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Week Ending Friday, August 13, 1999

Message to the Congress Transmitting the Proposed "Central American and Haitian Parity Act of 1999"

August 5, 1999

To the Congress of the United States:

I am pleased to transmit for your immediate consideration and enactment the ''Central American and Haitian Parity Act of 1999.'' Also transmitted is a section-by-section analysis. This legislative proposal, which would amend the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act of 1997 (NACARA), is part of my Administration's comprehensive effort to support the process of democratization and stabilization now underway in Central America and Haiti and to ensure equitable treatment for migrants from these countries. The proposed bill would allow qualified nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Haiti an opportunity to become lawful permanent residents of the United States. Consequently, under this bill, eligible nationals of these countries would receive treatment equivalent to that granted to the Nicaraguans and Cubans under NACARA.

Like Nicaraguans and Cubans, many Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Haitians fled human rights abuses or unstable political and economic conditions in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet these latter groups received lesser treatment than that granted to Nicaraguans and Cubans by NACARA. The United States has a strong foreign policy interest in providing the same treatment to these similarly situated people. Moreover, the countries from which these migrants have come are young and fragile democracies in which the United States has played and will continue to play a very important role. The return of these migrants to these countries would place significant demands on their economic and political systems. By offering legal status to a number of nationals of these countries with long-standing ties in the United States, we can advance our commitment to peace and stability in the region.

Passage of the ''Central American and Haitian Parity Act of 1999'' will evidence our commitment to fair and even-handed treatment of nationals from these countries and to the strengthening of democracy and economic stability among important neighbors. I urge the prompt and favorable consideration of this legislative proposal by the Congress.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
August 5, 1999.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 6. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks at the Arkansas Broadcasters Association's 50th Anniversary Dinner in Little Rock, Arkansas

August 6, 1999

Thank you very much. Congratulations on your 50th anniversary. And thank you for honoring my friend and my partner James Lee Witt.

You know, Bobby—I was wondering what Bobby would say. I thought he would say, ''You know, I knew I could guilt Bill Clinton into coming to this dinner once I found out he was going to be in Arkansas and I reminded him how many early-morning radio interviews I'd given him over the last 20 years.'' And I want to thank Bobby Caldwell, who is my longtime friend, and all of you for the work that you do, as well as for honoring a wonderful man tonight.

I am honored to be joined by Rodney Slater, and I know there are others here in our administration—Kay Goss, Buddy

Young, and people who were in our administration in Arkansas, like Bill and Judy Gaddy, are here, and many others that I haven't had a chance to see. I thank the members of the legislature who are here—Steve Faris and Don House; and Bud Harper, who has the job that James Lee used to have and, like James Lee, used to be a county judge, and therefore, was prepared for it.

And I want to acknowledge my good friend John Paul Katz, who served as Speaker of the House when I was Governor. And also, James Lee's family—James Lee and Lea Ellen have done a great job, and you know they're building a political dynasty in Yell County. And if your last name is not Witt, you can't be county judge in Yell County anymore. [*Laughter*] Not ever.

Let me say that—I know most of this has been said, but I want to say a few things about James Lee and what he represents in terms of what I've tried to do as your President. This is one of the best times in American history, but when it comes to weather, it's been one of the worst. Since 1993, we've had the worst flood of the century in the Midwest; the worst earthquake in Northridge, California; weather disasters in places they weren't supposed to happen. We've had tornadoes in Minnesota, ice storms in Florida. And now the farm crops are burning up, not in the South, but in the East and the Northeast, where today we acknowledged the worst drought ever for the farmers from Maryland to New Jersey to Rhode Island.

We have had in total more than 250 natural disasters in all 50 States and territories. And many of them have cost a lot of human lives.

Well, the old saying that God doesn't send you anything you can't handle was made true from the point of view of my administration and millions of Americans because James Lee Witt agreed to be head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

I got this idea, I have to tell you, when I went to Florida as a candidate for President and I saw the enormous anxiety that people felt in the aftermath of the terrible hurricane, where their whole lives had been wrecked. And I talked to Senator Pryor about this—I remember this very clearly—that people kept saying the Federal Government is not working; they're not helping; I don't know what they're doing; they're taking too long; they act bureaucratic. You know, just one thing after another.

And I realized what the problem was. And that is that for decades, through Democratic and Republican administrations alike, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was treated like a political appointment. And normally the person who got it was somebody who wanted something else, who was a big supporter of the President, but couldn't quite become an Ambassador to a European country or couldn't quite get a position in the Cabinet. I took care of that by putting FEMA in the Cabinet.

And all these people that had this job were good people. They were not bad people; they were good people. And there were all these dedicated professionals who were working day in and day out. But there was no one at the helm who wanted the job and who had experience in what the job was and who could put every fiber of his being into dealing with people in the most difficult times imaginable.

And, you know, when I was Governor and James Lee was head of the office of emergency services here, we had horrible floods; we had tornadoes that leveled little towns. I remember going over to west Memphis when the whole place was decked and the glass had been shattered at the dog track and glass was flying through the air over there at more than 100 miles an hour. Just a miracle that we didn't have lots of people killed by something that was just like a hail of bullets.

And I knew that he cared what happened to people when they were running tight, and I knew he knew that people were frustrated, they were angry, they were disoriented, when they'd lost everything in the world. And we needed somebody who actually had that kind of experience and that kind of ability doing this job.

You know, when everything is going along all right, most people think of the Cabinet of the President as the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and the Attorney General, and maybe if you're from Arkansas, you think about the Secretary of Agriculture. But

when your house is blown away and when your community is buried in water, the most important person in the Federal Government is the person that heads the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

And because of all the things we've been through as a nation in natural disasters in the last 6 years, James Lee Witt has very often been the most important person in the Federal Government to tens of millions of Americans.

I kid him every time we have a disaster someplace, 3 weeks later there's another State he could be elected to State office in. When we went through all this terrible thing in southern California with that earthquake—they think of themselves as a big, modern place, and a lot of them, actually, are from places like Arkansas, but they forget it from time to time. And he gave them a whole new take on what it was to have a grassroots sense of common sense and compassion.

So I can just tell you that I think we're going to have more of these difficult natural problems, and I think we're going to have a lot of challenges to meet. But it will be a long, long time before any Federal official ever has this position who can remotely equal James Lee for his experience, his knowledge, his ability, and his compassion. He has served America well, and he has done Arkansas proud.

I'd just like to take advantage of the fact that you gave me this podium to give you a brief report on a couple of other things, by using, if I might, James Lee. The way he runs FEMA and the way he conducts his business is the way I believe the Federal Government as a whole should be run, that we should basically put people ahead of politics and power.

Now, all you've got to do is read the paper every day or listen to the news to know that that's not the way Washington works and that's not the way some people who report about Washington want it to work, because they think it would be immensely boring if it did, I think. But James Lee is exhibit A of the kind of Government we've tried to bring to Washington. So is Rodney, I might add.

You have these two Arkansans serving with great distinction, by the way, who are quite popular with both Republicans and Democrats in the United States Congress, both of them, because they treat people decently; they give them a quick answer; they shoot straight. They don't say yes when the answer is no, but they try to say yes whenever they can. And they are very well thought of. And they don't become the kind of lightning rods that normally just titillate the day-to-day coverage of politics in Washington.

I believe, out here in the country there is a national consensus around a vital center for America moving forward. It crosses party lines on nearly everything. I believe it exists nearly everywhere—except in Washington.

I'll just give you one example, this debate we're having over the Patients' Bill of Rights. I have supported health maintenance organizations. I have supported managed care as a way of holding down the costs of health care. Let's not forget, in 1993 when I took office, health care costs for several years had been going up at 3 times the rate of inflation. And they threatened to absolutely engulf the budgets of businesses and of families. But I also believe that you can't manage a system if you forget what the primary mission of the system is. In this case, it is to improve the health care of the American people.

Now, I believe if you went out to anyplace in Arkansas—I think if you took an exhaustive survey, if you polled 20,000 people here in Pulaski County, or in any part of our State, and you divided them properly among the parties, you would find overwhelming support for the idea that every American in an HMO ought to have the right to see a specialist if their doctor tells them they need to see a specialist.

And in a lot of big cities, believe it or not, when people have accidents—when the ambulance picks them up, they have to go by two or three emergency rooms until they get to one in a hospital that's covered. Well, if it's you in the back of that ambulance, you want to go to the first emergency room you come to. You don't want to have to bump two or three until you get to one that just happens to be in a plan.

And a lot of you run small businesses. And small businesses that do provide health insurance for their employees often have to change providers, and they have to look around, from time to time, for the most cost-effective provider. But if there's an employee in that business who's in the sixth month of a difficult pregnancy, or in the middle of a chemotherapy treatment, I think that those people ought to be able to keep their doctors until the treatment is finished. These are just basic, simple things. And I think 70 percent of the American people agree.

Now, there is a glimmer of good news. About 20 Republicans in the House of Representatives—including all of their doctors, about a half dozen of them—have said they want to help us pass this. And I hope we can get it done. But the fact that we've been fighting for it for nearly 2 years is an example—we'd never have a 2-year fight over this in the Arkansas legislature. We just wouldn't do it, because it would be such a clear, human, basic thing that we'd figure out how to get it done without imposing undue burdens on the businesses involved.

And that's what we have to do in Washington. If you take the debate we're having over the surplus today—I know it may just seem like politics to you, but believe me, it is not to me. It's about everything I've tried to stand for and do since I went up there. Just remember, when I went to Washington, we'd been running on a balanced budget down here for 12 years and they had quadrupled the debt in 12 years. And we had—the deficit was $290 billion and projected to be $390 billion this year. And we were able to turn it around by arithmetic, which meant we have to make hard and controversial decisions, and a lot of Members of my party lost their seats in Congress in the '94 election because they voted to reduce the deficit.

But just today, before I came down here, we announced that we have gone over 19 million new jobs since January of 1993—19 million; the longest peacetime expansion in history; the highest homeownership in history; the lowest minority unemployment ever recorded; a million and a half fewer children in poverty. Record numbers of new small businesses have started in every single year. The air is cleaner; the water is cleaner; the food is safer; there are fewer toxic waste dumps. We've got 90 percent of our kids immunized against serious childhood illnesses for the first time in the history of the United States.

We've set aside more land to be preserved forever than any administration, except those of the two Roosevelts. We've got 100,000 young people that have served their country in AmeriCorps in their communities, earned money for college. The HOPE scholarship essentially guarantees that everybody can have at least 2 years of college—and already, 15 million people have taken advantage of it; 12.5 million people have taken advantage of the family and medical leave law.

This country is a stronger country because we have looked to the future and tried to put people first, tried to keep thinking about what's best for tomorrow. And that's what this whole debate is about. But I just want to give you my take on it. And it's exactly the same attitude I'd have if I were still Governor sitting here watching it go on.

This country quadrupled our debt in the 12 years before I took office. We have turned that around, but we're looking toward a 21st century in which, among other things, the following will happen. I'll just give you two things. Number one, the number of people over 65 is going to double in 30 years when the baby boomers all get into the retirement age. Right now Medicare is supposed to go broke in 15 years; Social Security is supposed to go broke in 33 years, 34 years. We are not prepared for the aging of America.

Number two, we've got the largest number of children in our school system we have ever had—bigger than the baby boom generation, and we have the largest percentage of them who come from all different kinds of backgrounds.

I saw an article in the Christian Science Monitor the other day that said Arkansas was one of the two States in the country with the fastest growing Hispanic populations. And nobody really believes seriously that we're giving every one of our children a world-class education. But our future as a nation, and those of us who are baby boomers, the security of our retirement depends upon our ability to educate all of our children.

Now, here's what I think about this surplus. First of all, it's only going to materialize if we have a good economic policy. And secondly, only if we have a good economic policy will any tax cut be worth a plug nickel to anybody. So what I think we ought to do is meet the big challenges of the country. And I'll just mention three.

Number one, we ought to save Social Security and strengthen Medicare and provide a modest prescription drug benefit to the three-quarters of the seniors in this country that don't have access to it. Two, we ought to decide how much money we have to invest in our future, in everything from education to national defense, the environment, to things that are important in Arkansas—veterans' health care. We have to put some more money into the university teaching hospitals. Everybody agrees with this up there. And we've got to do something about the farm problem. It's about time that we admitted that '95 farm bill, as I said when I signed it, reluctantly, had no safety net and will not work in bad economic times. It doesn't work, and we ought to fix that. But it costs money. So we need to figure out how many other things we have to invest in.

And then the third thing we ought to do, in my opinion, is to save enough of this surplus for Social Security and Medicare that we actually pay this country's debt off. We can be out of debt, in 15 years, for the first time since 1835. And if we do that, that means in every community represented in this room, lower interest rates for businesses, for home mortgages, for college loans, for credit cards, for car payments. It means that the children in this room will grow up into an economy that is much stronger than it otherwise would have been.

Now, can you imagine what people would have said and thought of me if I had gone out in 1992 and said, ''Now, I want you to vote for me, and 7 years later I'll come back and we'll have a little talk about what to do with the surplus and getting America out of debt.'' They would have said, ''You know, that young fellow from Arkansas is a nice young man, but he's deluded and we need to send him home.'' [*Laughter*] But that's where we are today, because people like David Pryor put their political necks on the line and stood up and did the right thing.

And I'm just telling you—I see this now in the broad history of our country. A generation gets a chance like this maybe once in a lifetime. The World War II generation, they did for us by getting us through the Depression and winning the war and saving the world for freedom. And now what we're being asked to do is to look down the road and think of the long-term interest of America, and the strength of our country in good times and bad, and do what's right for our children.

If you save Social Security and Medicare, when those of us in the baby boom retire, we won't have to burden our children with our retirement and undermine their ability to invest in our grandchildren. If you invest in education, we'll have a stronger economy. And if you pay the debt off, we'll sure have a stronger economy, by far, than we otherwise would have.

So here's my simple idea. I know this sounds simple, but why don't we figure out what we've got to do for Social Security and Medicare? Why don't we figure out what—even the Republicans, they're up there spending all the money—what they want to spend on everything from education to agriculture and veterans, and what it takes to pay the debt off? There will be some money left, and give it back to the America people in a tax cut.

But this debate, it's all backwards, you know. They're up there giving the money away—with no Medicare plan, nothing to extend the life of the Social Security Trust Fund, ignoring the commitments that they want to make in everything from defense to veterans to agriculture, with no prospect of paying the debt off.

It is—one of the young men that works for me said this is kind of like a family sitting down at dinner and talking about what they're going to do for the summer and deciding they're going to have the vacation of their lifetimes; they're going to just blow it out. And when they get home from this month-long vacation, they'll see if they can pay the home mortgage and send the kids to college. That's exactly what is going on here.

And it is not partisan, from my point of view. I'm not running for anything. But when I come home here, and we put that library up down on the river, and I'm looking at the next generation of young people and trying to bring people from all over the world here to see our State and to talk about what we did and what we still need to do in our country and in our world—I want to go to bed every night knowing that we did everything we could to give the children in this room the 21st century they deserve.

So I ask all of you, as you watch this debate unfold—we can't even have this argument about how big the tax cut should be until we have met our fundamental obligations to you and to our future. I will work with the Republicans—keep in mind, we passed the Balanced Budget Act in '97; we passed welfare reform in 1996, in the teeth of the election. And I would remind you that we have now cut the welfare rolls in half; they're the lowest they've been in 32 years.

So we are capable of working together up there across party lines. But we can't forget about common sense and basic arithmetic. And we need to maintain the spirit of kindness and concern and humility that James Lee Witt has brought to that FEMA office every day he's been there. And I hope that, in whatever way you can, you will get that message out to the people who listen to you—because a lot of people do, and we've got an awful lot riding on it.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:16 p.m. in the Ambassador's Ballroom at the Embassy Suites Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Bobby Caldwell, member, board of directors, Arkansas Broadcasters Association; William Gaddy, former director, Arkansas Employment Security Division, and his wife, Judy Gaddy, former special assistant to the Governor; State Representatives Steve Faris and Don R. House; and W.R. (Bud) Harper, director, Arkansas Office of Emergency Services. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks to the Community in Helena, Arkansas

August 7, 1999

Thank you very much. Good morning. Thank you for coming out in the heat. Congressman Berry asked me—we were standing up here—Congressman Berry said, "You smell that cotton dust that's been in here a hundred years?" [*Laughter*]

I am glad to be back. I want to thank Senator Lambert-Lincoln who has done such a wonderful job; my good friend Congressman Berry. I want to thank Mayor Weaver for coming out and Dr. Robert Miller, the mayor of Helena, my longtime friend. And I want to thank our Secretary of Transportation, Rodney Slater, from Lee County.

Let me say to all of you, I'm about to go down to the Cultural Center for a business meeting about the future of the Delta in Arkansas, but I just want to say a word or two. And I'll be brief because it's hot and I want to get out and shake hands, and then I want to go to work.

Yesterday in Washington I was able to announce that our country had produced 19 million jobs, and then some, since I became President. But the unemployment rate in the deep Delta is still twice the national average. The income is less than two-thirds the national average. And a lot of the things that we have tried to do in the last 6½ years have helped some discrete communities, but not the whole region.

In my State of the Union Address this year, in an attempt to build on the work that we've done with the enterprise zones and the empowerment communities, under the leadership of Vice President Gore, I proposed that we look at the Mississippi Delta, at Appalachia, at the Indian reservations, at the small towns and the inner-city communities that have been left behind as a big new market for America; that if we had parts of America where we hadn't had new investment and new jobs and new opportunity, and we were growing like crazy and we had the best economy in a generation, we ought to find a way