

The President's Radio Address May 2, 1998

Good morning. Today I want to talk about our efforts to improve service and end abuses at the Internal Revenue Service. American citizens have every right to expect that they'll be treated with respect by a Government that works for them. A big part of our values as a people include courtesy, efficiency, and fairness from Government.

For far too long in the minds of too many Americans, the IRS has symbolized an immense bureaucracy, a place where unfair treatment and unresponsive service were far too common. We've worked hard to give the American people an IRS that is fairer, more efficient, more responsive to their needs, and to support the many dedicated IRS employees who do want to serve them well. And we've made progress.

Two years ago I was proud to sign into law the second Taxpayer Bill of Rights. It's made it easier for taxpayers to appeal IRS decisions and to recover attorney's fees when the IRS makes mistakes. And last May Vice President Gore and Treasury Secretary Bob Rubin began an unflinching top to bottom review of customer service at the IRS. They reported back to me with their recommendations, and we're already beginning to see a new IRS that is more committed to the needs of taxpayers.

We're keeping IRS offices open longer during filing season, launching independent citizen advocacy panels to help taxpayers get relief. Now you can call the IRS and get telephone service 6 days a week, 18 hours a day; soon it'll be 24 hours a day. And this year 24 million Americans saved an awful lot of time and hassle by filing their returns on the phone or electronically. I've also appointed a new IRS Commissioner and a new kind of IRS Commissioner. Charles Rossotti is an experienced businessman who spent his entire career on the taxpayer side of the table.

But we've got more to do. Like most Americans, I was outraged by testimony at last week's congressional hearings on the IRS, by the stories of our citizens harassed and humiliated by what seemed to be an unaccountable, downright tone-deaf agency. These problems developed over years, of course, and we can't solve them all overnight. But Commissioner Rossotti has moved swiftly to rout out abuses and to further reform operations of the IRS.

Also, he's asked Judge William Webster, the former Director of the FBI and the CIA, to conduct an independent review of the criminal investigation division. As further steps are needed, they will be taken.

But above all, our new Commissioner needs new tools to build a better IRS, and he needs them now. Last year our administration worked with the House of Representatives to pass sweeping, strong, bipartisan reform of the IRS, to give citizens more protection, improve service, reduce abuse. Now the Senate is poised to enact very similar legislation. I call on Congress to make this year the year we set aside political differences to enact real reforms of the IRS. When it comes to quality service at the IRS, Congress can't afford to file for an extension.

As we continue to improve our work, we may uncover more problems at the IRS. Now, if we do, I pledge to the American people that once again we'll act swiftly, guarding against abuse, punishing those who cross the line. And as we do, we will build a fairer and more effective Government for a stronger America in the 21st century.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 4:30 p.m. on May 1 at a private residence in Palo Alto, CA, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on May 2.