We see now leaders with an unquestioned determination to defend and advance the interest of their own people but also determined to marshal the courage and creativity, the vision and resolve, to secure a bright future based on peace rather than a dark future under the storm clouds of continuing, endless conflict.

At the close of this millennium and in this season of religious celebration for Jews, for Muslims, for Christians, Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese, all have it within their power to end decades of bitter conflict. Together, they can choose to write a new chapter in the history of our time. Again, let me say that today's meeting is a big step in the right direction, and I am profoundly grateful for the leaders of both nations for being here.

We have just talked and agreed that it would be appropriate for each leader to say a few brief words on behalf of the delegation. We will take no questions, in keeping with our commitment to do serious business and not cause more problems than we can solve out here with you and all your helpful questions.

But I will begin with Prime Minister Barak.

[*At this point, Prime Minister Barak and Foreign Minister al-Shara made remarks.*]

The President. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. We're going to work.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:12 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria; and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Prime Minister Barak and Foreign Minister al-Shara.

Remarks on Action by Germany To Compensate Nazi Regime Victims of Forced Labor and an Exchange With Reporters

December 15, 1999

The President. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I want to make a statement about the very important work that Stu Eizenstat has been involved with. I have just received a letter from Chancellor Schroeder confirming that the German Government and German industry are prepared to commit 10 billion deutsche marks, the equivalent of more than $5 billion, to a fund for those who were slave and forced laborers and suffered other injuries under the Nazi regime.

We believe this satisfies the requirements of those representing the victims. We close the 20th century with an extraordinary achievement that will bring an added measure of material and moral justice to the victims of this century's most terrible crime. It will help us start a new millennium on higher ground.

Those who will benefit are elderly survivors. Sadly, they're passing away at a rate of almost 10 percent a year. Some are living here in the United States, many are living in central and eastern Europe, double victims who endured the Holocaust first and then a half-century of communism. They have been waiting a long, long time, and nothing can fully compensate their searing loss.

But we can accept our generation's responsibility to remember and to redress the injustices they suffered. We owe that to them and to future generations. I've been working with Chancellor Schroeder for some time to reach this point. We could not have done this without his truly remarkable leadership.

Germany already has made more than $60 billion in payments to Holocaust survivors and to other victims of Nazi persecution. But this is the first important gesture made to those who were forced and slave laborers working for private industry, to those whose insurance policies were not honored, and those whose property was confiscated.

This was not an easy step for the German Government to take, but it reaffirms its commitment to human dignity, reinforces its partnership with the United States, and strengthens its ties with neighbors in central and eastern Europe. I want to thank the companies involved in the settlement for acknowledging their moral and historic responsibility.

I will do everything I can to provide legal finality for them and to remove the potential cloud hanging over German companies doing business here in the United States. I also

thank the plaintiffs in this case for their persistence in a just cause and their patience in reaching a just solution. Given the age of the survivors, it was vital to reach this agreement now rather than wait for the outcome of lengthy litigation.

Finally, let me say I am deeply grateful to Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Eizenstat for the truly remarkable job he has done to bring us to this day. He has already done so much to help us shed light on this cruel period in human history and to bring justice to its victims. I know of few people who combine his commitment to doing the right thing with his actual skill at getting things done.

I'm sending Stu and his team to Berlin to meet with all the parties to finalize the agreement so that it can be implemented as soon as possible. After I complete this statement, he will go to the briefing room and answer your questions. Again, my deepest respect and appreciation to Chancellor Schroeder and the German Government, as well as to Deputy Secretary Eizenstat. This is a very good day for the cause of freedom and a good day for the United States.

Thank you very much.

Q. Mr. President, what kind of compensation do you think the lawyers, if any, deserve who negotiated this deal?

The President. We're all going to get a cold if we stay out here. Stu can answer all those questions. Let's go in the Briefing Room and he can answer them. Thank you.

Israel-Syria Talks

Q. Mr. President, before you go, could you give us a sense of how the Mideast talks are going today?

The President. They're going pretty well. But it's hard going and we've got work to do, so I'm going back to work. Thanks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:52 p.m. on the South Grounds at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany.

Statement on the Retirement of Cartoonist Charles M. Schulz

December 15, 1999

Like all readers of "Peanuts," I was saddened by the news that Charles M. Schulz will retire his beloved comic strip on January 4. But every one of his fans understands that this difficult decision is the right one for Mr. Schulz's health and for his family.

The characters Charles Schulz created are more than enduring icons. Charlie Brown, Linus, Snoopy, Pig Pen, and Lucy taught us all a little more about what makes us human. Virtually every day for a half-century, Charles Schulz has shown us that a comic strip can transcend its small space on the page. It can uplift; it can challenge; it can educate its readers even as it entertains us. "Peanuts" has done all of these things. I wish Charles Schulz a speedy recovery and a fulfilling retirement.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Reporting on the Deployment of United States Military Personnel as Part of the Kosovo International Security Force

December 15, 1999

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)

In my report to the Congress of June 12, 1999, I provided information on the deployment of combat-equipped U.S. military personnel as the U.S. contribution to the NATO-led security force in Kosovo (KFOR) and to countries in the region to serve as a national support element for them. I am providing this supplemental report, consistent with the War Powers Resolution, to help ensure that the Congress is kept fully informed on continued U.S. contributions in support of peacekeeping efforts in Kosovo.

The U.N. Security Council authorized member states to establish the international security presence in Kosovo in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 of June 10, 1999,