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NOTE: The President spoke at 9:05 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Flood Damage in Grand Forks, North Dakota

April 22, 1997

The President. Well, first of all, let me say to all of you that I'm honored to be here with the people from our administration. Thank you, Mayor Owens and Mayor Stauss, the other mayors that are here. I thank Senator Conrad and Senator Dorgan, Senator Daschle, Senator Johnson who came in with me, and Senator Wellstone and Senator Grams who met us, and Congressman Pomeroy and—and Congressman Peterson who met us here; Governor Schafer, Governor Carlson. I also want to thank all the people who came with me from my administration: the Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman; the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala; the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Andrew Cuomo; the Secretary of Transportation, Rodney Slater; Aida Alvarez, our Small Business Administration; and Togo West, the Secretary of the Army. I want to thank the Air Force, the National Guard, the Red Cross, the Corps of Engineers, the Coast Guard, the Salvation Army, and all the people at the State and local government and the community groups that have worked so hard on this endeavor.

Today we saw, obviously, these two communities that have been so devastated, but we know that there is a lot of other loss in North and South Dakota and Minnesota. We're going to meet with people now, and I'm going to get a briefing from people who have, unbelievably, dealt with blizzards, floods, and fires, all at the same time. I have never seen that before. And when I saw pictures of some of you stacking sandbags in a blizzard, I thought that I had bad reception on my television at first. It was an amazing thing. I don't recall ever in my life seeing anything like this. And I've been very impressed by the courage and the faith that all of you have shown in the face of what has been a terrible, terrible dilemma.

I want to say before we start this roundtable discussion that we are going to do everything we can to move as quickly as possible to do as much as can be done to help. I want to be briefed by everyone here at the table. And James Lee Witt has already talked to me quite extensively about this over, as you might imagine, a long period of time now. But I wanted to say that there are three things I'd like to announce first.

First of all, before I left the White House this morning, I authorized FEMA to provide 100 percent of the direct Federal assistance for all of the emergency work undertaken by Federal agencies in the 149 counties where disasters have been declared. We will do this retroactively from the moment that the counties were recognized as disaster areas, which I hope will relieve the State and local governments from the worry of whether or not they'll be able to actually afford to help citizens and the communities through the cleanup. We do this only in the most difficult of circumstances. Normally, the reimbursement rate is 75 percent. But anyone who has been here and seen the destruction, as I have, knows that this is not an ordinary disaster, if there is such a thing. The people here are giving 100 percent, and we should, too.

Second, we are dramatically expanding FEMA's public assistance grant program. We'll add 18 counties in Minnesota and 53 counties in South Dakota today. And these counties also will be eligible for funds for repair and restoration of their communities after the waters subside. Let me also say that we expect to make additional counties in North Dakota and Minnesota eligible for this assistance as soon as we can fully assess the damage that they have sustained.

The third thing I'd like to say is that today I'm asking Congress to approve an additional $200 million of contingency emergency funds for North and South Dakota and for Minnesota. I've asked that these funds be made available both for short-term emergency response activities and for long-term efforts to help the region to rebuild in the aftermath of the flood. If approved, this action will bring to $488 million the total amount of disaster assistance we've requested for the people of these States.

Finally, I'm directing our FEMA Director, James Lee Witt, to lead an interagency task force to develop and direct a long-term recovery plan for North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. We know that this is going to be a long-term effort.

And when we were coming in today, one of the things that I was just noting based on my now 20-plus years of experience in dealing with things like this—although I have never seen a community this inundated by flood, this large a community—we have to deal with the long-term problems. And you have to know that we can be relied on to be there in all these communities over the long run.

The only other thing I'd like to say, Madam Mayor, to you and the other officials—you know this already, but a lot of people are still almost in shock, I'm sure, and have not had time to focus on some of the things which will make the losses most painful, the things that have been lost in these homes, the records of family occasions, the letters from World War II, the letters from the kids that go off to college, all the things that people will have to come to grips with in the days ahead. And I know that $488 million or $4 billion wouldn't make that go away. But at least we want you to know that we are going to be there over the long run.

And the rest of America has, I think, looked with great compassion and pain, but also enormous admiration at the heroic conduct of the people of this community and of all these States in the last several days when they've gone through things that most of the rest of us can't imagine. We could never imagine facing a flood and a fire and a blizzard all at the same time. And we admire you greatly, and we're going to do what we can to be there with you over the long haul.

Thank you.

Mr. Witt.

[*At this point, the roundtable discussion began.*]

The President. First of all, Mayor, and to all of you who've spoken, I thank you for what you said and for how you said it and for what you've done. And the pain with which you spoke, I think, only showed the rest of us that you're speaking for all the people in these communities. And I thank you for that.

I wonder if, Mr. Witt, if you could comment, or any of the people that we brought with us can comment on the question of the immediate needs—the immediate need for housing, even for basic toilet facilities, for these things—these basic immediate needs. How are we going to deal with that?

[*The roundtable discussion continued.*]

The President. We've got the entire congressional delegation from North Dakota and from South Dakota, and they came to see me as one a couple of weeks ago. And I really appreciated it. I don't think even they were prepared for what's happened since then here, but they did come and made me aware of what was going on.

And of course, we have Senator Wellstone, Senator Grams, and your Congressman, Collin Peterson here from Minnesota. And I wonder if any of them, or Governor Schafer or Governor Carlson, would like to either make a comment or ask a question.

Senator Dorgan, Senator Conrad, either one of you have anything you want to say?

[*The roundtable discussion continued.*]

The President. Well, let me just say this. I think one of the things that we need your input in, to go back to this sort of "Marshall plan" characterization that Senator Conrad and Senator Dorgan used and that my Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles used yesterday, we need to try to design this aid package so that it gives maximum flexibility to people at the grassroots level to do what needs to be done in these communities. This is an unprecedented thing, and I will work with you on it.

As I said, my sense is that the rest of the country has been profoundly moved by this. And if your colleagues in the Congress, in both parties, will really help us with this—we just need to—we need your guidance. You've been out here since Thursday; you know a lot more about it than we do. We need to try to structure what we're going to do in the Congress in the next few days in a way that deals with it.

I think that's why Senator Daschle mentioned the community development block grant program or some other programs that gives the maximum flexibility to the people at the community level.

Governors, would you like to say anything?

[*The roundtable discussion continued.*]

The President. After years and years of dealing with things of this kind, my instinct is that what Governor Carlson said is right, that what Minnesota learned and what we learned in all the Midwestern States that were engulfed in the flood of '93 will give us some very valuable lessons about what to do in the rebuilding in all the communities affected here, with the exception of these two where you've had the total destruction of communities of this size. In my experience, we've not gone through anything like this. So I do think we're going to have to be creative and flexible.

I just want to make two brief points, but I want to—before I do, we have some other mayors here, and I know we can't hear from everybody, but Mayor Stauss, would you like to say anything?

[*The roundtable discussion continued.*]

The President. Before we break this up, I just want to make two points. The first thing I wanted to ask is a question. Is there an estimated time for when the water and sewer will be hooked up again? Do we even know? Do we have any way of—anyone know?

[*A participant responded that it would be at least a month before the normal water supply was restored.*]

The President. Well, one of you—I think maybe it was Curt said you were worried it might take 3 or 4 weeks before people could be back on their homesites.

Let me say—Mr. Witt said something about the trailers, on-site trailers, which we have found work best. As soon as we know how many people want to go back there and live under those circumstances and how many people—the quicker we can do that inventory, the better because even if we have to have these made, which typically we do in numbers this large, you can get incredibly rapid turnaround. You can turn one around—you can order, make, and deliver up here probably within less than 2 weeks. They can make a large number on order at any of these sophisticated manufacturing places in 10 days.

So I think we can do our part of that, but it depends on what kind of other arrangements you can make for water and sewer and when you tell us. Isn't that about right?

[*Director James Lee Witt of the Federal Emergency Management Agency responded affirmatively to the President's question.*]

The President. Yes, but we've also got to have the inventory ready simultaneously. We could be—we can order these things before the water and sewer is back on so that they happen together. That's the point I'm trying to make. You can—and that can save people at least a couple of weeks. And I know right now, any day, people say, means something to them.

The second point I want to make is to my—basically a request to the Members of Congress who are here and for help from the Governors. Believe me, everybody in Congress—I think virtually everybody will be sympathetic to this request. On the other hand, the thing that bothers me that could delay this some, and I don't want to see it happen, is sometimes in Congress, when something that is so important, so popular like this comes along, other people, for perfectly legitimate reasons, think, "Well I've got something I care about; maybe I can tack that on there, too." And there may be some other agendas that get caught up in this.

So I would just ask, on a completely bipartisan, or, if we will, nonpartisan basis—this is an American issue—if we can get this supplemental request through the Congress on its own terms or, at most, only with other emergency-related expenditures in other parts of the country, so that none of us—and the administration included—we all resist whatever temptation we might have to get something else done. I think that is the moral and the right thing to do. These people deserve help now, and that's the only way to make sure we won't have any extraneous debates and won't fool around and waste a lot of time.

And I will do whatever I can. But we need—and again, believe me, I don't know anybody who is going to do this, I've just seen it happen over and over and over again where it seems like it's just an irresistible temptation when you think some interest you represent can ride along on the train that deserves to go out of the station in a hurry. We all need to resist that and do what's right by these folks and get it done now. And if we can do that, I think that, from what I've seen here today, they'll take care of the rest.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:58 p.m. in the Enlisted Club at Grand Forks Air Force Base. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Patricia Owens of Grand Forks, ND; Mayor Lynn Stauss of East Grand Forks, MN; Gov. Edward T. Schafer of North Dakota; and Gov. Arne H. Carlson of Minnesota.

Remarks to the Community in Grand Forks

April 22, 1997

Thank you. Wait a minute, folks, I've got to get these crutches right here. [*Laughter*] Thank you, General Hess. Let me begin by thanking everyone who is a part of the Grand Forks Air Force Base for what you do for our national security and especially for what you have done to support the people of the Grand Forks communities in these last few days. I'm very proud of you. Thank you.

As I think all of you know, I have just come from touring the devastation of the floods as well as a very moving community meeting, presided over by Mayor Owens, attended by Mayor Stauss and other mayors, the entire congressional delegation from North Dakota and from South Dakota, Senator Grams and Senator Wellstone from Minnesota, Congressman Collin Peterson from Minnesota, and the Governors from North Dakota and Minnesota.

It has been a very moving experience for all of us. Five members of my Cabinet are here, the Secretaries of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, and the Administrator of the Small Business Administration. The Secretary of the Army is here. We have all come, first of all, to see firsthand what it is you've been going through; secondly, to pledge to do our part to help make you whole; and thirdly, to tell you that we're for you. We have hardly ever seen such a remarkable demonstration of courage and commitment and cooperation and basic human strength, and we are very impressed and proud to be Americans when we see what you have done in the face of this terrible disaster.

We know that this rebuilding is going to be a long-term prospect, and we also know that there are some very immediate and pressing human needs that many people have. Before I left this morning, I took some steps I wanted to tell you about. First, I authorized James Lee Witt and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide 100 percent of the direct Federal assistance for all the emergency—[*inaudible*]—work going to be undertaken here.

The second thing we did was to add to the counties already covered another 18 counties in Minnesota and 53 in South Dakota who need help.

The third thing I did was to ask Congress to approve another $200 million in emergency funds for North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. These funds will be available for both short-term emergency response activities and for long-term efforts to help you rebuild. If approved, this action will bring to $488 million the total amount of disaster assistance that I have requested for the people of these three States.

Now, let me say there are—I say again, I know there are short-term, immediate concerns, people who need a place to sleep, people who don't know where their next check is coming from, even people who don't have access to basic sanitary facilities except here on the air base. We are working to restore those things with your local community folks. And we had some specific talks about what we could do to get proper housing available while you're rebuilding your communities.

[*At this point, there was a disturbance in the building.*]

That's up there. Anybody hurt?