

Remarks on Welfare Reform and an Exchange With Reporters January 27, 1995

Murder Trial of O.J. Simpson

The President. Is everyone in? This is a big pool today.

Q. The O.J. trial is not on—

The President. The O.J. trial hasn't started yet today, has it? Thank goodness it's in California or you all wouldn't pay any attention to what we're doing. *[Laughter]*

Q. Have you been watching it?

The President. I've seen a little of it. I saw a little of the argument last night.

Welfare Reform and the Economy

I think all of you know, as I said in my State of the Union, perhaps the most important legislative issue Congress will take up this year is welfare reform. And I strongly believe we have to end the welfare system as we know it. Tomorrow I'm having a working session with Members of the Congress, with representatives of State and local government.

But I wanted to begin this process by meeting with four people here who made the decision to choose work over welfare. I thank these women for coming in to meet with me, and I thank them for the work they've done to make the most of their own lives.

When we meet tomorrow, we need to be mindful of how this system has worked, what works about it, what doesn't work about it, what the human impact's going to be, and how we really can foster work and independence and good parenting. And that will be the focus of our discussion today and the focus of our discussion tomorrow.

One other point I'd like to make is that today we had the economic report on 1994, and we see now that last year we had the strongest economic growth in 10 years and the best combined rates of high growth and low inflation in 30 years. So we're moving in the right direction—or, 25 years. We're moving in the right direction.

And as we take up these decisions in the Congress over the budget and over the things that we are going to do, I would say we have to keep in mind that the most important social program is a job. And the most important thing that we can do to get to the New Covenant

of more opportunity and more responsibility is to make sure as we are working to legislate and to create more responsibility at the grass-roots level, we also keep opportunity in mind. And so we've got to keep the economic recovery going. We've got to pass responsible welfare reform. And those are the two things that I want to emphasize today.

Q. Mr. President, what worries you about some of the welfare remedies that are being proposed by Republicans in Congress?

The President. Well, some of them seem to say that we should cut people off of assistance without regard to what will happen to their children and without regard to whether they will have an opportunity to get the skills they need to move into the work force. And I think that's the thing that bothers me most of all.

The other thing I wanted to do is to make sure that as we give more responsibility to the States, which is something I strongly support—we've given two dozen States permission to get out from under Federal rules and regulations to try their own remedies; no one of us has all the answers to this; nobody does, otherwise the problem would be solved—but I want to make sure that we do not do it in a way that strongly disadvantages some States and helps others. I think we have to be fair to all States. Not every State at every point in time in the future will have the same percentage of its citizens eligible for welfare.

The third thing I want to point out is, I think it's important that we do not forget that a lot of people who go on public assistance will only do it one time in their lives and do it because they hit a bump in the road—they have a marriage that breaks up, they lose a job, they have some personal misfortune. They're there for 4 or 5 months, 6 months, and then they get off. Their lives are stabilized; it never happens again. I think as we try to deal with the problem of long-term welfare dependency, we shouldn't forget and we shouldn't do anything that unduly burdens the people that never were in danger of being long-term welfare dependent but do need some short-term help.

Those are the three things that bother me most as we get ready to go into this debate.

I think that there is a genuine consensus across party lines, regional lines, income lines, racial lines that we ought to promote work and education and responsible parenting. I just want to make sure we don't fall into those other traps.

Q. Mr. President, what do you think of the balanced budget?

Q. Would your plan cost more at the beginning, though?

The President. The plan I presented last year cost somewhere in the beginning—I think we underestimated the savings. The more you invest in putting people to work, the quicker you will reduce long-term taxpayer costs. The more people are put into the work force, even if you have to spend some money to do it—for example, we gave Oregon permission to take the welfare checks and actually use it by giving it to employers as a wage supplement. They wanted to try it, and we said, “Have at it.” I’m going to be very interested to see whether that works. Maybe a lot of States will do that. The Government can’t afford a lot of public service jobs. Maybe the answer is to let the welfare checks go as employer supplements, to pay those wage supplements.

But the point is that however we do it, the more we focus on work and giving people a living wage and an opportunity to work, the better off we’ll be. That’s another good argument for raising the minimum wage.

Balanced Budget Amendment

Q. Mr. President, what do you think of the House passing the balanced budget amendment? Are you for it?

The President. I’m glad they adopted the Stenholm amendment.

Q. Are you?

The President. Absolutely, it makes the bill much better. I still believe that if it’s going to be presented to the country, they ought to tell the country what’s involved—what’s involved. Let’s have—there’s a right to know here. I’m all for open Government, and I think there’s a right to know what is involved. Let the people know what is involved, both in the short run what will have to be cut and what, if any, downsides there are, what’s going to happen when we get into a recession, how will that be impacted? The people need more information about this before the legislators vote on it. If it’s going to be sent out there, there ought to be a cover sheet showing how it would be done.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House, prior to a meeting with welfare recipients. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks to the U.S. Conference of Mayors *January 27, 1995*

Thank you very much. I’m delighted to be here. I see that half of the Cabinet is here. I guess they’ve already answered all your questions, solved all your problems. Now they can come solve ours. [*Laughter*]

Mayor Ashe and distinguished members of the organization, I’m delighted to see all of you. Is Mayor Grant from East Providence here? Your wife told me this was your birthday. Happy birthday, happy birthday. Just wanted you to know I was checking up on you. [*Laughter*]

Let me begin by saying congratulations to all of you on the overwhelming passage of the unfunded mandate legislation by the Senate today, 86 to 10 the bill passed. I have not had a chance

to look at the final version of the Senate bill. It just passed a little while ago. But I know some very good amendments were added, and I want to congratulate Senator Glenn and Senator Kempthorne. We worked very hard on this bill last year, and I was sorry we didn’t pass it then. Both of them did very, very good work. And I believe the bill is a very strong one as it goes to the House. But I have not seen its final form, but I heard it was in good shape. And it must have been pretty good if it passed 86 to 10. And I think that should be reassuring to you; it certainly is to me.

I want to thank you for the resolution you passed on the baseball strike and the action