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Remarks Honoring the 1994 Victim Service Award Recipients and an Exchange With Reporters

April 25, 1994

Thank you very much, Attorney General Reno, Secretary Bentsen, ladies and gentlemen. Before I go any further, because they had to introduce other people, I don't know that we appropriately thanked Lieutenant Bean and Steve Sposato for their—just their sheer courage for coming here and telling their stories. And I think we ought to recognize that.

As has already been said, just before we came out to the Rose Garden I was in the Oval Office, proclaiming this week National Crime Victims' Rights Week and, again, recognizing the 11 people who have already stood up and been recognized for what they've done in the cause of victims' rights. I want to wish all of them well and encourage them to continue their important work. I want to assure them that the Justice Department and the Office of Victims' Rights and Aileen Adams, the new Director, we're all going to do everything we can in this regard.

The visit of the victims' rights advocates is especially important here today because, as everyone has already said, we are at a pivotal point in the fight for the crime bill. One of the reasons that I ran for President—I was glad to hear Mr. Sposato say he was a registered Republican—because one of the reasons I ran for President is I couldn't imagine how it seemed to me from a distance every problem in Washington became a subject of partisan dispute, no matter how much it seemed to all of us who lived out there in the hinterland to be a human problem that ought to bring people together, not divide them.

It took 7 years to pass the Brady bill after Jim Brady was nearly killed with President Reagan. It's already beginning to save lives, because the background checks do make a difference. For 5 years the crime bill has been paralyzed and defeated time after time in the 11th hour because of some partisan dispute. Now it appears clearly that gridlock has been broken. The crime bill passed with an overwhelming bipartisan majority in the Senate in its first forum and then another bill in the House also with a bipartisan majority.

We think we're closing in on a bill that will make our streets, our homes, our schools, our lives safer. Victims' concerns are a centerpiece of the crime bill. They include the development of State registries for convicted child abusers, the expansion of programs to combat violence against women, the imposition of life sentences for three-time repeat violent offenders.

But I also say to you today that we should take this opportunity to end the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on our streets. People say the President should stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction around the world. Why don't we start with the streets of the United States of America?

I have asked Attorney General Reno, a former prosecutor, and Secretary Bentsen, an ardent hunter who's also in charge of registering the gun dealers of this country—the licensed gun dealers—to spearhead this effort. I have asked our Drug Policy Director, Lee Brown, who just came in and is a former Chief of Police in Atlanta, in Houston, in New York City, to reach out and mobilize the law enforcement support that we need. It's not just Lieutenant Bean, every major law enforcement organization in this country has said we should ban semi-automatic assault weapons. And most importantly, I want to ask the law-abiding citizens of this country to tell Congress that it's okay to vote for this and take these kinds of weapons off our streets.

I know there are those who oppose any effort to ban assault weapons. I've heard all the arguments. There's the camel's-nose-in-the-tent argument: "today the assault weapons, tomorrow my .22." There's the argument that, "Yes, there are a million of these weapons in circulation and 80-some percent of them belong to criminals, but what about the other 10 or 12 percent?" There's the argument that, "Well, maybe it'll save some lives, but all those people will go out and get a revolver and kill somebody."

I hate to be crass about it, ladies and gentlemen, but I'll bet you if Steve could get up here and say again, he would gladly trade his wife's chances for that maniac with a six-

shooter revolver over what she and the lawyer and all the other people in that office building had to face. I mean, who are we trying to kid? There is an air of unreality about this debate in Washington that has very little to do with the reality of what Lieutenant Bean and his deceased partner and all the other law enforcement officials in this country face day in and day out on the street every single solitary day.

Do I believe that there's a right to keep and bear arms in this country? You bet I do. I also believe there's something wrong with our country being the site of 90 percent of the youth homicides in the entire world, don't you? I think there's something wrong when one in 20 teenagers carriers a gun to school and 160,000 a day—a day—stay home because they are afraid to go to school. I think there's something wrong with that. I think the American people have a right to be safe and secure. How can we pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness if we don't have the most elemental security?

The weapons of choice for drug traffickers, gang members, paramilitary extremist groups are these assault weapons. This ban in the bill, as the Secretary of the Treasury said, specifically excludes from banning over 600 sporting weapons, including Remington and Browning rifles that have a semi-automatic firing mechanism with relatively few shots that are exclusively used for hunting. This is a very carefully drawn piece of legislation. It does not include protections for the AR–15, the AK–47, and the Uzi, to name just a few. These weapons were designed for the battlefield, not for the streets of America.

This is a real test for us. What will the Members of the House be thinking of when they vote on this bill? The letters they will surely get if they vote for it, Secretary Bentsen described, or will they think of the man who had a modified AK–47 who went into a schoolyard at recess time in Stockton, California, 5 years ago and in less than 2 minutes killed 5 kids and wounded 29 others? Will they think of what happened to Steve Sposato's wife and the other people who were in that building? Will they think of the 23 people who were killed in that cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, or the 4 Hasidic students who were shot on the Brooklyn Bridge?

You know, we have a lot of freedom in this country. And I was always raised to believe that with that freedom goes responsibility. I would argue to you, my fellow Americans, that as a people, individually and through our elected representatives, we have been woefully irresponsible in permitting the spread of these kinds of weapons to make police officers outgunned and ordinary citizens in more danger than they would have been anyway.

Now, this crime bill also contains a prohibition on the ownership and possession of handguns by minors unless they are under the supervision of a responsible adult, out for an approved legal purpose. If we can do that, surely we can do this. This is a big deal, not only because of the weapons involved but because it will tell us whether we are really going to continue to keep working on this problem. The crime bill will make a difference. The police will make a difference. The prevention money will make a difference. The victims' assistance efforts will make a difference. The tougher penalties will make a difference. But we have to change the rules of the game.

Today, in a free and open society, the presence of these assault weapons drastically tilt the rules of the game against the innocent and the law-abiding and the law-enforcing. And it is wrong.

Let me just close very briefly with this story. In 1992, early in the year, I was in New York one night to give a speech to a dinner which had been organized in behalf of our campaign. And I was going through the back way of this hotel and through a kitchen, and one of the gentlemen who was on the hotel staff came up to me and told me he was an immigrant. And he said, ''In the country where I came from, we were very poor, and I was glad to come to America where I do better. My 10-year-old boy is a student in school, and he is studying this election. He thinks I should vote for you. But before I say I will, I want to ask you something. I want you to make my boy free.'' He said, ''You see, we have more money here than we had at home, but at home we were free.'' I said, ''What do you mean?'' He said, ''How is my boy free when he cannot walk to school by himself, when there is a beau-

tiful park across the street from our apartment, but he cannot play there alone unless I am there with him? So If I give you my vote, will you make my boy free?''

Freedom is an empty word to people who are not even gifted with elemental safety. And I urge you to help us make sure that when the Members of the United States House of Representatives vote on this bill, they are thinking about that freedom for all Americans.

Thank you all very much.

China

Q. [*Inaudible*]—think you'll grant MFN to China now that they've released the dissident Wang Jontao?

The President. Well, I'm very pleased about that. I'm very pleased about it. And it's a good step.

Bosnia

Q. Mr. President, are you satisfied with the chain of command now in Bosnia after the confusion over the weekend? And exactly what was that confusion, and did the White House contact Boutros-Ghali to try to get it straightened out?

The President. Let me answer the first question first. I believe that the chain of command, and more importantly the understandings about what would or would not trigger air strikes are in proper order now. And I think what happened over the weekend, I believe, was reported essentially at the time the ultimatum took effect. There's no question that there was still some shelling going on in violation of the ultimatum. The U.N. forces on the ground there felt that there had been some command and control problems on the part of the Serbs, but they did intend to comply and they would in fact comply. And therefore they—it was their judgment that there should be a delay even though the ultimatum was enforced to see if they were right.

And that is why they delayed. There was not a big argument about what the rules were or the conditions were. All were agreed on the fact; all were agreed on the rules. They believed that the Serbs did intend to comply and had gotten strict instructions not just from their political but also from their military commander within Bosnia. And of course, as it turned out at least to date, that seems to be the case. I think we're all together from here on in.

Q. So you don't think this bolsters the argument of some that this is too cumbersome a chain of command, that it's too bureaucratic?

The President. Well, it's somewhat cumbersome—it's a little less cumbersome than it was before—that is, we hammered out some better procedures. But I think—we'll continue to try to work to streamline and improve the procedures. But we're, after all, all of us trying to do something that has not before been done: put NATO in the service of preserving the peace in Europe outside the NATO membership area for the first time ever and to work with the United Nations when the United Nations forces are on the ground, but not combatants themselves. So this raises a whole series of delicate and not easy questions, difficult questions.

I think that things are in proper order at this time. I have no reason to believe they're not and absolutely no reason to believe that the U.N. is anything but strongly supportive of the NATO air strike ultimatum there. I think that progress is being made.

Q. And the Serbs shouldn't take any comfort in——

The President. Absolutely not. It is exactly what I said, nothing more, nothing less. U.N. people on the ground said I believe they've had—[*inaudible*]—on their side. I believe they're going to stop. I believe they're going to withdraw. And of course, in effect, that's what happened during the course of the day. And that's all there was. There was not a difference of policy at all. And I think we're completely together now.

Crime Legislation

Q. Mr. President, why won't you take a position, your administration, on the racial justice act in the House version of the crime bill?

The President. I think that we—I was under the impression we had. We're going to have a position on everything in the House crime bill and some other things as well.

I think we have some people—working on a racial justice—[*inaudible*]. We think that

you can absolutely have a racial justice provision that will do some good. I'm not—I don't want to get into—this is a complicated piece of legislation, with two competing bills. But we will have positions on all those issues, so—I don't think it's accurate to say that we've not taken a position.

Q. Mr. President, why would the assault weapons ban work better separately than part of the overall crime bill?

The President. The administration liked it as part of the overall crime bill. We liked what the Senate did.

Q. Well, why—now that it's no longer part of the crime bill?

The President. Because we'll make it part of—[*inaudible*]—process separately in the House, then the conferees will put it into the crime bill.

Q. Realistically, politically, sir, what are the prospects?

The President. I don't know yet. We're working it. We couldn't—because the House was unwilling to consider it together, we had to work the crime bill and get it through before we could work the assault weapons bill, because they had made a decision to vote them separately. So I can't answer your question now because we're just now getting pounced in trying to get our teeth into the effort.

Q. So you don't know yet whether the tide is turning on that.

The President. I think we're in a lot better shape than we were a week ago. But I don't know yet that it'll pass. I'm working on it. I think—it certainly should pass, and we're in better shape than we were a week ago. We'll just keep working. I feel pretty hopeful about it. If these people are heard from, it will pass.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:40 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Randy Bean, whose fellow officer was killed during a routine traffic stop; Steven Sposato, whose wife was killed by a gunman in a San Francisco law office; James Brady, former White House Press Secretary who was wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan; former political prisoner Wang Jontao; and U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. A tape was not available for verification of the exchange portion of this item.

Proclamation 6678—National Crime Victims' Rights Week, 1994

April 25, 1994

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Every day, our Nation's peace is shattered by crime. Violent crime and the fear it provokes are crippling our society, limiting our personal freedom, and fraying the ties that bind us. No corner of America, it often seems, is safe from increasing levels of criminal violence. And more and more, the victims of these crimes are random targets of assaults stemming from a serious breakdown of values in our families and our communities.

National Crime Victims' Rights Week is a time when our Nation pauses to seriously reflect on these innocent victims of crime and on those who are working all across this country in their behalf. Thousands of people—many of them volunteers who have been victims themselves—are tirelessly striving at the Federal, State, and local levels to provide emotional support, guidance, and financial assistance to help crime victims recover from their trauma and to ensure that they are treated equitably and sensitively as their cases progress through the criminal justice system.

My Administration is working to stop the violence today to ensure fewer victims tomorrow. The pending crime bill is tough and smart and fair, with victims' concerns as its centerpiece. It will strengthen programs that combat violence against women, it will impose a life sentence—without possibility of parole—on repeat, violent offenders, and it will amend the Victims of Crime Act to expand Federal resources available for crime victims' services, and it will promote the development of State registries for child abusers. We are encouraging citizens to assume personal responsibility for improving their neighborhoods and to get involved in finding solutions to the violence in their communities.

Those who give of themselves to assist victims are helping immeasurably in this effort. They are there for their neighbors. They are there to provide comfort when someone has