

And we should understand that life is a fragile and fleeting thing. Nothing lasts forever—nothing good and, thank God, nothing bad. And if somebody asks you why you came here tonight, you tell them, because you like what happened but because you feel a heavy responsibility to make sure that we make the most of a truly magic moment.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:05 p.m. at the Four Seasons Restaurant. In his remarks, he referred to dinner host Doug Teitelbaum, his wife, Traie, and their daughter, KateRose; Edward G. Rendell, general chair, Democratic National Committee; New York State Comptroller H. Carl McCall; and former Senator Bill Bradley.

Remarks on Funding for Native American Programs and an Exchange With Reporters

February 25, 2000

The President. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to be joined today by Senator Akaka and Senator Johnson; Sue Masten, the president of the National Congress of American Indians; Kelsey Begaye, the President of the Navajo Nation; and other distinguished tribal leaders from all across our country.

I'd also like to thank a few Members of Congress who are not here today but who have been vital to our efforts to increase support for Native Americans: Senators Daschle, Domenici, Bingaman, Inouye, Nighthorse Campbell, and Dorgan; and Representatives Kildee, Kennedy, and Hayworth.

Before I leave to give out the Baldrige Awards, I just want to say a few words about the importance of bringing the promise of prosperity to Indian country.

Nearly four centuries ago, not far from where we stand today, the Powhatan Confederacy enjoyed a prosperous trading partnership with the newly settled European colonists. As our country grew, many tribes gave up their land, water, and mineral rights in exchange for peace, health care, and education from the National Government. They formed solemn and lasting pacts with our country, agreements the United States, to be charitable, has not always lived up to.

While some of today's tribes have found success in our new economy, far too many have been caught in a cycle of poverty and unemployment. Too many have suffered from Government's failure to invest proper resources in education, infrastructure, and health care. The facts, of course, are all too familiar. American Indian

unemployment remains unacceptably high, reaching 70 percent on some reservations. One-third of American Indians and Alaska natives still live in poverty and many lack decent health care. Indians are the victims of twice as many violent crimes as other Americans. Nearly half the roads and bridges on reservations are in serious disrepair. Many schools are crowded and crumbling. More than 80 percent of the people in Indian country are not connected to the Internet, and one-third of Indian children never finish high school.

These facts are discouraging, but clearly not irreversible. That's because of something no statistic can measure accurately, the potential of the more than 2 million members of tribal nations in the United States. I am confident that with the right tools and the right support we can, together, bring new opportunity with new investment to Native Americans and to Indian reservations. That's something I made clear back in 1994, when I met with leaders from over 550 federally recognized tribes in our first government-to-government meeting here at the White House, and when I visited the Pine Ridge Reservation last summer. I want to make that even more clear today.

We're in the midst of the longest, strongest period of economic growth in our history. There is no better time than now to make sure Indian country has the tools to succeed in the new economy. If not now, when will we ever step forward to bring the hope of a good job, decent health care, safe communities, quality education,

and new technology to every corner of this Nation, from Penobscot, Maine, to Window Rock, Arizona?

I was proud to announce in my State of the Union Address the single largest budget increase, nearly \$1.2 billion, for new and existing programs that assist tribal nations. This bipartisan budget proposal includes funding to increase economic opportunity, health care, education, and law enforcement for Indian communities, in a cooperative effort with all agencies of our Government.

One of the first steps must be to make sure American Indian children and children everywhere in America have the education they need to succeed. My budget more than doubles last year's funding to replace and repair schools on reservations and to address the growing digital divide with grants to tribal colleges for information and technology training.

The information superhighway links people and communities across very great distances, but we can't abandon our old highways either. Our budget includes unprecedented funding to improve roads and bridges in Indian country. It also takes steps to strengthen tribal communities through improved public safety and health care. It increases funding for law enforcement officials and alcohol and substance abuse programs. Finally, it includes a 10 percent increase for the Indian Health Service, to expand access to high quality health care.

Working with members of both parties, representatives from tribal communities, and leaders from the private sector, together we can pass this budget and give the people in Indian country the tools they need and deserve to succeed. These are important steps, and we have an historic opportunity to achieve them this year. I ask Congress to work with me to seize this vital opportunity.

An old adage of the Sioux says, "Each of us were created in these lands and from them will spring the future generations of our people." We should all begin this new century by honoring our historic responsibility to the new generations of the first Americans.

Thank you.

Oil Prices

Q. Mr. President, at least two OPEC nations seem to have decided that they're going to increase their oil output. I'm wondering if the

United States put direct pressure on them, and why do you think they are doing this?

The President. Well, I think that they're doing it because they believe it's in their long-term best interest. They don't want oil prices to go as low as they dipped at the bottom, not all that long ago, and we shouldn't either. But they know if oil prices are too high, one of two things will happen. Either they will provoke any economic downturn among their customers, and then the demand will fall off and the price will drop; or they will provoke more competition from non-OPEC members, and the supply will go up in ways they don't have control over. So I think that they would be making a sound decision to try to stabilize prices at a lower rate.

Q. Was there diplomatic pressure put on them to do this from the United States?

The President. I think—we are in constant contact with all the oil producers and all these other—as we are with other countries around the world. I wouldn't characterize it that way, however. I think this is a decision they will make on their own, based on what they believe is in their interest.

Iraq

Q. Are you easing the import restrictions on dual-use technology to Iraq, sir?

The President. What we are reviewing is whether there is some way to continue our policy of meeting human needs without allowing Saddam Hussein to rearm. I think it's clear to everybody who has looked at the facts, however, that they're exporting about as much oil now as they were before the embargo was imposed. And any continued suffering from lack of food and medicine on the part of Iraqi children or the poor is the result of Saddam Hussein's policies, not this embargo.

If you look at the difference in the health indicators of children in the north of Iraq where this program, the oil for food program, has been administered by the United Nations and in the rest of Iraq where it's been administered by Saddam Hussein, it's perfectly clear that he has increased the misery of his people and has blamed us for something that is no longer—clearly—clearly no longer attributable to the international community.

Nonetheless, if there is a way to further free up resources for the overall health and development of the people of Iraq without doing anything that will make it easier for him to rearm in ways that will be damaging to his neighbors and to the stability of the region, we ought to be open to that. And we ought to be careful and constructive in listening to arguments about it.

Yes, April [April Ryan, American Urban Radio Networks].

Secret Service Promotions Lawsuit

Q. Mr. President, what are your thoughts about the black Secret Service filing a suit against the Service in reference to promotions there, and especially in light of the fact that you supported the Secret Service officers that filed suit against Denny's several years ago?

The President. I knew what the facts were there. This case has just been filed. There are a lot of members of racial and ethnic minorities who have done very well in the Secret Service, and I think that it's better not to comment on the merits of the case. I will say this—I try never to pass up a chance to say I think that it is a superb organization. They do a wonderful job. And we have been, my family and I, very well served by men and women in the Secret Service of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. And I think that, beyond that, I shouldn't comment because it's in litigation, and there are very specific facts that are alleged that it would be wrong to comment on. But I think the Secret Service has given a lot of different kinds of Americans a chance to serve, and they have done it superbly well there.

Go ahead, John [John Roberts, CBS News].

2000 Presidential Election

Q. Mr. President, I know that you hate to talk politics, sir, and I don't mean to keep you here for a long time. And I realize that you don't want to influence the race, but we are about to go into a very important week here in the primary season. And I'm wondering, sir, without asking you to handicap the race, who do you see as being the stronger Republican candidate to go up against the eventual Democratic nominee in November?

The President. Sounds like a handicap question to me. [Laughter]

I'll give you a straight answer which won't sound straight. I don't think you can know now.

I mean, what happens is, in national political life, one person begins and is in total control of the way he or she presents himself or herself and is hot as a firecracker. And then a fuller picture comes out, and maybe even an attack or two comes out, and then that person once again returns to the ranks of human beings, and people make more reasoned and seasoned judgments.

And we're in a period where there's been a shift in that. But I think you have no way of knowing whether today's facts will be November's facts. So I don't think that—for our Democrats, my advice not only to the Vice President but for all of our people out there running is, run on what we believe in; run on what we've done; run on what you want to do. And don't worry about what the Republicans are doing. Just go out there and make your case to the American people, and don't worry about it, and time will take care of it. And then eventually these races, including the Presidency, will be joined. There will be two choices. There will be debates, and people will draw their own conclusions.

But I don't think—I think it is utterly impossible on today's facts to answer the question that you've asked with any confidence, because look how different today's facts are than the facts 6 months ago. And 6 months from now, they might be different again.

John [John Palmer, NBC News].

Situation in Chechnya

Q. Mr. President, there were reports today of really some horrendous atrocities in Chechnya, allegedly carried out by the Russians. Does this give you even more concern than you've had in the past about Russian behavior there?

The President. Well, of course it does. The reports are very troubling, and I think they again make the case for the right kind of unfettered access to Chechnya and to the people there by the appropriate international agencies.

I think, you know, in every conflict of any duration, there are always excesses. I'm not excusing anything. I'm saying that if you look at the fact that this is the second incarnation in this decade of the conflict in Chechnya, if you look at the bitter feelings, the tensions there—and I think it is imperative for the Russians to allow the appropriate international agencies unfettered access to do the right inquiries, to

find out what really went on, and to deal with it in an appropriate way. I think that these reports should increase the sense of conviction that people all over the world have about that.

Permanent Normal Trade Relations With China

Q. One quick question on China. Key Democrats are saying right now that the chances of getting your trade policies through Congress are not very good, rather bleak. And it comes at a time when China has been doing a lot of saber rattling and also has been telling, basically, the United States to mind its own business regarding Taiwan. Do you really think you can get those trade policies through in this environment?

The President. Well, I think the environment is unfortunate, but I think you have to see those statements in terms of—in the context of the election in Taiwan for Presidency. I think that's what's going on here. Keep in mind, the United States has had now for two decades a "one China" policy that says we believe in one China, but we believe the differences between Taiwan and Beijing have to be resolved in a diplomatic manner, and we support a cross-strait dialog.

So in the context of this season, the President of Taiwan announced that he thought they ought to start acting like there was not one China, that it was—that they should be state-to-state relations. Then the Chinese made some military maneuvers which raised questions. We said the same thing then we said in light of their statements here. But it would be a mistake for either side to abandon a policy that has served both well for the last 20 years.

Now, having said that, in the absence of some destructive action, it would be a terrible mistake for the United States and for those who basically find this an uncomfortable vote to use this as an excuse to isolate China and almost guarantee the very things they say they're worried about.

Look, this is an economic no-brainer. It's almost—it's amazing to me that anybody could say the contrary. China opens all their markets to us for reducing tariffs, allowing us to invest there, allowing us to open business there. In some areas, we no longer have to transfer technology. We get special rights outside the WTO if they bombard our markets unfairly with cheap products that forge a big surge and throw a lot of Americans out of business. We have special rights in this agreement to go against them,

something most Members of Congress don't know. So it is clearly an economic plus.

So the real issue is, from the point of view of national security, do you want them in the international system as responsible players, or do you want to say, "We don't want you in the international system until you're governed exactly the way we think you should be and until you do exactly what we think you should. And until that time, we will keep you out, so there"? Now, based on all your knowledge of human nature, which do you think is more likely to produce constructive partnerships and constructive conduct on the part of the Chinese?

All I can tell you is, I know this is an election year. I know that some Members are receiving pressure—in both parties, I might add. I think it is very interesting that most of the religious groups, for example, that have done missionary work in China and have seen the impact of religious persecution or the absence of religious liberty there—virtually all of them that have actually worked in China strongly favor China's coming into the WTO because they understand once there are millions and millions of Internet connections, once the Chinese are open to the world, once they are involved in an international system, the Government will be more likely to be responsible, and the people will be more likely to find their own freedom.

And I believe that if we do not do this, that our country will be regretting this 5, 10, 15, 20 years from now. We will be shaking our heads saying, what in the world got ahold of our judgment in the year 2000? If we do it, 10 years from now, we will marvel that it was ever even a hard debate. That's what I believe. And so I'm going to stick with it, and I believe we'll make it.

Now, the statement on Taiwan may get harder, but you have to see it in the context of the electoral politics playing out in Taiwan and not necessarily assume that some destructive action will follow—just as I saw the Taiwanese provocative comments in the context of the Taiwanese elections.

Thank you. Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:17 p.m. on the South Grounds at the White House. Following his remarks, he went to the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel for the presentation of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards. However, a fire in the hotel at the beginning of the President's

remarks there prevented him from completing his planned participation in the awards ceremony.

Statement on the Report of the Interagency Task Force on the United States Coast Guard Roles and Missions

February 25, 2000

I am pleased to receive the report of the Interagency Task Force on the U.S. Coast Guard Roles and Missions. I extend my sincere appreciation to Chairman Mortimer Downey and the 15 other members who provided advice as to the appropriate future roles and missions for our Coast Guard. I also would like to commend the leadership of Secretary Rodney Slater and the Department of Transportation for their vision and vigilance in maintaining safety—my administration's highest transportation priority.

As we have witnessed time and again, and most recently with the tragic loss of Alaska Air Flight 261, the Coast Guard provides America with a maritime military and a multimission presence that is flexible and adaptable.

The Coast Guard will continue to safeguard America's maritime safety and security. I look forward to working with the Congress to ensure that the world's best Coast Guard remains as its motto proclaims: *Semper Paratus*—Always Ready.

Statement on Assistance to Communities Struck by Hurricane Floyd

February 25, 2000

When Hurricane Floyd hit communities on the eastern seaboard nearly 6 months ago, it left many thousands homeless, destroyed countless businesses, and caused severe loss of crops. While this storm took a terrible toll, hard-hit communities have shown determination and courage as they have made great efforts to rebuild. It is our job to help them, and today I am asking Congress to provide an additional \$347 million to do so.

These funds include essential assistance to farmers who have suffered crop loss, to help to construct low income rural housing, and to provide some 2,000 housing vouchers for families displaced from their homes. I am also asking

Congress to fund a feasibility study for the historic Princeville, North Carolina, to best determine options to protect this culturally significant town from future flooding.

We have already made \$2.6 billion available in grants and loans to help the victims of Hurricane Floyd. I urge Congress to approve my request today for additional funding in order to support the efforts of hard-pressed communities as they continue to rebuild and to bring to nearly \$3 billion total funds available to them.

NOTE: A portion of the President's statement was also made available on the White House Press Office Actuality Line.

Statement on Emergency Assistance to Fishing Communities

February 25, 2000

Due to the decline in important fishing stocks on the west and east coasts, many fishing communities are suffering unexpected losses that se-

riously threaten their livelihoods. In Long Island Sound, the lobster catch has fallen sharply this year. On the west coast, in Oregon, Washington,