

Remarks on the Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement Reform and an Exchange With Reporters February 10, 1994

The President. I want to thank all the members here for agreeing to serve on this Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement Reform. If you look at the membership from the Congress and from the private sector, you see a wide variety of experience and understanding of this issue and a real willingness to work together in a bipartisan spirit for the interest of the United States. I particularly want to thank Senator Bob Kerrey, who proposed this idea, and extend my gratitude to him and to Senator Jack Danforth for agreeing to cochair the Commission.

The Commission will report directly to my National Economic Council later in the year, giving us an opportunity to consider its recommendations as part of the deliberations for preparing the fiscal year 1996 budget. I expect these results to be thought-provoking and significant.

This Commission will be asked to grapple with real issues of entitlement reforms, not caps or gimmicks that defer hard choices but specific and constructive proposals. And we will take very seriously proposals that have strong bipartisan support.

In the last budget, the one that is now in operation, I proposed and the Congress acted on a number of restrictions and cuts in entitlements. We all now, looking ahead, know that our number one entitlement problem is Medicare and Medicaid. They are growing much more rapidly than the rate of inflation plus population. We are committed to reforming these programs through a health security plan. And I was gratified that notwithstanding some of the disagreements we had with the CBO on the timing of the cuts, the CBO study clearly showed that the proposal we have put on the table will dramatically reduce health care spending in the next decade and beyond. It is clear that there are also other entitlement issues we have to look at, and the Commission will do that, too. We cannot let up on our reforms and our efforts to reduce the deficit and get this economy going again.

The Vice President has done some important work on reinventing Government, which has underscored our commitment to a Government

that can do more with less. We are committed now to a plan that will reduce the Federal bureaucracy by 252,000 over the next 5 years. It will be at its lowest level in 30 years. But even if you do that, we can't bring the deficit down unless we deal with other problems.

This panel, I expect, will ask and answer the tough questions. This panel, I expect, will do the kind of work that—something like the balanced budget amendment can never do; it doesn't ask or answer any of the tough questions. But this panel has had the courage and the willingness to face them, and I thank them for that.

If I have learned one thing since I have been President, it is in the end we have to decide on specific matters and that rhetoric sooner or later always has to give way to reality.

I want to thank again all the citizens for agreeing to serve, and in particular I want to thank the Members of Congress in both parties for agreeing to undertake what many might regard as a thankless task. It will not be thankless if it gives us a strong and secure and healthy American economy and society moving into the 21st century. I appreciate your willingness to deal with it, and I assure you that I look forward to your deliberations eagerly.

Senator Kerrey, the floor is yours.

[At this point, Senator Kerrey made brief remarks.]

Russian Position on Bosnia

Q. Mr. President, it seems that in the aftermath of NATO's decision to issue this ultimatum to the Serbs, that you're having a very tough time talking to President Yeltsin. Is he deliberately snubbing you?

The President. I don't think so. I don't think so. And I expect to talk to him soon. I don't know—I can't say any more than you already know.

Q. Well, what is the problem?

The President. I don't know. You'll have to ask them. But we've had a lot of high-level consultations on it. Madeleine Albright has talked to her counterpart. Ambassador Collins is there, even though Ambassador Pickering is

here. We have no reason to believe at this point that there's a serious problem with our going forward.

I did receive a letter early yesterday from President Yeltsin that I wanted to be the basis of the telephone conversation. And he initiated this letter with me. And I think we can work through it so that we can go forward. And as you know, I said yesterday I was hoping he would agree to help get this peace process on track. So, I don't know what else to say.

Social Security

Q. Mr. President, you've appointed some people to the Commission who advocate deep cuts in Social Security benefits, means testing, and so forth. Does that mean that you could go along with that, or would you rule that out before the Commission starts its work?

The President. Well, I think Senator Kerrey said that nobody's really interested in cutting Social Security in terms of the social safety net that we have built up in this country. I want to wait and see what they have to say.

In my budget I recommended what amounted to a restriction on the unlimited benefits of very high income people by subjecting more Social Security income to taxation for the top 12 to 14 percent of Social Security earners. But no one that I know of has suggested actually cutting the benefits to people who have paid for them. That's not what's at issue here. So, let's see what the Commission recommends. They're just starting. I don't want to prejudice their deliberations.

Bosnia

Q. Mr. President, is NATO prepared to go ahead on Bosnia with air strikes or other measures without Russia's acquiescence, if necessary?

The President. Well, we have no reason, I'll say again, we have no reason to believe that—keep in mind, everything we have done with NATO is consistent with action the U.N. has already taken. It's within the umbrella of U.N. action, and Russia was on the Security Council when that happened. So, I don't think we're doing anything inconsistent. There may be people within Russia that don't agree with this at all, but the primary purpose of what we're trying to do is not to get in a fight with the Serbs but to have NATO protect the integrity of Sarajevo and the innocent civilians who live there while we make an effort, which I hope the Rus-

sians will participate in, to get the peace process back on track.

Q. Mr. President, why do you think after nearly 2 years and 200,000 deaths it took this last incident Saturday to get the NATO allies finally to issue this ultimatum to the Serbs?

The President. I can't answer that except to say that I think that there was a feeling—first of all, keep in mind, the people who were opposed to this have troops on the ground there in numbers too small to defend themselves from an overwhelming assault. So all along, I think they were sympathetic with the desire to try to use the muscle of NATO to save civilians. What they felt was that they were saving more lives doing what they were doing now.

And I think that just because the conflict has gone on, a lot of people lost sight of the fact that the United States has largely carried out and largely paid for the largest humanitarian airlift in history, now longer than the Berlin airlift, that the people with troops on the ground there have put thousands of people's lives at risk to try to keep those highways open and to keep people alive. And I think they just felt that the risks didn't outweigh the—or outweighed the benefits.

I think this last horrible incident, coming as it did after a pattern of shelling of Sarajevo, convinced them that, what I have always believed about this, that Sarajevo is sort of the Humpty Dumpty of Bosnia. If you ever want it to be put back together again, the country, you've got to keep Sarajevo from total collapse, and you've got to try to save those people if you can. And I think finally they agreed with that, and I applaud them for doing it. But let's not be sanctimonious here. It was harder for them than for us because they had their troops on the ground.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:34 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Madeleine K. Albright, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations; James Collins, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large-designate to Russia and the New Independent States; and Thomas R. Pickering, U.S. Ambassador to Russia.