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maintain their confidence and independence, and improve their overall quality of life.

Every day, physicians and researchers make progress in the search for better treatments—and ultimately a cure—for vision loss. In this new century, emerging technologies will improve upon existing visual devices and techniques, and new medications will ensure more effective treatment of eye diseases and disorders. By investing in research and technology and committing to regular comprehensive eye examinations, we can ensure a brighter, healthier future for ourselves and our children.

To remind Americans of the importance of safeguarding their eyesight, the Congress, by joint resolution approved December 30, 1963 (77 Stat. 629; 36 U.S.C. 138), has authorized and requested the President to proclaim the first week in March of each year as "Save Your Vision Week."

Now, Therefore, I, William J. Clinton, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim March 5 through March 11, 2000, as Save Your Vision Week. I urge all Americans to participate by making eye care and eye safety an important part of their lives and to ensure that dilated eye examinations are included in their regular health maintenance programs. I invite eye care professionals, the media, and all public and private organizations dedicated to preserving eyesight to join in activities that will raise awareness of the measures we can take to protect and sustain our vision.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this sixth day of March, in the year of our Lord two thousand, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-fourth.

William J. Clinton

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Remarks Following a Meeting With Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

March 7, 2000

Gun Control Legislation

The President. Good afternoon. Given what I want to talk about today, it seems fitting that I am speaking to you in the briefing room we have just named for Jim Brady.

Last spring, the brutal shootings at Columbine gave a life and death urgency to the call for strengthening our Nation's gun laws. The Senate responded to that call, in spite of fierce pressures by the gun lobby. With a tie-breaking vote by the Vice President, the Senate passed an amendment to close the gun show loophole and pass other commonsense provisions that require child safety locks and ban the importation of large capacity ammunition clips.

Unfortunately, the House narrowly defeated the McCarthy amendment to close the gun show loophole and passed a much weaker bill than the Senate did. Now, for the past 8 months, the leaders in Congress have done virtually nothing to complete a final bill.

That's why I called upon Senators Hatch and Leahy and Representatives Hyde and Conyers to come to the White House this morning. I met with them in the Oval Office for nearly an hour. We had a very good discussion. My message was simple: Congress has kept the American people waiting long enough. I want Congress to finish the gun bill and send it to me by the anniversary of the Columbine tragedy, April 20th.

In the meeting this morning, I told the leaders the final bill needs to close the loophole that allows criminals to buy firearms at gun shows, without opening any new loopholes in the process.

I said I wanted a ban on the importation of ammunition clips that allow shooters, including those in Littleton, to spray bullets across a wide killing zone in a matter of seconds. And I said a final bill needs to require child safety locks and should hold adults accountable when they allow young people to get their hands on deadly guns, two measures

that are particularly relevant in light of the heartbreaking shooting of Kayla Rolland last week.

I know the gun lobby is cranking up pressure on Congress again. But when first graders shoot first graders, it's time for Congress to do what's right for America's families.

All four Members of Congress I met with this morning expressed their desire to work with us in good faith. I'm grateful for their willingness to meet with me today and to continue working together. But let's be clear here: 8 months is long enough. There's no more time for delay. The conference committee should meet and work out their differences and send me a good bill. We owe it to our children and to the victims to get this done by April the 20th.

When I talk to the parents of victims, they just can't understand why people in Washington are always talking about what we can't do instead of what we can do. I'm not interested in talking about how little we can do. I'm interested in how much we can accomplish to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children.

Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, did you get any kind of commitment from the leaders——

Q. Mr. President, if Congress——

The President. I'll take both of them.

Q. If the congressional leaders and the gun lobby were not swayed after the Columbine shooting, what makes you feel that the time is, so to speak, more right now?

The President. Well, how many more people have to get killed before we do something? I mean, we had a pretty rough week last week.

And let me say, one of the things that I did in preparation for this—because, as you know, before last week we were pushing to try to get a conference on the juvenile justice bill—I actually read the proposal made by Mr. Hyde on this subject and the counterproposal made by Mr. Conyers. And the Conyers proposal, I think, is workable, and would keep—would go a very long way toward, in fact, closing the gun show loophole. The Hyde proposal is a substantial movement away from just the total, what you might call the complete NRA position.

So I think that if we could get a conference meeting and they could start working on the things everybody agrees on and get these two leaders to work through this and give us a provision that would actually work—there's more than one way to do this; we need something that will actually work—I think that it's quite possible that that could occur.

Keep in mind, there's a reason that there's such an effort to keep this conference from meeting. I think they know now that if a bill came out that had a reasonable gun show provision, loophole provision, in it that actually closes the loophole, that it would pass the House and the Senate because the American people want it.

So we can't pretend that it's not the same as defeating the bill just to never have the conference meet. The conference needs to meet. And what I believe will happen is that you will have more talking and more thinking and less shouting if the conference committee will meet. That's what Congress hires on to do, to write laws. And I think it's very important that this be done. And I hope that the conference committee will meet soon. And I believe that there's a way to work through this that will satisfy some of the practical concerns that people who are interested in the gun shows have, and still allow us to have an airtight guarantee that we're going to keep the guns away from the criminals and the other categories of people covered by the Brady law.

Yes, Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press]?

Q. Mr. President, did you get any commitment from the Republicans today that they would actually have a meeting, that there would be a conference? And would you be willing to accept any bill that did not include the gun show background check?

The President. First of all, where we left it was that—I think that Leahy, Conyers, and Hyde, I believe, were willing to start the conference. I believe that. I don't want to speak for Mr. Hyde, but I think that's accurate. I believe that—Senator Hatch said that he thought he had to go back and consult with the Republican leadership and the members of the caucus, and he would try to give us an answer in the next little bit here.

I think that Senator—I mean, Mr. Conyers said he would work with Mr. Hyde to try to work out the gun show issue, but he didn't want to do that as a way of putting off the conference, and I agree with that. He said he thought we ought to have a conference. The conference ought to approve everything else, including the child trigger locks, the ammunition clip ban, which is a big issue in view of some of the other things that have happened here lately, and these other issues, and that, meanwhile, he would work with Mr. Hyde to try to work through this.

Now, all I can tell you is, I think it would be a big mistake for Congress not to close the gun show loophole. Keep in mind—lets everybody remember this—one of the principal arguments used against the Brady bill, when we passed that and I signed it, was that criminals don't buy guns at gun stores; they buy guns at gun shows. You go back and look at the debate. And one of the things they said, "Oh, the criminals don't buy—they either get them on one-on-one sales, or they get them at these gun shows or urban flea markets."

Well, it turned out that was wrong. We've had almost a half-million gun sales not approved through gun stores. But the same people who were telling us 7 years ago, or 6 and 7 years ago, that we didn't need the Brady bill, because all the criminals were buying their guns at gun shows, now tell us we can't stop the criminals from buying guns at gun shows. I mean, I think it's very important to understand, there are people's lives at stake here. This will save lives.

Now, people that are very solicitous and understanding of all the sort of practical problems for these rural gun shows—I'm telling you, there are ways to work through that. I've actually been to these rural gun shows. I know what they look like. I understand what these people are saying. I'd been to them when I was Governor, I know—you have something off in a field in the country, and you've got all the pickups and the cars opened up, and two or three thousand people come through in a day. I understand that. We have the technology to do the background checks, and we can do it, and we can do it without shutting these things down and all the law-abiding people that are involved in them down.

But if we act like because there are practical problems, we're just not going to save these people's lives, and we're going to let all these criminals buy guns, I think that is, to me, it's unconscionable to walk away from that.

Q. When you meet with the mother of the Michigan child this afternoon, do you think that you can reasonably assure her that there will be a bill this year? And secondly, can you make that kind of commitment knowing that there are as many Democrats as Republicans needed still to get support for something like this?

The President. Well, first of all, I don't think that is true. I think that if—among the Democrats that voted for Mr. Dingell's bill, I think if some practical changes were made in the law which would not undermine that ability of the checks to actually keep guns out of hands of criminals, felons, fugitives, and stalkers, I think that most of the Democrats would vote for that bill. And I think a lot of Republicans would, and I believe it would pass. So that's what I believe would happen.

Now, what I'm going to tell her when I see her, first of all, is that as a parent my heart goes out to her, and as President I'm going to do everything I can to see that it doesn't happen to other children. That's all I can do.

I can't—do I know whether the Republicans will permit a bill to pass this year or whether they will be willing to stand up to the NRA? No, I don't know that. But I think that if we could get a bill out of that committee that was a good bill, this year, I think it would pass. And I think that may be what is going on now. That may be why there's so much pressure on Senator Hatch not to call a meeting.

But that is no way to do it. They ought to vote, vote up or down, declare themselves. If they don't want this bill to pass, they shouldn't be ashamed to tell America they don't want it to pass. And if they do, they ought to get together and pass it.

President's Upcoming Visit to South Asia

Q. Mr. President, regarding your trip to India, there are now reports that you will make a brief stop in Pakistan. Are those reports true?

The President. I should have an announcement on that probably within a day. I'm working that, and we're about to finalize the arrangements, and as quickly as I know—as I can do so, when I finish the calls I'm making, I'll be glad to release that.

Colombia

Q. Mr. President, aid to Colombia is facing problems in the Congress of the United States. There are some people who doubt—they think it might be another Vietnam. Some people think that the military aid will end up in violation of human rights and talks of collusion between the military and paramilitary forces. What are you doing to try to get this aid passed that Colombia has been waiting for a long time and you've been pushing for a long time?

The President. Well, I still believe the package will pass. I think the questions which are being asked are legitimate questions and should be asked. I mean, if I were a Member of Congress and I just heard the administration were to give this amount of money to Colombia and it was generally going to be used to fight drugs and do some other things, I would ask the same questions.

But all I can tell you is that it's not like Vietnam in the sense that we are not making a commitment to train soldiers in a way that we will then be called upon to come in and replace them or fight with them or work with them. This is to deal with a guerrilla war, which is what happened in Vietnam.

In this case, we will be using some of the funds to train soldiers to support police officers who will be doing antinarcotics work. And the units that will be involved in this will have to be particularly vetted to make sure that they don't have the pattern of abuse that you referred to.

So we have worked as hard as we could to do this. Now, can I tell you that there will never be a dollar of this that would be spent in a way that I wouldn't want? Nobody can say that. But I can say this: I think that we're a lot better off trying to help stabilize Colombia and save democracy there and help them fight narcotics there and keep more drugs out of this country, than if we walk away from it. I think the consequences, if we walk away, are pretty clear. And if we help them, we just might make it and turn the situation around. That's what I think we ought to try to do.

Mary [Mary McGrory, Washington Post].

Gun Control Legislation

Q. Mr. President, the argument is made that the bill under consideration, all the other bills would not have prevented either Columbine or what happened in Flint. Have you ever considered advocating abolition of handguns, as advocated by the late Senator John Chafee, who spoke of the insanely easy access to guns in this country?

The President. Well, I think, first of all, I'm not sure that's true. I just have a statement here by the young woman that bought the guns used at Columbine, and she said, "I wish it had been more difficult. I wouldn't have helped them buy the guns if I had faced a background check."

So, first of all, this works. And I also believe we should license handgun owners, and when they buy guns, I think they ought to have to pass a Brady background check and show they've taken a safety course. I think we should do more than we're doing. But I believe that it is best for me as President to focus on what we can get done to save lives.

John Chafee, as you know, was a wonderful man and an aberration in the present Republican Senate caucus. But I don't think there would be many votes for that in the Congress. And what I should be doing is trying to pass the strongest possible legislation I can pass to save the largest number of lives I can save.

I do believe, Mary, if we—one of the things that we ought to do if we can get this legislation on the books is to be much more aggressive in these gun buyback programs, as well, to try to reduce the total stock out there of the kind of loose guns that are running around. I mean, when you hear over 200 million guns are held in America, it's trembling—it's a staggering figure. But a lot of them are held by collectors and hunters

and others with big supplies who are responsible people. But if we had, I'm convinced, if we had a more aggressive use of gun buyback programs, we could draw down a lot of these guns that are used in crimes.

Yes sir.

2000 Presidential Election

Q. Page one of the usually reliable Washington Post reports this morning that you regularly——

The President. Is that an editorial comment? [*Laughter*]

Q. ——you regularly advise the campaign of Vice President Gore. Did you advise Mr. Gore to allow no media questions for the past 17 days, particularly because of the Maria Hsia case, including Gore's appearance in Buffalo on Saturday, where I found that the gymnasium was one-third empty, Mr. President?

The President. No. [*Laughter*] No.

Q. Don't you think he ought to answer media questions like you do?

The President. Well, since I didn't advise him privately, I don't think I should advise him publicly. [*Laughter*] It looks to me like he's doing a pretty good job with his campaign. But I did not—I haven't talked to him about that at all.

Go ahead.

Gun Control Legislation

Q. Mr. President, back on guns for just a moment. You said what we need to do is pass the strongest legislation we can pass. The leaders who came out were not all that specific, other than to say that the gun show loophole was the main thing hanging this up. In your view, what has to be done to close that loophole? Is it three days? Is it 24 hours? Is it less than 24 hours? What in your view needs to be done to close it?

The President. Well, first of all, let's look at the facts here. The answer may be a combination of both. That is, if you have an Instacheck system—today, when we do the background checks, over 90 percent of them are completed within a day. Over 70 percent of them are completed within an hour, I think.

But you have to have some provision for dealing with the leakage. That is, suppose you're meeting over the weekend, and the records are not in the national crime database; suppose you're dealing with mental health records, for example, that would have, under the Brady bill, would disqualify someone from getting a handgun but aren't available; suppose you're dealing with records that are in a local police department that might not be in the database, where you have to make a phone call. So the answer is, if you had 24 hours, you'd get most people. But the thing is, the people you don't get—the people you don't get in that last 5 percent—listen to this—are 20 times more likely to be turned down than the population as a whole.

So what you need—I have no objection to some provision which would say, okay, everybody that clears, do the 24 hours, and let it roll. But you have to have some other provision there to deal with the 5 percent you can't—or however, whatever the percentage is; it's less than 10—whatever the percentage is you can't get done in 24 hours, because a significant percentage of the people that shouldn't be getting the guns are in that percentage.

So that's why I say, you guys would have—it would be great for you if they would actually have this conference and start debating this. And instead of debating the Senate provision or the Dingell bill, or the Senate provision or nothing, you could hear this debate between Conyers and Hyde, and we could get down to the facts. And it would be—you'd really have something to get your teeth into and talk about in terms of, what does it take to save lives?

My criteria is, does it work? You know, I don't mind being—like I said, I've been to these country gun shows. I know what they're like, and I understand what some of the practical questions raised are. But I'm just telling you, with a minimum of effort, we can save lives, and we can take care of all these cases that the Brady bill takes care of.

So I'm not giving you an evasive answer. I'm telling you, this is a fact question. But you don't want to just—the problem with the 24-hour thing is, you do over 90 percent of the checks, but of the ones that leak, they're 20 times more likely to be turned down. So,

therefore, I think we have to have some provision to deal with them.

Taiwan

Q. Mr. President, when do you plan to act on a request by Taiwan for new weapons systems? Do you think that granting such a request could help you with your China trade legislation on the Hill? And do you think the Taiwanese, perhaps, deserve the weapons given recent Chinese saber rattling in the area?

The President. I think my answer to the first question will answer the next two. I don't know because I have not sat down and looked at the facts. Any decision I make has to be made consistent with the Taiwan Relations Act and with our general policy in the area. And I will do what I think the right thing to do is. But I literally have not had a meeting on it. We haven't discussed timing or anything. I have had no meetings.

Go ahead, April [April Ryan, American Urban Radio Networks].

2000 Presidential Election

Q. Mr. President, today is Super Tuesday, and it's the weeding-out process. What are your hopes for the candidates that are left standing? And since John McCain has been talking about George Bush's morals and ethics, have you been reminded of that cruel joke that he told about Chelsea a couple years ago, and what are your thoughts about that?

The President. He asked me to forgive him, and I did.

Q. Do you think that he makes an appropriate Presidential candidate——

The President. He asked me to forgive him, and I did. And since I have asked people to forgive me, I would be in a poor position if I refused the same thing. And I believe him to be a good man. And he asked me to forgive him, and I did.

And I think the—you know, what I think—I have a slightly different take on this than most people, I guess, but since I'm not a candidate, maybe you will believe me when I tell you, since I'm not running. When people fight with each other over issues that they disagree with and they advertise about it, I don't consider that necessarily negative campaigning. When people say to each other that they're somehow—that their opponents are morally inferior or that they're morally superior, that can be negative campaigning. It's also very hazardous.

You know, there are lots of verses in the Bible. One of them says that you've got be careful when you're standing not to brag about it; otherwise you might find yourself on your knees. I mean you know—but I think the fact that this has been a vigorous campaign fight over differences of opinion on campaign finance, the nature of a tax cut, what kind of education policy we should have in all these primaries, I think that's been good for the American people. And my only wish today is that there's a real big turnout. I just hope they all go out and vote, and I hope they'll continue to vote all the way to November.

Press Secretary Joe Lockhart. Thanks. Thank you.

Q. And your hopes for those who remain standing?

The President. What did you say?

Q. The hopes for those who remain standing after this weeding-out process?

The President. I think they ought to go before the American people and say this is the millennial election, and they ought to say what they say. You know who I'm for and what I hope happens in the election. But the main thing is, I want this election to be fought out over the issues. And if they fight over the issues and criticize each other over the issues, I don't consider that to be negative campaigning. That's debating. That's the way the system works.

I would like to see this election be given back to the American people. I'd like to see the fights over things that affect them and not over whether one candidate should have gotten more merit badges than another.

Oil Prices

Q. On gas prices, just one last quick question. There are predictions that it could go to $1.80.

The President. Yes.

Q. Today I paid $1.70 for a gallon of gas. Well, I can afford it. Many Americans can't. [*Laughter*] It's a serious thing for many people who are on tight budgets.

The President. First of all, let me say—I've told you this before, and as time goes on we'll have more to say about this. I've been working on this issue. I think what we want are stable oil prices that aren't too high, and I think that's what the oil producing countries should want. Because what's going to happen is, there will be all kinds of reactions—we have our options; others have theirs—but some countries will just have their economic growth slowed if you have oil prices that are too high.

And then what's going to happen? One of two things or both will happen. You will either have a big drop in demand for oil prices, which will drive the price back down just because people won't be buying as much anymore, and it will cut the revenues of the oil-producing countries below where they would have been if they have maintained stable prices at a lower level. Or you will have a lot of non-OPEC members who aren't subject to their agreement start increasing their production, taking market share away from them, and that will also cut oil prices and lower their revenues, because they'll have less market share.

Now, one of those two things is going to happen unless there's more equilibrium in this market. And I think everybody recognizes that they're too high. There's a reason they're too high now, because we're producing 73 million barrels a day and consuming 75 million. Therefore, the price is continuing to rise, because demand exceeds supply. And demand exceeds supply because of, in effect, artificial decisions made by the producers.

So this would be kind of like deregulation in America in telecom and a lot of other areas, once you get other producers. Either that or supply will drop because—I mean, excuse me—demand will drop because they won't be able to sustain the price. So I think, sure, I want oil prices to go down some. But the producing countries should want them to go down some, too.

Now, on the other hand, Americans should not want them to drop to $12 or $10 a barrel again, because that puts you in this roller coaster environment which is very destabilizing to the producing countries and not particularly good for our economy and takes our mind off our business, which should be alternative fuels, energy conservation, reducing the impact of all this on global warming.

But we need stable prices at a lower level, and that's what we're working for. And I hope that's what the producing countries will see is clearly in their best interests, because it is.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:40 p.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Presidential Press Secretary James S. Brady; Veronica McQueen, whose 6-year-old daughter, Kayla Rolland, was shot and mortally wounded by a 6-year-old classmate in Mount Morris Township, MI; and Robyn Anderson, who allegedly purchased several handguns that were used in the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, on April 20, 1999. A reporter referred to Maria Hsia, who was convicted of illegal campaign fundraising practices.

Statement on Senate Action on Judicial Nominations

March 7, 2000

I am pleased that the United States Senate, by a vote of 93 to 0, has confirmed Julio Fuentes to be a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Judge Fuentes, whom I nominated one year ago tomorrow, is a richly experienced State court judge from Newark, New Jersey. He will be the first Hispanic judge to serve on the Third Circuit.

Despite this positive step, however, the Senate still must act on the 38 judicial nominees currently awaiting hearings or floor votes. In particular, the Senate is poised to act this week on the nominations of Richard Paez and Marsha Berzon to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Paez, the first Mexican-American ever to serve as a Federal district court judge in Los Angeles, has awaited a vote for more than 4 years, longer than any judicial nominee in modern history. Berzon has been before the Senate for 2 years. Both are highly qualified individuals who will serve the courts and our country with distinction.