

who are here who worked so hard on this. I want to thank Representative Lane Evans of Illinois and Senators Daschle and Rockefeller, who were also active in that endeavor.

This is a very good thing we do today, but it is long overdue. And I thank the representatives of all the veterans' groups who are here today as well for their service and their persistence in this matter. This legislation proves that we can make progress when we all put politics aside and join across party lines to get the job done for our country.

Before I sign the bill into law, I want to give you some more good news that proves if we all work for opportunity, responsibility, and a stronger American community, we'll be a better country.

Just before I came out here this morning, the annual census study of incomes for 1995 was released. The news is remarkably good, and I'd like to share it with you. In one year, median household income was up \$898 after inflation. That's the biggest increase in a decade. Over the last 2 years, the typical American family has seen its income rise \$1,600 over inflation. After two decades of increasing inequality, these gains were finally shared by people at every income level for the second year in a row. We have had the largest decline in the inequality of incomes in America in 27 years.

There are also 1.6 million fewer people in poverty. That is also the biggest drop in 27 years. Poverty among elderly Americans has fallen to its lowest level in history. Poverty among African-Americans has fallen to its lowest level in history. With 10½ million new jobs, the lowest unemployment in 7½ years, a 60 percent reduction in the deficit, the lowest combined rates of unemployment, inflation, and mortgage

rates in nearly three decades, it is clear that we are moving on the right track.

Today it is clear that more and more of our people are sharing in that prosperity. We are growing and growing together, and I am convinced that for us to keep the American dream alive into the 21st century for all Americans, we must grow and grow together. That, too, is good news for our American community.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, let me say again, I thank all of you who are responsible for this legislation. I thank all the hard-working Americans, the business leaders, the labor leaders, the working people of this country. I thank our economic team and others who have worked to construct an economic direction for America that will permit us to grow together. This is a good day for our country.

If we keep our economy strong, if we educate our young people, if we protect our environment, and if we fulfill our responsibilities to one another, then we will build that bridge to the 21st century I've been talking about, and our best days are still ahead. No one who heard what was said today and saw these families and looked at these Members of Congress standing together and working together for America's benefit could be anything but optimistic about that future.

It is now my honor to sign this legislation. And I'd like to ask the Members and the families who are here to join us up here on the platform so we can sign the bill.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:25 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. H.R. 3666, approved September 26, was assigned Public Law No. 104-204.

Statement on Signing the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 1997

September 26, 1996

Today I have signed into law H.R. 3666, the "Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, FY 1997."

The Act provides funding for the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Aero-

navics and Space Administration, the National Science Foundation, and several other agencies. This Act will fund vital environmental, veterans, housing, community development, science, and space programs.

I am pleased that the Congress has responded to my call to include three bipartisan provisions aimed at eliminating a range of health care crises that thousands of Americans face every year. These include: a mental health parity provision that prohibits health plans from establishing separate lifetime and annual limits for mental health; the Newborns' and Mothers' Health Protection Act of 1996 that requires health insurers to let all new mothers and their babies stay in the hospital for at least 48 hours following normal deliveries; and my proposal to assist the children of Vietnam veterans who are born with the birth defect, spina bifida.

The Act provides funding for a number of my high-priority investment proposals, including the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) fund. The National Service initiative gives young people an opportunity to obtain funding for a college education while serving the country in areas of great need, such as education, environment, public safety, and human services. If Congress had provided my request, an additional 6,000 young Americans would have had the opportunity to help their community through AmeriCorps. Funding for CDFI will increase the flow of capital to distressed neighborhoods and their currently underserved, low-income residents, and provide financing for neighborhood redevelopment and revitalization efforts.

The Act provides \$6.7 billion for the EPA, or 4.5 percent less than my request and will enable the EPA to adequately enforce our environmental laws and provide for the continued cleanup of hazardous waste sites.

I am, however, concerned about the levels provided for EPA's important implementation of the recently enacted safe drinking water and food quality legislation, continued progress on the U.S. global climate change Action Plan, Montreal Protocol efforts to prevent ozone layer depletion, and Boston Harbor clean-up. I will continue to press the Congress to provide more adequate funding levels for these and other important priorities as my Administration negotiates with the Congress over an omnibus appro-

priations bill to resolve remaining fiscal 1997 funding issues.

The Act extends several expiring provisions of last year's bill that are critical to HUD's ability to continue its activities, including demolishing and replacing the worst public housing, supporting movement from dependency to work, and streamlining low-income housing assistance and FHA mortgage insurance programs. The bill also provides the tools necessary to reduce the costs of section 8 renewals for FHA-insured properties, and fully funds my request for the Housing Opportunities for Persons With Aids program.

I am pleased that the bill continues to support States and cities through HUD's key economic development programs—Community Development Block Grants, and the Home Investment Partnerships program. Funding provided for the Youthbuild program will help at-risk youth learn valuable skills, that will enable them to gain employment and break the cycle of poverty. The bill also provides needed capital and operating funds to support the sound operation of over one million public housing apartments.

The Act fully funds my request for the medical care of this Nation's veterans and includes incremental funding for a VA hospital at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California. I am, however, disappointed that the bill does not provide necessary funding for an additional hospital in Brevard County, Florida.

The bill fully funds the Space Station program, and includes needed buyout authority for NASA as it moves to restructure itself for the future.

I am concerned, however, that the bill does not provide funding for NASA's or EPA's contribution to the innovative GLOBE program. This unwarranted change of direction will adversely impact thousands of teachers and students in 2,000 U.S. schools and in 35 other countries who have invested their resources, time, and energy in this valuable program. I plan to press the Congress to include funding for GLOBE in the omnibus 1997 funding bill that my Administration is negotiating with the Congress.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,
September 26, 1996.

NOTE: H.R. 3666, approved September 26, was assigned Public Law No. 104-204.

Remarks on the Middle East and an Exchange With Reporters September 26, 1996

The President. Good afternoon. I'd like to say a few words about the situation in the Middle East. I deeply regret the injuries and the loss of life we've seen in the West Bank and Gaza in the last few days. It points to the urgency for both sides not only to end the violence but to take positive steps to resolve the issues that divide them.

Over the past 24 hours we have been in constant touch with the Israelis and the Palestinians. Our message to them is this: It is in everyone's interest to resolve their differences peacefully, to work together on security, and to avoid any actions that could make progress on the peace between Israelis and Palestinians more difficult.

The events of the past 2 days stand out precisely because we have made so much progress toward peace in these past few years. Violence was becoming the exception, not the rule. The overwhelming majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace, and they have been doing the hard work to build it.

So again, let me say: I ask both sides to end this violence, to get back to the business of peace, to implement the agreements they've reached, to resolve their differences through negotiations.

Q. Mr. President, are the Israelis wrong to open this tunnel? It seems like to some people it may have been really a provocation.

The President. Let me say, I have said repeatedly, and I would like to just repeat what I have said consistently: I think that all the parties should avoid any actions which are likely to undermine the progress of the peace. And now, the important thing is to end the violence and to get back to implementing those peace agreements.

Wolf [Wolf Blitzer, Cable News Network].

Q. Do you think, Mr. President, the Israelis should seal up that tunnel since that seems to have started this chain of events?

The President. What I think is, they need to end the violence, and they need to discuss these matters between them, and they need to

ask themselves, all of them do: What can we do to avoid unnecessarily provocative actions?

Let me also say to you that in a larger sense, what is important is that some progress be made on the issues that are the subject of the agreement. Now, we were supposed to have talks begin again this week to resolve those larger issues, and I had hoped that those talks—and I had some indication, some reason to believe that those talks could lead to some concrete progress which would diminish these tensions instead of seeing them aggravated.

So all I can tell you today is, I hope again that everyone will heed our position, which is to do nothing that will provoke a disruption and instead to get back to the talks and to the business of resolving the differences.

Q. Mr. President, have you spoken with Chairman Arafat or Prime Minister Netanyahu, and what have they told you?

The President. Secretary Christopher has talked with Prime Minister Netanyahu more than once, and we have been in touch several times with Chairman Arafat through the channels that we always use, through our team there, to talk with him, and I have had extensive and regular reports over the last 2 days about this.

So we are working with them, and we are working with them to try to work this out to restore order and peace, and then to get on with the talks. We are prepared to do anything we can that will be of assistance, and I've made that clear, that I personally was prepared to do anything I could. The Secretary of State has worked hard on this. He's done a fine job as always in these matters. And I've been kept completely informed by him of everything that is going on. So, we're working hard.

Q. Mr. President, do you have any plans to talk with Prime Minister Netanyahu today?

The President. You know, he was in Europe, and he cut his trip short to go back to the Middle East, which I think was a very good thing for him to do. And when I come back from the Hill today, I'm going to get another