

Week Ending Friday, June 12, 1998

Question-and-Answer Session With Students at the Thoreau Institute in Lincoln, Massachusetts

June 5, 1998

Writings of Henry David Thoreau

Participant. I'm Liz Coogan from Concord Middle School here in Massachusetts, and this question is for you, Mr. President and Mr. Henley. What do Thoreau's writings and Walden Woods mean to you?

The President. To me they mean two things. First, when I was very young and was first exposed to Thoreau's writings, he crystallized the feelings that I had when I was in nature and awakened in me a sense of profound obligation to respect and to preserve the natural environment.

The second thing that impressed me about Thoreau from the very beginning is how much he learned about himself and about human nature and society by living apart from it for a while, how much, in effect, he learned about life by being a solitary person living alone for an extended period of time.

It made a huge impression on me because most people wouldn't think that you could learn that much about life living alone. But when I saw what he wrote about solitude, for example, he persuaded me that you could learn quite a lot.

[At this point, musician Don Henley, founder of the institute, and Hillary Rodham Clinton responded to the same question. Russian students at the Municipal Children's Ecological Center in St. Petersburg, Russia, who participated by live video hookup, presented Mrs. Clinton with a copy of an artwork they had previously presented to the Thoreau Institute.]

Environmental Issues Education

The President. I would just like to say that I very much appreciate the work that you're doing at the institute to teach the Rus-

sian children about the environment and how we have to preserve it.

Most adults in all industrial countries were raised to believe that in order to have a strong economy you have to destroy part of the environment, and we have to change that. We have to raise a whole generation of young people who believe that the only way to preserve the economy over the long run is to take care of the environment. And if we all work at it together, we'll be successful.

Russian Participant. I think, Mr. President, that we cannot only be hopeful that everything will be the way you said right now, but we can be positive that it is going to be like that in the future.

The President. *Spacibo* [Thank you].

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:34 p.m. in the Education Center. Participants present at the institute were students from Boston Latin School, Lincoln-Sudbury High School, and Concord Middle School. The Russian video participant spoke in Russian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks at the Grand Opening of the Thoreau Institute in Lincoln

June 5, 1998

Thank you, please sit down. Well, we've been here a long time in this beautiful setting, and if Thoreau were here, he would say we need more silence and less talk. But I have immensely enjoyed what has been said.

Senator Kerry has been a consistent, devoted supporter of the environment, and he was profoundly eloquent about it today. Senator Kennedy has worked so hard for projects like this one for so long now, but he has a way of telling a personal story that brings home to people, who might not otherwise be engaged, the importance of the moment.

You know, I thought I'd get a few brownie points for coming here and saying, because

of his work here, I gave Don Henley the National Humanities Medal last year. But that's nothing compared to Ted Kennedy coming here and calling him the "big fish" and the "distant drummer" at the same time. [*Laughter*]

I would very much like to thank all the people who Don mentioned. I know Ed Begley, Jr., and Tony Bennett were on before; they've been good friends of ours. I thank Jimmy Buffett and Joe Walsh and all the musicians and other friends of Don who have helped. I thank you, Kathi, for your magnificent work. And I'm grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for supporting this project. And I thank you all for clapping when we said we weren't going to let it be done away with, along with the NEA.

I'd like to recognize two people who aren't here today, but who played an important role in getting this endeavor off the ground with Don: the late Paul Tsongas and the late Michael Kennedy. Thank you, to them.

Hillary and I got to walk a little along the path coming down here today. It's very frustrating being where we are now because back when we had real lives, we used to walk in the woods a lot. [*Laughter*] And so to be able to come here and only be able to walk 200 yards so that our friends with the cameras could at least get a good picture so the American people could get a real feel for the magnificent work that's been done here, it winds up almost being more real to them than it is to us sometimes. [*Laughter*] But it was enough just to see what moved Thoreau to move here on July 4, 1845, so that he could live deeply and deliberately.

In a way, he was engaging in his own experiment in independence, in the finest tradition of American citizenship. A lot of you know that Thoreau was a friend of Emerson, who talked about our Revolution as "the shot heard 'round the world." In many ways, Thoreau's sojourn here at Walden was also a shot heard 'round the world. And it continues to echo today. That's why, as Hillary said, we have to, all of us, support saving it, along with our other national treasures.

I want to reiterate something Don said in a rather delicate, soft, Southern fashion: They need more money here. [*Laughter*]

And since we'll probably be on television, if anyone within the sound of my voice—[*laughter*—whoever read Thoreau, who was ever inspired by his writings and what he stood for, we have to raise a \$12 million endowment and pay off a construction loan. Send a check. [*Laughter*] You'll be proud you did. [*Applause*] Thank you.

Well, let me get back to the point I mentioned. Thoreau has echoed over the decades and now more than a century. And what do we have to learn from him, and what does it mean in 21st century terms? First, we have to live in harmony with nature. What does that mean? That's one thing for one guy living on a pond. You've got 260 million people in this country; they can't do that. What does it mean?

For us, it means that we have to completely give up the notion that we can only grow our economy if we destroy the environment, and we'll just do it little by little. We have to learn a whole new way of thinking so that we grow our economy by improving the environment and living in greater harmony with ourselves here in this country and around the world. It is a fundamental insight that Americans of all political factions, all backgrounds, all walks of life must embrace.

Second, in an era where for the first time in history more people on the globe live under governments of their own choosing than do not, the first time ever a majority of people live under governments of their own choosing, it is well to remember that oppression still lives in the world and that there is a great deal of tension and, as the Good Book says, wars and rumors of war. We must not forget both the power and moral superiority of civil disobedience over violence in the face of injustice.

As Hillary said, Dr. King, Gandhi, Mandela, all were moved by the insights of Thoreau. We must not forget that today. We must not forget for a moment the value of self-reliance; nor must we forget the fact that Thoreau came here and wrote about solitude, that he learned more about his fellow human beings and the proper relations among people from his solitude, because if he had too much contact with other people, he thought you came to take too much for granted and frittered too much away. We must be both

self-reliant and interdependent, and that is a lesson that Thoreau learned that we can learn from him today. And in a world that is getting smaller and smaller and smaller, it is a very important lesson, indeed.

Finally—I love this quote, so I want to close with it. We have to understand that in a fundamental, moral way we are interconnected not only with nature but with all other people, and that any attempt to define ourselves in a way that elevates us at someone else's expense—any effort anywhere in the world by people to put themselves in a group that can only succeed if they're putting someone else down is wrong and, in this world, unaffordable. Listen to what Thoreau said: "Let us settle ourselves and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of prejudice and delusion till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place which we can call reality."

It is a great mistake to think this man was just a dreamer. Like all truly wise people, he understood that altruism was the ultimate form of enlightened self-interest, that no one can pursue self-interest and material things devoid of a heart or a spirit.

Today we still have a whole lot of "mud and slush of prejudice and delusion" in this and every other society. With all our prosperity, we still can't afford it; there is too much to be done.

So let us hope and pray that Walden Pond will flourish. Let us hope and pray that people will come to these woods forever from now on to learn not only more about themselves and their relationship with nature but the proper order of human society and the responsibility of every citizen to preserve it. If that happens, Don Henley and all of his cohorts will have given an astounding gift to America's future.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:30 p.m. on the lawn of the Institute. In his remarks, he referred to musician Don Henley, founder, and Kathi Anderson, executive director, Thoreau Institute; actor Ed Begley, Jr.; singer Tony Bennett; musicians Jimmy Buffett and Joe Walsh; and President Nelson Mandela of South Africa. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Statement on the House of Representatives Republican Budget Proposal

June 5, 1998

Over the past 5 years, we have followed an economic strategy of fiscal discipline coupled with smart investments in education, health care, and the environment. That strategy has eliminated the deficit and helped spur economic growth and the creation of more than 16 million new jobs. The House Republican budget is an unfortunate step backwards that would mean severe and unnecessary cuts in education, the environment, and health care. At a time when Washington is seeing its first surplus in almost 30 years and spending as a share of the economy is at its lowest level in a quarter century, this budget is not the right approach. As Congress readies its final budget, I urge Members to continue our strategy of fiscal discipline and strategic investments to prepare our country for the 21st century.

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Statement on House of Representatives Action on Agriculture Legislation

June 5, 1998

I commend the House of Representatives for joining the Senate in passing by an overwhelming majority the bipartisan agriculture research bill. This legislation restores benefits to thousands of deserving legal immigrants who will now be able to rely on much-needed food stamp assistance. It builds on our success last year in reversing harsh cuts in SSI and Medicaid benefits for legal immigrants that had nothing to do with our goal of moving people from welfare to work. With these actions, the Congress has gone a long way toward fulfilling the commitment I made to reverse this unfair treatment of legal immigrants. At the same time, the bill funds crucial agricultural research, crop insurance, and rural development priorities which will strengthen the farm safety net and enhance the quality of life in rural America.