

Bruce says that “Vento” means “win” in Italian, and I think they’re both winners, so I like this.

First of all, I want to thank Gerry Sikorski and Vin Weber for cochairing this event. I understand there is a slew of Members of Congress here today, so I won’t attempt to call all their names, but I thank them for being here. And I know Bruce’s sons are here. And I think Garrison Keillor is coming, and he’ll be better than me—[*laughter*—so that will be worth waiting for.

I also want to recognize our great Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, who is celebrating his birthday tonight with Bruce Vento. Thank you. I like to ride Bruce about his birthday because he’s older than I am and looks younger, and I resent it. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank all of you for coming here to pay tribute to Bruce tonight and to support the Bruce Vento Science Educator Scholarship Fund. I think it’s quite an appropriate time to be doing this, just a day after we announced the sequencing of the human genome. On the way in, Bruce was saying, “You know, that was a really exciting announcement you had yesterday. Now we’ve got to find a few more science teachers to explain to people what it means.” [*Laughter*] I thought that was pretty great.

He has been a scientist and an environmentalist since his boyhood in Minnesota. And I reminded him today that one of my most memorable times as President has been the time I spent with him in Minnesota and with a number of others of you here from the Minnesota congressional delegation, as well.

Since 1977, he’s been an advocate for science and the environment in the Congress. Some of this will be said later, but I think it’s worth—this is astonishing, and maybe even some of you don’t know this—he has steered into law more than 300 bills to protect our natural resources. He has led in the preservation of hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness from Minnesota’s boundary waters to Alaska to American Samoa.

That would have been record enough, but the thing I like even more is that Bruce Vento cares about people, especially people without a voice, the homeless. He’s also been

a leader for health care and education. And if there is anybody who has ever listened to him perform at any of these hearings, he has never stopped being a teacher. Time and time again he’s reached out to bridge the gap between researchers and lay people, to help the rest of us understand both the majesty and the frailty of the natural world we inhabit.

And tonight, as he fights a disease which has not yet yielded all its secrets to science, he’s our teacher again. He has certainly shown us a lot about courage, and we’re very grateful for it.

Bruce has become a real friend to me over these last 7½ years. He’s been an honest and trusted adviser, and he’s always said exactly what he thought. And as a consequence, I have also been his student, and I have learned a great deal.

Bruce, Hillary and I admire you. We love you, and we’re grateful. You’ve made me think this being term limited is not all bad. But let me say to all of you, I think the best thing I could say about Bruce Vento is the now very famous thing Henry Adams said nearly a century ago: “A teacher affects humanity. You can never tell where his influence stops.” Bruce, your influence will never stop.

Thank you all, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:05 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Washington Court Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Gerald E. Sikorski and John V. (Vin) Weber, salute cohosts; and Garrison Keillor, host of “Prairie Home Companion.”

The President’s News Conference

June 28, 2000

The President. Good afternoon. This has been a good week for the American people: first, the landmark breakthrough in human genomic research, which promises to eradicate once incurable diseases and revolutionize health care for a very long time to come; second, the release of the midsession review, which told us that the health of our economy continues its remarkable expansion.

Our budget surplus this year will be the largest in history, \$211 billion. Over the next 10 years, after we lock away Medicare and

Social Security surpluses, the remaining surplus is expected to be almost \$1.5 trillion. This progress exceeds even our own predictions just 4 months ago, another milestone in what is now the longest economic expansion in our history.

This is a tribute to the hard work of the American people and our commitment to fiscal discipline, expanded trade, and investments in our people and our future. Now is not the time to abandon the path that has brought us here. We must use this moment of prosperity to make important investments in our most pressing priorities.

Chief among them is the need to provide affordable, reliable prescription drug coverage to our seniors. There is no question that this is a critical need. Just yesterday a study released showed that prescription drugs shot up over 10 percent last year alone. That is too heavy a burden for our older seniors to pay and for our people with disabilities to pay.

There are some who say we can't provide affordable, accessible prescription drug coverage for all our seniors. I believe that's wrong. With millions of them without coverage, the absence of prescription drug coverage is a fatal flaw in our present health care system. Think about it. Because of breakthroughs like the human genome project, in our lifetime, there may be new life-saving drug treatments for many dreaded diseases. But they won't mean anything if our seniors and people with disabilities can't afford them. That's what this debate is really all about.

Today the House is set to vote on a prescription drug plan that amounts to an empty promise for too many of our seniors. It's a private insurance plan that many seniors and people with disabilities simply won't be able to afford. Insurers, themselves, say the Republican plan won't work. The bottom line is, their plan is designed to benefit the companies who make the prescription drugs, not the older Americans who need to take them. It puts special interest above the public interest.

Let me make it specific and clear. This plan would not guarantee affordable prescription drugs to single senior citizens with incomes above \$12,600 a year or to senior

couples with incomes above \$16,600 a year. And we have all heard countless, countless stories of those with crushing medical burdens, that if they could get these prescription drugs, would have their lives lengthened and the quality of their lives improved.

An article in today's paper reveals that a group calling itself Citizens for Better Medicare is running—I give it points for chutzpa—Citizens for Better Medicare is running millions of dollars in ads to kill our prescription drug proposal. You'd think a group with this name would be in favor of affordable Medicare prescription drug coverage for all seniors and people with disabilities, but this is one of those mysterious interest groups whose financial backers are cloaked in secrecy.

Now, just last night the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to force groups like this to open their books and disclose their fundraising sources to the American people. I applaud the House for this vote and all those, Democrats and Republicans, who voted for it. With the vote on Medicare in the House, I call on Citizens for Better Medicare to respect the will of the Congress and reveal the sources of their support today. We should let the American people judge who is truly interested in better Medicare.

It is clear that this lobbying effort is part of a larger campaign to block real progress. In fact, the Republican leadership in Congress won't even allow our prescription plan to come up for a vote in the House—I suspect, because they're afraid it would pass.

I have offered a Medicare prescription drug benefit that is voluntary and affordable. My plan puts the interest of seniors first. Whether you're on a fixed income, live in a big city or a rural area, the plan is dependable, and it is affordable. This is particularly important for rural Americans. More than half of our oldest seniors in rural communities go the entire year without any prescription drug coverage at all.

Earlier this week, in an effort to break the logjam, I offered a compromise proposal to give seniors the relief they desperately need. I said we could pass a prescription drug benefit while providing real tax relief to married couples, something the majority in Congress

say they want to do. And we could do both now within the framework of fiscal responsibility.

As the Vice President has proposed, the first thing we should do is to take the Medicare tax receipts we get off budget so they are saved for Medicare alone and, meanwhile, used to pay down the debt. That will do more to protect and strengthen Medicare. It will help extend the life of the Medicare Trust Fund to 2023. It will put us in a position to pay down the debt completely by 2012, a year ahead of schedule. It will enable us still to set aside \$500 billion to reserve for America's future, to be used after a full debate and after this year's elections to meet the country's key priorities.

Now, with less than 35 days left in the legislative year, time is running out for Congress to meet its obligations to the American people. They have to make the tough choices to get something done or continue to be dragged down by the weight of special interests.

So again I ask Congress, let's not waste these precious weeks. It's time to get down to business, to pass a strong Patients' Bill of Rights; to raise the minimum wage by one dollar over 2 years; to pass the commonsense gun legislation; to hold tobacco companies, not taxpayers, accountable for the health care costs of tobacco; to pass hate crimes legislation; to finish the jobs of giving American businesses and farmers access to a huge new market by passing permanent normal trade relations with China; to open new markets to American investors here at home; to bring prosperity to people in places who have been left behind; and most important of all, to continue to improve our schools, to demand more of them and invest more in them, including more teachers for smaller class sizes, after-school programs for all our kids who need them, and repairing or modernizing thousands of our schools that are today literally falling apart or so overcrowded they can't contain all the kids. We can still do a lot of this if we work together in the days ahead. That's what the American people want us to do, even in an election year.

There's been some encouraging developments in this Congress. We lifted the earnings limit on Social Security; we passed the

Africa/Caribbean Basin trade bill. Apparently, the bill to aid Colombia is making good progress. And I think the China legislation will pass if we can get it up to a vote in a timely fashion. So the Congress can do a lot of things, and I hope they will, and I'm looking forward to work with them.

Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Cuba-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, after 7 months, the Elian Gonzalez case is coming to a conclusion, removing a thorn from U.S.-Cuban relations. And House Republican leaders have struck a deal to ease decades-old sanctions against Cuba. Would you accept that legislation? Is it time to normalize relations with Fidel Castro's government? What would that take?

The President. Let me deal with the questions separately. First, on the question of the legislation proposed by Mr. Nethercutt: If I believe that the legislation essentially allows for the sales of American food and medicine to Cuba or to other countries, but has some protection for us for extraordinary circumstances that foreign policy might require, like Senator Lugar's bill does in the Senate, then I would be inclined to sign the bill and to support it. I've always wanted to sell more food and medicine, not only to Cuba but to other countries as well.

I have some concerns about it, and I just have to analyze the bill as it passed and whatever legislation finally makes its way to my desk, because, as I understand it, they put some new restrictions on travel to Cuba, which might undermine our people-to-people contacts, which had been more and more extensive over the last several months and which, I believe, to be very important. And since no Federal programs can be used to help finance these food sales, as they can be to other countries, we need an analysis of whether there actually will be more sales under the legislation.

So I guess what I want to know—and I just haven't had time to get the analysis from our folks—is whether this will be a net plus in terms of our strategy, which is to reach out to the Cuban people without supporting the Cuban Government.

Now, the second question you ask is whether it's time to move toward normalization. Let me just do a little history here. In 1992, when I was running for President, the Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act, and President Bush signed it, and I strongly supported the bill. The bill seemed to strengthen economic sanctions on Cuba but actually provided a specific, step-by-step way for us to move toward normalizing relations. And we were in the process of doing that. We did it in '93, '94, '95. We were moving toward sort of—we would do something; they would do something. It was working, I thought, quite well. And I thought the law was actually quite good. And then, the Cuban Air Force shot the planes down and killed American citizens illegally and deliberately. And so, since—after that, the Helms-Burton bill passed, and it codified the embargo.

So the real answer to your question is, I don't believe that we can change that law until there is a bipartisan majority which believes that there has been some effort on the part of the Cuban Government to reach out to us, as well.

I like the old law, I thought it was working well. The killing of those innocent people in those two airplanes changed all that. And now we're in a position where until there is a bipartisan majority of Congress persuaded that there has been a fundamental change, we can't do more than what I've been doing, which is to try to aggressively expand people-to-people contacts.

That brings us back to the Nethercutt bill. If I think, on balance, it allows the President—not just me, my successor as well—to pursue our foreign policy interest and will, on balance, further that policy, then I would support it. But I want to analyze it for the reasons that I said.

Go ahead, Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Middle East Peace Process

Q. There are reports that Israel and the Palestinians will be coming to Washington next week for talks. Do you think enough progress is being made to arrange a Middle East summit, or are you discouraged? And secondly, should Israel stop the sale of radar systems to China?

The President. Let me answer the second question first because that's a much clearer one. We're very concerned about that sale, and I've talked to Prime Minister Barak about it extensively. And as you know, there's a lot of concern in the Congress, so we're still working on that.

Now, in terms of their coming here for talks, there has been no date set. I do not believe that they can resolve the final, most difficult issues without having the leaders get together in some isolated setting and make the last tough decisions—or decide not to make them, as the case may be.

Of all the issues involved with regard to all the parties in the Middle East peace talks, the final status issues between the Israelis and the Palestinians are the most difficult. I do not, however, believe they're going to get any easier with the passage of time. I think that some foreign policy problems—the answer is to kick the can down the road and wait for them to get better and hope time takes care of them. Some have to be decided sooner or later, and sooner is better than later. My own instinct is that the cluster of problems here would be better off being resolved sooner rather than later.

I've had Mr. Ross out in the Middle East, and then Secretary Albright went, and she's going to give me a report. And when she does, then I'll make a judgment about whether the time is right to ask them to come here. But I have not made that decision yet.

Go ahead, Paul [Paul Singer, United Press International].

Death Penalty

Q. A death penalty question, sir. Do you believe that Governor Bush made the wrong decision by allowing Mr. Graham to go to his death last week? And secondly, do you believe it's time for the American people to stop and reassess where we stand on implementation of the death penalty in this country?

The President. Well, on the Texas case, I didn't read the file. All I know about it is what I've read about it in the press. But let me say generally what I think. I think that those of us who support the death penalty have an extra heavy responsibility to assure both that the result is accurate and that the

process was fair and constitutional. And that means, to me, at least in modern terms, the broadest possible use of DNA evidence and the strongest possible effort to guarantee adequate assistance of counsel. That's a big issue. And I think those were two of the reasons that motivated Governor Ryan in Illinois to do what he did, and have driven a lot of other things in this debate. So that's where I think it is.

Now, I don't know that the American people have changed their position that it's still an appropriate penalty under certain severe circumstances, and I haven't. But I am concerned also, at the Federal level, with the—I don't believe that adequate assistance of counsel is an issue in the Federal cases. And as far as I know, there are no cases in which the question of DNA is an issue. There may be. I don't know if there are some.

The issues at the Federal level relate more to the disturbing racial composition of those who have been convicted and the apparent fact that almost all the convictions are coming out of just a handful of States, which raises the question of whether, even though there is a uniform law across the country, what your prosecution is may turn solely on where you committed the crime. I've got a review underway of both those issues at this time.

Yes, Bill [Bill Plante, CBS News].

1996 Campaign Finance Investigation

Q. Mr. President, as you know, for the third time, a Justice Department investigation has recommended that the Vice President's activities in fundraising during the last campaign cycle be looked into. Previously, on two occasions, the Attorney General has declined to do this. Would it be better for the Attorney General, for your administration, and for the Vice President's candidacy if he invited such an investigation?

The President. Well, first let me say, my understanding is—I know this is true in the previous cases, and I think it's true here—is that there are some people in the Justice Department that think there should be and some who think there shouldn't be. And the Attorney General, who has shown no reluctance to ask for a special counsel when she thought one was called for, didn't think one

was called for in this case, and she reaffirmed that yesterday.

I think the fact that the Vice President released the transcript of his interview was a very good thing, because some Republican Senators had made some assertions about it that just weren't so—they weren't true. And now that the whole thing has been put out in the public, it seems to me that the best thing to do is for the American people to make their own judgments about it. But I don't see any reason that the Attorney General shouldn't make a decision in this case, as she has in every other one.

Claire [Claire Shipment, NBC].

Vice President Al Gore

Q. Another question about your Vice President. A year ago when people looked at his poll numbers compared to the Texas Governor's, his supporters would say, "Oh, the election is a long way off." Six months ago people were saying the election's a long way off with those same poll numbers, and today, his supporters are still saying that. And I wonder, do you think it's time to suggest that this might be a trend, that there is a reason why the Vice President is trailing the Texas Governor in the polls? And secondly, you have said that the Vice President will not be held accountable, that the American people will not hold him accountable, for the scandals of this administration. Do you still believe that's the case or is this, in fact, part of it?

The President. Well, first of all, I said—no, let me say exactly what I said—I said that the people would not hold him responsible for anything I did that they didn't agree with or that was wrong, and that's clearly true. That's still true. There is no evidence of that in the surveys.

Secondly, let me remind you that a lot of these other so-called scandals were bogus. Mike Espy was acquitted. The Cisneros thing was a tempest in a teapot, totally overdone, and you all know that the Whitewater thing was bogus from day one. It had nothing to do with the official conduct of the administration, anyway.

Now, so the word "scandal" has been thrown around here like a clanging teapot for 7 years. And I keep waiting for somebody

to say—I noticed there was one columnist in the Washington Post that had the uncommon decency to say, “Will no one ever stand up here and say that a whole bunch of this stuff was just garbage and that we had totally innocent people prosecuted because they wouldn’t lie? We had totally innocent people’s lives wrecked because they wouldn’t go along with this alleged scandal machine.” So let’s be careful; let’s be specific.

Now, I’ve already told you, my view is that the Vice President, on the only thing as far as I know that he’s been in any way implicated in is this campaign finance thing. He put out the whole transcript of his interview, made himself available for questions, and, I thought, made a very compelling case and certainly demonstrated that a lot of the accusations against him with regard to that are not so.

There was also a very interesting article—I think in the National Law Journal—which basically went through all of the things and concluded that there was no basis for a lot of these criticisms of him, under these circumstances. And I think another magazine here—maybe the New Republic, the Washington Monthly—one of those other magazines had an analysis of it. So I think that we should be very careful in throwing that around.

Now, let me come back to the polls. First of all, I must say, I haven’t seen any or done any lately, so I don’t know. But I’m perplexed that I can’t remember a time when we had two major polls coming out within a couple of days of each other that had 13 points difference. One said there was a 13-point difference in the race; the other one said it was tied—and they came out, they were done within 2 or 3 days of each other. I don’t think either one of those pollsters rigged the results, so my instinct is that people are still trying to figure out what they think about this race.

And all I can tell you is, I know three things, and I’ve said this over and over again. I know three things. One is, no person in the history of the Republic has ever had the positive impact on this country as Vice President that Al Gore has had. That is a historical fact. We’ve had a lot of Presidents who were Vice Presidents who were great Presidents.

Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, Harry Truman were great Presidents, but not because of their service as Vice President. Nobody has ever done as much for America as Vice President as Al Gore has. Therefore, in my lifetime, he’s the best qualified person to serve.

The second thing is, I believe that he’s right on the issues. I think his economic policy is right. I think it’s far more likely to keep the prosperity of this country going. I think it’s far more likely to include people that would otherwise be left out.

And the third thing is, I think it’s important that somebody be elected that understands the future. We just announced this genome project yesterday. What are we going to do to make sure there’s no genetic discrimination? A lot of people will want genetic discrimination in employment, in promotion, in extension of health insurance. What are we going to do to make sure it doesn’t exist? What are we going to do to make sure, in the computer revolution, that there’s no violation of people’s privacy rights with their health and financial records? A lot of people will want to get that private health and financial information.

So I think that what will happen is, we’ll come to the conventions; we’ll have these debates; and somehow—I’ve been amazed by an amazing volatility since the end—you know, at the end of the primary campaign, most of the polls had him up a point or two. So there’s been a lot of volatility in these polls, and my best judgment is that people are still trying to figure out what they’re going to do. And sooner or later they will. I don’t think they have—and I think they know those three things about Al Gore, and it’s still more likely than not that he will win.

Yes.

Cuba-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, you’ve spoken to the congressional constraints that are attached to your ability to deal with Cuba, and yet, a hallmark of your foreign policy, sir, has been a commitment to engagement, the idea that American trade and investment, ideas and practices can be powerful engines of change—China, Russia, Vietnam, now even North Korea. Do you think, sir, that it’s in the American interest not to have those tools

available in dealing with Cuba? Do you think there's any prospect at all that the current policy will actually work? And after 40 years and now nine Presidents, do you think the time has come to reassess?

The President. I think the next—I like—I'll go back. I like the system that exists under the Cuban Democracy Act. I think Congress has a role to play here, but I like the Cuban Democracy Act. I think it's not wise to take away from the President all the tools of diplomacy with regard to one country that he might have, or she might have, some day with another country. So I like that.

But I will say again, there was a reason for that. All these other countries you mentioned, none of them—none of them—by order of the leader of the country, killed, murdered two airplanes' worth of people. I think there were four people involved. These people were killed illegally. It violated the Chicago convention. Even if you believe that those planes were in Cuban airspace, which we believe they were not, they could not legally be shot down. Now, let's not—that changed everything. The deliberate decision to murder those people changed everything. And it made me wonder whether Mr. Castro was hoping we never would normalize relations, so then he could use us as an excuse for the failures of his regime. But we are where we are here.

What have I done? I was aggressively moving to implement the Cuban Democracy Act before that happened. Since then, we have done everything we could—and I noticed there was one article about it last week which pointed out how Secretary Albright had dramatically increased the people-to-people contacts and the travel to Cuba. We are doing what we can.

Obviously, I think that anything we can do to engage the Cuban people, to get them involved in the process of change, to get them to look outside the world, to get them to look beyond the present system they have, is a positive thing to do. And that's why I answered in response to that very first question, to evaluate the legislation in the House on the food and medicine sales, I've got to really have an analysis of it to say, will the restrictions and personal contact, which the legislation imposes—which I think are a mistake—

be outweighed by the increased sales of food and medicine, in terms of the ultimate benefit to the Cuban people. And I will look at it and see.

Yes, George [George Condon, Copley News Service].

Supreme Court Decision on Partial Birth Abortion

Q. Mr. President, does the closeness of today's abortion vote in the Supreme Court suggest to you that abortion rights are at risk in the next court? Or does it suggest that the fact that partial birth abortion can survive even a conservative court say that they aren't as threatened as some believe?

The President. Well, first, I think the court decision is clearly the only decision it could reach consistent with *Roe v. Wade*. So I think what you know there is that that's the vote for *Roe v. Wade*. You can't have a rule like the rule of *Roe* and then ignore it. So that's why—if you remember, on this late-term abortion issue a couple of years ago, I pleaded with the Congress to adopt a broad limitation on late-term abortions consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, but to make an exception for the life and health of the mother, as the Supreme Court decision required. They declined to do that, and so we've had a political impasse here, and then you've seen what's happened in all these States.

So the decision is, I think, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*. And as you pointed out, it was narrowly upheld. I think that's about what the vote for *Roe* is. And I think that in the next 4 years, there will be somewhere between two and four appointments to the Supreme Court, and depending on who those appointees are, I think the rule will either be maintained or overturned. And I think that it's very much in the balance, depending on what appointments are made in the next 4 years. That's what I believe.

Yes, go ahead, Larry [Larry McQuillan, USA Today].

Gasoline Prices and Energy Policy

Q. Mr. President, Governor Bush has been critical of you and the energy policy of the administration, saying that you've failed to adequately convince OPEC to increase oil production. He also claims that, if he became

President, he'd be able to use personal diplomacy to persuade allies, like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, to, I believe he said, turn on the spigot. Do you find that kind of claim realistic? And do you have any reaction to his criticism of you?

The President. Well, first of all, I have spent an enormous amount of time on this in the last several months, and there have been two decisions by OPEC to increase production—not as much as we would like.

If you look at the allocation of the production increases against the real capacity of those countries, most countries don't have the capacity to produce much more than their latest allocation, except for the Saudis. And it's clear that they were trying to maintain some sort of harmony within the OPEC family.

Let's go back. I think that these big increases in gasoline prices in America are the result, as I said, I think, several weeks ago, first and foremost, of the unfortunate decision of OPEC several months ago to cut back production at the very time the world economy was growing. They left production out there when the world economy sunk, which is one reason we had very inexpensive gas prices for a good period of time. And these two developments grated up against each other. So that's the first thing.

Then the second thing is, we had here, as you know, in America—so we had a tight supply situation. Then we had some broken pipelines, which interrupted supplies, which caused a temporary spike. And then in the Midwest we did have, apparently, some, but I think quite a modest, impact on prices because of the intersection of the clean air rules with trying to mix the fuels in a different way, particularly ethanol.

And I think what we have to do now is to keep doing what we can to get production up, to let this FTC investigation proceed. I think the gas prices have dropped 8 cents a gallon in the Midwest and, in the blended fuels area, 12½ cents a gallon just since the investigation was announced. But the main thing I would say to you is, we need a long-term energy strategy to maximize conservation and maximize the development of alternative sources of energy and also maximize domestic sources of energy.

Now, let me just mention two or three things—I've mentioned this before. The House, by the way, has reauthorized the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and I compliment them on that. That's a good thing. We also need a home heating oil reserve for the Northeast. We need to do that. That's very important. We ought to pass my proposal to provide tax credits to people who manufacture or buy energy-efficient homes, cars, and consumer products. That ought to be done. We ought to pass my appropriations to help develop alternative sources of energy and energy conservation technologies.

Since I've been President, or since '95, anyway, the Congress has approved approximately 12 percent of my requests, and the House voted to zero our participation in the Partnership for New Generation Vehicles. This kind of research is just as important as the human genome research in terms of the role of the Government in this. A lot of this basic research needs to be done by the Government. We can be driving cars that get 80 miles to the gallon through fuel cells, through electric cars, through natural gas fuel, a lot of other options, within a matter of 3 or 4 years if we'll just get after it and treat this like it's important. So I think that's very important.

Let me just mention one other thing. I think it's very important to pass a comprehensive electricity restructuring proposal, because they also, the electricity companies also—electric companies—use traditional fuels, and if we can reduce their reliance on it, obviously it will lower the price for other purposes. I think there's \$20 billion a year in savings to the American people through electricity restructuring, which is also quite important.

Yesterday the Vice President issued a number of other proposals, including what he said he felt should be done with some of the surplus, which dealt with energy efficiency in factories and power plants. And all the analyses there show that there are massive, massive savings there, again, which would not only cut their bills but by freeing up supply would lower the overall price of the fuel that we need.

So that's the system we need. We need to—it's all out there. It's not like we don't

know that these technologies are there. It's not like we don't know we have options for conservation.

Some of you were with me, I think it was 3 years ago now, when I went out to San Bernardino, California, to a stop on the rail line outside Los Angeles, to a lower income housing project where they promised 40 percent lower utility bills, using elemental solar reflectors that looked like just little shingles on roofs, better windows, better insulation. And I can tell you, after 3 years, the average utility bills are 65 percent lower than they would be for that kind of floorspace for those families in other places in California.

So it's out there. All we have to do is to make up our mind that we're going to accelerate this. That's what I think we should be doing.

Q. Mr. President, does that mean that Governor Bush is oversimplifying things when he points to places like—

The President. Yes, I think that it's a—we all rate our powers of persuasion differently, you know, and our powers of persuasion sometimes work when people's interests are involved and sometimes don't. But it's not just a question of how much oil is being pumped. And obviously, I have done what I could in the way I felt was most effective to increase production. I will continue to do that. But I think it's a simple answer to a complex problem and—although I saw that story that one of you put out about his 1992 letter in which he was arguing for high energy prices. So I'm glad that he's changed his position anyway. It's amazing how a few years will do that to you. So I like that.

Yes, John [John Harris, Washington Post].

Presidential Decisionmaking

Q. Mr. President, supporters of Vice President Gore have been fairly blunt in raising questions about whether Governor Bush has the knowledge and depth to be President. On the other hand, many scholars have noted that Ronald Reagan managed to be effective by concentrating on a few big ideas and leaving the details to others. In your experience here, how important is command of facts and plain old brainpower to being President? Are there other qualities that are more important? [Laughter]

The President. That's a dead-bang loser, isn't it? [Laughter] No matter what I say, I'm in a big hole.

Well, first of all, I don't think it's so much a question of intelligence, generically. I think it's more a question of curiosity and willingness to learn what you think is important, and learn—I guess—I think that no President can say, "Well, it should be enough for the voters if I get the best advisers in my party, and they come up with a position and I take it."

So what the voters will have to analyze here is, how important is the fact that Al Gore spent 20 years working on arms control issues, for example, and dealing with all these things. How much of an effort—see, I ran as a Governor, although I had been a Governor a lot longer—but how important is what you know, what you've learned in the job you've got?

And I think this is a question that's more readily addressed, really, to the candidates than to me. I'm a different person. Everybody's different here. So I always felt that I needed to know as much as I could, not so I could make decisions without experts and without advisers but so I'd be in the best position to evaluate the advice I was getting.

But it's very important for a President not to try to micromanage the Presidency. So what you try to do is to find a balance between—because it's a deciding job; it's a deciding job. And a lot of our Presidents, I think, have had some problems, not because they knew too much but almost because they worked so hard that they were so tired, they maybe couldn't make really good decisions when they were tired.

But I think what you know counts, because I think the more you know, the better position you're in, not only to draw your own conclusions but to take advice. And so, I think what—the best is a balance, obviously. It's like everything else in life; the best is a balance. The best is a President that's had broad experience and that knows a lot and that is curious—I think curiosity is profoundly important—but also a President who understands what the big, important things are and then can listen to the right people. You've got to have a blend of both if you

want to make the best decisions. That's my view.

Mark [Mark Knoller, CBS Radio].

Supreme Court Decision on Gays in the Boy Scouts

Q. Mr. President, what do you think of the Justice's ruling this morning that allows the Boy Scouts to bar gays as leaders? And if you disagree with it, can you justify your role as honorary president of the Boy Scouts, which discriminates against gays and atheists?

The President. Well, first of all, the Court's ruling, I noticed with interest—I haven't read it yet, but I did get a pretty good report on it—I noted with interest that they seem to go out of their way to draw the ruling quite narrowly and to limit it strictly to the question of whether the Boy Scouts could pick the people who were going to be Scout leaders.

I, generally—I have to tell you, I'm generally against discrimination against gays, and I think that the country has moved a long way. And I'm proud of the things that we've been able to do, and I'm disappointed we haven't been able to do more in some areas, but I think we're moving in the right direction. And I think that's all I should say. The Boy Scouts still are—they're a great group. They do a lot of good. And I would hope that this is just one step along the way of a movement toward greater inclusion for our society, because I think that's the direction we ought to be going in.

Go ahead, Jim [Jim Angle, Fox News].

Elían Gonzalez

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. As you know, the Supreme Court declined to intervene today either to stop Elían Gonzalez from leaving the country or to overrule other courts, all of which have deferred to your administration. As you look back on this—

The President. That's pretty rare, isn't it? [Laughter]

Q. As you look back on this, sir, do you have any sense, any regrets, at all about the way your administration handled this matter? And in light of what you've said about Cuba here today, sir, do you have any second thoughts about Elían returning to Cuba?

The President. Well, if he and his father had decided they wanted to stay here, it would be fine with me. But I think that the most important thing is that his father was adjudged by a people who made an honest effort to determine that he was a good father, a loving father, committed to the son's welfare.

And we upheld here what I think is a quite important principle, as well as what is clearly the law of the United States. Do I wish it had unfolded in a less dramatic, less traumatic way for all concerned? Of course I do. I have replayed this in my mind many times. I don't know that we had many different options than we pursued, given how the thing developed. But I think the fundamental principle is the right one, and I'm glad we did.

I was just in Germany, having a discussion with Chancellor Schroeder about some family reunification issues where we have serious differences with the Germans, who are our great allies, on this. And as I looked and reviewed some of these cases that I've tried to bring to the attention of the German officials, it made me even more convinced that we had upheld the proper principle here.

Yes, John [John King, Cable News Network].

National Missile Defense

Q. Mr. President, we hear increasingly from senior officials here and at the Pentagon that when it comes to national missile defense, you're inclined, essentially, to split the difference, authorize the contracting but leave the decision about whether to break from the ABM Treaty to the next President. Is that a fair reflection of your thinking?

The President. The most important thing I can say to you about that today is that I have not made a final decision, and that most of this speculation that is coming in the press is coming from people who have not talked to me about it.

Let me try to at least set up the thing, because I'm working hard on it now. Remember when we put out—when Congress passed a law about this a couple years ago, you remember, and we had to sort of come up with some timetables, I said two things that I want to repeat today.

First of all, insofar as there might be technology available which would protect us and other people around the world from missile attacks with warheads of weapons of mass destruction, obviously, anybody would have a moral obligation to explore that technology and its potential. I believe that.

Secondly, whether I would make a decision to go forward with deployment would depend upon four things: one, the nature of the threat; two, the feasibility of the technology; three, the cost and, therefore, the relative cost of doing this as compared with something else to protect the national security; and four, the overall impact on our national security, which includes our nuclear allies and our European alliance, our relationships with Russia, our relationships with China, what the boomerang effect might be about whatever China might do in South Asia, with the Indians and then the Pakistanis, and so on.

So what I have tried to do since then is to say as little as possible, except to explore what would have to be done in our relationships with the Europeans, our allies, and with the Russians, in the first instance, to keep our options open—could we get an agreed upon modification to the ABM Treaty.

Even the Russians—keep in mind, don't minimize—everybody talked about how we didn't reach an agreement, Mr. Putin and I, when I was in Russia. And that's absolutely true; we didn't. But we did get a document out of there which I think is quite important, because the Russians acknowledged that there are new and different security threats on the horizon; that is, that it's quite possible that in the next few years, countries not part of the arms control regimes of the last three decades could develop both long-range missile delivery capability and weapons of mass destruction which they could put on warheads, and that none of this would be covered by, essentially, the mutual deterrence structure of the ABM Treaty and all the things we've done since then.

So they recognize, too, that we, in the new century, in the coming decades, are going to have to make adjustments. Now, what they don't say is, they don't want America unilaterally building a missile defense that they think someday can undermine their deter-

rent capacity. That's kind of where they are now, and we're still talking about all that.

But John, the truly accurate thing is that I have not yet formulated a position which I am prepared to go to the American people with, but I will do so some time over the next several weeks based on those four criteria and what I think is the right thing to do.

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, last Monday the IRA allowed inspectors to come in and see caches of their weapons. Would you like to see the other terrorist organizations on the Protestant sides allow inspectors to look at their weapons? And are there any words that you could say to the people of Northern Ireland who are facing the marching season, other than Colonel Crowley's oft "peace is good" position—any personal—[laughter]—any words from the heart that you could ask as they approach this very tense time?

The President. You know, one of the hardest things I've had to learn in life is that not every cliché is wrong. [Laughter] Peace is good. Well first, I think it would be a good thing for all the paramilitary groups that have secret arms caches obviously to follow the lead of those who are doing what's been done. I think this is a great deal. I think this is a very, very hopeful development.

And it ought to inform the marching season—that is, if people are going to do their marches, ought to do it mindful of the context in which they're doing it and the diminished tension and the enhanced hope for long-term peace and the institutions working again, and all of that.

This is America. We can't say—anybody can march; anybody can talk; anybody can say whatever they want to say. But everybody ought to—what I would hope is that there will be a new sense of responsibility and a new sense of possibility in Northern Ireland because of these developments.

You know, there's been lots of work done now over the last several years on this. We've come a long way since the first talk of then Prime Minister Major and then Prime Minister Reynolds, and I think that the work, particularly the things that have been done, the commitments that have been made, and the

actions that have been taken in the last few months, they ought to be cherished by the people of Northern Ireland, and we ought to have a marching season that unfolds, I would hope to the maximum extent possible, in recognition of all we have seen.

Yes, ma'am.

Vice President Al Gore

Q. Mr. President, I'd like to know how you feel Al Gore is doing at being his own man. The reason I ask that question is so many of his policies seem to be extensions of your policies, and even last week in the handling of the renewed call for a special prosecutor, the press was full of reports of how his response was very "Clintonesque." So how do you think he's doing at establishing a sense of his own identity?

The President. Oh, I think he's done that very well. Let me remind you, when I asked him to become Vice President, there were some people who criticized me, who said what a dumb thing I did because we were the same age, we came from—although he never lets me say that; he's a year younger than I am, and looks much younger now because he has no gray hair—but anyway, that we came from the same part of the country, and we basically came from the same wing of the Democratic Party. But I thought I was getting good balance because he knew things I didn't know about arms control, energy, environment, the way Washington worked.

So it shouldn't surprise you that having worked here for 8 years, as we all have, that a lot of the new things he proposes would grow naturally out of what has been done, rather than being a departure from it. But I must say, I read quite carefully those proposals he made yesterday, and while he did incorporate a lot of what I have proposed on energy efficiency, he went way beyond anything I'd ever proposed, too. I was kind of sorry I'd never thought of one or two of the things that were in there.

So I think he's doing fine on that. I think that—if you just go back to the times when this has happened before to good effect and—if you go back to when President Nixon ran in 1960 or when Hubert Humphrey ran in '68 or when President Bush ran in '88, it's a gradual process. But then one day, it

reaches, in the words of that now-famous book that everybody is reading, it reaches a tipping point and people kind of get it, and they say, "Oh, there it is. There this person is." And I think that's happening with him. And I think after the conventions, it will be crystal clear. And the main players on the stage of American political life will be the two candidates for President.

Mara [Mara Liasson, National Public Radio].

Gasoline Prices

Q. Mr. President, the proposals that Vice President Gore laid out yesterday on energy and the proposals that you discussed today are all long-range solutions to the Nation's dependence on oil. In terms of the problems that drivers in the Midwest are experiencing right now, during the summer driving season, with high gas prices, what would be so bad about suspending gas taxes temporarily just to give those drivers a break?

The President. First of all—well, the Federal gas tax is not that big. Most of the gas taxes come from—are at the State level. But if it were done—and Congress debated this before—if it were done, they would just have to decide what they were willing to pay in terms of either the deferral or the cancellation of Federal highway projects. And that's—it's a tradeoff, and they would have to make that judgment.

It would—even there, it would take some time, and there was some question, as I remember, when it was raised before, whether all those price savings would be passed along to the consumers. So I think if the Congress was going to do that, they would want to have some assurance that that would be done.

But let me say, this is not such a long-term deal. First of all, the most important thing is to let the industry know we're running a serious investigation here—and I would remind you, gas prices have dropped 8 cents in the Midwest, a gallon, since we announced it, at the pump—more, much more, at the wholesale level—and the blended gas has dropped more than 8 cents a gallon. So let's not minimize that.

The second thing we need to do is to make absolutely sure that everything that can possibly be done to make sure the pipelines are

flowing properly and the refineries are working—that's done. You know, we had a small problem, you may remember, where I used the Strategic Petroleum Reserve recently because of a breakdown in supply available to a refinery in the South. So if I can find any other kind of backlogs like that where there is something I can do to get the flow going, I will do that as well.

But the most important thing I can tell you is, I think that this, as we get more production on line, this present price crisis will begin to abate. But we will have fundamentally higher prices, now that the rest of the world's economy has recovered, and now that virtually all of the OPEC members but Saudi Arabia are operating virtually at full capacity—until we make up our minds that we're going to drive higher mileage vehicles and do other things that use less oil.

And we are not talking about a long, long, long-term thing. You're talking about—a lot of these cars could be on the road and available for sale within 2 years—a lot of them. And it's just a question of whether we think it's a national priority, because—we've treated the human genome like a priority every year because we all want to live forever. And that's good. I'm not minimizing that. I'm not being flippant about that. We do. That's a good thing, not a bad thing. But we only get interested in this when the price of gasoline goes through the roof.

And this was inevitable. We were actually quite—I expected it was going to hit sooner, but the Asian financial crisis dropped it down. Now, they went up more than they should have and more than any of us anticipated, including me. And I think part of that is perhaps not justifiable, and that's what we're seeing—why we're seeing some price adjustments in the Middle West today.

But the only real answer for this is for us to develop alternative sources to oil and more efficient ways of using the energy we have. And we can do it in a hurry if we just put our minds to it.

Q. If I could just follow up on that. The Federal gas tax is 18 cents, which is not insignificant. Half of that was instituted originally for deficit reduction. Now that we don't have deficits and, in fact, we have record surpluses, what would be wrong with tempo-

rarily rolling back, say, 9 cents, or maybe even just the 4.3 cents that you instituted as part of your 1993 budget deal?

The President. Inherently, there's nothing wrong with it. But you would want to know two things: first of all, the Congress should be satisfied that whatever the financial consequences are to the highway construction and repair program are consequences they're willing to pay, and they think their constituents are willing to pay, number one. And secondly, they'd need some assurances that actually the people would benefit from it at the pump.

Deborah, go ahead [Deborah Mathis, Gannett News Service].

Post-Presidential Plans

Q. Sir, you know we're obligated to ask you about your post-Presidential plans just in case you've made a decision since the last time we asked you. [Laughter] I recall that many years ago, you were asked about, when you were still Governor of Arkansas, you were asked about your future political plans. And interestingly, you didn't mention the Presidency, but you did say that you had always wanted to be in the United States Senate. Is that on the table for you? Have you made any other decision that we need to know about?

The President. No. But let me remind you what the context—you go back and read that interview. I think you'll see what I said was, when I was a young man, I always wanted to be a Senator, and I never thought about being a Governor. But when I became a Governor, I found that I liked being an executive better than I liked being a legislator. And I still feel that way. I think—maybe I'll run for the school board some day. That's about the only thing I can imagine doing. I don't have any other plans. I just want to be a good citizen.

Go ahead, in the back.

Press Secretary Joe Lockhart. Last question.

Congressional Action on the Budget

Q. Republicans in Congress are seeking to pass the spending bills early this year, in an effort to get out of Washington and go

campaign in the fall. And yet, there are significant differences between what they want to spend and what you have proposed. I'm wondering, what do you see as the major points of disagreement at this time, and do you think that we're in for the same type of prolonged budget stalemate that had been featured in the past?

The President. That's entirely up to them whether we're in for the budget stalemate. But if you just—look at the education budget. I mean, how many times do we have to go down this road? You know, it's still not supportive of the 100,000 teachers and the smaller classes; it's still not supportive of the dramatic expansion in after-school programs, which is critical to school performance; still has nothing in there for school construction; still is inadequate in terms of my plan that people ought to either identify these failing schools and either turn them around or shut them down—and lots of other problems with the school program.

If you look at the crime proposals—this is unbelievable. When they wouldn't adopt the commonsense gun safety legislation, all I heard was this constant barrage about how, if only the administration would enforce the gun laws on the books, everything would be wonderful; we wouldn't have any problems in America.

So what I said, "Look, why don't we do both? We have increased gun prosecutions under my administration, but we can do more. So please, give me some more money for people to investigate gun crimes, for people to prosecute gun crimes, to develop safe gun technology"—this whole—it was nothing but a straight enforcement measure; exactly what they said they wanted, and no money for it.

Still no support for the 50,000 new police officers in the higher crime areas. And still the constant threat of these environmental riders, and underfunding of the land's legacy initiative, and a number of other things.

So we still have some serious differences. Now, we've been doing this every year since 1995; we just sort of slightly change the script every year. And I'm more than happy to do it again, because, frankly, in the end, we normally wind up with an agreement that's pretty good for the American people.

But the timing in which we do it—it depends more on them than me. I'm not going to give up my commitment to education as our most important domestic priority and what we're doing to build the future of our children. And I think—we've got the crime rate down now to a 25-year low; we can't stop the policy that works. And here I gave them a big proposal that is exactly what they say they want and believe in, and they don't want to fund that.

So we'll just have to see what happens. I'm kind of hopeful about it, though. It's just late June, here. This drama has several more acts before it's over.

Go ahead. We'll take one more. Go ahead, sir.

National Missile Defense/Korean Summit

Q. Mr. President, if I could return you to missile defense for a moment. The missile defense plan was based in large part on the threat from North Korea. You've now seen a first warming of relations between North and South. South Korea is not enthused about the missile defense plan. I'm wondering whether you now view it as urgent as you did—the threat as urgent as you did a few months ago. I'm also wondering whether you would be willing to meet with Kim Chong-il of North Korea?

The President. Well, first let me say, I got a report both from President Kim on the phone and from his representatives in person about the summit of the Koreas. And I thought it was a very, very important development and a great tribute to President Kim's vision and courage and persistence. And I also think it justified the American policy, which is that we would never allow ourselves to be put in the middle between the two Koreas, that we wanted them to meet and work together.

So we, I think, contributed to it; the Chinese and others did as well. I think this is good for everybody, and I'm encouraged by it. I'm also encouraged by the moratorium that the North Koreans have on testing. But they still have a missile program, and so it's still something that the United States has to be mindful of and to prepare to deal with and to keep up with. And of course, I hope

it will go away as a problem. I hope it for the people of North Korea, too.

All these countries that have a lot of people in great need that are spending vast sums of money on defense, it's one of the great tragedies of the world today. So, would I like it to go away? Of course I would. Do I think it's gone away because of this meeting? I don't. Do I think it might? It might, and I hope it will, but we don't know that yet.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 192d news conference began at 1:45 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; Ambassador Dennis B. Ross, Special Middle East Coordinator; Gary Graham, convicted felon executed in Texas on June 22; Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; Gov. George H. Ryan of Illinois; President Fidel Castro of Cuba; former Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy; former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry G. Cisneros; Juan Miguel Gonzalez, father of Elian Gonzalez; Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; Assistant Press Secretary for Foreign Affairs P.J. Crowley; former Prime Minister John Major of the United Kingdom; former Prime Minister Albert Reynolds of Ireland; General Secretary Kim Chong-il of North Korea; and President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea. A portion of this new conference could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Remarks at a Ceremony Honoring Presidential Scholars

June 28, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Please be seated. Welcome to the White House. I'm sorry it's a little rainy, but it's a nice place to hide from the rain.

We're delighted to be joined today by Representatives Jack Kingston, Carlos Romero-Barcelo, John Isakson, and Ken Bentsen. And I want to thank Deputy Education Secretary Frank Holleman for being here, as well as Chairman Tom Britton and all the members of the Commission on Presidential Scholars, and the members of the Presidential Scholars Foundation who are with us here today.

I have had the privilege of meeting with the Presidential scholars every year since I've

been in office. I always enjoy meeting you and your parents, your teachers, your loved ones. I want to congratulate each of you for working hard, for believing in yourselves, for achieving something very special, and for being in a position to play such a large role in our country's future.

I am especially glad that all you young people are here this week, because this is a week which has had a very large impact on the future that you will live. Just 2 days ago some of our Nation's leading scientists came to the White House to announce they had completed mapping the entire human genome, the very book of life. It's one of the most important scientific discoveries of all time. It will launch a new era of discovery that will revolutionize the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of most, if not all, human diseases, from Alzheimer's to Parkinson's to diabetes to cancer.

Then, we also announced this week that according to the latest budget projections, our budget surplus this year will be the largest in the entire history of the United States, \$211 billion. When I leave office, we will have paid down the national debt by nearly \$400 billion—[*applause*]—thank you; locked away the taxes the American people pay for Social Security and, I hope, for Medicare, for debt reduction over the next decade, and still leave the American people a projected surplus to be invested in the future of about \$1.5 trillion.

If Congress works with me, we can map a course to place our Nation in a position we haven't been in since 1835, an America entirely debt-free. We can do that by 2012. And it will change your future forever.

One thing that I've worked hard to achieve over the last 7½ years—and we've had a surprising amount of bipartisan consensus on this—is to extend the ability to go to college to more young Americans. We've established the HOPE scholarship; the \$1,500 tax credit for the first 2 years of college, which effectively makes community college free to most Americans; a lifetime learning tax credit, which has been very, very important for the last 2 years of college, for graduate school, for adult education. We've allowed families to save in education IRA's. We changed the nature of the student loan program to lower