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Week Ending Friday, December 12, 1997

The President's Radio Address

December 6, 1997

Good morning. Yesterday the community of West Paducah, Kentucky, came together to remember the three young girls struck down at school in a terrifying act of violence. Our entire Nation has been shaken by this tragedy. West Paducah, on the southern shore of the Ohio River, is at the center of our circle of prayers. America has lost three beautiful daughters. We mourn deeply with the Steger, James, and Hadley families, with those students who were wounded and their families, and with all those whose lives were changed forever by a 14-year-old with a stolen gun.

We may never know what drove the son of a respected church elder to extinguish the lives of classmates bowed in prayer. But in the aftermath we've seen great heroism, generosity, and love: a courageous act by a classmate to head off more violence, an outpouring of understanding for the sister of the alleged killer, the donation of organs for patients desperately in need, an entire nation reaching out in support. One terrible act could not poison the deep well of goodness West Paducah has drawn upon in this moment of grief.

Now the rest of us must do everything in our power to prevent such things from happening again. At a time when we're trying to prepare our children for the opportunities of the 21st century, high school seniors are more likely to take weapons to school than to take calculus in school. This is unacceptable. We simply cannot educate our children, and they cannot learn and live up to their full potential, when violence and drugs threaten their safety in school.

One thing we must do right away is to gain a much clearer view of the problem. Sadly, our national picture of school violence is neither complete, nor up to date. We know more about the overall patterns of car theft in America than we do about the harm that comes to our children at school.

So today I'm directing Attorney General Reno and Education Secretary Riley to launch a major initiative to produce for the first time an annual report card on school violence. This report card will contain the data we all need in order to boost efforts to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

School safety is a challenge not only for police and parents, teachers and school officials, the scourge of young violence poses a challenge to every American. It demands that we do everything possible to find safe places for our children to learn and play and grow. It demands that schools follow a policy of zero tolerance for guns. It demands that we teach our children basic values, the unblinking distinction between right and wrong. It demands that we exercise responsibility when we create images for our children to see. Most urgently, it demands that whenever possible, we reach out to those who may be troubled, angry, or alone before they do something destructive and perhaps irreversible to themselves or others.

Youth violence represents an insistent, angry wake-up call to every parent, every teacher, every religious leader, every student. If we answer that call, we can ensure that the memory of Kayce, Nicole, and Jessica will help us to prevent other such tragedies. In the words of the girls' final prayer, we can ensure that their light will shine forever more.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 5:18 p.m. on December 5 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on December 6. In his remarks, the President referred to Kayce Steger, Nicole Hadley, and Jessica James, Heath High School students killed by gunfire following a prayer meeting; Michael Carneal, the alleged gunman, and his sister Kelly; and Ben Strong, a student who acted to end the shooting.

Remarks at the Metropolitan Baptist Church

December 7, 1997

Thank you. Thank you, Reverend Hicks, Mrs. Hicks, members of the ministry. Thank you, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, for telling me I should come here today, thank you. I must say, I would rather be in the choir than in the pulpit. [*Laughter*] They were wonderful. Thank you. Mr. Mayor, City Council Chair Cropp, and members of the council; Dr. Swygert and Mrs. Swygert; my good friend Maya Angelou, thank you for being here; David Du Bois. I thank three members of my Cabinet—Secretary of Labor Alexis Herman; the Secretary of Transportation, Rodney Slater; and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Frank Raines—for coming with me, and many members of the White House staff and friends. We're all glad to be here, and we have a happy heart after hearing all the wonderful music and seeing the people here, and especially the children.

Sean and Ahjah and the other children gave me the letters and the drawings; I was back there reading them. One letter said, "Can Project Spirit come and visit the White House and see the Christmas tree?" [*Laughter*] Yes. As a matter of fact, Dr. Hicks, anybody, any of these children in your youth group you want to bring, just bus them on in. We'd be glad to see them, and we'll arrange it. I'd like that.

Now, the letters contain some interesting things. One young man wrote, "I'm not trying to get myself in trouble, but I've always had a crush on Hillary." [*Laughter*] Now, I can certainly understand that. [*Laughter*] A lot of the letters were serious. They said, can I do more to get rid of violence, guns. A lot of them said very specific things about what they'd like to do to make their schools better.

Why are we here today? Or, at least, why am I here today, instead of down the street at Foundry, where I normally am on Sunday? Ephesians says we should speak the truth with our neighbors, for we are members, one of another. I believe that. I think that is the single most important political insight, or social insight, in the Bible. And I think it is what should drive us as we behave together. We have to decide whether we are members, one of the other: Is my destiny caught up in yours; are your children my children; do you care about my daughter; are we part of the same family of God? It's not enough to say that we are all equal in the eyes of God. We are all also connected in the eyes of God.

Now, just because we have responsibilities one to another doesn't mean we don't have a primary responsibility to ourselves. God helps those who help themselves. One great athlete once said, "You know, it's amazing, the more I practice, the luckier I get." [*Laughter*] So we have responsibilities to ourselves, but we owe a lot to each other.

I come here to say that I don't believe our National Government has always been the best neighbor to the City of Washington, Mr. Mayor, Ms. Cropp, Congresswoman Norton, but we are committed to becoming a better neighbor. Washington has gotten a lot of lectures from people in national politics about being more responsible, from making the schools work better, to the streets become safer, to the neighborhoods having more hope and economic opportunity. But in the essence of our Constitution is the idea that responsibility requires freedom.

And so I believe in the independence of Washington, DC. I want Washington, DC, to be able to run its own affairs. I want the crime to go down and the schools to go up and the neighborhoods to be strong and full. We are trying to do better. In this last meeting of Congress we did more things to take loads off of Washington that it should not have, and to give Washington responsibilities that it should have. And we must do more. I met with the mayor, the city council, the control board, and a lot of community leaders just a few days ago, a meeting that the Congresswoman requested. And we talked about what we could do together.

But I want to say to you that I come here at this Christmas season to say that I hope one of the gifts that I and our administration can leave for the 21st century is a National Capital that is a shining city on the hill for all America, that every American is proud of. I want a National Capital where every child looks like the children that I heard sing and who brought me those letters today, where they're all filled with a spirit of their own