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Week Ending Friday, February 19, 1999

The President's Radio Address

February 13, 1999

Good morning. This week the warring parties in Kosovo have been meeting at a 14th century castle in France, in search of a 21st century peace. They've come together because of the determination of the United States, our European allies, and Russia to help end Kosovo's bloodshed and build a peaceful future there. Today I want to speak to you about why peace in Kosovo is important to America.

World War II taught us that America could never be secure if Europe's future was in doubt. We and our allies formed NATO after the war, and together we've deterred aggression, secured Europe, and eventually made possible the victory of freedom all across the European continent. In this decade, violent ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have threatened Europe's stability and future.

For 4 years Bosnia was the site of Europe's bloodiest war in half a century. With American leadership and that of our allies, we worked to end the war and move the Bosnian people toward reconciliation and democracy. Now, as the peace takes hold, we've been steadily bringing our troops home. But Bosnia taught us a lesson: In this volatile region, violence we fail to oppose leads to even greater violence we will have to oppose later at greater cost.

We must heed that lesson in Kosovo. In 1989 Serbia stripped away Kosovo's autonomy. A year ago Serbian forces launched a brutal crackdown against Kosovo's ethnic Albanians. Fighting and atrocities intensified, and hundreds of thousands of people were driven from their homes.

Last fall, using diplomacy backed by the threat of NATO force, we averted a humanitarian crisis and slowed the fighting. But now it's clear that only a strong peace agreement can end it. America has a national interest in achieving this peace. If the conflict persists, there likely will be a tremendous loss of life and a massive refugee crisis in the middle of Europe. There is a serious risk the hostilities would spread to the neighboring new democracies of Albania and Macedonia, and reignite the conflict in Bosnia we worked so hard to stop. It could even involve our NATO allies Greece and Turkey.

If we wait until casualties mount and war spreads, any effort to stop it will come at a higher price, under more dangerous conditions. The time to stop the war is right now.

With our NATO allies and Russia, we have offered a comprehensive plan to restore peace and return self-government to Kosovo. NATO has authorized airstrikes if Serbia fails to comply with its previous commitments to withdraw forces and fails to support a peace accord. At the same time, we've made it clear to the Kosovo Albanians that if they reject our plan or continue to wage war, they will not have our support.

There are serious obstacles to overcome at the current talks. It is increasingly clear that this effort can only succeed if it includes a NATO-led peace implementation force that gives both sides the confidence to lay down their arms. It's also clear that if there is a real peace, American participation in the force can provide such confidence, particularly for Kosovo's Albanians. For them, as for so many people around the world, America symbolizes hope and resolve. Europeans would provide the great bulk of any NATO force, roughly 85 percent. Our share would amount to a little less than 4,000 personnel.

Now, a final decision on troops, which I will make in close consultation with Congress, will depend upon the parties reaching a strong peace agreement. It must provide for an immediate cease-fire, rapid withdrawal of most Serbian security forces, and demilitarization of the insurgents. The parties must agree to the NATO force and demonstrate that they are ready to implement the agreement.

NATO's mission must be well-defined, with a clear and realistic strategy to allow us to bring our forces home when their work is done. Anytime we send troops we must be mindful of the risks, but if these conditions are met, if there is an effective agreement and a clear plan, I believe America should contribute to securing peace for Kosovo. And I look forward to working with Congress in making this final decision.

America cannot be everywhere or do everything overseas. But we must act where important interests are at stake and we can make a difference. Peace in Kosovo clearly is important to the United States, and with bipartisan support in Congress and the backing of the American people, we can make a difference.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. from the Oval Office at the White House.

Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With President Ernesto Zedillo in Merida, Mexico

February 15, 1999

Senate Vote on Impeachment

Q. Mr. President, do you feel vindicated by the Senate vote? And how do you think you will be able to overcome any damage that was caused in your relations with Republican leaders in Congress?

The President. Well, I have, really, nothing to add to what I said on Friday about that. I think this is a time for reconciliation and renewal. I think what we have to do is to serve the American people. And if we keep that in mind, I think everything will be fine.

We can't resolve the challenges of Social Security and Medicare, education, these other things; we can't keep the international economy going unless we have a level of cooperation. I'm encouraged that we have a number of Republican Members of Congress on this trip, and I intend to do exactly what I said I'd do last Friday. And I think if everybody just keeps our eye on the ball—which is that we are here to serve the public, and not the other way around—I think we'll be fine.

Mexico-U.S. Antidrug Efforts

Q. Mr. President, do you have any problems with the system the United States has for certifying drug cooperation?

The President. Well, first of all, it is the law of the land, and the Secretary of State sometime in the next few weeks will have to make a recommendation. I think the question is, how can we do better to deal with the drug problem? President Zedillo said it's his number one national security problem. Neither country has won the drug war. And the fundamental question is, are we better off fighting it together or separately, and perhaps sometimes at odds with one another?

Under General McCaffrey, who's here, we put in place a very aggressive antidrug strategy. Finally, we've got a lot of the indicators going in the right direction in the United States. And cooperation with Mexico has clearly improved under President Zedillo's leadership. The issue is what is most likely to free our children of this scourge in the new century, and that's what will guide my decisions.

Thank you all.

Hillary Clinton's Possible Senate Candidacy

Q. Have you encouraged Mrs. Clinton to run for the Senate, sir? What have you said to her?

The President. People in New York started calling her. I don't think it had ever occurred to her before a lot of people started calling and asking her to do it. I think she would be terrific in the Senate. But that's a decision that she'll have to make. And for reasons I'm sure you'll understand, she hasn't had anything like adequate time to talk to the people who think she should do this, much less people who think perhaps she shouldn't. I mean, she just hasn't had time to deal with this.

But it's her decision to make. I will support whatever decision she makes enthusiastically. She has a lot of other opportunities for public service that will be out there, and she and I both would like to continue to be useful in public affairs when we leave office. But it's a decision she'll have to make. She'd be great if she did it, but she hasn't had anything like the requisite amount of time to talk to people and to assess it, and I'm sure that