

Iran

Q. Do you see new flexibility from Iran in statements made in the past few days?

The President. Well, I was quite encouraged by Mr. Khatami's statement, and it was welcome. And I will say again, I would like nothing better than to have a dialog with Iran, as long as we can have an honest discussion of all the relevant issues. We remain concerned about the sponsorship of terrorism, about the violent attacks on the peace process, about the development—their acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. And we will continue to be concerned about those things. But I was quite encouraged by the President's statement, and I think that the American people should be.

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Taoiseach, could I ask your impressions of your meeting with the President? How did it go?

Prime Minister Ahern. Well, first of all, I'm delighted to be here, and I'm very grateful that the President has afforded part of his horrendous schedule some time for us to be here. We had an excellent discussion, where we were able to go back over what has happened over the last number of months, and I had an opportunity to brief the President on all of the moves since the peace process and the real talks started on the 24th of September, right up to what's happening in Belfast and the castle buildings today.

The most important thing for us is that the President has continued to be so involved and so committed, so personally involved. The Presi-

dent has at all times helped, during the summer when things were scrappy, and he afforded me a number of phone calls, which I greatly appreciated, and of course, some of his most key people are actively involved in trying to bring us all to a balanced, comprehensive settlement.

And this morning we had an opportunity of going through what are the factors of the talks, the three strands, and how we can see ourselves working into the springtime to try to get to a comprehensive settlement. And that he liked the meeting that I had with Tony Blair the other day; the President is in full agreement and is urging me that we must now get into the detail and that we have to try to put together the comprehensive settlement that the people will be allowed to vote on and that is balanced and for all sides. And that's precisely what we'll do. And as the President has said, by St. Patrick's Day, hopefully I can report back some progress in that area.

President's New Dog

Q. Mr. President, what news on the puppy? [Laughter]

The President. He's here, and we had a great weekend. More later. [Laughter]

NOTE: The exchange began at 10:45 a.m. at the Northwest Portico at the White House. In their remarks, the President and the Prime Minister referred to George J. Mitchell, Special Assistant to the President for Northern Ireland; President Mohammad Khatami of Iran; and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom.

Remarks Announcing the Appointment of Bill Lann Lee as Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights and an Exchange With Reporters

December 15, 1997

The President. I want to thank the Attorney General for her support. And again, I want to join the Vice President and the Attorney General in thanking Isabelle Katz Pinzler for the great job she has done as Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. I wish her well as she returns to private life, to her husband, her son, and daughter in New York City.

Today it is with a great deal of pride that I name Bill Lann Lee to the post of Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights and Counselor to the Attorney General for Civil Rights Enforcement. From this day forward, he will be America's top civil rights enforcer, serving at the helm of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division.

It is fitting that this announcement comes on the 206th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, our charter of freedom and equality. Our present civil rights laws have helped all of us move closer to those timeless values. They protect every person from discrimination, especially discrimination against women, minorities, Americans with disabilities, and victims of hate crimes. They ensure that all Americans have equal opportunities to work, to learn, to live, to raise their children in communities where they can thrive and grow.

I can think of no one whose life story and impeccable credentials make him more suited to enforcing these laws than Bill Lann Lee. Because of his long struggle in this nominating process, his life story has become rather well known to millions of Americans. They know now that he has lived the American dream and that he embodies American values.

The son of poor Chinese immigrants who, like millions of other Americans, came to this country seeking better futures, and despite feeling the sting and frustration of discrimination throughout their lives, they were people who never lost faith in America. They settled in Harlem, built a small business washing clothes, taught their two sons the value of hard work and the limitless possibilities of a good education. Bill Lee won a scholarship to Yale and went on to earn a law degree from Columbia. His brother became a Baptist minister. I leave it to you to decide which one got the better end of the deal. [Laughter]

Above all, the Lees instilled in their sons a deep and abiding love for country and our values. It is this love for America, the faith in the American ideal, that inspired Mr. Lee to pursue a career in civil rights law. Over a lifetime he has worked tirelessly to end the discrimination that keeps us from reaching our greatest potential as a people.

As a lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the organization founded by the great Thurgood Marshall, Mr. Lee has sought to bring people together, to reconcile opposing views, to forge consensus, and to find the common ground we all must stand on. His commitment to fairness and the dignity of all Americans won the respect and admiration of clients and opposing lawyers alike.

We need more Americans like Bill Lee in the highest offices of Government. In the last session of Congress, he was denied the vote

he deserves on his confirmation because some Senators disagree with his views on affirmative action. But his views on affirmative action are my views on affirmative action: No quotas, no discrimination, no position or benefit for any unqualified person; but mend, don't end affirmative action, so that all Americans can have a fair chance at living the American dream.

My constitutional right and responsibility as President is to put in office men and women who will further our policies consistent with our obligations under the Constitution. Some people want to wait for me to appoint someone to this position whom I disagree with. But America cannot afford to wait that long. And it would be a long wait indeed. [Laughter] The enforcement of our civil rights laws demands strong leadership now.

In the coming months, I will resubmit Mr. Lee's nomination to the Senate. I will be pressing very hard for a straight up or down vote, and I am confident that once the Senate and the American people are given a fair chance to judge Mr. Lee's performance, he will be confirmed.

While he will have the full authority and support to carry out the duties of the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, I still look forward to striking the word "acting" from his title. He is a remarkable American, and I am confident that he will enforce our civil rights laws with the same professionalism, honesty, and integrity he has exhibited throughout his life and career. He is truly the best person for this job.

Mr. Lee.

[At this point, Mr. Lee made brief remarks.]

Q. Mr. President, why did you pick acting instead of recess?

Q. [Inaudible]—Senator Specter has appealed to you—

Q. Why did you choose to—

The President. I have two objectives. One is to get Mr. Lee into the leadership of the Civil Rights Division as soon as possible. The other is to maximize the chances that he can be confirmed in the coming year in the Senate. I believe this path is the best way to maximize the chance of achieving both objectives.

Q. Mr. President, do you think that you minimized the problem of retaliation that the Republicans threatened by choosing this path?

The President. Well, I don't know about that. I think that retaliation is not only inappropriate and unwarranted, it would be wrong. As far as the pace of confirmation of judges, I don't think it's been adequate to date anyway. The Senate has a constitutional responsibility to consider these judges in a timely fashion, and I want them to do much better, not worse.

But you know, no President can proceed in office and do the duty that the Constitution imposes if you spend your time worrying about retaliation. I think this is an honorable decision which gives the Senate a chance to consider Mr. Lee again, something which I believe would not have happened if I had done it in another way. That's what I want to do. And I want to work with the Senate in a positive way, but I can't be worried about retaliation. I have to do what I think is right.

Q. The Senate also appealed to you on constitutional grounds as well, saying that you shouldn't do this under Articles I or II. How do you respond to that? And if Mr. Lee wants to step up, why did you want to step into such a political firestorm that was caused by your nomination?

The President. Well, first of all, I have been very judicious in the use of recess appointments. If you look at my record as compared with every President—I've gone back all the way to President Ford, and he was just here a little less than 2½ years. But I have been very disciplined in the use of these appointments. President Reagan and President Bush made far more recess appointments than I have.

I have done my best to work with the United States Senate in an entirely constitutional way. But we had to get somebody into the Civil Rights Division. And I'm not sure anybody could have been confirmed if the test is that I have to appoint someone who disagrees with me on affirmative action, which seemed to be what some of the Senators are saying. And I just couldn't imagine getting anybody more qualified than Bill Lee. So I decided we needed to go on and do what I thought was right for the country.

Q. But, sir, why should this not be seen as an act of defiance against the advise and consent process in the Senate?

The President. Well, first of all, the Senate did not decline—they did not reject his appointment. The Senate never even got a chance to vote on his appointment. And if the Senate had

rejected his appointment, I would not—even though I would have bitterly disagreed with it, I certainly would not have named him to this position. I believe that the Senate, if given a chance to vote on him, will embrace his appointment. And I believe after he's been there a few months, he'll have even more votes. So that's what I hope will happen and what I believe we have a chance to have happen now.

Q. Isn't it like having one hand tied behind his back to start this job politically as an acting—

The President. No. Absolutely not. He has the full authority of the office. And you have seen here, he has the full confidence of the Attorney General and the President. That's all he needs.

Q. But, Mr. President, you still have those that are opposing him. And what if the same thing were to happen that happened this year? What's the next step?

The President. He'll be the Acting Attorney General for Civil Rights, and he'll be enforcing the civil rights laws.

Q. Why do you think politics were at play in this issue, sir? You and your top aides are saying that politics were responsible for the opposition. Why could it not—why do you not accept it as just an honest disagreement on issues?

The President. Because I was elected President, and I didn't make any secret of my position on affirmative action. I might say also, this administration has done a lot to change the affirmative action laws to eliminate some of the abuses that I thought existed. But we can never be in a position of saying that a President shouldn't have someone in office who agrees with him. Now, that doesn't mean every—if a President makes an appointment that's way outside the mainstream of established legal thought or somebody who has a lack of experience or someone who has otherwise demonstrated an unfitness for office, then the Senate may reject that person, who parenthetically may be agreeing with the President.

But none of those elements were here—none, not a single one. And that's why I thought this was the right thing to do, and I still feel that way. I feel more strongly than I did the day I nominated him.

Q. What is the name of your dog? [Laughter]

Q. When will you submit the nomination again?

The President. What did you say?

Q. When will you submit the nomination again?

The President. Oh, I don't know. Early next year, in a timely fashion.

Q. Your appointment to Mexico as a Mexican Ambassador was also blocked. Did you decide with this that enough is enough and that you were going to take a stand on this? Why was there a difference in the decision to put Lee in there without confirming him?

The President. Because I think under these circumstances we actually have a chance to get him confirmed. The Ambassador position to Mexico was entirely different. And normally you don't appoint a recess—you don't make a recess appointment, for example, of an Ambassador unless there is some understanding that that person will actually be confirmed when the time comes for the confirmation. The facts were different.

Q. Is there any difference between the way an Acting Assistant Attorney General does his job and a fully nominated and confirmed Assistant Attorney General can do his job? Is there any difference between the two?

The President. I do not believe there is any difference at all as long as the Acting Attorney General—the Acting Assistant Attorney General has the confidence and support of the Attorney General and the confidence and support of the

President. And that is the message today. I think he's in great shape, and I can't wait for him to go to work.

President's New Dog

Q. What's the answer to the big question in this country? What's the name of your dog? [Laughter]

The President. First of all, let me thank—I want to thank everybody, all these kids that came in all over the country. I've never gotten so many suggestions in my life. And some of them were quite hilarious, Advise and Consent. A child yesterday said I should name the dog Top Secret, so I could run around the White House saying, "Top Secret, Top Secret." [Laughter]

Q. What do you call him now?

The President. Anyway, I got all these names, and we had a little family conference last night. We got down to two names, and we selected one. And I think I'll announce it tomorrow at the press conference. [Laughter]

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:45 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Gov. William F. Weld of Massachusetts, whose nomination to be Ambassador to Mexico was withdrawn on September 18.

Remarks on Presenting the National Medals of Science and Technology December 16, 1997

The President. Thank you very much, Dr. Gibbons, Secretary Daley. I'm also delighted that Neal Lane, the Director of the National Science Foundation, and Dr. Harold Varmus, the Director of the NIH, are here with us, as well as the chairman of the House Science Committee; Congressman Sensenbrenner, thank you very much for being here.

Today we honor 14 remarkable men and women for extraordinary individual accomplishments from discovering new ways to chart the universe to exploring the internal universe of human nature. We honor them, however, also for their collective achievement. By giving these awards, we honor the American passion for dis-

covery that has driven our Nation forward from field to factory to the far reaches of cyberspace. This spirit of discovery will lead us into a new century and a new millennium.

This is a moment of great challenge for our Nation, a time where we must rise to master the forces of change and progress as we move forward to the 21st century. Later this week I will announce or discuss the new economy, one of the most powerful forces of change. This morning I want to talk about the force of scientific and technological innovation. It is helping to fuel and shape that new economy, but its impact goes well beyond it.