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Remarks on the Resignation of Les Aspin as Secretary of Defense

December 15, 1993

Ladies and gentlemen, it is with real sadness that today I accept Secretary Aspin's request to be relieved of his duties as Secretary of Defense for personal reasons. I am very grateful that he's agreed to remain at his post until January 20th, and beyond if necessary, so that we can plan together for the coming year and effect a smooth transition at the Pentagon.

Les has been a close adviser and a friend of mine for a long time. I have valued his wise counsel as a key member of our national security team. And I have told him that after he takes the break he's requested, I very much hope he will consider other assignments for this administration.

During a lifetime of public service in Congress, with our transition, and at the Pentagon, Les Aspin has made invaluable contributions to this Nation's defense and security. None of them have been more significant than his service as Secretary of Defense. Along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he has provided solid leadership for our uniformed and civilian defense personnel during a period of transition that is historic and has at times been unsettling.

He helped launch creative policy responses to the fundamental changes of this era, from the dissolution of the Soviet empire to the growing challenges of ethnic conflict and weapons proliferation. And through it all, he has led with character, with intelligence, with wisdom, and the unflappable good humor that is both his trademark and his secret weapon.

One of his most important contributions in this past year has been his efforts to help our administration relate our defense strategy in this new era and our defense spending. Under his leadership, the Pentagon conducted the first comprehensive review of our forces since the end of the cold war. This now well-known, bottom-up review has provided our Nation with a profile of this era's threats and a vision of our force structure that will guide our Nation's military for many years to come.

He's provided steady leadership for the entire defense community as it has confronted the inevitable downsizing that accompanied the end of the cold war. He acted on the recommendations of the base closure commission in a way that demonstrated equity, responsibility, and a great concern for the communities and the families that were hit hard by the closure of our military facilities. And as we've reduced our force levels, he's been the first to voice concerns for the men and women in uniform who shoulder the burden of our national security.

His leadership has also been invaluable in helping our country to adapt to our military social changes. He led the way in our efforts to open the doors for women to serve our Nation in combat roles and helped to ensure more equitable rules toward homosexuals in our military. He's provided creative leadership as he's mobilized the Pentagon to develop new and stronger responses to the many security challenges of this new era, such as his new counterproliferation initiative. And on a range of tough decisions and tough challenges abroad, from Bosnia to Korea, he has called them as he saw them, bringing to bear a lifetime of experience and dedication and a razor-sharp mind to our Nation's security interest.

Above all, Secretary Aspin has provided deep strategic thinking and leadership at a time of profound change in this world. As a result, when our citizens go to bed tonight, we can do so secure in the knowledge that our Nation is building the right forces and acquiring the right capabilities for this new era.

I will always appreciate the thoughtful and dedicated and ultimately selfless service that Les Aspin provided to me and to this Nation over this last year. I asked a lot of him, tough times and tough problems. He gave even more to me, to our military, and to our country than was asked, and I will always be very, very grateful.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:21 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.