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Finally, let me just thank all of you and the American people for giving Hillary, Chelsea, and me this incredible opportunity to share this joyous season and seven previous ones with you in the White House.

Thank you. God bless you. Merry Christmas.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:27 p.m. at the National Building Museum. In his remarks, he referred to Gerald M. Levin, chairman and chief executive officer, Time Warner, Inc.; George Stevens, Jr., executive producer, and Michael Stevens, producer, "Christmas in Washington;" actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, master of ceremonies; musicians Billy Gilman, Brian McKnight, Jessica Simpson, Marc Anthony, and Chuck Berry. "Christmas in Washington" was videotaped for broadcast at 8 p.m. on December 17.

Interview With Forrest Sawyer for the Discovery Channel

December 6, 2000

Mr. Sawyer. Good evening, Mr. President.

The President. Good evening.

Mr. Sawyer. Thank you for talking to us.

The President. Glad to do it.

Mars

Mr. Sawyer. Let us talk about Mars. It is much in the news right now, some new discoveries on Mars that suggest there is at least a real possibility that this was once, some good long time ago, a land of lakes. That puts it on the radar screen.

The President. Yes. All along, our people have thought there was some chance, based on other research that had been done, that there might have been some kind of life on Mars, at least for the last couple of years we've had some evidence of it.

Now, these new pictures that we've seen indicate that there might have been water there, quite near the surface, and much more recently than had previously been thought. So I think it's important that we continue our exploration, that we continue to take photographs, and that we keep working until we can set a vehicle down and get some things off the surface of Mars and bring it back home so we can take a look at it.

We had a couple of difficult missions there, but we learned some things from them. NASA was very forthright, and they came up with a new plan, and I think we should keep going at it.

Mr. Sawyer. The question is how you should keep going at it. As you mentioned, there had been a couple of losses, and that's been a hard public relations blow to get by. This new information at least raises what's going on in Mars, to the public's attention, a little higher. Do you continue more aggressively than you had before?

The President. Well, I think the NASA people will be the best judge of that, but they are and they should be committed to Mars exploration. They should continue to do more, I think, with the photographs. We should get as much information as we can from observation, in the greatest detail we can. And I think they should keep working on trying to get a vehicle to land on Mars that will be able to not only give us more immediate photographs but actually, physically get materials off the surface of Mars that we could then return to Earth. I think they should keep working on it.

Priorities for the Space Program

Mr. Sawyer. Look out a little further with me. You recall President Kennedy saying there should be a concerted effort to put a man on the Moon. Should there be a concerted effort to go that much greater distance and put humans—men and/or women—on Mars?

The President. I think it's just a question of when, not if. I think that now that we are committed to space exploration in a continuing way, now that we've got the space station up and the people there are working, and they're there 3 years ahead of the original schedule—I'm very proud of them—I think that what we should do from now on is to figure out how much money we can devote to this and what our most immediate priorities are.

The space station, I think, is going to prove to be an immense benefit to the American people and, indeed, to all the people of the world, because of the research that will go on there and what we'll find out. And so I think it's just a question of kind of sorting

out the priorities, and the people who will come here after me in the White House and the space people and, of course, the interested Members of Congress will have to make those judgments.

Possibility of Life in Space

Mr. Sawyer. Do you think there is life out there?

The President. I don't know. But I think the—what we know from Mars is that the conditions of life may well have, for some sort of biological life, may well have obtained on Mars at some point in the past.

Now, we know also that our solar system is just a very tiny part of this universe, and that there are literally billions of other bodies out there. And we're only now really learning about how many they are, where they are, how far away they are. And we can't know for sure what the conditions are on those bodies. We just can't know yet, but I think that we will continue to learn. And I hope we will continue to learn.

International Space Station

Mr. Sawyer. The International Space Station is not without controversy, and you have pushed hard for it. It is expensive. It is challenging. It is, in good measure, risky. Why do this project in this way?

The President. Well, first of all, it is expensive. It will cost us about $40 billion over about 10 years. That includes the cost to put it up, our part of the cost, and then to maintain our part of it over 10 or 15 years. But I think it's important for several reasons.

First of all, it is a global consortium. There are 16 nations involved in it, each of them making some special contributions. The Russians, for example have—because they had the *Mir* station and we conducted some joint missions to *Mir,* I think nine of them over the last 2 years and 3 months—have made it possible for us to expand the size of the station and the number of people we can have there.

I think that it's important because we can do a lot of basic research there in biology. We can see without the pull of gravity what happens with tissues, with protein growth. We've got a whole lot of things that we might be able to find out there that will help us in the biological sciences.

Secondly, I think we'll learn a lot about material science without gravity, how can you put different kinds of metals together and things like that. And the revolution in material science here on Earth is a very important part of America's productivity growth. It's just like our revolutions in energy that are going on now, our revolution in information technology. Advances we've made in material sciences are very important to our long-term productivity and our ability to live in harmony with the environment here.

Then there are a lot of basic physics things we're going to find out there. So I think the whole range of scientific experiments that we'll discover will be enormous.

Now, there are a lot of corollary benefits, too. When countries are working together, they're less likely to be fighting. And we've been able to keep literally hundreds of Russian scientists and engineers occupied who otherwise would have been targets of rogue states to help them produce nuclear or biological or chemical weapons or missiles or do some other mischief-making thing. So I think that's been a positive side effect.

But I believe in the potential of the space station, and I think that over the years we will come almost to take for granted a breathtaking array of discoveries, what they'll be beaming back to us.

Mr. Sawyer. The critics are saying, Mr. President, we've been doing work in weightless conditions for 20 years. This is not new. And when you take 16 nations, each one of them contributing a piece, this is enormously complicated; it makes it much more expensive; and frankly, for the astronauts, it can make it more risky.

The President. First of all, we're ahead of schedule. We're doing well up there, and we have never been able to keep people up, essentially, continuously. There were limits to our previous manned missions in outer space and the period of time in which weightlessness was available to them.

You're going to have now, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, 52 weeks a year, for more than a decade, to see this work done and develop. And I believe in its potential. The scientists who believe in it sold me a long

time ago, and I've never wavered in my belief that it's a good investment, and it'll pay back many times over what we're doing.

Mr. Sawyer. I think you said $40 billion for the United States part.

The President. But over 15 years, total.

Mr. Sawyer. Correct. And what the critics say, not the right calculations. In fact, all you have to do is look at the Russians right now, and they're not contributing what they were expected to contribute at all. And that could happen with the other nations, as well.

The President. It could, but I don't expect it will. What I think about the Russians is that as their economy comes back—and it's important to realize they went through a terrible, terrible economic crisis at the same time oil was less than half, almost a third of the price it is now—so I think as their economy comes back and they become more financially stable, I don't have any doubt that they'll pay their part.

Mr. Sawyer. Do you have any question in your mind about sharing technology with a nation that is certainly more politically unstable than we would like—and that includes sharing missile technology?

The President. Well, we try to have some restraints on that. But I think, on balance, the technology we're sharing up there, the benefits of it, the benefits of cooperation, the sense of the—what we get by working together and how much greater it is than what we get from being in competition with one another, I think makes it a good gamble. It's a good risk.

Future of the Space Program

Mr. Sawyer. Look down the road. What do you see the space program transforming to?

The President. Well, I think we will focus—I think we've already talked about it. I think there will be more and more focus on how we can do specific things with enormous potential in the space station. And I think there will be a lot of interest in Mars, in terms of exploration. And then with our powerful telescopes, I think there will be more and more emphasis on what's out there beyond the solar system.

Mr. Sawyer. And to those who say, AIDS, famine, the countless problems that array themselves before us right here on Earth, those billions of dollars are so precious to those problems—you say?

The President. I say, first, we should address those things. But the United States has tripled the money we're putting into international AIDS program; we pioneered for the last 2 years the largest international debt relief initiative in history. It's one of the finest achievements of this Congress that they embraced in a bipartisan fashion the legislation that I presented them on debt relief. We should continue to move ahead with those things.

But you almost take some of your wealth to invest toward tomorrow, the long-term tomorrow. And that's what our investment in space is. It's the investment in the long term. We have to know more about the universe, and we have to know more about what space conditions, particularly, the space station, can do to help us with our environment here at home, to help us deal with diseases here at home, to help us grow our economy here at home.

I believe this is an investment that has a return. And I feel the same way about other scientific investments. We've increased investment in basic science. You can argue that, well, it has a long-term payout; maybe we should spend something else on that. I just don't agree with that. I think you have to—societies have to take some of their treasure and invest it toward the long run. And that's how I view this.

Wilderness and Wildlife Preservation

Mr. Sawyer. Let's come back down to home, then. Earlier this week you set aside thousands of square miles of coral reefs off Hawaii, to be protected in perpetuity. And your administration is not yet over. Now, if my calculations are right, since 1996, you have 13 times established national wildlife protection areas. And you're considering some more?

The President. Yes, we have set aside more land, through legislation—we've established three national parks in California, the Mojave Desert Park. We saved Yellowstone from gold mining and saved a lot of the old-

growth forests, the redwood forest in California, and we're recovering the Florida Everglades over a multi-year period. We've basically protected more land in this administration in the United States than any administration since Theodore Roosevelt, about a hundred years ago.

So I think that's important. And the coral reefs are important because what's happening to the oceans as a result of global warming and local environmental degradation is deeply troubling, long-term, for everybody in the United States and everybody on the planet. Twenty-five percent of the coral reefs have been lost—are now dead. Over the next several decades, we'll lose another 25 percent of them within 20 to 25 years unless we do something about it. So that's why we moved there.

We did not end all fishing. We did not end all recreation. Indeed, we're preserving for the natives, the Hawaiian natives who live in that area and for those who come as tourists—leave live, vibrant coral reefs. But we had to protect them. And others will have to do the same thing.

We've got big challenges to the Great Barrier Reefs in Australia, big challenges to the magnificent reefs off the coast of Belize, and these are very important sources of biodiversity. So I'm glad we did it.

I'm looking at—I've asked the Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, to follow the same process we followed the whole time we've been here, to look at other potential areas for protection, make some recommendations to me, and we'll take one more look before I go to see if there's anything else I should do.

Mr. Sawyer. One of those areas he has just visited is a wide swath of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona——

The President. Yes.

Mr. Sawyer. ——which happens to be near a military bombing range.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Sawyer. Will you set that aside for protection?

The President. Well, I'm looking for a recommendation from Bruce on that, but I think there is a lot of support out there for that, across the board, members of both political parties and all the different cultures that make up Arizona. And we're trying to work through that, and there are some very compelling environmental arguments there. And when he gives me his recommendation, I'll make a decision. But we're both very interested in that, and of course, he's from Arizona, so he knows a lot about it.

Mr. Sawyer. The military wants its flying rights to continue, and you would approve that?

The President. We're working on that. I haven't made a decision yet. We've got to work through all that.

Mr. Sawyer. You know that a lot of folks are talking about the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Sawyer. Some suggest that you could, by executive fiat, establish it as a protected site from oil drilling. Can that be done?

The President. It is. As a national wildlife refuge right now, oil drilling is not legal there. There are some people who believe if I were to make it a national monument, as I have created national monuments, for example, and a million acres around the Grand Canyon to protect the watershed area there, that it would have extra protection.

Now, as a legal matter, I don't believe that's right. That is, there is nothing to prevent Congress from specifically authorizing drilling either in a national wildlife refuge or in an arctic national monument. That is, I don't think—sometimes I don't think people understand that in order to have drilling there, I believe legislation is required, regardless.

So there may be some other reason to establish some part of the National Wildlife Refuge as a national monument, because it would have other beneficial impacts during the time a monument existed. And of course, it depends in part on what happens in the ultimate resolution of this election, because one of the candidates, Vice President Gore, is against drilling; the other, Governor Bush, is for drilling.

But he would still have to get some legislative acquiescence or approval of drilling even if it's a national wildlife refuge, just like it is now.

Mr. Sawyer. Will you consider making the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge a national monument?

The President. I have not made a decision on that, but I will just say I do not believe that the drilling issue should be the determinative factor, based on the research I've seen so far. I don't think it has—in other words, I don't think that it would make it any harder to pass an act of Congress. And I think that as the land is now, it would still require an act of Congress.

So I'm not sure that that should be the determinative factor. There may be other reasons to do it, and as I said, I'm going to talk to Secretary Babbitt, and we'll look at what the arguments are.

Mr. Sawyer. May I ask how many other areas you are considering?

The President. I think there are three or four or five that we've been asked to consider by people around America or things that we've been interested in. We always like to get out and talk to the local people in the communities and see what the arguments are, pro and con.

Mr. Sawyer. Which one stands highest on your radar screen?

The President. I don't want to talk about it until I can give the recommendation. No point in stirring everybody up unless we're going to do it.

Technology in the Future

Mr. Sawyer. High tech underpins all of this. And we've been going through a bit of a resettling period here. It's been a tough, tough time.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Sawyer. Look out. How do you see that happening?

The President. Well, I think the future is still quite bright. I know that a lot of the dot-com companies have been up and down, just like biotech companies go up and down. But that shouldn't be surprising, because a lot of these companies don't make money in themselves, that they really have value, inherent value for what they can do and how they might someday add to some other enterprise. So that shouldn't surprise people.

But I think that the continued explosion in information technology and in biotechnology is inevitable. I do believe that the vagaries in the market should strengthen the resolve of Members in Congress of both parties who care about science and technology to keep up the basic research budget.

For example, one of the things I have fought very hard for is a lot of investment into nanotechnology, or super, super microtechnology, because, among other things, it will enable us to have computer capacity the size of a supercomputer some day on something the size of a teardrop.

I have a piece of nanotechnology in my office. It's a little outline of me playing the saxophone that has almost 300,000 elements in it, and it's very tiny. So I think that—what does this mean to real people? It means that if you take nanotechnology and you merge within it the sequencing of the human genome and the ability to identify defective or troubled genes, what you're going to have before long, I think, is the ability to identify cancers when they're just several cells in the making, which—and if you could do that and you develop the right kind of preventive screening, you can make virtually 100 percent of cancers 100 percent curable.

Mr. Sawyer. For any of these things to be accomplished, Government has to function and function well.

The President. Yes.

Resolution of the 2000 Presidential Election

Mr. Sawyer. And we are living in an extraordinary time. As you look forward, whoever becomes President, is that President running the risk of not being considered legitimately the President of the United States?

The President. Well, I think—first of all, it's a difficult question to answer, because it depends on how this plays out. If the Vice President is elected, there will always be some Republicans who don't believe he should have been. If Governor Bush is elected, there will always be some Democrats who believe that Al Gore not only won the popular vote in the country but also had more people in Florida who wanted to vote for him, and perhaps more who did, which is—one good argument for counting all the so-called undercounted ballots and all the

punchcard counties is trying to help resolve that.

But once we actually get a determinative decision, that if it is in accord with our Constitution—and the Constitution, you know, our Founders foresaw close elections and tough fights, and they have prescribed all kinds of ways to deal with it. Back in 1800, we had 36 ballots in the House of Representatives before we resolved it. And it produced Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Jefferson turned out to be successful because he was mindful of how divided the country was. He served two terms. He retired in honor. A member of his party succeeded him, served two terms; a member of his party succeeded him and served two more terms.

So then, in 1876—nobody ever really quite felt good about it—the President who won didn't run for reelection, and then everything was sort of up in the air for a while. So I think that you cannot predict how this is going to come out. I think it depends a lot on whether the constitutional system is followed, the will of the people is determined, and then it depends on how people behave once they get in office.

Prospects for the 107th Congress

Mr. Sawyer. I think what a lot of people are worrying is that it's very difficult to determine what the will of the people is when the country appears to be divided right down the middle and, in fact, Congress is divided right down the middle.

The President. That's right.

Mr. Sawyer. And we have the Democrats on one side saying, "What we really want when we have a 50-50 split in a Senate is cochairmen, and we want an equal split of everything." And the Republicans are saying, "Not on your life." Now, that looks to me to be a recipe for gridlock.

The President. Well, it depends. You know, I'm leaving the budget in pretty good shape, and they're going to ride up the surplus a little bit, although they should be cautious about that, because, again, these surplus numbers are 10-year numbers, and I always believe in taking them with a grain of salt.

Our success here these last 8 years has been based in no small measure on being conservative on economic forecasts and trying to make sure we had the numbers right. And I personally believe that America is best served by continuing to pay the debt down. I know it's not as appealing as having a bigger tax cut now or having the money go to—all to some spending program or whatever. But I think that if you keep paying that debt down, you're going to keep interest rates lower than they otherwise would be, and that's money in everybody's pocket—business loans, car loans, home mortgages, college loans, credit card payments—and it keeps the economy stronger.

But still, even if they do that, they'll still have money for a tax cut; they'll have money to invest in education; they'll have circumstances that will argue for cooperation rather than conflict after the election.

Mr. Sawyer. Your worst critics admire your political acumen. When you look at what's happening in Congress right now and the pushing and shoving that's going on, where is the resolution? How do you resolve the Democrats saying, "I want cochairmen" and the Republicans saying, "It's not going to happen"?

The President. Well, of course, if all the Republicans vote together, they can stop it, because they'll have—if the Vice President is elected President, then Senator Lieberman leaves the Senate and his Republican Governor appoints a Republican Senator, and they have a 51–49 lead. And then it will be a more normal circumstance. If Governor Bush is elected, and then all the Republicans vote with him, with Vice President Cheney, they could vote 51–50 for whatever system they wanted.

But since in the Senate it only takes 41 votes to stop anything except the budget, that's a difficult sell. Now, Senator McCain said today that he thought there ought to be sharing. And I think—all I can tell you is, I think the country would like it. The country would like to see that one House of the Congress shared the resources, even-Steven, and shared the responsibilities. Somebody could chair a hearing today; somebody else could chair it tomorrow, because as a practical matter, to pass any of these bills, they're going to have to have broad bipartisan cooperation anyway.

And I think that it—we know that there is kind of a dynamic center in America that has the support of two-thirds of the American people, and if they could reach out for that in the Senate, it might be quite exciting.

Now, it's also going to be interesting in the House. The House is more closely divided. Now, there will only be, depending on—I think there are one or two recounts still going on in the House, so there will be, in effect, a three- or four-vote difference in the House—margin. And they need to decide whether that's going to change their rules any, because individual House Members or even our whole caucus in the minority, no matter how narrow the minority, very often cannot affect a rule. So in the House, debate tends to be cut off much more. So they're going to have to think, should they change the procedures in the House as well, at least—not necessarily to have cochairmen, because they do have a narrow majority in the Republican Party, but at least to have the opportunity for more options to be considered.

It's going to be quite challenging. But I wouldn't assume it's going to be bad because they do have more money. They have a strong economy, and if they keep paying the debt down, it will keep going for some time to come, I think.

Election Reform

Mr. Sawyer. Let's look at what we've learned from this extraordinary period. Should we now consider voting reform, looking at these machines, looking at the vote count?

The President. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. For one thing, even—I was impressed—I didn't know very much—I'm probably like most Americans; I didn't know very much about some of this beforehand. When I voted absentee most of the time I was here in the White House, from Arkansas, instead of a punchcard system, we had a system with an arrow by every choice, and you had to take a pencil and fill in the arrow. There was a gap in the arrow, and you had to fill it in. So it was much less subject to misinterpretation. I didn't know what a butterfly ballot was until this happened.

And I think—the question I think is, can we find a way to both simplify the ballot but also feel good about the return? For example, in northern California this year, in a county there was an experimental computerized voting system, where you punched on a screen the person you were for, and it would say, "You have voted for Ralph Nader. If that's correct and that's what you meant to do, punch 1," and you punched 1, so it had a guarantee. None of these 3,400 predominantly Jewish voters that now think they voted for Buchanan—or did vote for Buchanan, who apparently meant to vote for Vice President Gore—you couldn't have that happen there.

The only question I would have with that is, every computer from time to time goes down, so you wouldn't have any error in the voting there like you did with the 19,500 double-punched ballots in Palm Beach County or the 10,000 African-Americans who apparently were told they had to vote on two pages, and then they wind up voting for some of these minor Presidential party candidates they never even heard of and didn't know what they were doing, so that's 10,000 more votes out the window that were lost. You could probably fix that with electronic voting.

Then the question would be, what are your assurances that the count won't be lost if the computer goes down? In other words, there may not be any perfect system, but it seems to me that—I think particularly troubling to people is the evidence that's come out that these punchcard systems where there was most of the trouble had a plastic coating underneath, rather than the original sort of spongelike design which would have made it much easier to pierce all the way through—that they tended to be in the counties that had lower per capita income voters, and therefore, the people that maybe needed to vote the most, that we've always tried to bring into the political system, lost their votes because of a flaw in the system. That's tragic, and we can't let it happen again.

It's interesting. But the only thing that bothers me about the northern California system is—I think you can probably design it, but to have the confidence in the voters—because every system has to be subject to a recount at some point if it's a close enough

election. Even a computerized system has got to be very hard—like in Canada—of course, they only have 30 million people in Canada, but in Canada, interestingly enough, they all still vote with paper ballots, and they have like 100,000 counters, so they count all the ballots within an hour of the polling close, even though they're all paper ballots.

Chretien was just here. He played golf with me over the weekend. And I said, "Don't you all vote with paper ballots?" He said, "Yes." And I said, "How did you count them all?" He said, "We have 100,000 counters." He says, "Every community has equal—all the parties are represented, and then there's sort of a judicial overseer type. And we all sit there and look; everybody can watch everybody else; and you just count the ballots right away." It's interesting.

Mr. Sawyer. You are an advocate of high-tech. You are an advocate of applying science to technology and applying that to our lives. Should that not also be applied to the way that we choose our representatives?

The President. Yes, I think anything that increases the likelihood that a legal voter will have his or her vote counted in the appropriate way should be done. Anything that increases the likelihood that every legal voter will actually fully understand the ballot and not make the wrong choice by accident should be done. And as I said, this new system that we see, that was used in northern California, which is rather like the systems that some companies have—if you order things over the Internet now, some of them have not one but two different checks, where you have to say not once, but twice: Yes, this is what I ordered; this is what it cost; this is what I know. If you can simplify the voting that way, that would be good.

The only question I have is, what do you do if the computer goes down, and how do you know for sure that no votes are lost, so that there has to be a recount, you know that the tabulation is accurate, because that's also very important? You're never going to have a time in America where we're never evenly divided over something. So anyone who runs for office ought to have access to some sort of legitimate recount if it's very tight or if it's a dead-even vote. But I think that, surely, a lot can be done to make sure that no one ever goes into the polling place in a national election with ballots as confusing and as subject to error as we've seen here. I think that the system has got to be cleaned up.

You just think how you'd feel if you were one of the people who had lost his or her vote. We have a lot of friends with kinfolks down in Florida who think they may be some of the people whose votes were wrongly cast. And they are sick—sick, sick. So you don't want that to ever happen again.

Science and Technology Accomplishments

Mr. Sawyer. Mr. President, we're talking about science and technology. And your administration is coming to a close. In years to come, looking back, how would you like the administration to be remembered in this area?

The President. First, I would like to be remembered for a serious commitment to pushing America forward and keeping us on the forefront of science and technology in two or three areas. We reorganized and revitalized the space program, kept it alive, and kept it moving. We had a very serious attempt to deal with the climate change in the development of alternative energy sources and conservation. We finished the sequencing of the human genome and began to work on its practical implications. We worked on—that's what the whole nanotechnology issue and all that. And fourthly, that we worked on information technology and tried to make sure it was democratic—small "d"—with the Telecommunications Act, the E-rate, hooking the schools up to the Internet, so that—and finally, that we dealt with the scientific and technological implications of national security—biological warfare, chemical warfare, cyberterrorism—that we prepared America for those things.

I think that will be our legacy in this area.

Mr. Sawyer. Mr. President, thank you for talking to us.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:30 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House for later broadcast, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 11. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime

Minister Jean Chretien of Canada; and Republican Presidential candidate Gov. George W. Bush and Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks on the Childhood Immunization Initiative and an Exchange With Reporters

December 11, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. And let me say, I took a lot of pride, just listening to Mrs. Carter speak here. She seemed right at home.

When Hillary and I moved into the Arkansas Governor's mansion in 1979, Betty Bumpers began her lifelong campaign to wear me out about immunizations. [*Laughter*] And I reminded Rosalynn that it was in 1979 or 1980 that we actually did an immunization event in the backyard of the Arkansas Governor's mansion. I can't remember whether it was '79 or '80 now, but it was, anyway, a year or 2 ago.

So I can't thank these two women enough for what they have done. And I was marveling, when Mrs. Carter was going through all those issues, at just how well she knows and understands this issue. So I'm very grateful to both of them, because we wouldn't be here today if it weren't for them.

I also want to thank Secretary Shalala and Secretary Glickman and, in her absence, Hillary. They have worked very hard on this for the last 8 years, and we have made some remarkable progress.

I want to recognize also Dr. Walter Ornstein of the CDC and Shirley Watkins of the Department of Agriculture, who will be very active in the steps that I'm going to announce today.

I think it's worth noting that we're meeting in the Roosevelt Room, which was named for our two Presidents and Eleanor Roosevelt. And Franklin Roosevelt spent almost half his life in a wheelchair as a result of polio. And I was part of the first generation of Americans to be immunized against polio.

And I remember, as a child, seeing other children in iron lungs. And I remember what an enormous elation it was for me and my classmates when we first got our polio vaccines, to think that that's one thing we didn't have to worry about anymore. It's hard for people now who weren't alive then and weren't part of it to even imagine what that meant to a whole generation of children. But it was profoundly important.

We now know that vaccines save lives and agony. They also save money. They're a good investment. And we have done what we could, over the last 8 years, to make sure that our children get the best shot in life by getting their shots. And we have, as Rosalynn said, made progress.

In 1993 almost two out of five children under the age of three had not been fully vaccinated. And Secretary Shalala and Hillary and the rest of our team went to work with the Childhood Immunization Initiative to improve immunization services, make the vaccines safer and more affordable, and increase the immunization rates. We enacted the Vaccines for Children program to provide free vaccines to uninsured and underinsured children. And thanks to the work of people in this room and people like you all across America, these rates, as Mrs. Carter said, are at an all-time high. And the incidence of diseases such as measles, mumps, and rubella are at an all-time low.

In recent years, we've been able to say that for the first time in our Nation's history, 90 percent of our children have been immunized against serious childhood diseases. And just as important, vaccine levels are almost the same for preschool kids across racial and ethnic lines. So our children are safer and healthier.

But as has already been said today, there is still a lot to do. At least a million infants and toddlers are not fully immunized. Too many children continue to fall victim to diseases that a simple immunization could have prevented. Low-income children are far less likely to be immunized. In some urban areas, for example, immunization rates are 20 percent below the national average.

In Houston, just 63 percent of low-income kids are vaccinated. In Detroit and Newark, it's 66 percent. And we know areas with below-average immunization rates are at greater risk of potentially deadly outbreaks, such as what we saw with the measles epidemic in the early eighties—the late eighties.