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The President's Radio Address
March 16, 1996

Good morning. I have recently returned from an historic meeting in the Middle East. Twenty-nine leaders from the region and around the world came together in support of peace and against terrorism. Our summit was called to confront an urgent threat. Recent terrorist atrocities in Israel have taken scores of innocent lives, including those of two young Americans. They have jeopardized the hopes of Israelis and Palestinians who long for peace, and they menace the dreams of all the mothers and fathers there who seek a better life for their children.

But the merchants of terror will not succeed. By their acts of violence they have only reinforced the determination of the peacemakers. Whatever the effort, whatever the time it takes, we will prevail because we must.

The violence in Israel is a terrible reminder of the challenges we all face to protect the security of our Nation and our people. For while we live in an age of great possibility, we face new perils as well. Open societies and open markets are on the march. And the dawn of the information age is creating exciting new opportunities to build a brighter future. But as barriers fall, the freedom and openness that make our Nation strong can also make us vulnerable. The freedom and openness that will bring Americans almost 3 million new jobs in the next few years in telecommunications alone, spurred on by the telecommunications bill I signed just a few weeks ago, also mean that our democratic societies, which have to be open to new people and products and information, are also more vulnerable because they're open to threats that all too easily can cross national borders.

Terrorism is a part of the growing web of threats that include the spread of weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, and organized crime. I have made our fight against terrorism a national security priority. And in order to defeat these forces of destruction, we need every tool at our disposal. The United States maintains strong sanctions on states that sponsor terrorism. We have stepped up cooperation with other nations to root out terrorists before they act and to capture them when they do. We have increased funding, manpower, and training for our law enforcement agencies to combat terrorism. And our efforts are yielding results. We made swift arrests after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City. Today those responsible for the World Trade Center bombing are behind bars. In the last 3 years the United States has arrested more terrorists than at any time in our history, plucking them from hiding all around the world and bringing them to justice for their crimes. This progress is dramatic, but we must do more.

Yet on the same day I was in the Middle East rallying the world community to fight terrorism, some in Congress, led by Republicans, were taking apart piece by piece the tough legislation designed to beat back that very threat. More than a year ago I sent a bill to Congress that would strengthen our ability to investigate, prosecute, and punish terrorist activity. After the Oklahoma City bombing I made that legislation even stronger. My efforts were guided by three firm goals: first, to protect American lives without infringing on American rights; second, to give law enforcement officials the tools they need to do the job; and third, to make sure that terrorists are barred from our country.

The congressional leaders promised to send me that bill by last Memorial Day, 6 weeks after the Oklahoma City tragedy. The Senate passed counterterrorism legislation last June. But now, less than 6 weeks before the anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, the House has finally acted to gut the bill. The House took the teeth out of our efforts to fight terrorism. Unbelievably, the House voted to give law enforcement officials fewer tools to fight terrorism than they have to fight far less horrible crimes here at home.

First, the bill had a provision to chemically mark the explosive materials terrorists use to build their deadly bombs. If we know where explosives come from, we have a better chance of figuring out who used them. The House voted to strip this law enforcement tool because for some reason the Washington gun lobby opposed it. The House and the Washington gun lobby are against giving law enforcement the ability to trace explosives. I know we should

be able to keep up with materials terrorists use to build bombs.

The House also voted to let terrorists like Hamas continue to raise money in America by stripping the Justice Department's authority to designate organizations as terrorists and thereby stop them from raising funds in the United States. The House voted against allowing us to deport foreigners who support terrorist activities more quickly, and it voted to cripple our ability to use high-tech surveillance to keep up with stealthy and fast-moving terrorists.

At the same time the bill went easy on terrorists, it got tough on law enforcement officials. The House stripped a provision that would have helped protect police officers from cop-killer bullets. And it ordered a commission to study not the terrorists but the Federal law enforcement officials who put their lives on the line to fight terrorism. Even the Republican chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Henry Hyde, couldn't believe what his colleagues did, saying the House eviscerated the terrorism bill. I urge the Senate to stand firm and turn this bill back into the strong antiterrorism legislation I want to sign and America needs.

Our Nation has felt the lash of terrorism. We know its terrible costs, and we know that only America can lead the world's fight against it. We can't let the gun lobby turn America into a safehouse for terrorists. Congress should get back on track and send me tough legislation that cracks down on terrorism. It should listen to the cries of the victims and the hopes of our children, not the back-alley whispers of the gun lobby.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 5:08 p.m. on March 15 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on March 16.

Letter to Congressional Leaders on Product Liability Legislation
March 16, 1996

Dear Mr. Leader:

I will veto H.R. 956, the Common Sense Product Liability Legal Reform Act of 1996, if it is presented to me in its current form.

This bill represents an unwarranted intrusion on state authority, in the interest of protecting manufacturers and sellers of defective products. Tort law is traditionally the prerogative of the states, rather than of Congress. In this bill, Congress has intruded on state power—and done so in a way that peculiarly disadvantages consumers. As a rule, this bill displaces state law only when that law is more beneficial to consumers; it allows state law to remain in effect when that law is more favorable to manufacturers and sellers. In the absence of compelling reasons to do so, I cannot accept such a one-way street of federalism, in which Congress defers to state law when doing so helps manufacturers and sellers, but not when doing so aids consumers.

I also have particular objections to certain provisions of the bill, which would encourage wrongful conduct and prevent injured persons from recovering the full measure of their damages. Specifically, the bill's elimination of joint-and-several liability for noneconomic damages, such as pain and suffering, will mean that victims of terrible harm sometimes will not be fully compensated for it. Where under current law a joint wrongdoer will make the victim whole, under this bill an innocent victim would suffer when one wrongdoer goes bankrupt and cannot pay his portion of the judgment. It is important to note that companies sued for manufacturing and selling defective products stand a much higher than usual chance of going bankrupt; consider, for example, manufacturers of asbestos or breast implants or intra-uterine devices.

In addition, for those irresponsible companies willing to put profits above all else, the bill's capping of punitive damages increases the incentive to engage in the egregious misconduct of knowingly manufacturing and selling defective products. The provision of the bill allowing judges to exceed the cap in certain circumstances does not cure this problem, given Congress's clear intent, expressed in the Statement of Managers, that judges should do so only in the rarest of circumstances.