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Remarks Commemorating the First Anniversary of the Brady Law and an Exchange With Reporters

February 28, 1995

The President. Thank you very much. Mr. Vice President, Mr. Secretary, Madam Attorney General, Commissioner Lovitt, and my friend Jim, congratulations. Happy anniversary.

You know, I'd like to begin by saying a special word about Jim Brady. He dedicated his life to public service. In no small measure because of that dedication, 14 years ago his life was in danger and his life changed forever. In spite of all the hardship and the pain that followed, he never looked back but instead decided he should fight on, determined to do his part to prevent the tragedy that struck him from striking other people. More than any other person in the United States, we celebrate today the courage and determination of Jim Brady, and we are in his debt.

Thank you, sir.

James Brady. Thank you, sir.

The President. You know, Jim and Sarah Brady represent in so many ways the kind of citizen action I talked about in the State of the Union Address, the New Covenant: moral responsibility along with more opportunity and people sparking grassroots movements across this country. I am committed to this law and committed to what it represents. You know, our big problems here in Washington often stem from the fact that we don't think about what promotes responsibility and what creates opportunity and what enables people to make the most of their own lives. The Brady bill does all that.

A crucial part of our job here in Washington is to help arm the American people, through our police officers, to fight crime and violence. The Brady law, in that sense, is one of the things that I'm proudest of that has happened since I have been President. We put an end to 7 years of politics-as-usual, of people saying one thing and doing another, when the Brady law passed. It's not a complex piece of legislation, but it took 7 years, 7 years to pass the Congress.

And all the naysayers talked about how terrible it would be. Well, now we know that, as the Secretary said, over 40,000 convicted felons, fugitives, drug dealers, gang members, stalkers, were prevented from purchasing handguns in the Brady law's first 11 months. I should point out that the real national number is bigger than that because, as you know, there are some States that have companion laws that go along with that, and the estimates are that, nationwide in the States with Brady-like laws and the Brady law, the total is more like 70,000.

A recent study says that, as the Secretary said, that that's only 3.5 percent of all the people who buy handguns. And as he said, it's kind of like airport metal detectors. I think 97 percent of us should be willing to wait a while, so that the 3 percent of us who are trying to buy guns for the wrong reasons can be stopped. Three percent of the American people buying guns for the wrong reasons can do a phenomenal amount of damage, and stopping them can do a phenomenal amount of good, can keep a lot of citizens alive, and it can keep an awful lot of law enforcement officials alive.

There are thousands of examples around the country, but let me just cite one or two. In March of 1994, the Brady law stopped a handgun purchase by a man in Kansas under a restraining order for allegedly stalking his wife and threatening to kill her. In April, the law led to the arrest of a suspected drug dealer in Texas with outstanding warrants for possession of cocaine and heroin with intent to distribute. In November, it helped to catch two gang members, both convicted felons, who traveled all the way from California to Nevada to purchase weapons.

These are the people the law was meant to stop. Law-abiding people are those the law was meant to protect. The test was simple: Will it save a life? Will it protect one child walking home from school, so he or she could feel a little safer? Will it spare one woman from abuse? If it could, we all thought the law would be a success. Now we know that it has done that thousands of times over in

just one year. The Brady bill has become the Brady law with flying colors.

After years of the same old politics-as-usual, the last Congress stood up to the special interests and stood up for the American people. They heard the pleas of the victims, and they thought through to the end, past all the rhetoric that was in their way. When they passed this bill and when they banned 19 deadly assault weapons and their copies, many of them paid a terrible price. Some of them laid down their seats in Congress to stand up with the law enforcement officials of this country and with Jim Brady. But America is safer because of their courage. And I think now, after one year of the Brady law's impact, the entire American electorate will see that those who attacked it were wrong and those who stood up for it were right.

You know, today there's a lot of concern in our country and a lot of interest in the news media about the balanced budget. And next week there will be another issue, and the week after that there will be another issue, and 6 months after that there will be another issue. And people may forget what Jim Brady went through for 7 years, and people may forget why some of those Members of Congress lost their seats last November. But from now until the end of this country's existence, every year there will be more people alive because of Jim Brady and because of what the Congress did.

And so I just want to say this: For all the other things that will be debated, you can mark my words, the Brady law and the assault weapons bill are here to stay. They will not be repealed.

Thank you, Jim, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Republican Crime Bill

Q. Mr. President, does that mean you're reaffirming your veto threat for the Republican crime bill and the——

Mr. President. I will stay with what I said all along. We ought not to repeal the Brady bill, we ought not to repeal the assault weapons ban, and we certainly ought not to back off the 100,000 police commitment. And I will do everything I can to protect that.

But let me be fair to this new Congress. Remember, there are two Houses in this new Congress. The Senate has not yet acted on the crime bill or any of these other bills. And I'm confident that we have at least a chance of working out a better bill in the Senate and in the conference process.

I have made clear my veto position on 100,000 police, and I reaffirm it. But I want to emphasize that I still am committed to trying to make good things happen in this Congress, and I have not in any way or shape given up on that. The bill has still got to go to the Senate, and we'll see what happens.

Q. Why do you have so much faith?

The President. I'm just a cockeyed optimist and always have been. [*Laughter*]

Balanced Budget Amendment

Q. Mr. President, does that extend to what's coming on the balanced budget amendment today? Do you have anything that you'd like to say to the Senate as they approach that?

The President. Well, I have two things. I made a little note here. I asked somebody to give me this. Obviously, I don't support it. But I support the impulses that are giving rise to it, that is, the American people understand that something went terribly wrong about 14 years ago. In the 12 years before I got here, we quadrupled the national debt. And before that, in almost 200 years as a country, we didn't have permanent deficits. We've raised the debt when we needed to, and we ran a surplus when we needed to.

Now, I don't believe we need to change the Constitution to overcome the 12 years before I got here and the mistakes that were made. We've already lowered the deficit for 3 years in a row, and we can do more. But I want to say this. You know what I think is wrong with it. What I think is wrong with it is that it may give a little extra impetus to our reducing the deficit, but it also runs the risk of turning recessions into near depressions and of turning Federal judges into budgeteers—they're not elected—and of giving the Federal Reserve the power, in effect, to wipe out all of our education programs, because when they raise interest rates, they'll raise the deficit. So there are a lot of problems with this automatic mechanism.

But let me say this: Whatever happens today, the real question should be, what are we going to do tomorrow? What are we going to do tomorrow? You know, I'm very proud of the fact that my budgets are the first budgets in 30 years which run surpluses, exclusive of interest on the debt. That is, no President since the Johnson years has introduced a budget and passed a budget through Congress which runs a surplus with all the operating programs of the Government, exclusive of interest on the debt. I'm proud of that. That shows that we've done what we could to bring down unnecessary spending, to reinvent Government under the Vice President's leadership, and to move in the right direction.

Now, I have been here now waiting for 770 days—770 days—for the members of now the majority party in Congress to both propose and vote for a budget that actually reduces the deficit. And I am willing to work with them. But this balanced budget amendment does not reduce any spending. And the American people still don't know what's going to happen to Social Security. They still don't know what's going to happen to education. They still don't know what's going to happen to Medicare. They still don't know anything about what the details are.

So the real question is: Whatever happens today—and it's obviously in the hands of the sponsors in the Senate, because they know what they have to do to get the votes to pass. They have to make it less bad; they have to fix at least the judicial—they have to fix the idea of giving the Federal judges the power to raise taxes and cut spending. And what are we going to do tomorrow? That's what I want them to think about. I'm willing to work to do more, to cut more of the deficit, but we need a partnership here, and we need to go beyond posturing.

So I do not think it's a good idea, but that decision is in the hands of the Congress, and we'll just have to see what they do. But whatever happens today, the real question is, what are we going to do here tomorrow?

Q. It sounds like you're throwing in the towel.

The President. No, I'm not. No, I think——

Q. You sound very——

The President. I have worked—it's just that I know where those five people are that are undecided, and I know that there are changes that the majority could make in the Senate to get the votes. You know, if they would—for example, they plainly could pass it if they said that they weren't going to give Federal judges the power to raise taxes and cut spending and they weren't going to use Social Security in trying to resolve this, they weren't going to put Social Security into the balanced budget calculation. Then the thing would clearly pass.

The only point I'm trying to make is, it's up to them now whether it passes or not, because I've talked to all five of those folks. Others have talked to them. They've made their positions public. They've made it clear where they stand. Those five Democrats are all people who, like me, have worked hard to try to bring down the deficit. So we'll just have to see what happens.

No, I'm not sure it's going to pass, see, because I don't know what's in their minds. Some of the cynics believe that they want it to lose so they can continue to blame the Democrats.

Q. You don't seem to have put much energy in it.

The President. That's not—I have made my position very clear. I don't have a veto, as you know, in this process. I've made my position clear. I've had extensive talks with undecided Members. I've done everything I could. Our administration has testified on it. But what I think happens is that a lot of the Members of Congress are frustrated because of what's happened in the previous 12 years before we showed up here, and they see this mountain of debt that's piled up. But I don't believe the amendment is the way to solve it, because I think of the whole history of America. I know we could fix this without a constitutional amendment.

And if we fix the big structural deficit and we're stuck with this amendment, then what happens the next time we have a recession? Are we going to make it worse? In a recession, are we going to be raising taxes and cutting job training programs? What happens the next time the Federal Reserve has to raise interest rates? Are we going to come back and cut Head Start and college loans?

So we need to continue to work on this. We need strong action. I'm just afraid that the American people have not been told the full implications of this for Social Security, for education, and for the economy. And I think that it's regrettable, but understandable, that the supporters did not want to comply with the right-to-know suggestion. But they're going to have to, anyway. They're going to have to before the States vote on it. They're going to have to tell people what the consequences are.

Q. Is there anything they could change to make you go along with it with this point of view that it's such a bad idea to change the Constitution?

The President. I think that changing—I think if you change the Constitution without some sort of an economic emergency—that's my problem. That is, my problem is, if you read Senator Moynihan's three lectures on this, three speeches in the Senate, he did a wonderful job, Moynihan did, of laying out the whole history of our budgeting and pointing out how this problem that we're saddled with is a new problem in American history. It arose from 1981 to 1993. It did not exist before in our country. And the point he made is, we can fix it without amending the Constitution if we have the will to do it and if we'll work together in a bipartisan fashion.

And if we amend the Constitution and we fix it, then the next time it takes effect, it'll be destructive, because we'll be in a recession and it will make the recession worse. That's what I'm worried about. I don't know how they could fix that. I understand one of the Senators had some sort of an economic emergency amendment that would fix that. But that's what I see as the real problem.

You know, I guess when you come down to it, the best argument for it is the drunk in the liquor store argument: Every time I drive by, I'm going to go in and buy a fifth; you better board it up. I mean, near as I can tell, that's the argument for it. And I just think that we should have a bipartisan determination to keep bringing that rascal down without amending the Constitution in ways that 10, 15 years from now are likely to hurt our children and our grandchildren.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:32 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin; Jerry Lovitt, Kentucky State police commissioner; former White House Press Secretary James Brady, who was wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan; and Mr. Brady's wife, Sarah, who is head of Hand Gun Control, Inc. Public Law 103–159, "To provide for a waiting period before the purchase of a handgun, and for the establishment of a national instant criminal background check system to be contacted by firearms dealers before the transfer of any firearm," approved November 30, 1993, took effect on February 28, 1994.

Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister Wim Kok of The Netherlands

February 28, 1995

Iran

Q. Mr. President, are you concerned about Iran placing anti-aircraft missiles at the mouth of the Persian Gulf?

The President. I think that I'll wait until later to answer any questions.

Q. Even the ones—the Republicans saying that they're willing to change the balanced budget amendment so that the courts cannot raise taxes or cut spending?

The Netherlands

Q. And about The Netherlands—[*laughter*]——

The President. It's a great country and a great ally of the United States.

[*At this point, one group of reporters left the room, and another group entered.*]

"Apache" Helicopters

Q. Mr. President, how will you react if the Dutch Government decides not to buy *Apache* helicopters?

The President. Well, that's a decision for the Dutch Government to make. Obviously, I hope that that will be the decision because I think on the merits, it's the best product. But that's a decision that the Government has to make.

Q. Mr. President, are you trying to sell the Prime Minister on the benefits of the *Apache* helicopter?