

July 27 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

Statement on the Organization of African Unity's Framework Agreement for Ethiopia and Eritrea

July 27, 1999

I welcome the announcement by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that Ethiopia and Eritrea have accepted the OAU framework agreement and the modalities for its implementation, and agreed to steps proposed by the OAU to facilitate implementation of the agreement. This is a significant step toward peace.

We have worked intensively with the OAU in recent weeks to help bring an end to this

devastating conflict. My Special Envoy, Anthony Lake, has just returned from the region, where he met with the leaders of both governments and the OAU. The United States will continue to support the efforts of the OAU under the chairmanship of Algerian President Bouteflika to bring this tragic conflict to a speedy conclusion.

Remarks to the American Legion Boys and Girls Nations

July 28, 1999

Thank you very much. I always look forward to your coming every year because I know we'll have plenty of enthusiasm to light up the old house here. *[Laughter]*

Let me begin by thanking Secretary Riley, who is, I'm almost sure, the longest serving Secretary of Education in American history, and I am quite sure the finest Secretary of Education we have ever had. And I thank him for his service.

I would like to thank the officials of Boys and Girls Nation who are here: the American Legion National Commander, Butch Miller; Boys Nation Director Ron Engel; Director of Activities Jack Mercier, who was a counselor when I was at Boys Nation, in 1904 or whenever—*[laughter]*—a long time ago—1963—Girls Nation Director Dianne McClung, Youth Program Coordinator Kenya Ostermeier.

I'd also like to acknowledge the presence in the audience of some alumni of Boys and Girls Nation: Congressman Jim Ramstad of Minnesota, who was there with me in 1963. Stand up, Jim. *[Applause]* And I see one of my two White House staffers who is an alumnus, Fred DuVal of Arizona, who is here. And Janet Murguia from Kansas is—I don't know if she's here or not, but she went to Girls Nation—a long time after I did. *[Laughter]*

I also can't help noting that—I think the State of Nevada today is represented by Patrick Sergeant. His father, Colonel Steve Sergeant, is the

new Deputy Executive Secretary of the National Security Council here at the White House, and we're glad to have his service.

I want to thank your Boys Nation and Girls Nation officers who are here: Vice President Denise Battle and Vice President John Feeny. If Al Gore were here, he would tell you that's a very important job. *[Laughter]* And I might say it is a very important job.

The Vice President has this great joke. He says every time he votes, we win. *[Laughter]* And as all of you know, we only vote when there's a tie in the Senate. And actually, we've had some of the more important—perhaps one of the two or three most important votes taken in the Senate in my term as President was the vote on the economic plan of 1993, which led to big reduction in the deficit and gave us the biggest leg up on the balanced budget. It was a tie vote, and the Vice President broke the tie. So you might think about that as you contemplate your future. It's a good thing to break ties.

I want to thank President Teah Frederick and President Ryan Rippel for their comments and their example.

I look forward to this day every year, partly because of my own memories of being at Boys Nation and the debates we had. When you talked about the issues you were dealing with—we had this huge debate on civil rights in 1963, and I was one of the four representatives from

the South that voted for the civil rights plank. And in the light of history, it looks pretty good. I feel good about it. But I've never forgotten what it was like that week hearing from the Cabinet members, meeting Senators and Congressmen, and all the debates that occurred.

I've never forgotten that President Kennedy met with us and made us feel that public service is a noble endeavor and that we all could make a difference. And I hope all of you feel that way, because your country needs you. You have so much to give.

One of the young people here today may go on to be President. One might command the first human mission to Mars. One might develop a cure for cancer or AIDS. Perhaps you will teach the next generation of young people or help to alleviate poverty or violence in your own communities. As long as you keep setting goals and working hard and using your talent for the common good, there's no limit to what you can do. And America needs you.

This country has been around a long time because we have remained faithful to our ideals, but forever young and open to change. I don't want to conduct a tour of the White House today, but the old house was finished in 1800. So, on our millennial year, we will celebrate the 200th birthday of the White House. The painting of George Washington to my left, to your right, was painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1797 and purchased for the then enormous sum of \$500, for the White House. It is priceless today.

But it's worth remembering how important it is to keep democracy alive, that in 1814, when we were in the last throes of the War of 1812 and the British were coming up the Potomac, the President of the United States, James Madison—who was the last President to be the active Commander in Chief for the Armed Forces, and so was up in Maryland, where he mistakenly thought the British would be—at the head of an army, sent word back to his wife, Dolley, who was preparing this vast banquet—the White House was full of food; this room was full of food—that the British were on the way and she should get out, but no matter what, she had to take the picture of George Washington.

So Dolley Madison cut that picture out of its frame, rolled it up, and got out of the White House. The British arrived to find the empty frame, ate the food, and burned the house. [Laughter] But we rebuilt the house, and the

picture still lives. And every time I see that picture, I think about it.

It was in this room that Thomas Jefferson met with his secretary, Merriwether Lewis, to plan the Lewis and Clark expedition—right where you're all sitting. The place was covered with bearskins and ancient maps, and they were—President Jefferson was in love with the geography and science, and he saw this whole thing as not only a geographical expedition, but he thought that all kinds of scientific information would be gathered along the way. So a lot of very important things have happened where you are sitting today that remind us that America is a place with great opportunities and great responsibilities.

Today, our country is the greatest force for peace and security and human rights and prosperity in the world. We have the longest peacetime expansion in our history. We have almost 18, 19 million new jobs now. We have the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest crime rate in 26 years, the smallest welfare rolls in 30 years. Our social problems, in general, are getting better. Teen drug abuse, pregnancy, teen smoking are declining. And the country is learning to live with the most amazing array of diversity—racial diversity, ethnic diversity, religious diversity—and still find a way to be bound together as one community.

This is a very important time. And rather like you at this time in your life, your always-young Nation faces the question of what to do with our prosperity and our promise, just as you face the personal question of what to do with your promise. Will we seize this chance of a lifetime to meet the long-term challenges of America, to ensure that when you are our age, you will have a great country to live in and cherish and pass on to your children and grandchildren? I would argue that that is the real challenge we face today, just as you must decide whether you're willing to continue to forgo certain things today in order to achieve your goals tomorrow.

Will we invest in creating the best system of education in the world, with smaller classes, better-prepared teachers, modern and safe schools? Will we save Social Security and Medicare before the baby boomers retire and the number of people over 65 doubles, which will happen in 30 years? Will we make America debt-free for the first time since 1835, and so ensure your prosperity, and do those things

which will enable economic opportunity to come to the people and places who still have not felt this recovery?

These are some, but not all, of the great long-term questions before us as a nation, as you gather here. And so we're having this enormous debate in Washington. It is a good-faith debate, based on competing visions and values. It will help us to define what we see as our most fundamental responsibilities to our parents, to our children. It is a debate about the future of our Nation and, to be sure, about your future.

I want to talk just a minute about it today, because it is a debate that 6½ years ago, when I was taking office, no one thought we would ever have. Everywhere I go in America now I say, "You know, when I was here in 1992, if I had said to you, 'Now, I want you to vote for me, and in 6½ years from now, I'll come back and we'll talk about what to do with the surplus,' they would have laughed me out of the room. I never would have carried a single State. They would have said, 'That poor young man seems like a nice fellow, but he's terribly out of touch.'" [Laughter] Because we had a \$290 billion deficit, high interest rates; we had averaged 7 percent unemployment for a long time, and we quadrupled the national debt in 12 years.

All I could do was to tell the American people I was going to bring the debt down; I would do my best to balance the budget; and if we did it, we'd get interest rates down, and investment would come up. And I said, but we had to do it in a way that allowed us to continue to invest in education, in the environment, in health care and research, the things that were critical to our future.

So that's what I did. You probably won't remember this because you were all young, but in the year I ran for President in 1992, one of the best selling books—quite a well-written book, written by two journalists from Philadelphia—was entitled "America: What Went Wrong?" Thanks to the hard work of the American people, our country has made a seismic shift in the last 6 years. Now we're looking at \$99 billion in surplus this year, and we look forward to a new decade of budget surpluses and a new century full of confidence and pride.

I'm also proud that while we have eliminated the deficit and produced the surpluses, we nearly doubled our investments in education and training programs, because that is the most ef-

fective investment we can make in our long-term future. Without good teachers and high expectations, I wouldn't be here today. But education is even more important to your generation and will be even more important to those coming along behind you because of the nature of the way the information age works.

Secretary Riley has already talked about the historic investments we've made to open the doors of college to every American, to do more for underprivileged children, to try to make sure every classroom in the country is hooked up to the Internet by the year 2000, and that because of the so-called E-rate, even the poorest schools will be able to afford to log on in all those classrooms—and the other things that we're trying to do.

This year Congress is debating whether to work with us to finish the job that Congress made an initial commitment to last year of hiring 100,000 teachers so we can lower class size to an average of 18 in the first 3 grades all across the country. And I have asked Congress to pass a tax incentive to help us build or modernize 6,000 schools across America, because enormous numbers of young people are going to schools that are very, very old, a lot of them not even capable of being wired; and a lot of other young children are in house trailers out beside the old schools because we now have, finally, a class of schoolchildren bigger than the baby boomers. And we have to do more in that regard.

I have also asked Congress to help us to strengthen performance—with higher standards for schools, for teachers, for students—to say that Federal aid should go only to those schools that end social promotion but also provide summer school programs, after-school programs, and extra help to turn schools around that aren't doing the job.

So far, the main thing that the Congress has heard in all this is the siren call of large tax cuts on the theory that we have a surplus, it's your money, and we ought to give it back to you. Now, it only takes 5 seconds to say that, and it sounds great. I heard one Member of Congress the other day, in all seriousness, said, "If you let them"—referring to the President and the members of my party—"if you let them keep your money, they'll spend it on their friends."

Well, what I have proposed to do is to take most of the surplus and set it aside for Social

Security and Medicare, and in the years when we don't use the money, use that to pay down the debt so we can be debt-free in 15 years, for the first time since 1835, which means lower interest rates for everybody, more investment, more jobs, higher incomes and, for your families, lower mortgage rates, college loan rates, credit card rates, and car payment costs. And it would guarantee the long-term stability of the country. I think that's the right thing to do.

And I have also proposed to spend adequate amounts of money to continue the Federal role's investment in education and medical research, national defense, and other things and then to take what's left and spend it on a tax cut. It is, admittedly, much smaller than the one that the majority approved.

Now, they believe—to be fair—it is your money. It's the taxpayers' money; and they believe that the best thing to do is to give it back. It would cost about \$800 billion over the next 10 years and \$3 trillion over the 10 years after that. Sounds like an unimaginable sum—that's real money there. And that's when the baby boomers will be retiring.

Now, the problem I have with it is that under their plan, to be fair, we could save the Social Security surplus to pay down the debt, partially, but we would not lengthen the life of the Social Security Trust Fund or the Medicare Trust Fund, and we'd have to have big cuts in education and the other items that I've mentioned. But people would get the tax cut. But that would be the price tag; in other words, it's not free. So we're having this big debate.

My argument is that we quadrupled the debt of this country between 1981 and 1992. And I don't believe we should be even discussing the tax cut until we decide what our obligations are—to deal with the aging of America. And let me say, this is not just an issue for you—I mean, for us. I mean, I'm the oldest of the baby boomers. But it's not just an issue for us. It is an issue for you. Why? Because I can tell you that my generation is absolutely obsessed with the notion that if we retire, there will be so many of us that we will break the bank of Social Security and Medicare and we'll have to depend on our kids to support us and then our children won't have the money they need to raise our grandchildren.

So this—when you hear about the Social Security and Medicare debate, it's not just about senior citizens. It's about the compact between

the generations in America and whether we can continue to, in effect, let seniors take care of themselves by and large so that their children by and large will be free to take care of their grandchildren. That's really what is going on here.

So—and if I had my way, we would decide this issue in the following order: We would decide what are we going to do—what does it take to fix Social Security and Medicare; what do we have to have to take care of education, defense, research, and the things that we should do as a nation? And then let's take what's left over and give it back in a tax cut. The way we're having the discussion about the size of the tax cut first, it would be like if you go home this weekend, when you finish, you go home and you have dinner and your folks say to you, "You know, we have always wanted to take this month-long vacation to Hawaii, and we're going to take it. We're going to fly first-class; we're going to go to the most expensive hotels; we're going to have everything we've ever dreamed of. And when we get home, we'll figure out whether we can pay the home mortgage and send you to college." [Laughter] Now, you being—I'm sure you need the vacation. I'm sure it would be a good thing. [Laughter] But you wouldn't make the decision in that order.

So that's the debate we're having here, in part. I believe that a lot of people who voted for this tax cut, they know I'm going to veto it if it passes, so they don't think it will be law. And they want to be on record as, "I was for a bigger tax cut than President Clinton was." But what we should be doing, I think, is saying, "Hey, we have—once in a lifetime you get this kind of chance where there's no more deficit, projected surpluses, and you know what the big challenges of the country are. You know it's dealing with the aging of America, dealing with the education of our children, dealing with keeping the economy going and bringing economic opportunity to people who haven't felt it. There are other things, but let's just focus on those three." I think we ought to decide what we ought to do.

And let me give you an idea of what would happen if a tax cut of this size were to become law, so you can focus on it. Because there is no such thing as a free decision. It is your money, and if you tell the Congress you want it back, they could by enough—if they could override my veto, they could give it all back

to you. I mean, everything you give us is your money. We could abolish the Department of Defense tomorrow and everything else we do and give it all back to you and have no Federal Government. So it is your money.

But let me give you an example. If we pass the tax cut, and we stayed with a balanced budget, according to our Office of Management and Budget, here's what the consequences would be. Today, we're helping 12 million children in high-poverty areas get extra help. I have proposed reforms to raise standards for them and give them more help. This plan, if it passed, with this tax cut, would require us to say to 6 million of those children, "We can't help you."

Today, we provide funds to help a million children learn to read independently by the end of the third grade. If the tax plan passes, we'd have to say to 480,000 of them, "We're sorry; we can't do that."

Today, we're nearing our goal of enrolling a million people in Head Start. If the plan passes, we'd have to say to 430,000 preschoolers, "We can't do that."

Last year we reached across party lines to hire 30,000 of that 100,000 teachers I talked about. It was a wonderful moment—like when we passed the balanced budget in '97, overwhelming majorities of both parties in both Houses; when we passed welfare reform in '96, overwhelming majorities of both parties in both Houses. That's the way the country ought to work. And we did that last year. And it will allow us, as I said, if we finish the job, to reduce class size to an average of 18 in the first 3 grades. But if the tax cut passes, and we keep a balanced budget, we'd have to say to a million students, "No smaller classes."

So I think this is a big problem. Today, we're helping 400,000 students with after-school programs. This is a huge deal. Every inner-city, tough neighborhood that has after-school programs that are aggressive sees a big drop in the juvenile crime rate and a big increase in learning in the schools. We propose to triple the number of people who would be included in those programs next year. If this tax plan passes, we'd have to cut that in half.

The school construction tax cut I mentioned to you earlier, to help us build or modernize 6,000 schools, ironically, is not in the plan. In this plan, only 10 percent of that many schools would be fixed.

Now, these are not just numbers; these are children. And keep in mind, most of you are going to be fine regardless. I mean, you got to Girls Nation; you got to Boys Nation. Somebody will give you a scholarship if your family doesn't have the money to go to college. You have to ask yourself whether you will be better off if your country is better off. If we try to make sure that we all go forward together—you came here because you believed in the American system, a system that is designed not to just address the needs of the most talented and the most fortunate among us but a system premised on the fact that nearly everybody, nearly everybody in a free country can do what is necessary to be a good, productive, hard-working citizen if given the tools to do so. And I believe that.

The reverse is true, that those of us who are most fortunate will also have the quality of our lives diminished to the extent that we do not provide everyone the chance to live up to their God-given abilities. So that's what's going on now. And believe me, this is an honest, philosophical debate. If the people who disagree with me were here, they would say, "Well, we just think Government wastes too much money, and this is your money, and you paid the taxes, and we ought to give it back to you."

There's another element here I want to say to be fair. We might keep spending all this money, but if we did that and pass the tax cut, then we'd be right back in the same fix we were in before I took office—huge debts, higher interest rates dragging down the economy, higher unemployment. So I know it's easier for me to say, maybe, because I'm not running for anything. You know—under our system we have a two-term limit, and I can't run for anything unless I go home and run for the school board some day. *[Laughter]*

But I believe that the American people can be told the truth about our long-term challenges. And I believe the American people feel good about the decisions we made that were hard decisions at the time that have brought our country to this moment. And there are still such big things out there.

So what I say is, let's do first things first. Let's lift the burden of your parents' aging off your shoulders by securing Social Security and Medicare. Let's give you a chance to have an even more successful economy than we have today, by getting this country out of debt for

the first time since 1835 and taking extra steps to bring money into these inner-city neighborhoods, the rural neighborhoods, the Indian reservations, where there has been no economic recovery.

Let's continue to make sure that we are investing in the education of our young people. We'll still have money for a tax cut that could include long-term care, child care—for me, helping ordinary families save for retirement. But the main thing is not so much what the elements of it are but that it's not so big that it either throws us into debt or requires us to compromise our future.

Now, that is the way I see this. I wonder if 36 years from now you will remember what was going on in Washington with the same clarity that I remember. But I can tell you, it was by no means certain that Congress and the country would do the right thing on civil rights. Indeed, President Kennedy, when he addressed the Boys Nation delegates, thanked us for our resolution on civil rights and bemoaned the fact that the Governors, who had just met a week before we did, could not reach agreement; they could not reach across party lines and regional lines to stand up for the elemental principal of civil rights. And he thanked us for doing it.

Thirty years later, 36 years later, it looks like Boys Nation was right, and the Governors' Association was wrong. [*Laughter*] Just look around this crowd today. Look at all the differences represented by the young men and women here. Who could possibly say that America is not better off for the progress we have made? But you need to know a lot of people lost their jobs in election sticking up for civil rights in

places where it wasn't so popular. A lot of Congressmen lost their jobs in 1994 because they voted to bring the deficit down, or they voted for the Brady bill or the assault weapons ban, which helped to give up the lowest crime rate in 26 years.

But sometimes you have to look to the long run. And one of the things that the sad events of the last couple of weeks have reminded us all of is that the gifts of life and the burdens of life do not fall according to some rational plan—that all of our lives, even if we live to be 80—or in the case of Secretary Riley's father, over 90—life is still fleeting. And the great test is to try to enjoy and make the most of every day and still sow the seeds for your children to have a better tomorrow.

That is what we are trying to do here. Thomas Jefferson said every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. If we can remember that here, I think we can once again reach across the party lines and the regional lines and think about the long-term interest of America. It has been a long, long time since our country has had a chance to make provisions for the next generation with absolute confidence, unencumbered by the burdens of just getting through the day. That is where we are. And I am determined to do everything I can to see that we make the most of it to give you the chance to live your dreams.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:52 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Teah Frederick, president, Girls Nation; Ryan Rippel, president, Boys Nation; and authors Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele.

Statement on Senate Action on Juvenile Crime and Gun Legislation *July 28, 1999*

Today, after weeks of partisan delay, the Senate finally appointed conferees on juvenile crime and gun legislation. While I am heartened by this modest progress, more than 3 months have passed since the tragedy at Columbine, and Congress has yet to send me a bill to make commonsense gun reforms the law of the land. I challenge the House to follow the Senate's

lead and appoint conferees before the August recess, so that the full Congress can get back to work and pass a bill with strong gun provisions as our children go back to school.