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1998 Elections

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Some closing thoughts about the importance of tomorrow's election?

The President. Well, again, let me just say that tomorrow the American people will decide on the Congress that will take us into the 21st century. They will decide whether it's a Congress that wants to represent all the American people and work for one America or a Congress that will continue to try to divide the American people in ways that undermine our ability to unite and to go forward. They will decide on whether they want a Congress that supports a Patients' Bill of Rights, that supports 100,000 teachers and smaller classes and modern schools or a Congress that opposes those things; a Congress that supports an increase in the minimum wage or one that opposes it; a Congress that supports protecting our surplus until we have saved Social Security for all the seniors in this country in the 21st century or one that is still committed to squandering the surplus and endangering our economic strength in the long run so that we can't do what we should do on Social Security.

Now, these are big decisions. For Hispanic-Americans, you also have clear choices in terms of our commitment to a decent, fair, equitable, and accelerated process of immigration and naturalization, and their policy, which is to slow it down, make it more difficult, and do things which, in my view, are unfair to immigrants coming to this country.

So there are clear choices here, and I say again, a choice not to vote is just like a vote for someone you don't agree with. This is a very, very important election, and I would just urge all of you to talk about it today and to go and vote tomorrow. Your vote is your voice.

NOTE: The interview began at 9:40 a.m. in Room 415 of the Old Executive Office Building. Journalists participating in the interview were: Eduardo Carrasco, MetroSource Network; Jacobo Goldstein, CNN Radio Noticias; and William Restrepo, Radio Unica. A Radio Bilingue journalist did not participate but had an interview on the evening of November 2.

Interview With Tavis Smiley of Black Entertainment Television

November 2, 1998

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, it's nice to see you. Thanks again for sitting down, talking to us.

The President. Glad to be here.

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Mr. Smiley. Glad to have you. I have had the pleasure, as you know, to sit down with you one-on-one a few times in the past, and so I know that asking you to make a prediction is like wasting my time. So I'm not going to ask you to predict anything about tomorrow's elections, but let me ask you, on a scale of 1 to 10, if I can, 10 being confident, 1 being apprehensive, how do you feel about tomorrow on this election eve?

The President. I feel both confident and apprehensive. And I'll tell you why. If you look at it, first of all, in the House of Representatives, there are probably 36 elections that could go either way. And in my opinion, it will depend overwhelmingly on the turnout. Then there are in the Senate seven, perhaps eight, elections that could go either way, depending on the turnout. Then in the Governorships, there are a huge number of Governorships—there are 36 up, but there are probably 10 of them still very much in play. So I think that it is really impossible to know.

It's clear to me that our message has resonated with the American people, though we have been at an enormous, enormous financial disadvantage, the largest in my lifetime. The Republican committees—the Senate committee, the House committee, and the national committee raised over $100 million more than their Democratic counterparts in these last 2 years. And there's been a breathtaking amount of money spent against some of our congressional candidates. So I just don't know. I feel good about it, but it depends upon who votes.

Mr. Smiley. You mentioned just a moment ago that this may be the election where the imbalance has been greatest with regard to fundraising in your lifetime, Republican and Democrat, that you've been involved in. Speaking of your lifetime, let me ask you whether or not it would be fair for me or

anyone else to suggest that this election is not just important to the country, it is not just important to African-Americans, but it is, in fact, quite important to William Jefferson Clinton. Would I be wrong in my assessment that this may be the most important election day of your entire political career?

The President. No, I don't agree with that. It's not the most——

Mr. Smiley. Not that much riding on it?

The President. No, no, it's not the most important election in my career. But it's very important to me because it will determine how much I can do for the American people in the next 2 years. We did very well here in this budget this year. We got a downpayment on our 100,000 teachers. We got programs for hundreds of thousands of kids after school. We fended off a Republican attempt to raid the surplus before we fixed Social Security.

But there was so much we did not do. And there is so much we still have to do that if we got a few more Democrats here, we could pass this Patients' Bill of Rights; we could have modernized schools and 100,000 more teachers; we could raise the minimum wage; we could secure Social Security; we could reform Medicare in the right way; we could do something for child care; we could do more for the areas of our country which still haven't felt the economic recovery.

And so the last 2 years of my Presidency I think would be far more focused on progress as opposed to this Washington partisan politics. So I would like it very much. It's terribly important to me. But the most important elections were the election and reelection in '92 and '96.

Mr. Smiley. Let me follow up on that, and again I ask this respectfully, and I'll move on. I promise. The reason I asked that question in the first place is because you and I both know what you personally have at stake, what personally is riding on this election tomorrow. And you mentioned that the two most important elections were the one when you were elected in '92 and, of course, reelected in '96. And I would expect you to say that. But the reason why I asked whether or not you felt there was more riding on tomorrow is precisely because this election, depending on the outcome, could be the beginning of the undoing, the unraveling of what those two elections were all about.

The President. Well, that depends upon who votes and what the message is. And I hope that the American people will turn out, and I hope that the electorate tomorrow will reflect what we know the electorate as a whole feels. The American people as a whole want us to put this partisanship behind us, want us to get back to their business. They think altogether too much time is spent in Washington on the considerations of the politics of Washington and altogether too little time spent on the real problems and the real opportunities of people out there in the country. So I agree with that, and I think that they can do a lot tomorrow to reduce partisanship and to increase progress if they all show up.

It's really a function of whether the people who show up tomorrow are fairly reflective of what all the research and all our instincts, mine and everybody else's, tell us where the American people as a whole are.

First Family

Mr. Smiley. We'll move on and ask a couple of questions that I admit at the outset I'm somewhat apprehensive in asking, but I ask them because they're things that you have spoken about in the past, and I want to give you a chance to expound and extrapolate, if you will. You've talked in the past a great deal about atonement, leading up to this election day tomorrow. It seems to me that you've talked about atonement in two regards: one, atoning as President, and secondly, atoning as a husband and a father. With regard as atoning as President, you promised to work harder to be a better President.

I don't know that anyone, Republican or Democrat—even your critics agree that you've been on a roll of late: the budget deal with Congress; the historic peace agreement between Israel and Palestine; I note last Friday the G–7 nations agreed on your proposal to put money into markets that are jittery at the moment. You're on a roll, domestically and internationally, with regard to that atonement issue and your being President.

What you've not talked about much lately—and I want to give you a chance to respond if you so choose—is how the atonement process is coming along with regard to your being a husband and a father. What's your assessment of how that atonement process is coming along?

The President. I haven't talked about it deliberately because I think that it ought to be a private matter between me and my family. All I can tell you is I'm working at it very hard, and I think it's terribly important. It's more important than anything else in the world to me—more important than anything else in the world. But I think the less I say about it, the better.

I think one of the things that I hope will come out of the reassessment of this whole business is a conviction again, which I believe the American people already have, that even people in public life deserve some measure of private space within which to have their family lives and to deal with their—both the joys and the trials of their personal lives. So I don't think I should say more about it except that I'm working at it.

Whitewater

Mr. Smiley. I respect that.

As you know, there was not a single reference—not a single reference—to Whitewater, as your White House staff and the entire Clinton administration reminds us every day—not a single reference to Whitewater in the Starr report. On the eve of this election day, though, it occurs to me that you still, though, have not been, despite that reality, you still have not been officially exonerated with regard to the Whitewater matter. I'm wondering whether or not that frustrates you in any way, whether you're bothered by the fact that there wasn't anything in the report, but you still have not been officially exonerated.

The President. Well, I think the American people should draw some comfort from the fact that after 4 years and $40 million, reviewing all my checks, contributions, and the pressure—the extraordinary pressure a lot of people were put under to say things damaging, that nothing has come out. That's because neither my wife or I did anything wrong. And eventually that will become clear to the American people. I hope it will become clear sooner rather than later, but I know that. I knew that in the beginning. I knew it from the start. And so I'm at peace about that, and I'll just have to let what others do be a matter for them to decide.

Rightwing Conspiracy

Mr. Smiley. "A vast rightwing conspiracy"—I'm sure you've heard those words somewhere before—"a vast rightwing conspiracy," of course, uttered by your wife on the "Today" show a few months ago. Since she uttered those words, three things have happened: Number one, as I just suggested, the Starr report has come out with embarrassing, lurid, salacious details, and no mention of Whitewater; we have since had a straight party-line partisan vote in the House to move forward with this impeachment inquiry; thirdly, the Washington Post tells us last week that the Speaker of the House, Mr. Gingrich himself, was behind these personal attack ads against you.

I'm wondering, in light of that, and a number of other things I'm sure you could list, but those are three things that come to my mind—I'm wondering whether now we can reassess the First Lady's comments and ask whether or not Hillary Rodham Clinton was right when she suggested that there is, in fact, a vast rightwing conspiracy.

The President. Well, I think the facts speak for themselves, and as more facts come out, they will speak for themselves. The only thing I would say is there's a sort of a permanent political class in Washington that tends to thrive on such matters because they're not affected by what I came here to do.

In other words, most of these people, it doesn't matter to them whether there's a Patients' Bill of Rights or not, to make sure doctors, instead of accountants, make health care decisions. It certainly doesn't matter to them whether there's a minimum wage increase. It doesn't matter to them whether we have 100,000 more teachers and modernized schools. It doesn't matter to them whether we save Social Security for the 21st century.

So there is a group in America where the acquisition of political power is more important than the purpose for which it's used. To me, I never came here to be part of that

permanent political class. I didn't come—I'm not a Washington person, in that sense. I don't expect to be when I'm not President anymore. My whole goal was to use these precious years the American people have given me to deal with the challenges facing our country. I've done my best to do it, to move our country forward and to bring our country together.

And I have to say, I think I haven't really succeeded in reconciling the political parties in Washington. There is still too much partisanship here. But to me, that's what's going on here. This is a question of whether you've got politics or people as your top goal.

Politics of Hate

Mr. Smiley. That phrase, a vast rightwing conspiracy, would seem to suggest on some level that there is a visceral hatred, if you will, of Bill and Hillary Clinton in this city by some folk. You buy that? Let me ask you, first of all, if you buy that, Mr. President. And number two, if you buy that, let me just ask you in a very point-blank and direct way—and I'm not so sure I've ever heard you asked this question before, so maybe I'm a revolutionary here, I don't know, maybe I'm not—why do they hate you so much?

The President. Again, I think that people whose whole life is whether or not they are in or out of power, rather than what they do with power when they get it, don't like it when they're out. And a lot of these people really never thought there would be another Democratic President in our lifetimes. They really didn't think so. And all the things they said about Democrats—that we couldn't run the economy, that we couldn't balance the budget, that we couldn't deal responsibly with welfare, that we couldn't be tough and smart on crime, that we couldn't be strong on foreign policy—all those things that they told the American people about Democrats generally over decades turned out not to be true. And we now have 6 years of evidence that it's not true.

So there are some, again, whose life is solely—they evaluate themselves solely on whether they're in or out, who are very angry about that. And I'm sorry for them. I'm not even angry at them anymore. I'm just sorry, because I believe that there are people in the Republican Party who are good people, who have honest differences of opinion with me, that I can work with, and we could have these debates and work through to have a good, positive result.

I think—but the ones that are consumed with personal animosity toward me or toward Hillary, I think, are just angry because they thought they and their crowd would always be able to drive up to the West Wing to work every day. To me, I just never thought of it that way. To me, every hour I serve here is an honor and a gift. But I never thought of myself as someone whose whole life was evaluated based on whether you were in or out. I think it's what you do when you're in that counts.

Politics of Race

Mr. Smiley. Speaking of what you do while you're in that counts, there are a significant number of African-Americans who feel that part of the reason why this hatred exists, part of the reason why this animosity exists, part of the reason why this friction exists between you and them is because you have been not just friendly to black folk and people of color—a lot of folk are friendly to black folk, and they speak and pat you on the back and stop by your fundraiser and your dinner—it's not just that you're friendly to black folk, it's that you appear downright comfortable with black folk and other people of color, and women, for that matter.

I'm wondering whether or not, with regard to the issues, you think that the reason why this hatred exists is because you have been so comfortable, so open, so accepting of diversity. Toni Morrison, as I'm sure you know, recently in the New Yorker magazine wrote that you are the first—Bill Clinton is the first black President. There are lot of black folk who feel that way about you. I'm wondering whether or not you think——

The President. [*Laughter*] I love that.

Mr. Smiley. ——might that be part of the reason why people don't like you, because you're just so friendly and so open to this concept of diversity?

The President. Well, it might be. I don't know. I honestly don't know the answer to that. I can tell you that I have watched over time, since I was a little boy, and we had

all the racial troubles in the South when I was a kid—from that day to the present moment, where I'm trying to stop a disaster in Kosovo from occurring, and then we've dealt with Northern Ireland and the Middle East and tribal warfare in Africa and all these things—there are many different kinds of people in the world, but there are certainly two different kinds. There are those which draw their strength and identity from what they aren't and who they aren't, and they feel more secure when they know they're in a more dominant position over others. And then there are people who believe that they're more secure and stronger when they're unified with others, when they're connecting with people, when they're reaching across the lines that divide, and they don't feel threatened by the success of people who are totally different from them. And I was raised by my mother and by my grandparents to be in that latter group. And I don't claim any credit for it. That's just the way I am.

And this racial issue, to me, it goes way back before I was ever in politics. It's been a passion of a lifetime. I think my life is more interesting, more fun, more fulfilled because I have been able to reach out and have friends of different races and different backgrounds. And I just thank God that I was put in a position of political influence for a period of time where I could help more people to come into that mainstream of American life. I think this country is better off, and I think people individually are better off when they are connecting with people who are different from them. To me, that's one of the things that makes life interesting.

So it may be that that's a source of anger and animosity toward me. But if it is, I've gotten a lot more from this than I've paid for it. I can't imagine any more important job for the President right now than trying to unify this country across racial lines.

African-Americans and the Democratic Party

Mr. Smiley. As you know, the black community does not think or act monolithically. And while you have enjoyed a great deal of support—overwhelming, in fact—in the African-American community, there are some black folk who think that you have not been liberal enough. You are not the most liberal President, let's face it, that we've ever had. There are some folk who think that the black community still is taken for granted by the Democratic Party, that we are blindly loyal to the Democratic Party, that the Democratic Party wants black votes, but they don't put the resources they ought to put to secure those black votes, and then the weekend before election day everybody comes running to the black community begging for support.

What do you say to folk who think—black folk, particularly—who think that they're being taken advantage of, being taken for granted by the Democratic Party, and that too many of us, quite frankly, are blindly loyal, as black folk, to the Democratic Party?

The President. I would say a couple of things. First of all, I don't think the evidence supports that in my case. I mean, in these 6 years, whether you measure it by Cabinet members, by 54 Federal judges, by any other standard, I have tried to make black Americans an integral part of our national life and my administration.

Secondly, if you look at the record here—there are those who say I'm not liberal enough. Let's talk about that in two different ways. What is the standard? This economic policy I have pursued and the special efforts that we've made through empowerment zones and community development banks and other initiatives—housing initiatives in the inner city—has given us the highest homeownership in history, the highest African-American small business ownership in history, the lowest African-American poverty ever recorded, more access to college than ever before. So I think that if you just look at that, I think the evidence is clear.

Now, there are those who say that I was wrong to sign the welfare bill that I signed. But I vetoed the welfare bills that would have taken food and medical guarantees away from poor children and families. The bill I signed simply says that every State has to make an effort to get able-bodied people in the workplace, and if able-bodied people can go into the workplace, they shouldn't be able to draw public assistance after a certain period of time. I think I was right about that.

The crime bill I signed puts 100,000 more police on the street, but it also gives young

people programs and ways to stay off the street. Now—so I believe that. Then there are some African-Americans who say that I'm not conservative enough because they favor—and they say they favor the Republicans on business grounds. It would be hard to argue that. We've done more to promote economic activity in the inner city and for African-Americans than anybody ever has.

So I actually would like it, believe it or not, someday if we could restore some balance in the party's appeal to the races. But as long as the Republicans follow the policies they're following, and if Democrats will follow the policies I've followed, I think that African-Americans are simply making the right decision based on what's right for their families and children.

I think most white Americans ought to be voting for us. Look at the economy. Look at the crime rate. Look at the welfare rolls. Look at the position of our country in the world. The truth is I think you could make a compelling case that a lot of the non-African-Americans who vote for the Republicans are doing the irrational thing. They're voting against their self-interest and what's best for our country and what's good and strong for our country.

If you listen to what I say—the speech I gave in that Baltimore church yesterday, I could have made that speech in a white church. I could have made that speech to a white civic club. I believe that what I'm trying to do is to unify America, not divide it.

Mr. Smiley. I know that you are tight on time, and I appreciate your sitting down with me, and I'm getting some time cues here, so if I can squeeze out a couple of quick questions.

The President. Sure.

Apology for Slavery

Mr. Smiley. Far be it for me to rush the President off. I'd talk to you for another hour and a half. Let me squeeze out a couple more if I can.

When we last sat down—speaking of black folk—when we last sat down one-on-one, just a few months ago, you granted me an exclusive interview in Capetown, South Africa, as you recall. I thank you again for that. One of the questions I was pressing you on that particular day, as you were about to make a trip to Goree Island—I pressed you that day on whether or not when you got to Goree Island you were going to offer an apology for slavery. You made some rather provocative statements, but you didn't quite, in the minds of many, offer that apology for slavery. Your race commission, subsequently, has punted, if I could use that phrase, the question of the slavery apology. I'm wondering whether or not, since no one seems to want to apologize for slavery, whether or not in your mind that means that this country, America, is unapologetic about slavery.

The President. No, no. First of all, I think Dr. John Hope Franklin, who is the Chairman of my race commission, has enormous credibility with all African-Americans.

Mr. Smiley. Indeed he does—indeed.

The President. And I think what he decided was that he did not want—that, in effect, the country had been apologizing for it for over 100 years in the sense that it was abolished after the Civil War by, first, the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln, and then by the passage of the constitutional amendment, the 13th amendment, and then that we had been on this long struggle, that it was self-evident that what we had done was wrong, and that we had been struggling to overcome it, and that all of us—at least virtually all thinking Americans and feeling Americans—were deeply sorry for what had happened and that we were still struggling to overcome it.

But I think that Dr. Franklin and the race commission concluded that it might be a diversion from our present task, which is to look at the problems we have today and to figure out how to overcome them, and to recognize, too, that the race issue in America is today and going forward even more complicated because it's not just about black and white Americans; it's about Hispanic-Americans; it's about Asian-Americans; it's about people from South Asia, people from the Middle East.

I gave a speech Saturday—a little talk—on my school modernization initiative over in Virginia at an elementary school, where there were children in just this elementary school from 23 different countries. And they

said they were very sorry that they could not have simultaneous translation of my remarks in Spanish and Arabic.

So what I think the race commission wanted to do was to say, ''Hey, the overwhelming majority of white Americans regret the whole episode of slavery, have been trying in various ways with fits and starts to overcome it for 100 years, have to continue to try to overcome it, but we should focus now on where we are and where we're going.''

1998 Elections

Mr. Smiley. Last question. I asked you earlier how important you thought this election day was for you. I've tried in the few moments that I've had to ask you how important you think it is for black America, specifically. Let me close by asking you how important you think this election is for the entire country tomorrow.

The President. Well, that's the most important issue. And I think it's really a question of what the country wants us to do here. Do they want more of the last 8 months of partisanship, or would they like more progress? Do they want us to have more Washington politics as usual, or would they like the people of America to be the center of our focus?

When I say—we've got a mission here. We want to continue to prepare America for the new century. We want to finish the agenda that was unfinished in this last year. We want the Patients' Bill of Rights. We want modernized schools. We want an increase in the minimum wage. We want to save Social Security. We want to do more for child care for working people. We want to do more to spread economic opportunity where it hasn't been spread and to keep this economy going. We have a mission, an agenda. It's not about politics; it's about people.

And I can just tell you that this election will be determined by two groups of people: those who vote and those who don't. And if I were sitting out there in America, I'd say, I believe I'll be among those who vote.

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, as always, a pleasure to sit down and talk to you, and I thank you for taking the time doing it and address us today.

The President. Thank you.

Mr. Smiley. Thank you, sir.

The President. Good to see you.

NOTE: The interview began at 11:13 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 2 but was embargoed for release until 11:30 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to Dr. John Hope Franklin, Chairman, President's Advisory Board on Race. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks on the Patients' Bill of Rights

November 2, 1998

Thank you so very much, Mrs. Jennings, for coming here with your son amidst your evident pain to share your experience with us. Thank you, Dr. Weinmann, for sharing your experiences with us. If you would do that every day until we pass a bill, you can drink my water every day. [*Laughter*] I loved it. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, Dr. Beverly Malone. Thank you, Secretary Herman, for the work you and Secretary Shalala did. Thank you, Deputy Secretary Gober; Director of OPM Janice Lachance. I'd also like to thank Linda Chavez-Thompson, the executive vice president of the AFL–CIO; Gerry McEntee, the president of AFSME; Bill Lucy, the secretary-treasurer of AFSME; John Sepulveda, the Deputy Director of OPM; and Rudy de Leon, the Under Secretary of Defense, for being here. And a special word of appreciation on this day before the election to Congressman Eliot Engel, one of the great supporters of the Patients' Bill of Rights from New York City. Thank you, sir, for being here.

Iraq

Let me say before I begin a few words about the situation in Iraq, which has been dominating the news, and I haven't had a chance to talk to the American people through the press in the last couple of days.

Saddam Hussein's latest refusal to cooperate with the international weapons inspectors is completely unacceptable. Once again, though, it will backfire. Far from dividing the