

Nov. 16 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1993

Rejecting NAFTA would, quite simply, put us on the wrong side of history. That is not our destiny. I ask the House of Representatives to join me in choosing the path of expanded trade, to make the decision to compete in the world, rather than to retreat behind our borders. We are a great country, and we cannot shrink from this test.

Sincerely,

BILL CLINTON

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to Thomas S. Foley, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Robert H. Michel, House Republican leader. This letter was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 16 but was not issued as a White House press release.

Remarks on Signing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 *November 16, 1993*

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President, for those fine remarks and to the Members of Congress, the chaplains of the House and the Senate, and to all of you who worked so hard to help this day become a reality. Let me especially thank the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion for the central role they played in drafting this legislation and working so hard for its passage.

It is interesting to note, as the Vice President said, what a broad coalition of Americans came together to make this bill a reality; interesting to note that that coalition produced a 97-to-3 vote in the United States Senate and a bill that had such broad support it was adopted on a voice vote in the House. I'm told that, as many of the people in the coalition worked together across ideological and religious lines, some new friendships were formed and some new trust was established, which shows, I suppose, that the power of God is such that even in the legislative process miracles can happen. *[Laughter]*

We all have a shared desire here to protect perhaps the most precious of all American liberties, religious freedom. Usually the signing of legislation by a President is a ministerial act, often a quiet ending to a turbulent legislative process. Today this event assumes a more majestic quality because of our ability together to affirm the historic role that people of faith have played in the history of this country and the constitutional protections those who profess and express their faith have always demanded and cherished.

The power to reverse legislation by legislation, a decision of the United States Supreme Court,

is a power that is rightly hesitantly and infrequently exercised by the United States Congress. But this is an issue in which that extraordinary measure was clearly called for. As the Vice President said, this act reverses the Supreme Court's decision Employment Division against Smith and reestablishes a standard that better protects all Americans of all faiths in the exercise of their religion in a way that I am convinced is far more consistent with the intent of the Founders of this Nation than the Supreme Court decision.

More than 50 cases have been decided against individuals making religious claims against Government action since that decision was handed down. This act will help to reverse that trend by honoring the principle that our laws and institutions should not impede or hinder but rather should protect and preserve fundamental religious liberties.

The free exercise of religion has been called the first freedom, that which originally sparked the development of the full range of the Bill of Rights. Our Founders cared a lot about religion. And one of the reasons they worked so hard to get the first amendment into the Bill of Rights at the head of the class is that they well understood what could happen to this country, how both religion and Government could be perverted if there were not some space created and some protection provided. They knew that religion helps to give our people the character without which a democracy cannot survive. They knew that there needed to be a space of freedom between Government and people of faith that otherwise Government might usurp.

They have seen now, all of us, that religion

and religious institutions have brought forth faith and discipline, community and responsibility over two centuries for ourselves and enabled us to live together in ways that I believe would not have been possible. We are, after all, the oldest democracy now in history and probably the most truly multiethnic society on the face of the Earth. And I am convinced that neither one of those things would be true today had it not been for the importance of the first amendment and the fact that we have kept faith with it for 200 years.

What this law basically says is that the Government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion. This judgment is shared by the people of the United States as well as by the Congress. We believe strongly that we can never, we can never be too vigilant in this work.

Let me make one other comment if I might before I close and sit down and sign this bill. There is a great debate now abroad in the land which finds itself injected into several political races about the extent to which people of faith can seek to do God's will as political actors. I would like to come down on the side of encouraging everybody to act on what they believe is the right thing to do. There are many people in this country who strenuously disagree with me on what they believe are the strongest grounds of their faiths. I encourage them to speak out. I encourage all Americans to reach deep inside to try to determine what it is that drives their lives most deeply.

As many of you know, I have been quite moved by Stephen Carter's book, "The Culture of Disbelief." He makes a compelling case that today Americans of all political persuasions and all regions have created a climate in this country in which some people believe that they are embarrassed to say that they advocate a course of action simply because they believe it is the right thing to do, because they believe it is

dictated by their faith, by what they discern to be, with their best efforts, the will of God.

I submit to you today, my fellow Americans, that we can stand that kind of debate in this country. We are living in a country where the most central institution of our society, the family, has been under assault for 30 years. We are living in a country in which 160,000 school-children don't go to school every day because they're afraid someone will shoot them or beat them up or knife them. We are living in a country now where gunshots are the single leading cause of death among teenage boys. We are living in a country where people can find themselves shot in the crossfire of teenagers who are often better armed than the police who are trying to protect other people from illegal conduct. It is high time we had an open and honest reaffirmation of the role of American citizens of faith, not so that we can agree but so that we can argue and discourse and seek the truth and seek to heal this troubled land.

So today I ask you to also think of that. We are a people of faith. We have been so secure in that faith that we have enshrined in our Constitution protection for people who profess no faith. And good for us for doing so. That is what the first amendment is all about. But let us never believe that the freedom of religion imposes on any of us some responsibility to run from our convictions. Let us instead respect one another's faiths, fight to the death to preserve the right of every American to practice whatever convictions he or she has, but bring our values back to the table of American discourse to heal our troubled land.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:15 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. H.R. 1308, approved November 16, was assigned Public Law No. 103-141.

Remarks on Governors' Endorsements of NAFTA and an Exchange With Reporters November 16, 1993

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you to all

the Governors who are here and to the many Governors who are not here who have helped