bill first passed, have State laws requiring them, and they will continue to do the background checks. Even in other States, criminal background checks will continue. The Brady law was drafted by our law enforcement community; they wanted it. Again, it was a community-based resolution of a difficult problem. So I know that these State and local law enforcement officials who asked us to pass the law will continue to do the background checks.

I've asked Attorney General Reno and Secretary Rubin to contact police departments across our country to make sure they know that the background checks can and should continue to be done by local police on a voluntary basis. And then the Attorney General and Secretary Rubin will immediately convene a meeting of law enforcement officers to review and develop recommendations, including appropriate legislation, to ensure that we can continue to perform these background checks. It's my understanding that the Supreme Court actually made some suggestions about how we might proceed from here.

My goal is clear: No criminal background check, no handgun anywhere in America. No State should become a safe haven for criminals who want to buy handguns.

We know that—again, I say, tremendous progress has been made. The idea that 250,000 of these sales and transfers have been stopped is a very impressive thing in just a few years, and I think it clearly contributed to the largest drop in violent crime in over 35 years last year, murders dropping a stunning 11 percent in 1996.

So we've got to keep going on this. And even though I wish we didn't have to do this extra work, I think the framework of the Court decision makes it clear that we have done the right thing, that the 5-day waiting period is legal. And let me remind you, as the Attorney General said, by November of 1998, which is not all that far away, we expect to have in place the technology and the capacity to do instantaneous background checks. Is that the date? So what we've got to do is figure out how to keep this system alive between now and November of '98. We are committed to doing it.

Let me just say another couple of words, if I might, about this legislation today and what it means to us. I think the Congressman said it's only a small part of our overall drug budget, but it clearly sends a signal that we are shifting emphasis not to diminish what were doing on interdiction and the other work that we have to do about drugs beyond our borders but to recognize that we will never get a hold of this problem unless we deal with the demand side here in America.

And we know that while casual drug use has plummeted over the last 15 years among adults, it has doubled among young people in just the last 5 years, and among eighth graders it has tripled. The fact that the percentage of total people trying drugs at that age level is small is cold comfort when you look at the trends and you ask yourself, how could these trends be running in direct contradiction to the fact that drug use is going down among people between the ages of 18 and 35? That is the real threat to our future. That is the problem we face today. And the quicker we face up to it the better off we're going to be.

A study by Columbia's Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse has shown, for example, that a young person who tries marijuana is 85 times more likely to try cocaine than peers who don't try marijuana in the first place. So a middle schooler or a high schooler who mistakenly decides that it's safe to try cocaine or heroine or LSD or methamphetamine or any of the so-called designer drugs, along with marijuana, is playing a dangerous game, and we have to try somehow to do more than we have done in the past to stop this. And we know that the broadly based community antidrug coalitions have been successful at driving down casual drug use. We know that they've been more successful than anyone else and then any other approach has been.

So what we're trying to do here is to find a way to support them, to encourage them to do more, and to increase the number of such coalitions throughout our country. We know that this has got to be done person by person, family by family, community by community. That's what this legislation does. More than 4,300 communities in every State in America and our territories have organized themselves to deal with this, to help parents, to help the teachers, the coaches, the principals, all the others who are fighting for drug-free schools and communities and a drug-free future for our children.

So this is the sort of partnership we need more of. Again, let me say I am immensely gratified by the bipartisan nature of this. I also would say, if you focus on the problem, which is why juvenile drug abuse is going up while young adult drug use is going down, and the whole impact of the culture on that, I think it justifies the policy that General McCaffrey adopted that I have supported him on of having an unprecedented advertising campaign to try to get the message out to these young people. And I certainly believe it supports our juvenile crime strategy of having 1,000 afterschool programs to give our young people positive things to do, because we know that a lot of the most difficult hours are those right after school closes for criminal activity and for casual drug use.

So the Drug-Free Communities Act of 1997 is not only a good thing, but I hope it is an indication of things to come.

The last point I'd like to make, just to echo what the Vice President said about the smoking issue, is I think that this settlement was a terrific achievement. It is the result of all the work that was done before then in the

public health community and the work that our administration had done. But we have to take a quick look—I mean, a careful look at it, and we will take a careful look at it. Secretary Shalala and my Domestic Policy Advisor, Bruce Reed, are heading a group that will consult with the public health community, will look at it carefully, and we will offer our judgments on it.

My preliminary take is that we do not want to paralyze the capacity of the FDA to protect the American people. That, to me, is the critical thing. And that in no way minimizes the enormous achievement of the attorneys general and the others who are involved in this in the public health community. And I have no final judgment on it. I just want to say that Secretary Shalala is going to take a serious look at it. We're going to work hard here in the White House. But if we can do more and more of these things together in a bipartisan way as we're doing today, I think this country is going to be much better off.

Thank you very much.

[*At this point, the President signed the legislation.*]

Q. Mr. President, with the Supreme Court ruling today, will your administration—and can it legally—speed up the process of getting this instant background check system in place?

The President. Well, that's one of the things the Attorney General and Secretary Rubin are going to tell me in the next day or two. We're going to look at what our options are. Obviously, we've been thinking about this. I think the important thing to point out is, the Supreme Court said it was constitutional for us to have a 5-day waiting period, that we can have background checks but that five of them did not believe we could require local officials to do it. They said we could have done what we've done in the past by tying Federal funds of some kind to the willingness to do it, sort of a contractual arrangement.

We're going to look at what our options are and see where to go from here. But in the short run, I would just implore the officials in the 23 States that don't have their own State laws requiring this to keep on doing it, because there is no longer any serious debate here; no one who needs to get any kind of weapon has been seriously inconvenienced, and a quarter of a million people who had no business with them don't have them. It's a huge public policy success for the United States. It's a part of driving the crime rate down. And we'll come up with our options as quick as we can.

Proposed Tobacco Agreement

Q. It sounds like you like the tobacco agreement.

The President. No, I don't think you should draw any conclusion one way or the other. I like the fact that they achieved it and that has—and the broad dimensions of it are quite staggering. I mean, even in Washington $368 billion is a lot of money. [*Laughter*] And I think that it's a real testament to all—to the work the attorneys general and the other parties did. But I would say that we have an obligation to look at it very carefully from the public health point of view.

Keep in mind, whenever—in any settlement in any lawsuit, both sides think they're better off settling than not, or there wouldn't be any settlement—I mean, by definition. So what we have to make—we have to be sure that the things that made the tobacco companies believe that they did the right thing to settle don't compromise the long-term interests of the public health and especially our attempts to stop children from smoking in the first place. That's all. And we're looking at it.

But I don't think—you know, even if I were to render a negative judgment on it after Secretary Shalala and Bruce Reed finish their review, I would still be immensely impressed with the work that the attorneys general and the others have done. It's quite a staggering thing. It's a long way from where we were just a couple of years ago when no one thought that any progress would ever be made on this issue.

Q. Mr. President, what are your specific concerns about the FDA provisions in this agreement?

The President. I want to wait until I get my review. I just want to make sure that they will still be able to do what is necessary to protect the public health and children's health based on the evidence that comes be-

fore them in the intervening period. Now, there is a period of years in which they cannot actually ban nicotine. But there are a lot of other options and issues which could come before them during that period, and that's what we're looking at, to make sure their jurisdiction has not been under any——

Tax Cut Legislation

Q. Sir, how do you resolve the rhetorical battle between Republicans and Democrats with the tax bill? There seems to be a standoff going into yesterday over the income tax——

The President. Oh, I think a lot of that is—I think the best way to resolve it is, one, for everyone to say, we want a tax bill, we want a tax cut bill. We want a tax cut bill that does not explode in the out-years, does not bring the bad old days of the deficits back to us. We want one that is faithful to the agreement that was made. And I want one that, particularly within the confines of the agreement, that helps families to raise their children and that helps to fund greater education.

But you should expect a little of this skirmishing. We're going to do more, and we're going to offer our thoughts on Monday about what should be in the tax bill, and then we're going to keep working. But I'm, frankly, quite optimistic. I wouldn't—you would expect that all the parties would advance their views in the most vigorous way possible. But I think the issue is, are we likely to have a bill that meets those criteria, and I think the answer is, yes, we are quite likely to have one.

Line Item Veto

Q. You feel stronger with a line item veto, don't you?

The President. Well, I think it's the right thing to do. I was pleased that the Supreme Court didn't strike it down, although they invited the first person who gets mad enough to do so. [*Laughter*] So I guess we'll be back in court on that one. But let me—I had it when I was Governor; most Governors do. I think it should be used with great care and discipline. You have to respect the congressional process. And my experience was after having used it a few times, that the great value of it was that it was a low—it was just another part of the framework of fiscal discipline we're trying to effect. That is, when I was a Governor, after a year or two, the most important thing about it was not when it was used, but that it existed in the first place, because it helped to keep us within a framework of fiscal responsibility. That's basically what I'm interested in.

Sending Power Back to the States

Q. Mr. President, what do you think of the Supreme Court's record on sending power back to the States, now that the term is almost over?

The President. Well, I need to have time to evaluate all the things. Basically, you know, we sent a lot of power back to the States since I've been President. Since I used to be there, I can hardly say it's a bad idea. I think the question is, what are the terms on which the power goes back, what is the framework, can the national interests still be protected? And that's how you have to evaluate all this.

But in general, it's just like this bill here. This bill basically empowers communities within the framework of an agreed-upon national objective. Why? Because this is not a problem we can solve in Washington. And every Republican and every Democrat who has ever looked at it says the same thing. So what these Members have done is to embody what seems to me to be a commonsense principle.

So I have no problem with that. I think that a lot of the operational work of life is better done where people live, at the grassroots level. The only question I would have on any of these things is, can we still pursue the national interests? If we had no capacity coming on-line in '98—let's take the Brady bill, for example—if we have no capacity coming on-line in '98 to do instantaneous background checks, then I would take the—certainly would want to take the Supreme Court up on their offer to tie the receipt of some kind of Federal money, at least, to the willingness to continue these background checks because I think that's a national interest issue.

But on balance, I think the operations, doing more operationally at the State and local level, is a good thing.

Line Item Veto

Q. Would you use the first line item veto on the tax bill?

The President. You go back and read that legislation; that was a battle over legislation—they were very artful, the Congress was, in kind of limiting the extent to which the President can use it on a tax bill. It's different. The options on spending are broader than the options on the tax bill. So I'll have to look at that.

I hope I don't have to use it at all. I hope we just make a good agreement; that's my goal.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:32 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. H.R. 956, approved June 27, was assigned Public Law No. 105–20.

Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister John Howard of Australia

June 27, 1997

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Q. Sir, do you have any sympathy for Australia's position on greenhouse gas emissions?

The President. The Prime Minister was just expressing sympathy with ours. [*Laughter*] We're going to talk about it today. I think we have to do something. I think it's a serious problem. But we've all got to—you know, what you want is everybody making a good effort. We don't want to falsely compare one person's circumstance to another. We've got from now to Kyoto to find a solution; I think we will.

Q. Sir, is differentiation the answer?

The President. I want to make sure I know what I am answering when I give an answer.

Q. Different targets for different countries, sir, is that the answer?

The President. I don't want to say yet; I want to have time to look through this and make a judgment.

Q. Do you think Australia and the U.S. can meet on this, then?

The President. I certainly hope so. I hope we can all meet in Kyoto on it. It's what I'm working for.

Q. [*Inaudible*]—on the developing nations?

Q. Will you be discussing China today and U.S. engagement in the region?

The President. Just a minute. I think the developing nations should be part of it. And I think that—we believe we can demonstrate that the developing nations can continue to grow their economies rapidly and still adopt responsible, sustainable development policies. That's what behind our Export-Import Bank loan policy. It's what behind what Mr. Wolfensohn is doing at the World Bank. We can get there.

What did you say about Asia?

U.S. Engagement in Asia

Q. Will you be discussing the U.S. engagement in Asia?

The President. Absolutely, a lot.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Q. Mr. Howard, do you think you can talk the President around?

Prime Minister Howard. Well, I don't think it's a question of talking around. I think the Australian position is quite well known. We want to play a part; we don't expect a free ride. But we've argued for some kind of differentiation, because different countries are in different situations. And the concern Australia had was that the Group of Eight meeting in Denver might have preempted the outcome of the Kyoto Summit. And that clearly is not happening. And I get a lot of encouragement from the remarks that were made by the President yesterday in New York. And I think that is the basis of an understanding. I'd like to see Australia and the United States work together on it. We have a concern about domestic jobs, and I'm sure the United States does, too.

NOTE: The exchange began at approximately 1:20 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.