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# The President's News Conference
*February 16, 2000*

*The President.* Good afternoon. I would like to cover a couple of topics in an opening statement, and then I will take your questions.

First, let me say that we all know that we're in the midst of the longest and strongest economic expansion in our history, with nearly 21 million new jobs, unemployment at 4 percent, and solid income growth across all income groups.

Americans in public service and in the private sector must remember that our success in promoting peace and prosperity is not the result of complacency but of our common commitment to dynamic action rooted in enduring values. If we want to continue to enjoy success, we must continue our commitment to dynamic action.

There is important work to be done in America this year, and in Washington, DC, this year. First, we must stay on the path of fiscal discipline that got us to this point. If we stay on that path, we can make America, in just 13 years, debt-free for the first time since 1835. Then we can use the benefits of debt reduction to preserve two of the most important guarantees we have made to the American people, Social Security and Medicare, something that will be a challenge as we see the number of people over 65 double in the next 30 years with the retirement of the baby boom generation.

Specifically, we can make a bipartisan downpayment on Social Security reform by crediting the interest savings from debt reduction to the Social Security Trust Fund to keep it strong and sound for 50 years, beyond the lifespan of all but the most fortunate of the baby boom generation. As a first step toward a comprehensive solution, I believe we should do something I called for in my 1999 State of the Union Address, to end the earnings limit for Social Security retirees between the ages of 65 and 69.

To strengthen and modernize Medicare, I propose to implement important reforms and to dedicate more than half the non-Social Security surplus to Medicare, over $400 billion, to keep it solvent for another decade, past 2025, and to add a voluntary prescription drug benefit. I'm pleased Congress is beginning to take up this issue, and I ask them to move quickly and to resist the temptation to spend large portions of the surplus before we have lived up to our commitment to prepare for the undeniable health and financing challenges that Medicare will bring.

We should also move to complete the unfinished business of the last Congress, passing a real Patients' Bill of Rights, campaign finance reform, hate crimes legislation, an increase in the minimum wage, and especially, commonsense gun safety legislation.

Guns in the wrong hands continue to claim too many young lives—lives like those of Andre Wallace and Natasha Marsh, the fine young DC residents who were gunned down in front of Natasha's home last week and were buried just yesterday. We saw it also in Littleton just a few days ago, with the shooting deaths of two teenage students from Columbine High School.

Today the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Andrew Cuomo, who is with us today, released the first-ever comprehensive analysis of gun-related violence in public housing in America. The report shows that while crime in public housing is declining, as it is in the rest of the country, gun-related crime remains a serious problem there, with residents of public housing more than twice as likely to be victims of gun violence as other members of our society. More than a million children and 360,000 seniors live in public housing in the United States. They deserve to be as safe as the rest of us. Ten months after the tragedy at Columbine, it is long past time for Congress to pass this commonsense gun safety legislation.

I would also like to address the impact of rising oil prices on American families. In the Northeast the impact has been particularly harsh because, from the Mid-Atlantic States to New England, many families still rely on home heating oil, a source of heating no longer used in the rest of the country. These families have been especially hard hit. That is a serious concern, especially because the winter months have been colder this year than in the past few years.

Since January we have released $175 million to help lower income families pay their heating

bills. We have also asked refiners to keep producing at full throttle until the crisis is past. And we directed the Coast Guard to expedite deliveries of home heating oil to affected areas. These actions have helped to ease the burden on the citizens who are most vulnerable. Still, there are too many families with moderate incomes who have no option other than heating their homes with oil, and they need help, too. There is more to do.

Secretary Richardson is in New England today holding a summit with refiners, distributors, and major users of home heating oil to determine how Government and industry can work together to better meet the needs of consumers in the Mid-Atlantic and New England States.

Today I'm announcing additional steps to help families struggling to pay their heating bills. I directed my Budget Office and the Department of Health and Human Services to release right now the remainder of this year's funding for emergency heating assistance, about $125 million more. This money will be targeted toward the hardest hit States, those with the highest usage of home heating oil. I will be meeting with Governors and Members of Congress in those States to ask them to use all their authority to expand the pool of people who receive those funds, making sure that as many people who need the help can get it.

And let me explain what I mean by that. Under the present law, States can pay LIHEAP assistance, low income heating assistance, to people up to 150 percent of the poverty line, the national poverty line, or up to 60 percent of the median income in their States. In the States that are most severely affected, where you have a lot of people who live on middle incomes, but particularly if they have children, are really hurt by an increase of two or three hundred dollars a month in their home heating bill—are eligible for this assistance but don't presently receive it. So if we provide more money—if the States really want to see the maximum number of people helped, they have the ability to raise the income limits of people eligible for that help and to structure the help accordingly.

We will also be requesting $600 million in emergency supplemental funding for the LIHEAP program to help more hard-hit families through the current crisis, as well as to have some money for others who may be hard hit later in the year when the hot weather sets in. We will send legislation to Congress in the next 10 days, and I hope there will be fast action on it.

Meanwhile, we will continue to work toward a longer term solution. I've asked Secretary Richardson to conduct a 60-day study on converting factories and major users from oil to other fuels, which will help to free up future oil supplies for use in heating homes.

Americans have always pulled together to help their fellow citizens in times of need. Over the last 7 years, we've stood to help the victims of earthquakes in California, of the farm crisis and a 500-year flood in the Middle West, and again and again and recently again this week, the violent storms in the South. Now the families in the Northeast need our help, too, and we must act.

Again I say, the United States did not get to this fortunate moment by inaction and complacency. We got here by a commitment to giving the American people the tools and conditions to solve their own problems and continuing to act aggressively and dynamically. This must be a year of that kind of action.

Thank you very much.

Now, Helen [Helen Thomas, United Press International], would you like to begin?

*2000 Presidential Election*

*Q.* Mr. President, you don't seem to have any good news on the Northern Ireland and Middle Eastern front, so I thought I'd ask you a homefront question. How do you like being targeted in the Republican Presidential campaign? Texas Governor—I have to quote this—Texas Governor Bush told Senator McCain, quote, "Whatever you do, don't equate my integrity and trustworthiness with Bill Clinton. That's about as low as you can get in the Republican primary." And McCain said that he resented being called "Clinton" or "Clinton-like," and a few other things. What do you say?

*The President.* Well—[*laughter*]—I have a couple of observations. One is, you know, they're playing to an electorate, most of whom did not vote for me. And secondly, I have a lot of sympathy with Governor Bush and Senator McCain. I mean, it's hard for them to figure out what to run on. They can't run against the longest economic expansion in history, or the lowest crime rate in 30 years, or the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, or the progress America has made in promoting peace around the

world, or the fact that our party overrode theirs and passed the family leave and it's benefited 20 million people and it hasn't hurt the economy.

So they've got a tough job, and I have a lot of sympathy with them. And I don't want to complicate their problems by saying any more about them. [*Laughter*]

Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

*Capital Punishment*

*Q.* Mr. President, there are growing calls for a national moratorium on capital punishment, from the American Bar Association to Members of Congress. Governor Ryan has halted executions in Illinois, as you know, because the convictions of 13 people on death row were overturned. On the other hand, Governor Bush said last night that he's confident that the 100 people who were put to death in Texas under his watch were all guilty. You've had some experience with this. You signed four death warrants or execution warrants while you were Governor. What's your feeling about a moratorium on executions?

*The President.* Well first, I think Governor Ryan did the right thing, and it was probably a courageous thing to do, because a majority of the American people support capital punishment, as do I. But I think that in Illinois, you had a situation where the exonerations and the executions were about equal in number over the last several years. So he had a difficult situation, and I think he did the right thing.

And I think that if I were a Governor still, I would look very closely at the situation in my State and decide what the facts were. There are, I think, not those grounds for that kind of moratorium under the Federal law because of the circumstances under which people are convicted.

Now, we have a different review going on here, a Justice Department review on the racial impact, or whether there was one, in the death penalty decisions under the Federal law. There are 27 people who have been sentenced to death under Federal law, 20 in the civilian courts and 7 through the military system.

We also are in the process of developing guidelines for clemency applications when an individual's claims of innocence or questioning of the sentence, even though guilt is not a question, can be pressed. And I think, in an attempt to address the problem you mentioned, I think Senator Leahy has introduced some legislation to try to give convicted criminal defendants access to DNA testing and other things which might tend to disprove their guilt.

So I think all these things need to be looked at. The people who support the death penalty, it seems to me, have an especially heavy obligation to see that in cases where it is applied, there is no question of whether the guilt was there. So the only issue that is left is whether, philosophically, you think it is the right or wrong thing to do.

*Q.* So you would not support a ban? You would not support suspending it or a moratorium now?

*The President.* In the Federal cases, I don't believe it is called for. But as I say, we do have the review going on in terms of the racial implications of the way it's been applied, and we also are in the process of drawing up guidelines for clemency requests, which obviously would give people an opportunity to raise the question of whether there was some doubt about their guilt or innocence.

But I do think Governor Ryan did the right thing. I think it was a great thing to do.

Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

*President's Upcoming Visit to South Asia*

*Q.* Mr. President, next month you're going on a trip to India and Bangladesh, but not Pakistan. What can Pakistan's military rulers do to get you to reconsider?

*The President.* Well, first of all, I haven't decided whether I'm going to Pakistan or not. I have decided that I am going to India and Bangladesh, and I will make a decision about whether to go based on what I think will best serve our long-term interests in nonproliferation, in trying to stop particularly the nuclear arms race, and trying to help to promote stability, democracy, and a resolution of the conflict between India and Pakistan.

I hope that my trip will serve to highlight to Americans the importance of that region to us and the very real danger that a conflict between India and Pakistan not contained is one of the most significant security threats to the interests of the United States in this new century and, I might say, a tragic situation.

You know, we—I think one of the reasons we've been able to play a meaningful role in Northern Ireland is we have so many Irish-Americans here. I think one of the reasons we've been able to play a meaningful role in

the Middle East is we have a lot of Jewish-Americans and a lot of Arab-Americans. I think we forget that among all the some 200 ethnic groups that we have in our country, Indian-Americans and Pakistani-Americans have been among the most successful in terms of education level and income level. They have worked and succeeded stunningly well in the United States and, astonishingly maybe, had good contacts with one another.

And I think the United States should be more involved there, even though I think that they'll have to work out this business of Kashmir between themselves. Unless we were asked by both parties to help, we can't get involved. We've been—in every other case we're involved, it's because both parties have asked us to be involved.

But I will make a decision about where to go and what to do based on what I think will further our long-term goals. And I have not reached a final decision.

Yes.

*Post-Presidency Legal Issues*

*Q.* Mr. President, as you're well aware, the Arkansas Supreme Court Committee on Professional Conduct has initiated an investigation into a complaint regarding statements that you made in testimony before Judge Susan Webber Wright—action that could include disciplinary action, up to and including disbarment. My question, sir, is would you be willing to surrender your law license to avoid such a hearing? Or will you fight it, up to and including availing yourself of a public hearing, as you are entitled to under the regulations?

*The President.* Well, let me say to you, the reason—and the only reason—I even settled the lawsuit in the first place was because I thought that it was wrong for the President to take an hour, much less a day, much less weeks, away from the job of the American people to deal with anything that could be a distraction. And I did it only after there was a court ruling that the case had absolutely no merit, which was obvious to everybody who looked at the facts.

Now, I haven't changed my position on that. As a result, in all the things that have happened subsequently, I have left a lot of things unsaid which I might have otherwise said. And I hope I can continue to do that, and that's what I'm going to do today. I don't think I should be spending my time on this. I think I'm working for the American people. And I'm going to do my best to adhere to that. And as a result, I have refrained from saying a lot of things I would otherwise have said as an American citizen and as a lawyer.

Yes, go ahead, in the back.

*Oil Prices*

*Q.* Mr. President, along the lines of the heating oil situation or whatever, would you at any point consider—because, perhaps as the prices continue to spike up—would you at any point consider that it could have some detrimental effect on the economy? Would you consider tapping into the Strategic Petroleum Reserves? And conversely, I'd like to ask if we as Americans have some kind of divine right to cheap gasoline and cheap heating oil?

*The President.* Well, you've asked two questions, and let me try to answer them. And I'd like to make, if I might, three points.

Number one, the statute for using the Strategic Petroleum Reserve sets forward the conditions under which it might be used. And I have not ruled out any action which I think is in the interest of the American people.

Number two, I think what is in our interest are stable prices that are not too high but don't drop real low, encourage overconsumption, and then jump way up again. That is, what we need is stable prices that are not too high but that are also stable.

I also think that is in the interest of the producing countries. Why? Because if prices got so high they weakened—disregard America's economy—other people's economies, that would shrink the markets for the producers. If the economy goes down, that would lower the price, and they'd wind up with the worst of both worlds. If the price stayed up for any period of time, it would make non-OPEC members who could produce oil more likely to do it, which would further drive the price down.

So I think the OPEC members understand that, and I think that there is an interest in stable prices at an acceptable level. And we have these conversations all along, and I think that is clear. And we will see what happens on that. But I wouldn't rule out using the Petroleum Reserve.

Now, the third point I want to make is this. You said, do Americans have a right to cheap gas and cheap heating oil? What I want to do, because I think it's important for our long-term

security, is get America in a position where the fuel efficiency of our vehicles is so great, or our ability to use alternative-fuel vehicles or dual-use vehicles, biofuels, mixed electric and gasoline-fuel vehicles that have automatically regenerating batteries—that our capacity to do that is so great that we will not be reliant on the ups and downs of supplies and the increases that might come in the future would have a much more limited impact on us. I would remind you that these increases have had a much, much more limited impact on the United States than the oil price increases of the seventies, for example, because we're so much more energy efficient.

The final point I would like to make is, there are all kinds of problems and historical explanations for why the Mid-Atlantic and New England States are so dependent on home heating oil, and no place else is, but it's not a good situation. It's just not. We need to examine it. That's one of the things I asked Secretary Richardson to look at, is look at what are the institutional barriers for businesses and individuals converting away from heating oil to heating sources that are more commonly used in other places? What are the costs? Are there any Federal actions that might be undertaken in concert with the States or with the private sector to help minimize those costs and facilitate a conversion?

The people on home heating oil are the most vulnerable people in America, by a good long ways, to these radical swings in oil prices. And it's also because they're delivered essentially by individual businesses who come to your home and send you a bill. Consumers don't have the option that many of you who live in DC have, for example. You can average your electric bills. You can average your utility bills over a period of months. So if you have a couple of bad months, you can average them out. Those options are not available to them either.

So I think we have to look long term, in my judgment, at whether there's a conversion strategy there that would enable a whole different energy future to open up in terms of home and business energy usage.

Yes.

*Gun Safety Legislation*

*Q.* Mr. President, on the topic of gun control, as you're well aware, the central sticking point in the Congress is over this division between the Senate and the House over a waiting period for gun sales at gun shows. The Senate has endorsed 72 hours. The House and a goodly number of Democrats endorsed 24 hours. Would you accept a compromise in-between, sir, or is that 72-hour waiting period so important, you prefer no bill to a compromise?

*The President.* Well, first, I think, to me, this is a fact question. There are two benefits to the waiting period. One is, does it really give you an adequate amount of time to check the records? And two is, should there be a cooling-off period if somebody who is really hot buys a gun with a bad intent and might cool down and refrain?

If you move away from 72 hours to a shorter period, then the question is, since so many of these gun shows occur on the weekend, will there be access to the records to do the check? Will you be able—I mean, to me, in terms of all compromises—at least, I can only tell you what I believe—this is not theology. This is, what does it take as a practical matter to have a bill that works to keep people alive? I mean, there's no question that the Brady bill has kept a lot of people alive. And there is, furthermore, no question that there has not been a huge amount of inconvenience in the waiting period.

Now, I know what the argument is. The argument is, well, the gun show people are mobile. So it's not like you can wait 5 days, go back to the same store where you placed the order for the gun, and it's going to be there 5 days from now. And the gun shows are mobile. I understand what the problem is. But there has got to be a solution here that deals with that. Maybe they could park the guns at the local police department or something else. There's got to be some way to deal with this that allows us to have a practical law that works. The one thing I will not do is, I will not sign a law which promises the American people that this is going to make them safer, and it won't do it.

But I am not hung up—I don't think we should be hung up on any of the facts. The facts should be, what is necessary to make us a safer people? What is necessary to save more lives? That should be the only driving concern.

Yes, go ahead, Jim [Jim Angle, Fox News].

*2000 Campaign*

*Q.* Mr. President, is a candidate's past record on abortion fair game in a campaign? The First

Lady seems to think it is; the Vice President seems to think it isn't.

*The President.* Oooh. [*Laughter*] Now, if I get into that, then you'll have me handicapping that debate last night. [*Laughter*]

Let me just say this. I'll make a generic comment about that because I think all of you are going to be writing about this. I see, you know, one candidate says this about the other's record. Then one complains about how the other one interprets his record and all that kind of stuff. I have never seen a hard-fought political race where candidates did not disagree with their opponent's characterization of their record and their positions. I mean, that's part of the debate, and it's always going to happen.

And again, I think anything I say to get in the middle of that is not—I'm not running for office, and by and large, I think I shouldn't comment under—there may be a few exceptions, but I think basically the American people are in the driver's seat. They're making this decision. I get to vote like everybody else, but I'm not a candidate, and I don't think I ought to get in the way unless there's some specific issue related to something I've done as President.

Yes.

*Northern Ireland Peace Process*

*Q.* Mr. President, may I return to Northern Ireland, sir? In light of what's happened this week, wasn't it a mistake not to ask for specific assurances to disarm from the IRA, not Sinn Fein but the IRA, in advance of going down the political road and starting a new government?

*The President.* I think Senator Mitchell believes—who, you know, negotiated the Good Friday accords—that like any accords of that kind, there were compromises involved that both sides had to accept about the other. And I believe he thought he got the strongest agreement he could. It was ratified overwhelmingly by the Irish people, by both communities in the North and overwhelmingly by the Republic of Ireland.

It has been honored, to date, in all of its specifics, including standing up the governmental institutions, although there was a delay of several months in doing that. And then the de Chastelain report came out, and then after the British Government passed through the Parliament the bill, in effect, suspending the institutions and reasserting control over Northern Ireland, the IRA made certain representations which General de Chastelain considered quite hopeful. And now they're in a rough spot.

But I don't think you can Monday-morning-quarterback that. I think Senator Mitchell and all the people who were negotiating it got the best deal they could from both sides. And I think what we have to recognize now is, while this is a very unfortunate development, a year ago at this time the Irish had had no taste of what self-government was like. They now have had it, and they like it—positive point number one.

Positive point number two: The IRA has given no indication whatever that they will revert to violence. And so that means that they still think, no matter what the rhetoric says, that all the parties really believe that they ought to find a way to work this out. And I can assure you, virtually every day since I've been here, we've worked on this. And in the last several days, we've been involved on a daily basis, and we're working very hard to work this out. I can't tell you what the end will be. I can only tell you that I think we're way ahead of where we would have been, and I still think there's a good chance we'll get there.

Yes, Claire [Claire Shipman, NBC] and then Susan [Susan Page, USA Today].

*Vice President Al Gore*

*Q.* Maybe this will be one of the exceptions that you'll be willing to make. Senator Bradley has made it a point of late to challenge Vice President Gore's veracity, essentially, to cast him as a politician not to be trusted. He's been your Vice President for the last 7 years. Are you offended by those remarks? Certainly there's nobody in a better position than you to speak to his character.

*The President.* Well, my feelings are not relevant, but I can say this: He has always—one of the great strengths that he had as Vice President is that he was always brutally honest with me. I mean, he was never afraid to disagree with me. And when we had very tough decisions, very often we'd be in these big meetings, and very—you see these—when these tough decisions come down—and I mean this, no offense to any of you; this is actually a compliment to you. But when you've got seven people in a meeting and some huge decision is on the line and you realize that if you make the wrong call, it cannot only be bad for the country, it

could be very bad for the health of the administration, it's amazing to see how some people guard their words because they're so afraid that what they say, even though the meeting is in confidence, will be public. In all those tough times, he took a—he decided what he thought was right, and he took a clear and unambiguous stand. And I think the country is better for it.

And I could give you lots of examples. I mean, when it was an unpopular thing to go into Kosovo, he wanted to do it. When it was unpopular to go into Bosnia, he wanted to do it. When it was unpopular to stand up for freedom in Haiti, he wanted to do it. When only 15 percent of the people thought we ought to help Mexico but I knew it could hurt our economy, he was right there. And I could go on and on. So all I can tell you is that in all my dealings with him, he has been candid in the extreme and all anyone could ever ask.

Now, I'll say again what I said before: I have never seen a tough race where people fought with each other where they didn't have different interpretations of each other's record and each other's positions. And then once you disagree with someone's position or someone's record, then the person will say, "I just think you're mischaracterizing it." Now, depending on the level of heat and intensity of the campaign, how they say that and how they feel about it will go up or down. But this happens in every election.

And I think the important thing to remember is, you've basically got four people running for President now who are people of accomplishment, people who have certain convictions, people who have, I think, pretty clear philosophies and records. And I know that everybody will get hot and mad at everybody else, but, I mean, this is not a bad thing for America, this choice they've got. And they're very different.

So America has a good choice. And I think that it's tough to be in these races, and when you're not running anymore, you can look back—everybody can look back on a life in public life and say, "There's one thing I said I kind of wish I hadn't said," or, "I said that, and I believe what I said, but I wish I said it in a slightly different way." But by and large, what's happening here is just perfectly normal, and we shouldn't get too exercised by it.

*Q.* You don't think Bill Bradley's charges have been below the belt?

*The President.* Well, I don't agree—I'm not going to get into characterizing his charges. You ask me if the Vice President—I don't have to fight this campaign for anybody. You asked me if the Vice President has been perfectly honest and candid with me, and I said, yes, in the extreme. And that's true, and America's been well served by it. That's all I can say.

My experience is that he is exceedingly honest and exceedingly straightforward and has taken a lot of tough positions which, since he always, presumably, knew he wanted to run for President, could have cost him dearly, and he did it anyway. And I was proud of him for doing it.

Yes, Susan.

*Kashmir*

*Q.* Mr. President, I would like to follow up on Steve Holland's question. You said that it's up to India and Pakistan to settle the issue of Kashmir and that they have not asked the U.S. to help mediate that dispute. If India and Pakistan both ask the United States to get involved to try to help mediate the issue of Kashmir, would the United States be willing to do that?

*The President.* Absolutely. I would. Why? For the same reason we've been involved in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Because, number one and most importantly, it is a hugely important area of the world. If the tensions between India and Pakistan on the Indian subcontinent could be resolved, it is my opinion, based on my personal experience with people from India, people from Pakistan, and people from Bangladesh, that the Indian subcontinent might very well be the great success story of the next 50 years.

You're talking about people who are basically immensely talented, have a strong work ethic, a deep devotion to their faith and to their families. There is nothing they couldn't do. And it is heartbreaking to me to see how much they hold each other back by being trapped in yesterday's conflicts—number one.

Number two, like Northern Ireland and the Middle East, this country has been deeply enriched by people from the Indian subcontinent, and I think we might be, because of our population, in a position to make a constructive contribution. But if they don't want us, it won't be doing any good. We'd just be out there talking into the air. And I'm not in for that.

Yes, Mark [Mark Knoller, CBS Radio].

*Post-Presidency Legal Issues*

*Q.* Mr. President, by your answer earlier to John Roberts [CBS News], did you mean to say that you or your lawyers would not offer a defense to the Committee on Professional Conduct?

*The President.* No, I meant to say I'm not going to discuss it any more than I absolutely have to because I don't think I should be dealing with it. I should be dealing with my job.

Yes, Mara [Mara Liasson, National Public Radio].

*2000 Presidential Election*

*Q.* You say you're not running this year, but you are casting a shadow over the debate on the campaign trail. And all of the candidates——

*The President.* I'd like to think I'm casting a little sunshine over it. [*Laughter*] I keep trying to build these fellows up, you know. I'm being nice and generous and all that. [*Laughter*]

*Q.* All of the candidates are running against your behavior and conduct, not just the Republicans, as Helen mentioned, but all of the candidates.

*The President.* Well, if I were running, I'd do that. [*Laughter*]

*Q.* But on the other hand, also all of the candidates, Republicans and Democrats, do sound a lot like you when they talk about policy. Even the Republicans say they want prescription drug coverage for Medicare——

*The President.* Yes.

*Q.* ——and they support a Patients' Bill of Rights with the right to sue. And I am wondering if you could comment on both aspects of your influence, both the negative, the fact that everybody seems to be running against your behavior, and also, on the other side, why everyone seems to sound like you when they discuss policy.

*The President.* First of all, I think, for the Republicans, it's probably good politics to do that, because they spent years and years trying to tell everybody how bad I am.

*Q.* But it's not just——

*The President.* So, so—but for everybody—the public, however—people are really smart, you know, and it's pretty hard to convince them that they should hold anyone responsible for someone else's mistake, particularly a personal mistake. I mean, I can't imagine any voter ever doing that. That's like shooting yourself in the foot.

I even caution people, for example, if somebody says something—one of you says something or prints something or has a story that we don't agree with—I tell people all the time, "Don't ever talk about the press. There is no such thing as 'the press.'" You can't blame—if you think somebody made a mistake, you can't blame everybody else for a mistake somebody made. But that's in a professional context. In a personal context, it's even more true.

So my view is that the voters are going to—this is, as I have said repeatedly, the Presidential election is the world's greatest job interview. And the voters are going to hire someone that they believe, of course, is a good person, a strong person, a person who will be a credit to the office. But they want to know, what in the world are they going to do? How are we going to keep this expansion going? How are we going to meet the big challenges facing the country?

And it is, to me, a source of reassurance—not personal but for my country's future—that so many of the candidates have adopted at least some of the policies that we have tried to put in place over the last 7 years, that moved the country away from this big, deep partisan division that dominated Washington politics for so long.

So all I can tell you is, I think—my instinct is that the voters are going to take the measure of these people. They're going to think: Who will be a good President; who will make good decisions; and do I agree with this person, in terms of priorities and positions? That's what I think. I think the implication that anybody would be held responsible for somebody else's mistake or misconduct is just—it's a real insult to the American people. And they're not going to do that. That's not in their interest, and it's not in their nature. They're too smart and too good for that.

Yes.

*Permanent Normal Trade Relations With China*

*Q.* Mr. President, would you rule out the one-year automatic renewal of China's normal trading status, unless Congress disagrees? And do you think that would be a formula Democrats would find easier to accept?

*The President.* That would be a—I would not support that because, in order to get China into the WTO and in order for us to benefit from the terms of the agreement that Ambassador Barshefsky and Gene Sperling and others made with China, they have to get permanent normal trading status. And since you asked the question, let me tell you why I feel so strongly about it. This is not a political issue for me. This is a huge national security issue, for three reasons.

Number one, our biggest trade deficit is with China, because China has access to our markets and our access to theirs is highly restricted. This trade agreement offers no increased access to the American markets by China but gives us dramatically increased access to their markets. Moreover, it means that we can get access to their markets without having to transfer technology or agree to do manufacturing in their country. And we retain specific rights, even once China is in the WTO, on a bilateral basis to take action if there is a big surge of imports in some sector into our economy that would throw a lot of people out of work in a short time.

So, economically, from agriculture to high-tech products to automobiles and all things in between, I think this agreement is a clear hundred-or-nothing deal for us, if the price of admission to the WTO is modernizing and opening the economy.

Number two, having China in a rule-based system increases the likelihood not only that China will follow the rules of the road in terms of the international economy but that China will cooperate more in other forums, the United Nations and many other areas—to try to help reduce, rather than increase, the proliferation of dangerous weapons or technology, for example. That's what I believe with all my heart.

Number three, I believe this agreement will change China from within, more than all the other economic opening of the last 20 years combined, fairly rapidly because of the dramatic increase in access to communications and contact with the outside world that this agreement portends.

Now, as I said in the State of the Union Address, and I tried to say it again when I went over to Switzerland to talk, the truth is, I don't know what choice China will make. I don't know what path China will take, and neither does anyone else. I don't want to oversell this to the American people in that sense. But what I believe I do know, based on all my experience not only as President but just with human nature, is that they are far more likely to be constructive members of the international community if they get into the WTO and they make these changes than if they don't.

And I think it's quite interesting—one of the things that has really moved me on this, since one of the big issues with which we have differences with China is in the repression of political and religious expression, is how many of the religious groups that actually have missions operating in China agree with this. People that have actually worked there, lived there, and been subject to some of the repression there agree that what we're doing is the right thing to do. I think that a substantial—a majority of opinion in Taiwan agrees that this is the right thing to do.

So I'm going to push this as hard as I can. I want to get the earliest possible vote I can. And I cannot tell you how important I think it is. I think that if we didn't do this, we would be regretting it for 20 years. And I think 10 years from now we'll look back, and no matter what decisions China makes, we'll say the only thing we could control is what we did, and what we did was the right, the honorable, and the smart thing to do for America over the long run.

Yes.

*Federal Election Commission*

*Q.* Both Senator Bradley and Vice President Gore have condemned your nomination of Bradley Smith to the FEC. Would you care to take this opportunity to explain exactly why you've nominated this man and to say what exactly this says about your own commitment to the campaign finance reform that you said you would support?

*The President.* Well, it doesn't say anything about my commitment, although I think they were right to condemn it, except that—look at what the law says. The law says, A, this is a Republican appointment, and B, as a practical matter, the way the appointments process works in the Senate, if you want anybody to be confirmed for anything, you have to take—and the Republicans in this case happen to be in the majority—the majority leader always makes that recommendation.

Now, I have—I argued with him, as he will tell you, for months about this. And there is a reason they wanted Bradley Smith on the FEC. You know, he hates campaign finance reform, Bradley Smith does. He's written about it. And he'll get a 3-year appointment now, where it will be one person on the FEC. And I don't like it, but I decided that I should not shut down the whole appointments process and depart from the plain intent of the law, which requires that it be bipartisan and by all tradition that the majority leader make the nomination.

And I think it ought to be instructive for the American people, and you ought not to change the subject and confuse them. We have a bill, the McCain-Feingold bill before the Congress. The administration is for it. Both the Democratic candidates for President are for it, and 100 percent of our caucus in the Senate and the House are for it, every last person down to the last man and woman. There is only one reason this is not the law: The Republicans are not for it.

And ever since I've been here—we didn't have unanimous support in '93, but ever since '94, '95, somewhere in there, we always had a big majority of the Democratic Party for campaign finance reform and a big majority of the Republicans against it, even though some Republicans are for it. But basically, the big majority of the Republican Party, particularly in the House and the Senate—I don't mean out in the country; I mean in the House and the Senate—are against this. That's why it is not the law of the land.

That is the ultimate truth. This appointment demonstrates that. It's the poster child—this should be—this is like a big neon sign, "Hello, America needs"—if you care about this issue, you need to know what the real issue is here. Ever since I've been here, there's been an attempt to say, "Oh, a pox on both their houses. The Democrats don't really care. If they really cared, if the President really cared, somehow we would have this." It is just not true. What else can we do? Both our Presidential candidates, the White House, and 100 percent of our Members of Congress are for it. Why hasn't there been a signing ceremony? Because they are against it.

Now, this man, his writings and his honest convictions demonstrate that. And I hope there will be no further doubt about this. The American people can make their own decision.

Go ahead.

*Hillary Clinton's Senate Campaign*

*Q.* Mr. President, current polls show that your wife is virtually tied with her likely challenger, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, when it comes to women voters in New York, and that she is trailing when it comes to white voters. And by most accounts, women will play a decisive role in this race. Can you address why you think your wife is having some trouble connecting with women voters, in particular; what advice, if any, you're offering her to help her better connect? And are you playing the role of a senior strategist in her campaign?

*The President.* Well, I'm basically doing for her what she's always done for me. You know, I'm talking to her about whatever she wants to talk about. I'm giving her my best ideas. I thought she had a wonderful announcement. I was really proud of her. She got up there and said that she understood she was new to the neighborhood, but she wasn't new to the concerns of the people of New York. And then she said in exact detail—she did what I believe all candidates should do—she said, "Look, if you vote for me, here's what you get. Here's what I'll fight for. Here's what I'll do. Here's what I'll fight against. Here's what I won't do."

And now the campaign is underway, and I think she's doing remarkably well, given the unusual nature of the campaign and the formidable obstacles out there. And I think now the people will begin to listen and debate, and I think she'll do real well. But I'm very proud of her, and I think she's doing fine.

But you should not—all I'm doing for her is what she did for me. So when she says something, it's what she believes. And she's made up her mind what she wants to run on, what she wants to be for, and why she wants to do it. And I was ecstatically happy with the way her announcement came out, because I just knew it was her. And I just think if—you know, you just go out there and make your best shot and hope that it works. But my instinct is, she'll do right well.

Sarah [Sarah McClendon, McClendon News Service], go ahead.

*Public Access to the President*

*Q.* Sir, do you see any way to make the Presidency a position that is closer to the people? It's sort of aloof now. And you're a friendly

type of man. You must see some means whereby you can bring the Presidency down to the people more.

*The President.* Well, I think part of what makes the Presidency aloof is that if you show up for work every day, you don't have as much time to spend with people as you'd like. I think that—I think technology will help some. I think this web chat I did earlier this week with Wolf Blitzer [Cable News Network], where he asked me questions, but he also let a lot of other people ask questions—I thought that was a good way to do it. I think that—in my first term, I did a lot of these townhall meetings, and I think they're good, although I think they tend to get turned in a certain way around whatever's breaking in the news at any given time.

I've tried to not get too aloof from the people. I went down to the Rio Grande Valley the other day. I was the first President since President Eisenhower to go down there, and I've been there three times. And a lot of people came out, and I stopped along the street and talked to them and visited with them. I think that you have to have—I think doing these press conferences helps. I think using the Internet and finding other ways that ordinary citizens can ask you questions in the course of your work helps. And I think that you have to find the proper balance of work in Washington and getting out with the folks to do that.

It's a constant struggle, but my instinct is that technology will help. I think a lot of you, for example—I think your jobs are changing because of the way technology works. And there will be ways that you also can help make people in public life less aloof and bring more people into it. It's going to be very interesting.

Yes, go ahead.

*Northern Ireland Peace Process*

*Q.* Mr. President, to follow up on what you said before, you said that no one should be held accountable for somebody else's actions. But if you examine the suspension of the powers in Northern Ireland last week, the British Government was holding Sinn Fein responsible for the IRA not disarming. According to the Good Friday accord, they encouraged both sides to encourage disarmament. Is there any protest on your part to the British Government for bringing down a democratically elected government and—similar to the way you pointed your finger at the IRA in a statement saying that you hoped that there wouldn't be any backsliding after they retracted their previous statements?

*The President.* Well, let me say, first of all, I was in constant contact with the Irish and the British Governments, and I think we all know what is going on here. The question is, how can we keep the peace process going; how can we get the institutions back up; and how can we keep the Unionist Party involved and under the leadership of David Trimble, an objective I believe that Sinn Fein strongly supports? That is, I believe that they believe that they have to have people they can work with in order to make this thing last.

I have found that my influence is greater when I say what I think about most of these things to the parties themselves but when I don't try to make their jobs any harder by what I say, particularly after the fact. Now, our big job now is to get these people back on track. In order to do it, we have to honor the votes of the people of Northern Ireland; we've got to stand these institutions back up; and then all the parties that said they supported the Good Friday accords and the people they represent, who voted in record numbers for it, they've got to comply. And we've got to find a way to get this done.

And I think that—I know it's not satisfying to a lot of people; they want me to be judgmental about everything. And all I can tell you is, in private I've tried to be straightforward and clear with them. But I don't want to say anything that would make it even harder to put this thing back together. We've got to keep going forward. The most important thing now is to look about how to go forward and how to get—how to keep the Unionists in harness and how to find a way to comply with all the requirements, including putting those institutions back up.

Yes.

*Oil Prices*

*Q.* Mr. President, back on the rising oil prices, Secretary Richardson is beginning a series of consultations with oil companies. Do you think that this will have some moderating effect on oil prices?

*The President.* I think that oil prices may well moderate. We'll have to see about that. But what I think that he wants to do is to make sure that we've gotten rid of some of the bottlenecks. There are plainly some reasons that are

only indirectly related to the general rise in oil prices—that home heating oil prices, for example, have gone up so explosively. That's why he went up to Boston first and why the Coast Guard is trying to assure rapid delivery of the oil.

So I think that he believes that in his talks with the oil companies—not necessarily he can talk the oil prices in the aggregate down but that they may be able to take certain specific steps which would alleviate some of the biggest burdens on them.

Yes.

*Q.* [*Inaudible*]—the oil-producing countries, I believe he's going to make some consultations around the world.

*The President.* Yes, I think we're in regular touch with them, and they know what our views are. I think that's all I should say about that.

Yes.

*DNA Testing for Death Row Inmates*

*Q.* Back on an earlier question, the death penalty, you mentioned that supporters of the death penalty, like yourself, have a special burden to make sure that innocent people are not executed. And you mentioned the Leahy bill, but you didn't state a position on that. That would make DNA testing available to death row inmates. Is it a good idea? Is it workable? Would you sleep better at night if it were law?

*The President.* Well, first of all, the reason I didn't take a position on it—I tried to make it clear that I am quite favorably disposed toward it, but I just learned about it in the last couple of days, and I've asked our people to review it, to answer the questions that you ask.

Would I sleep better at night, if it were law? If it would really work, I would. In other words, I am favorably disposed toward it. I just want—and we just have a review underway to analyze the law, how it would work, whether it will work, what, if any, practical problems are there. And I am trying to come to grips with it, and as soon as I do, I'll be glad to state a position. But I want to make it clear—I thought I had made it clear before—I am favorably disposed.

Yes.

*Vieques Island, Puerto Rico*

*Q.* On the issue of Vieques and Puerto Rico, currently there is major resistance by religious groups, civic groups, opposition parties to the agreement reached on Vieques. There's continued civil disobedience on Navy lands. This might entail a Waco-style operation to get these protesters out. Are you willing to go all the way with Federal authority to clear these Federal lands? And as a followup, do you believe in your heart that Puerto Rico's colonial status is the root of this problem or is related to Puerto Ricans' ambivalence to issues of national security?

*The President.* I think the root of the problem—I think the root of the problem is twofold. One is, as the Pentagon has acknowledged—and they should get credit in Puerto Rico for doing this. It's hard to get people in Washington to admit they're wrong, including me. We all hate to do it, you know, including you. We all hate to do it. The Pentagon has acknowledged that the 1983 agreement was not followed in letter and spirit. They have acknowledged that. That left a bad taste in the mouths of the people of Vieques and of all Puerto Rico.

Problem two is the unwillingness of the Congress to give a legislatively sanctioned vote to the people to let them determine the status of Puerto Rico. Now, I think those are the roots of the problem.

Now, there may be some people there who, on any given day, would be, I don't know, against the military or would think the military shouldn't train or whatever. But it's clear that if you look at the offer we made—to begin now to give the western part of the island to Puerto Rico; to facilitate transit back and forth between Vieques and the main island; to do a lot of the other environmental and economic things on the island of Vieques; to have no live fire in the short run here while we're going through this transition period; to cut the training days in half; and then to let the people decide for themselves with the future of the island is; but to give us a transition period when we don't have any other place to train—it is a perfectly reasonable compromise, unless either those first two things are eating at you, so you don't trust anything America or the Pentagon does, or unless you're just philosophically opposed to America having a military which has to train.

So I still believe it's a good agreement. I will continue to work with the Governor, with the mayor in Vieques, with the authorities, with a view toward trying to work this out.

I want the people of Puerto Rico to decide this. You know, I did a message to them. I wish they could decide their status. If it were

just up to me, if I could sign an Executive order and let them have a sanctioned election, I would do it today. And I view this compromise as an empowerment of the people of Puerto Rico and, to that extent, a ratification of their longstanding grievances.

But the people of Vieques should be able to decide this. And I don't think that—just as I don't think the Pentagon should impose it on them, I don't think the demonstrators should stop them from having a vote either. I think they ought to be able to make a judgment.

Thank you very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 186th news conference began at 2:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Nicholas Kunselman and Stephanie Hart, students at Columbine High School, Littleton, CO, who were murdered in a Subway sandwich shop on February 14; Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; Gov. George H. Ryan of Illinois; former Senator George J. Mitchell, who chaired the multiparty talks in Northern Ireland; Gen. John de Chastelain, Canadian Defense Forces, chair, Independent International Commission on Decommissioning; David Trimble, leader, Ulster Unionist Party; Gov. Pedro Rosselló of Puerto Rico; and Mayor Manuela Santiago of Vieques, PR. Reporters referred to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York City; Judge Susan Webber Wright, U.S. District Court for Arkansas, who presided over the Paula Jones suit against the President; and former Senator Bill Bradley. The President also referred to LIHEAP, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

## Letter to Congressional Leaders on Action Concerning Imports of Steel Wire Rod

*February 16, 2000*

*Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)*

I am pleased to provide to the Congress documents called for by section 203(b) of the Trade Act of 1974, as amended, pertaining to the safeguard action that I proclaimed today on imports of steel wire rod.

Sincerely,

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Albert Gore, Jr., President of the Senate. The proclamation and memorandum of February 16 on action concerning imports of steel wire rod are listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

## Remarks at the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education Dinner

*February 16, 2000*

Thank you very much. Dr. McClure, my mother is up in heaven smiling at that introduction. And she's probably the only person who heard it who believes every word of it. [*Laughter*] But I liked it, and I thank you. [*Laughter*]

I thank you so much, all of you, for welcoming me. To your chair-elect, Joann Boyd-Scotland, who sat with me for a few moments; your CEO, my long-time friend Dr. Henry Ponder; Dr. Earl Richardson, who welcomed me to Morgan State not too many years ago, and then Vice President Gore yesterday; to Dr. Iris Ish and all the members of my Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities; to my president, the Arkansas Baptist College president, Dr. William Keaton, my long-time friend.

I want to also have a special word of acknowledgement to your vice president, Dr. Wilma Roscoe. Her daughter, Jena, works in the White