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The President's News Conference With President Chirac of France

February 19, 1999

President Clinton. Please sit down. Good afternoon. President Chirac and I, as always, have had a very good meeting. We had a lot to discuss, and we have a lot to do together.

Most importantly, today we are working together to end the fighting in Kosovo and to help the people there obtain the autonomy and self-government they deserve. We now call on both sides to make the tough decisions that are necessary to stop the conflict immediately, before more people are killed and the war spreads.

The talks going on outside Paris are set to end on Saturday. The Kosovo Albanians have shown courage in moving forward the peace accord that we, our NATO allies, and Russia have proposed. Serbia's leaders now have a choice to make: They can join an agreement that meets their legitimate concerns and gives them a chance to show that an autonomous Kosovo can thrive as part of their country, or they can stonewall. But if they do that, they will be held accountable.

If there is an effective peace agreement, NATO stands ready to help implement it. We also stand united in our determination to use force if Serbia fails to meet its previous commitment to withdraw forces from Kosovo and if it fails to accept the peace agreement. I have ordered our aircraft to be ready, to act as part of a NATO operation, and I will continue to consult very closely with Congress in the days ahead.

The challenge in Kosovo and the one we have addressed in Bosnia underscore the central role NATO plays in promoting peace and stability in Europe. Today the President and I discussed the 50th anniversary summit, which will be held here in Washington in April, to admit Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as new members, and to set NATO's course for the new century.

The conflicts in the Balkans also highlight the need to strengthen stability across southeast Europe. The United States and France are pleased to announce today that we will pursue a new initiative we hope other allies will join, to increase cooperation with southeast Europe's emerging democracies on security matters, to coordinate security assistance to them from NATO countries, to promote regional cooperation and economic development.

The President and I also discussed our common efforts to reform the global financial system and to support economic recovery in countries that have been so hard hit. Last fall, working with other G–7 nations and key emerging economies, we set out a comprehensive agenda: making financial systems more open and resilient, improving international cooperation on financial oversight. Just this weekend in Bonn, our finance ministers will address these topics, and the creation of a new financial stability forum.

We're moving ahead on promoting sound lending practices and strengthening protections for the most vulnerable members of societies when crisis strikes. We need to do more to reduce the debts of the poorest, most heavily indebted nations, as they seek to meet basic human needs and undertake economic reforms. And I thank President Chirac for championing this cause for such a long time. Our budget makes a significant new investment in that challenge, and we proposed ways to help the IMF, with its existing resources, do the same.

On these issues we're aiming to make real progress by the time of the June G–8 summit in Cologne, Germany. I very much appreciate the President's leadership in this area.

We discussed the continuing challenge of promoting economic recovery in Russia and working with Russia to prevent its weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and technologies from falling into the hands of outlaw nations and terrorists. We will continue our cooperation on securing peace in the Middle East. We talked about the Middle East peace process at some length. We talked about our common determination to restrain Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program.

We want to expand cooperation in Africa, promoting peace in the Great Lakes region, encouraging an African Crisis Response capability. And today we are announcing that we're joining together with African nations in an effort I spoke about first last year in Senegal, building an African Center for Security Studies, to promote peace and democracy.

Finally, Mr. President, I want to thank France for showing leadership by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. One hundred fifty-two nations have signed the treaty, which would end nuclear testing forever and make it harder for more nations to develop nuclear weapons. Once again I want to express my hope that our Senate will also provide its advice and consent for ratification this year.

Mr. President, the floor is yours.

President Chirac. Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I want to say how happy I am to be once again here in the United States and here in Washington. I'm happy to be in this country, which is where everything is always moving, this country which constantly surprises the world, and a country which for a long time I have been very fond of. And when I feel well, I feel happy, and once again I'm happy to be the guest of President Bill Clinton. And I think everyone knows the regard and the friendship I have and I've had for a long time for President Clinton, and I want to thank him once again for his hospitality.

The President has covered, more or less, all the subjects that were on the agenda of our talks, so I'm going to make two remarks only. The first is to say that our agreement on the present problems in Kosovo is an unqualified agreement. It's complete agreement. We're almost at the end of the time allotted for trying to work things out at Rambouillet, and after President Clinton, I would like to say to the two parties and in particular to President Milosevic, who in fact holds more or less the key to the solution, that the time has come to shoulder all his responsibilities and to choose the path of wisdom and not the path of war, which would bear very serious consequences for people who would make that choice, for themselves and for their people. It's a very heavy responsibility that they would be taking if they were to do that.

I've already had occasion to say that, as far as the Europeans are concerned, it is our continent which is involved here, and we want our continent to be at peace, and we will not accept that situation, such as the present situation in Kosovo, should continue.

My second remark concerns a subject which President Clinton has not mentioned but that we have talked about at some time and that for me it's the big problem, for the big issue for the beginning of the next century, and that is what President Clinton raised himself about a couple of months ago, in a talk he gave—the question of humanizing globalization, making globalization more human. Everyone understands that globalization is both inevitable and also it bears progress, and this can be understood every day, ever more. And this is something that must be—a process that must be encouraged. It's a good thing.

But everyone I think can also understand that there are or can be social consequences of this, and it's really our job to control them. And it's one of the big challenges I think of this society in the years to come. And for we, the Europeans, it was really very gratifying to hear the President of the United States put this issue to the fore of matters that the world has to contend with. And I entirely agree with what he has said. And it's also a question that we have talked about among ourselves.

Otherwise, President Clinton has, in fact, covered everything we have been talking about, so I won't add anything because I entirely agree with him. And of course, I also agree to reply to your questions on these important issues for the whole world.

President Clinton. [*Inaudible*]—French and American journalists, beginning with Mr. Hunt [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Kosovo/Iraq

Q. President Clinton, President Milosevic refused to meet with the U.S. Envoy today, Christopher Hill, and said that he would not give up Kosovo, even at the price of a bombing. Is there any possibility that NATO would extend the Saturday noon deadline for reaching an agreement? And what do you say to President Yeltsin of Russia when he said that, "we will not allow Kosovo to be touched?"

And for President Chirac, did you and President Clinton find agreement today on the issue of Iraqi sanctions?

President Clinton. First, let me say I think it would be a mistake to extend the

deadline. And I respect the position of Russia, and I thank the Russians for supporting the peace process, as well as the proposed agreement. We had many of the same tensions in Bosnia, where ultimately we wound up working together for peace. I believe that is what will happen.

I would like to go back to the—just very briefly—to the merits of the argument that Mr. Milosevic made. He says that if he accepts this multinational peacekeeping force, it's like giving up Kosovo. I personally believe it's the only way he can preserve Kosovo as a part of Serbia. Under their laws, Kosovo is supposed to be autonomous but a part of Serbia. Its autonomy was effectively stripped from it years ago.

We are now trying to find some way to untangle the injuries and harms and arguments that have come from both sides and permit a period of 3 years to develop within which the Serbian security forces can withdraw, a police force, civil institutions can be developed—we can give them a chance to prove that they can function together.

I don't think, unless we do this, there is any way for the integrity of Serbia ultimately to be preserved, because of the incredible hostility and the losses and the anger that's already there.

So I'm not trying to—at least from our part, and I believe President Chirac and all the Europeans feel the same way—we're trying to give this a chance to work, not trying to provide a wedge to undo Serbia.

Mr. President.

President Chirac. Well, I entirely share the position expressed by President Clinton. I would doubt that—I'm convinced that the only possibility for Mr. Milosevic, the only way he can keep Kosovo within internationally recognized frontiers, as of course, planned in the Yugoslav constitution, a high degree of substantial autonomy, substantial autonomy—the only way he can keep the situation is to accept the proposals that are made today. Any other solution, I repeat, would involve for Mr. Milosevic some very serious consequences, indeed.

Q. If everything fails tomorrow, what could then prevent a military strike on the part of NATO? If there is no agreement tomorrow, what would then prevent——

President Clinton. I think there would have to be an agreement before the strikes commence. I don't think there is an option. Because keep in mind, part of what we have asked is that President Milosevic do things that he has already agreed to do, as I said in my opening statement. And we would—the NATO nations have decided and have given the Secretary General authority to pursue a strategy which would at least reduce his capacity to take further aggressive military action against the Kosovar Albanians.

This assumes, of course, that he doesn't accept it and that they do, as we discussed. But that would be my position. I believe that is both our positions.

President Chirac. Without a shadow of a doubt.

President Clinton. Helen [Helen Thomas, United Press International]?

The Presidency/Lessons of Impeachment

Q. President Clinton, what lessons have you learned from your 13-month ordeal? Do you think the office of the Presidency has been harmed? And what advice would you give to future Presidents?

President Clinton. Well, of course, I've learned a lot of personal lessons, most of which I have already discussed. And Presidents are people, too. I have learned, again, an enormous amount of respect for our Constitution, our framers, and for the American people. And my advice to future Presidents would be to decide what you believe you ought to do for the country and focus on it and work hard. The American people hire you to do that and will respond if you work at it and if they sense that you're doing this for them.

Q. And you don't think the office of the President has been harmed?

President Clinton. Oh, I think the Constitution has been, in effect, reratified. And I hope that the Presidency has not been harmed. I don't believe it has been. I can't say that I think this has been good for the country, but we will see. I expect to have 2 good years here.

I think the American people expect the Congress and me to get back to work, expect us either not to have any destructive feelings or, if we do, not to let them get in the way

of our doing their business. These are jobs—these are positions of public responsibility. These are—and the United States has great responsibilities to its own people and to the rest of the world. And I don't believe that any of us can afford to let what has happened get in the way of doing our best for our own people and for the future. And I'm going to do my very best to do that. And I think that we should all discipline ourselves with that in mind.

Banana Trade Dispute

Q. My question is to both Presidents. Have you talked about bananas? Because this is an American-European problem but also a problem for France because of the Caribbean bananas. And have you found a compromise? Could President Clinton explain to me why the United States is being so aggressive on this business? Because to my knowledge, and contrary to France and Europe, the United States themselves don't produce bananas.

President Clinton. Yes, we talked about it. [*Laughter*] And we're being quite strong about it because we do have companies involved, and there are people involved in other countries, not just the Caribbean—Central America, for example—and because we think the trade law is clear. We won a trade dispute. We won. And we have been trying to—there's been a finding here, and we've been trying to work out a reasonable solution with the Europeans, especially with the British, and others, and there has been no willingness to resolve this.

We don't want to provoke a trade crisis, but we won. And from our point of view—this is one place where we disagree—the Europeans are basically saying, ''Well, you won this trade fight under the law, but we still don't think you have a meritorious position. Therefore, we will not yield.'' Well, when we lose trade fights, we lose them. And if we're going to have a global trading system and a system for resolving disputes—which, most of us believe, normally take too long, anyway—and if we're, all of us, expected to have a reasonable resolution when we lose—and that's what you'd expect the United States to do—then that's what we want from Europe.

We took this matter through the normal chain of events, and we won. And I think most people in Europe believe we shouldn't have won, but sometimes we lose cases we think we shouldn't have lost, too. And therefore, we would like a resolution of this consistent with the finding of international trade law.

President Chirac. I would simply add this, that yes, we did talk about this problem, and President Clinton just said that the United States had companies—corporations involved. And my answer is that we have the actual workers who are involved. And I also added that the banana in the Caribbean was obviously the best, the best banana in the world, and that, therefore, they had to be safeguarded and in the interest of mankind, and I counted on him to understand this. [*Laughter*]

Hillary Clinton's Possible Senate Candidacy

Q. I wonder if you could share with us some of your thoughts about the pros and cons of—Senate seat in New York—Mrs. Clinton——

President Clinton. Well, first of all, I think it's important that you all understand—I think you know this—this is nothing that ever crossed her mind until other people began to mention it to her. To me, the most important thing is that she decides to do what she wants to do. And I will be strongly supportive of whatever decision she makes and will do all I can to help on this and any other decision from now on, just as she's helped me for the last 20-plus years. If she decided to do it and she were elected, I think she would do a fabulous job.

But I think that it's important to remember this is an election which occurs in November of 2000, and she has just been through a very exhausting year. And there are circumstances which have to be considered, and I think some time needs to be taken here.

I also think that even in a Presidential race, it's hard to keep a kettle of water boiling for almost 2 years. And so I just—from my point of view, this thing is—it's a little premature. And I would like to see her take—my advice has been to take some time, get some rest,

listen to people on both sides of the argument, and decide exactly what you think is right to do. And then, whatever she decides I'll be for.

Kosovo

Q. Mr. President, if it appears that the Serbs—they have to be sanctioned because they refuse the presence of NATO troops in Kosovo, have you the assurance that the Kosovo Liberation Army will renounce its demands on independence?

President Chirac. Well, as I said before, the pressure that we are exerting, legitimately, especially we're exercising on both parties, on both sides. And we replied to a question on Serbia because the question was on Serbia, but let's be perfectly clear: A lot will depend on the personal position adopted by Mr. Milosevic.

But it goes without saying that if the failure, the breakdown, was caused by the Kosovars, their responsibility, sanctions of a different kind, probably, but very firm sanctions would be applied against them. We haven't—there's no choice. I mean, we don't have to choose. We want peace; that's all.

President Clinton. First of all, I can entirely support what President Chirac said. But if I could just emphasize that the agreement requires that they accept autonomy, at least for 3 years and sets in motion a 3-year process to resolve all these outstanding questions. Three years would give us time to stop the killing, cool the tempers. And it would also give time for the Serbs to argue that if they return to the original constitutional intent, that is, to have genuine autonomy for Kosovo, as Kosovo once enjoyed—that that would be the best thing for them, economically and politically. And people would have a chance to see and feel those things.

Right now—after all that's gone on and all the people that have died and all the bloody fighting and all the incredibly vicious things that have been said, you know, we just need a timeout here. We need a process within which we can get the security forces out, as Mr. Milosevic said he would do, before—and build some internal institutions within Kosovo capable of functioning, and then see how it goes. I think that's the most important thing.

And so, yes, to go back to what President Chirac said, yes, both sides have responsibility. Their responsibility would be to acknowledge that that is the deal for the next 3 years, during which time we resolve the long-term, permanent questions.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President's 168th news conference began at 3:44 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); Christopher Hill, U.S. Ambassador to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and President Boris Yeltsin of Russia. President Chirac spoke in French, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Digest of Other White House Announcements

The following list includes the President's public schedule and other items of general interest announced by the Office of the Press Secretary and not included elsewhere in this issue.

February 14

In the afternoon, the President and Hillary Clinton traveled to Merida, Mexico, where they toured the Governor's Palace with President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico and his wife, Nilda.

February 15

In the morning, the President toured the grounds of the Hacienda Temozon with President Zedillo. In the evening, the President and Hillary Clinton returned to Washington, DC.

February 16

The President announced his intention to appoint Gregory L. Craig to the President's Export Council.

The White House announced that the President proposed $956 million in disaster assistance for Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and other Caribbean nations struck