

Remarks on Welfare Reform and an Exchange With Reporters October 8, 1997

The President. Good morning. I ran for President with a challenge to our country to replace the broken welfare system with one that expands opportunity, demands responsibility, and reflects our values of faith, work, and families.

Since I took office, we've worked hard to make this vision a reality, first by working with 43 States to launch innovative experiments in welfare reform, and then by enacting a welfare reform law that challenged all our States and all people involved in the system to do far more to move from welfare to work.

Today we received yet another piece of evidence that welfare reform is working far better than anyone had predicted it would. We learned that welfare rolls have continued their unprecedented decline, dropping by another 250,000 people in the most recent month alone, one of the largest monthly drops ever. Altogether, we have seen our welfare rolls shrink by more than 1.7 million people since I signed the welfare reform law and by more than 3.6 million people, or 26 percent, since I took office.

This is a truly historic achievement for America. It shows that we can accomplish great things when our policies promote work and reflect our values. We're building an America where all families have the chance to center their lives around work, family, and responsibility.

But we have more to do to ensure that all those who can work are able to work. The private sector here must do more to take the lead. The balanced budget law I signed last August not only repealed unfair cuts that targeted legal immigrants but also created a \$3 billion welfare-to-work program and increased incentives for businesses to hire former welfare recipients.

For our part, we've set a goal of hiring 10,000 people off the welfare rolls to fill existing jobs in the Federal Government. Later today the Vice President, who has led this initiative, will report on our progress in doing our part.

We are working hard here to change lives to empower all Americans to seize the new opportunity of a new century. I am very encouraged by these welfare numbers. We now have the smallest percentage of our people on welfare in about three decades after the biggest drop in the welfare rolls in history. This proves that

this system can work. But to get to the rest of the people, we have to have more help in creating these jobs, the businesses have to take advantage of the tax credits, and the municipal governments and others have to take advantage of the \$3 billion fund. But this is great news for America today, and I must say I am very, very pleased.

Wolf [Wolf Blitzer, Cable News Network].

1996 Campaign Finance Inquiry

Q. Mr. President, Senator Thompson says that it's time for you to take personal responsibility for the campaign finance irregularities and relieve Janet Reno of her responsibility and simply ask for an independent counsel on your own. How do you respond to Senator Thompson on that?

The President. Well, I think that, first of all, I have assumed responsibility. We set up a system that has given Senator Thompson 100,000 pages of documents. And I was surprised that these films had been subpoenaed and not turned over. I think there is a logical reason for it. I'm frustrated whenever there has not been absolutely full compliance, but I think it's in everyone's interest that the films be turned over, and I would urge you to watch them if you haven't. I think they will reinforce the fact that no one has done anything wrong here. So I would just urge—there's been a lot of talk about these films; everybody ought to watch them and see what they show. That's what they're for.

The other thing I would say is, again, I'd say that question is a legal question, notwithstanding the best efforts of some to turn it into a political question. And I don't think there is any lack of evidence that the Attorney General, when she thought it was warranted, has asked for special counsels.

Q. Mr. President, what about Senator Thompson's charge that you and your administration are just trying to run out the clock since his hearing mandate expires at the end of the year and that you've delayed, stonewalled, and otherwise put barriers in the way of the investigation?

The President. He knows better than that. I think he may be disappointed in the results of the hearings. He now has more evidence. If he wants to have more hearings, he's got

them. But let Senator Thompson comment on what's in those films. He has 100,000 pages of documents. They have the evidence. If there is any more, we'll do our best to get it to them. They have the films. Let them discuss what's on the films.

Q. Mr. President, do you worry about the credibility of your administration in view of these mistakes, and do you think that you have hurt the Vice President in all of this campaign fundraising frenzy that's resulted in this?

The President. No. I don't worry about our credibility. You know, it's interesting that we have come to this point after all these hearings, and they're not talking about any wrongdoing by the President or the Vice President as uncovered in the hearings, they're talking about why they didn't have access to films which reinforce the fact that we didn't do anything wrong. What I hope—the only thing I ever hope in this is that we get through the smoke to the facts.

Now, I have said—and it's interesting that we're discussing this—I have said all along and now for nearly 5 years that the campaigns have become too costly and require too much time to raise money and require too much money to be raised and that, inevitably, will raise some questions. And the only answer is to reform the campaign finance system.

Yesterday there was yet one more attempt to kill any campaign finance reform. That is the real story there lurking in the weeds. I actually think it's probably pretty good strategy for those who are trying to kill campaign finance reform to try to talk about these films of events in the White House which were legal and which I want everybody to watch.

I think it's in everybody's interest to get whatever evidence is relevant out here. But once we get all the relevant evidence out, we need to really look at what's going on here. And what's going on here is that under the smoke-screen about all these films, which everybody can now freely watch, there was yet one more attempt yesterday, which I hope won't be successful, to deal the death blow to campaign finance reform. And they've done it every year in the Senate; they've done it every year with a filibuster. This year, they're prepared to use a filibuster and two or three other tactics because they raised more money, more big money, and more money from other sources than the Democrats. But both parties are going to have problems and questions raised, and raise too

much money and spend too much time raising it, until we reform the campaign finance laws.

The big story yesterday was, one more time, they're doing their very best to kill it, and they're hoping that they can stir up all this business, I think, about these films. Now, I'm not defending the fact the films should have been turned over. But I think you've been given, I think, a pretty good background on what happened. I think there is a logical explanation. I don't like it; I'm frustrated when there's not complete compliance. But when we gave 100,000 pages of documents to Senator Thompson's committee, I think that's pretty good evidence of our good faith. We have tried to do no inappropriate things to resist his need to discover evidence. We want him to know the facts.

Yes, go ahead.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, yesterday there was the first meeting in 8 months between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat. No statements were made. What have you heard about that meeting, and how do you see it in light of the latest events in the Middle East?

The President. The most important thing is that it occurred, and it occurred not a moment too soon. We've had some difficult developments in the Middle East. I am pleased that Ambassador Ross was able to put it together. As I said with President Weizman yesterday, it may be that the developments of the last few days have been so troubling and so difficult that it has gotten the attention of both sides and clarified the necessity for them to get back to talking with each other and to get this peace process back on track. I hope—I hope that is what happened. That is certainly what I have tried to do, certainly what Ambassador Ross is trying to do there. So the fact that they met is encouraging. I think it would be better for me at this moment to let them characterize the nature and results of the discussions they had.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:10 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House, prior to his departure for Newark, NJ. In his remarks, he referred to Ambassador Dennis B. Ross, Special

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Middle East Coordinator; President Ezer Weizman and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel; and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority.

Remarks at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey October 8, 1997

Thank you all for that warm welcome. Thank you, Reverend and Mrs. Jefferson, for making us feel at home in the Metropolitan Baptist Church. Thank you, Senator McGreevey, for your introduction and your passionate commitment to the families and the children and the future of this State.

Thank you, Mayor James. Thank you, my great friend Congressman Donald Payne. Thank you, Audrey West, for your work here in the Head Start program. And thank you, Linda Lopez, for having the courage to get up here and give a speech today. You did very well. I thought you did very well.

Mr. Mayor and Congressman, I'm delighted to be back in Newark, a city that is earning its reputation as a Renaissance City every day. I hear story after story of Newark's coming back—a new performing arts center, a new sports complex in the historic Ironbound district, most importantly a new spirit that I sense in this room and that I saw in this church and its facilities for caring for children when I walked in the door.

You know, I have been in a lot of buildings in my life. Sometimes I think the job of a President or a Governor is going into buildings of all kinds. [*Laughter*] And after you have a little experience with walking into buildings, you get the feel of what's going on there before anybody tells you. When I walked in this building and I saw the posters of the children on the walls, I saw the pride people take in maintaining it, I saw the care that had gone into designing it, I knew that the spirit of the Lord had moved you to do the right thing for our children. And I thank you for that.

I'm feeling a little nostalgic now, not only because my daughter just went off to college, because this is the 20th anniversary of my first public office, when I was attorney general of my State, but also because last week it was 6 years ago that I first announced for President.

Now, sometimes young people come up to me all the time and they say, "I want a career in public life. Should I do it?" And I always encourage them. I tell them that no matter what they may read or hear from time to time, the overwhelming majority of people in public life, from both parties and all philosophies, are honorable, good people who work hard to do what they believe is right, and it is a noble endeavor. And we spend sometimes so much time finding fault with ourselves we forget that we wouldn't be around here after 220 years if we didn't have a pretty good political system supported by a wise and caring citizenry. But I always tell them, the most important thing before you run for office is not to decide what office you want, but what you would do if you got it.

You remember there was a—about 20 years ago, Robert Redford was in that great movie "The Candidate"—you remember that? And he won and said, "Now what?" If that's going to happen to you, don't run. I was encouraged. I was listening to Senator McGreevey talk, and I thought—it's the first time I've heard him speak since he's been officially the nominee of our party—I thought, that man knows what he wants to do, and that's the beginning of wisdom and the prospect of success. If you just want the job for the honor of the thing, it's not worth the pain of getting there. It's only worth it if you have an idea about what you're going to do.

And all of us are living on the vision of those who went before us. I'm sure that Reverend Jefferson is grateful for the vision of all of his predecessors, Reverend Johnson and others, who conceived of what this might be. The Scripture says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." And what I want you to think about today is, as you celebrate what goes on in this building for our children and you imagine what could go on in this entire State and Nation, what is your vision for what America should look like when your children or your grandchildren are