

The President's Radio Address September 27, 1997

Good morning. I want to talk this morning about a very real threat to our judicial system. For more than 220 years, our Nation has remained young and strong by meeting new challenges in ways that renew our oldest values. Throughout our history, our judiciary has given life and meaning to those values by upholding the laws and defending the rights they reflect, without regard for politics or political party. That is the legacy of the judicial system our Founders established, a legacy we recalled this Thursday on the 40th anniversary of the court-ordered desegregation of Little Rock Central High School.

But in the past 18 months, this vital partnership has broken down as the Senate has refused to act on nomination after nomination. And in Federal courthouses across America, almost 100 judges' benches are empty. In 1996 the Senate confirmed just 17 judges. That's the lowest election-year total in over 40 years. This year I've already sent 70 nominations to Congress, but so far they've acted on less than 20. The result is a vacancy crisis in our courts that Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist warned could undermine our courts' ability to fairly administer justice.

Meanwhile, our courts are clogged with a rising number of cases. An unprecedented number of civil cases are stalled, affecting the lives of tens of thousands of Americans, from the family seeking life insurance proceeds, to the senior citizen trying to collect Social Security benefits, to the small business protecting its right to compete. In our criminal courts, nearly 16,000 cases are caught in limbo while criminals on bail await punishment and victims await justice. Our sitting

judges are overloaded and overworked, and our justice system is strained to the breaking point.

The Senate's failure to act on my nominations, or even to give many of my nominees a hearing, represents the worst of partisan politics. Under the pretense of preventing so-called judicial activism, they've taken aim at the very independence our Founders sought to protect. The congressional leadership has actually threatened sitting judges with impeachment, merely because it disagrees with their judicial opinions. Under this politically motivated scrutiny, under ever-mounting caseloads, our judges must struggle to enforce the laws Congress passes and to do justice for us all.

We can't let partisan politics shut down our courts and gut our judicial system. I've worked hard to avoid that. And the people I've nominated for judgeships and had confirmed have had the highest rating of well qualified from the American Bar Association of any President since these ratings have been kept.

So today I call upon the Senate to fulfill its constitutional duty to fill these vacancies. The intimidation, the delay, the shrill voices must stop so the unbroken legacy of our strong, independent judiciary can continue for generations to come. This age demands that we work together in bipartisan fashion, and the American people deserve no less, especially when it comes to enforcing their rights, enforcing the law, and protecting the Constitution.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 6 p.m. on September 26 in the Presidential Suite of the Westin Oaks Galleria Hotel in Houston, TX, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on September 27.

Remarks at the Hot Springs High School Ultimate Class Reunion in Hot Springs, Arkansas September 27, 1997

Thank you very much. What a beautiful day. What a beautiful setting. I want to thank all of you for being here. I thank my dear friend

David Pryor for his introduction, for continuing to play golf with me. [Laughter] And I forgive him for leaving Washington. It is a poorer place