

Aug. 16 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Albert Gore, Jr., President of the Senate.

Remarks on Public Service Announcements on School Violence

August 17, 1999

Leilani, most people twice your age couldn't do that. [*Laughter*]

Earthquake in Turkey

Ladies and gentlemen, because this is my first chance of the week to speak to the press, before we get on to showing the spot, I have to say just a couple of words about the awful earthquake that occurred in Turkey, which I'm sure a lot of you have heard about. It has claimed hundreds of lives and many injuries.

So let me begin by saying on behalf of all Americans, our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families. Most of you know that Turkey has been our friend and ally for a long time now. We must stand with them and do whatever we can to help them get through this terrible crisis.

We've already released aid for the Turkish Red Crescent. We're sending a team to Turkey to help with search and rescue today. Our Energy Secretary, Bill Richardson, and General Hugh Shelton, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are actually in Turkey, and they have personally conveyed our willingness to provide additional assistance. General Shelton has met with his Turkish counterpart to offer the military's help with disaster relief. And we will continue to determine what further help is needed. But you can only imagine how difficult this is for them, and we will do what we can to help.

School Violence

Now, let me thank Leilani again and Wyatt Keusch and Harrison Boatwright, who are the young people here with us, who are also in the PSA. I want to thank Secretary Riley and Attorney General Reno, who have really done a wonderful job of trying to have a coordinated and balanced approach to keeping our children safe. Governor Romer, thank you. I want to thank all the people here from the entertainment industry, Jack and Richard and Eddie, Sheila and all the others who stood up. Thank

you so much for your generosity and your far-sightedness. Thank you, Peggy Conlon; you're a great spokesperson for the people you represent, and you've been great in helping us to get this far. And I want to thank my long-time friend Drew Altman and the Kaiser Foundation for their support in this endeavor. I'd also like to thank the young AmeriCorps members who are here today, who spent a lot of time working with our young people and trying to help them stay safe. This is a very important issue to Hillary, to me, to our entire administration.

In 2 weeks Leilani's going to start at a brand new school. That's probably more scary than introducing the President to a bunch of strangers. [*Laughter*] And you know, there are always a lot of worries associated with going to a new school: All these strange people—are they going to like me? Am I going to like them? You've got to get to know the teachers; you've just got to find your way around; got to remember the combination to a new locker. [*Laughter*] Those are the things that our kids ought to be worried about.

They shouldn't be worried about whether what they saw in Littleton or Conyers or what that young madman in Illinois and Indiana or at the Jewish community center in L.A. could possibly happen to them. That's what they shouldn't worry about. But they do because they've seen the press reports, and so has our entire Nation.

We're still grieving for the young children, the teacher, the counselor, the receptionist, at the Jewish community center, or the family of that young Filipino-American, Joseph Iletto, who was killed only because he was an Asian-American who worked for his country's government.

Secretary Riley has gone across the country trying to make sure that all of us can put this in some kind of context. The Attorney General has, as well. The crime rate in this country's at a 26-year low; juvenile crime is going down;

the Center for Disease Control and the Department of Education show that overall violence has actually decreased in our schools. It's important to tell these children here with us today, and others, that the chances of a tragedy happening are small, less than they used to be, less than one in a million.

But that's not good enough when you see how horrible it is when it occurs. Schools ought to be right next to our houses of worship as sanctuaries in America. They ought to be places where young people are completely safe and absolutely certain that they are. And each of us bears a responsibility. If Hillary is right that it takes a village to raise a child, it will take our whole national village to keep the Nation's children safe in their schools.

A big part of that responsibility lies with parents and giving parents and their children the capacity and courage to communicate with one another. And that's a big part of why we're here to launch this public service campaign.

As you will see in a moment, the PSA sponsored by the Kaiser Family Foundation, by Children Now, and the Ad Council sends out a powerful call to action: If you're a child and you see someone committing violence or even just talking about it—that's very important, given the evidence we now have about the situation in Colorado and others—if you see someone just talking about it, the best thing you can do is to first tell your parents. And if you're a parent, you have to take it seriously. You have to sit down and talk and listen, to draw your children out, to give them a chance to express their fears, to give you early warning, and then to share that early warning with your children's teachers and principal.

This is an important message, so I'd like to, again, with thanks to all concerned, turn the lights out and watch the ad.

[*The public service announcement video was shown.*]

The President. Thanks to the commitment of America's broadcast and cable networks and cable channels, this ad and others like it will be seen by just about every single person in America who turns on the television tomorrow night during the family hour of prime time.

This so-called television roadblock is really unprecedented. The networks are donating a million and a half dollars of free air time in one night alone. That's more blanket coverage than

I get for the State of the Union. [*Laughter*] Many of the networks have already pledged to continue airing these PSA's during different timeslots for the remainder of this year.

So let me say once again, I am very, very grateful to all the people involved who have fulfilled the commitment that they made at our youth violence summit in May, to use the power of your medium to send out positive messages to our children. This is a kind of thing we can do when we work together, and we need to continue to do so and to include all parts of our society.

You remember that when we had the national summit, the First Lady and I said we wanted to organize a national campaign against youth violence, to have the same sort of galvanizing impact on our people that Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Students Against—I think it's now called—Destructive Decisions, the campaign to promote seatbelt use. These grassroots campaigns can have a profound effect on the way Americans think and the way they behave. It will be much, much easier now, because of the work that all of you involved in the media have done to bring these public service spots to the people of the United States. But we also need our organized campaign.

So today I have the honor of announcing and introducing the person who will be the executive director of this campaign. His name is Jeff Bleich, and he's here with us on stage. He's been recognized by the American Bar Association as one of our country's leading young attorneys. He's also one of San Francisco's leading civic-minded citizens. He is the father of three beautiful children he desperately wants to have a safe childhood. He has received several prestigious awards for his pro bono legal service. He's built strong connections in Silicon Valley and in Hollywood, both of whom can be of immense help to us in this endeavor. And perhaps most important, he has written a very fine book on youth violence. So I'd like to ask Jeff to stand up, and to thank him for his service. And thank you for taking on this challenge to protect our children.

Today the Department of Justice is also releasing \$15 million to fund innovative partnerships between local police and school and community groups, something the Attorney General has been pushing since the first day she came here. These partnerships will help schools do

everything from training students in conflict resolution techniques to combating drug dealing and use on school grounds.

But as every police officer in America knows, we're kidding ourselves if we think we can conquer youth violence without addressing one of its undeniable catalysts, the appalling ease with which young people gain access to guns. Hillary has already said, and you know that I strongly agree, it is long past time for Congress to step up to its responsibility and restore some common sense, sanity, and strength to our Nation's gun laws.

Today I ask the Republican majority: When you come back to work, our children will be going back to school; think about them; let's not wait until the next senseless tragedy to pass commonsense gun safety measures to protect them.

Now, I know in a country of 270 million people and tens of millions of guns, no law can stop every disturbed person from committing a violent act with a gun. But we would never do anything, as a people, if we gave in to the objection that all of our actions would have less than 100 percent impact. The Brady bill has kept over 400,000 gun sales, which should not have occurred, from happening. It has saved countless lives. Closing the gun show loophole will have the same impact. Closing the loopholes in the assault weapons ban will have the same impact.

Doing these other things—will they solve every problem? No. Will they stop every act of violence? No. Will they prevent every madman? No. If we used that kind of excuse, we would all stay in bed every day. We would never get out of bed. We would never get out of bed. We would never hit a lick. So we need all the tools at our disposal. Look what these media people have done. Will this public service ad get every parent in America and every child to talk about every dangerous thing that happens at every school? No. But it will have a huge impact.

And so if the media people are doing their part and the school people are doing their part and the law enforcement people are doing their part, it is time to pass the reasonable and entirely modest measures before the Congress. For those who want to do more, I say, so do I. But that is no reason not to do this. This will make a difference. And it is certainly not an argument not to do it, that it won't solve every problem. It will save some lives, and we ought to do it.

We have got to work together. That's what our national campaign is about; that is the message that the Ad Council is putting out in these ads; and down deep inside, that's what all of us know we need to do, so that when we see children like Leilani—don't you wish all you ever had to worry about was that the kid you're pulling for can get through the speech in front of the strangers—[laughter]—can make it through the athletic event, can play the solo or sing the song that is so excruciatingly difficult the first time you did it? These are the things that our children ought to be worried about. We ought to give our kids back their childhood. And we can do it, if we do it together.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:12 a.m. in Presidential Hall (formerly Room 450) in the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to students Leilani Tassillio, who introduced the President, Wyatt Keusch, and Harrison Boatwright; Jack Valenti, president and chief executive officer, Motion Pictures Association of America, Inc.; Richard Masur, president, Screen Actors Guild; Edward O. Fritts, president and chief executive officer, National Association of Broadcasters; former Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, board member, and Peggy Conlon, president and chief executive officer, Ad Council; and Drew E. Altman, president and chief executive officer, Henry J. Kaiser Foundation.