

And I would like it if the Palestinian people felt free and more free to live wherever they like, wherever they want to live. I would also like it very much if we could help those countries which have borne a heavy burden, particularly Jordan, where a majority of the population is now Palestinian, to build a better life for the people who are there, because they have a lot of very serious economic challenges. They have a fine new King who is an able person, and we're trying to help and we want others to help. But I think it will depend upon the refugees themselves, and it will depend upon the shape of the final agreement.

Ask the Irish question if you want.

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Thank you, sir. Several questions on Northern Ireland. What is the latest—[laughter]—sorry.

The President. They're learning from you now. [Laughter]

Q. What is the latest update you can give us about your activities? Do you plan to make an emergency trip over there? Do you blame either side for the impasse, and what constructive suggestions can you convey to us at this juncture?

President Clinton. Well, I have been—for the last couple of days, particularly, we've been in virtually constant contact with the parties there. And I spent a lot of time on it yesterday and late, late last night, and this morning early. They are in negotiations as we speak. The mood seems to be reasonably positive, and they are exploring some new ideas. I offered my suggestions for a possible resolution of the sticking points, with the benefit of all the folks on our national security team who have been working on that.

And I'll say this, it is a very difficult problem for the parties, but it will be very hard for the world to understand if this breaks off, since everyone has agreed to the fundamental elements of the Good Friday agreement. Both sides agree that they have to comply with every bit of it. There was an election where the Irish people voted for it. Then there was an election where the Irish people voted for leaders under it.

So if you have a situation where you've had two elections ratifying a peace agree-

ment and you have all the leaders saying that we all have to comply with every element of it and it falls apart over sequencing, I think that it would be—to call it a tragedy would be a gross understatement. But it is a very difficult thing—it would take 30 minutes to go through the whole litany of why. But they are working now. They are exploring some new ideas, and they do seem determined to work it through to a positive conclusion.

Would you like to take one more?

Middle East Peace Process/Iraq

Q. Thank you. President Clinton, you talked about the 9½ days at the Wye Plantation. We know you tried; God knows you tried, but you failed, sir. [Laughter] What makes you think that—

President Clinton. I got an agreement. It wasn't my job to implement it. It has not been fully implemented. The agreement, itself, was a success.

Q. That's correct, sir, but your officials—[laughter]—

President Clinton. That's all right. They tell me I've failed every day. It's quite all right. [Laughter] You just save them the trouble today. Go ahead.

Q. Your officials used to speak about CBM, confidence-building measures. The Palestinians did their part, even Netanyahu thanked Arafat at one stage. But let's say you failed in convincing the Israelis to reciprocate and do the same. What makes you feel that this time around you would be more successful, sir?

My question to President Mubarak: Sir, how does Egypt view any external interference in Iraqi internal affairs from whatever source it comes? Thank you.

President Mubarak. I've failed also this time. [Laughter]

President Clinton. Yes, they zinged you this time.

Let me say, I think, with regard to Wye, obviously, I think its conditions should be honored, because it's like any agreement between two parties—unless both parties agree that the agreement should be modified, then it should be honored.

I believe that historians, when they look back on this period, will conclude that the principal difficulty that Mr. Netanyahu had

was the nature of his coalition, and because it was small enough—his majority was so small and it included people who were so hostile to the peace process, that no matter what he tried to do, they could always threaten to bring him down.

Now, the reason I think it will be different now is, number one, Prime Minister-elect Barak was a much more open and heartfelt supporter of the Oslo process. He has—you remember, I think his first public event after his election was to visit the gravesite of our friend Prime Minister Rabin. But number two, he got a big vote from the people of Israel with peace being the major issue.

And number three, he has constituted a government—apparently, from the morning press—with quite a large voting majority in the Knesset, obviously geared toward the peace process, because the parties have deep differences, in his coalition, over domestic policies unrelated to the peace process.

So for those reasons, I think the chances of success are now greater. And therefore, I think that all of us should try to restrain our comments about specifics until we talk to the Prime Minister-elect and we can form a common strategy.

President Mubarak. Concerning the interference in the internal affairs of Iraq, you know our principle from the beginning; we never interfere in the internal affairs of Iraq. If there is any change in the Government of Iraq, it should come from internally, not from outside. This is our principle which has been adopted all our life with any country in the world.

Press Secretary Joe Lockhart. Thank you.

President Clinton. One more, go ahead.

Q. On Russia?

President Clinton. One more.

Q. What if I say I'm going to leave? [Laughter]

President Clinton. I'll give you a question. [Laughter]

Bill Bradley

Q. Mr. President, when you were asked about George W. Bush and the Republicans a few moments ago, you deferred, pleading ignorance. Perhaps I could ask you about the Democrats. When you said that Al Gore is

the only one in the race on either side of the party who has been talking about ideas, clearly that represents a dig not merely at the Republican candidates, but also former Senator Bill Bradley as well. So let me ask you about his candidacy, sir, if I may.

Number one, do you believe that he's as qualified as is the Vice President to be President of the United States? And number two, how do you explain, in your own mind, when you heard the figures yesterday showing that the Vice President raised less money than he'd hope for and Bill Bradley appears to have raised more?

President Clinton. Well, first of all, I'm not going to talk about their fundraising because I don't think I should be a political handicapper. But anyone who understands Senator Bradley's career and life story would not be particularly surprised by this. I certainly wasn't. And I don't think it's accurate to say the Vice President has raised less money than he hoped for.

On the other question, it wasn't a dig at Senator Bradley. He has said, himself, that he has not laid out his case for being President and said that he wants to wait until the fall to do it. That's what he said. I'm not digging him. I have nothing bad to say about him. That's a fact.

But I, personally, have always believed that you should begin by saying why you want the job, because you're asking people to hire you to do things. And I think the Vice President deserves a lot of credit for doing that. That's my view. But you can't read that as a dig at Senator Bradley because he, himself, said, "In the fall, I will tell you what it is I intend to do." That's his position.

Q. And do you think he's as qualified as the Vice President, sir?

President Clinton. I think the question—the American people will have to decide who's qualified and who's not. There is nobody in the race who is running or who could run who has had as much experience in as many different ways. He's had both legislative experience and executive experience. Besides that, he's been a journalist, the Vice President; you've got to think that counts for something. [Laughter] So he's been a journalist; he's been in the executive branch; he's been in the legislative branch. He has vast

experience in foreign policy, in arms control issues, and vast experience in domestic policy. And maybe even more important than experience, the ideas that he's advanced have made America a better place. So if results counts and experience counts, then he has quite a good resume.

And I don't have to make comparative judgments about the other candidates to say that. No one has anything like that level of experience, with that level of positive impact on the people of our country. Those are just, I think, indisputable facts.

Q. How about one more?

President Clinton. You want to ask one more Egyptian? Equal time.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. I have a question for President Mubarak and one for President Clinton. Sir, at this moment, Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak is forming his government in Israel. What should be, with so little time before the next American elections, which are just around the corner, what would be—

President Clinton. Seventeen months? [Laughter]

Q. What would be perhaps the one thing or one message you would direct towards Mr. Barak as a step that should be taken as soon as possible to revive the peace process?

And President Clinton, your comment on President Mubarak's statement?

President Mubarak. Is the question directed to me?

Q. Yes, first, Your Excellency.

President Mubarak. I think I have already mentioned that in the comments I started with there should be some steps to make that feel much far better and to start the peace process. Eighteen months is quite a lot; we could achieve in one year so many things. The peace process was already started years and years ago. The Palestinians have signed some agreements. If Mr. Barak—and I'm sure that he's going to do it—starts implementing the Wye agreement, for example, makes some steps for the settlements, I think the process will move. And we hope that we could finish or reach a final status in one year. One year and a half is quite a lot of time for negotiations.

President Clinton. I agree with that. It doesn't have anything to do with the time left I have on my term. My advice would be—let me go back to 1993 when I became President. Our biggest problem was the domestic economy was not doing well and we had a \$290 billion deficit, and there was no easy way to close it. And we presented an economic plan to the Congress that passed by only one vote in both Houses. It was very controversial; it was very difficult, I think in that sense, politically, internally, was perhaps more controversial than making—than in Israel going forward with the peace process maybe now, given the vote in the last election.

I think it's better, if you know you've got to do something without which you cannot succeed in serving your people in the long run, it's better to do it sooner rather than later—generally. That is generally true. And if it is going to be difficult and there are tough consequences, it's better to take them early rather than later. That is just a general rule. Because, otherwise, if you don't do it, you may never get around to doing it, but it won't get any better. It will just get worse and worse and worse.

So it's better to just take a deep breath and go on and do what you think has to be done. That's what I believe.

Press Secretary Lockhart. Thank you.

President Clinton. First—next question, I'll give you—next time we come, I'll give you the first one, after we do the roll. I've got to go. Thank you.

President Mubarak. Thank you very much.

President Clinton. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 177th news conference began at 1:47 p.m. in Presidential Hall (formerly Room 450) in the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, President Clinton referred to Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; CNN senior White House correspondent Wolf Blitzer; President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; King Abdullah II of Jordan; outgoing Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel; and former Senator Bill Bradley. President Mubarak referred to President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria; and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. Both Presidents referred to Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak of Israel.