

Remarks to Senior Citizens at St. Monica's Episcopal Church January 5, 1996

Well, let me first thank Father Darko for his comments and for the work being done here at St. Monica's Church. I was hoping he'd say something—I've never seen a preacher pass up a podium. [Laughter] And I'm glad he didn't. [Laughter]

I want to thank the Friendship House for the leadership shown in being a true friend to our seniors. I want to thank all of you especially for working for this Meals on Wheels program. And I want to thank all of you for making me feel so welcome—me and, of course, the members of our administration: the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Glickman; the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary Shalala; Assistant Secretary Fernando Torres-Gil. And of course, we're joined here by Senator Leahy and by Congress—from Vermont, he came all the way from Vermont. And those that—he brought his wife with him, and she's a nurse. So if I get sick she can help me get out of here. [Laughter]

I'm delighted that Mayor Barry joined us, and it's good to see you in good health, Mayor. And I want to say a special word of thanks to Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton for the brilliant job she's done in sticking up for these programs in the Congress. I want to thank this fine couple that run this program here for the work they have done.

And I want to say a word of thanks especially to the folks who sat at my table and talked to me about this program and about Medicare and about what all is going on. I got a pretty good education. [Laughter] And I think most of what they said to me is true. Now—but the lady sitting next to me, she swears that she is 93 years old. [Laughter] You know, usually when somebody doesn't tell the truth about their age, they're kind of turning it low. But I'm not sure she didn't exaggerate a little bit. [Laughter] She looks awful young to me. And I thank you so much.

I know all of you know this, but all across this great country of ours, there are seniors like you and others who depend upon meals like this that are federally funded. In one year alone, more than 230 million of these meals are served to seniors all across America. And for a lot of seniors, this is the only really good, warm, nutri-

tious meal they get every day. Now, these meals are one of the things that are threatened by the shutdown that was forced by the Republicans in the House of Representatives.

This strategy has been abandoned, I want to say, by the Senate Republicans led by Senator Dole, and was never supported by the Democrats in the Senate and the House. And I want to thank all of them for not supporting that. And I understand that there are others in the House among the Republicans who may want to abandon it or change it.

But unless we do something within days, the regular Federal funds for the senior meals program, including the Meals on Wheels, could dry up. State and local charities all across America are stepping in to help in some cases, but the future of these meals programs could be at risk, and that would literally be a disaster for the lives of a lot of senior citizens in America. And we cannot allow that.

Where I can, as all of you know, I have acted in this crisis to keep services going to the American people. And today I am going to take some action that will keep providing food to these senior centers even if the Congress doesn't correct the problem today. I agree with Father Darko; this is not a politically sensitive program. This is a people program. It shouldn't have anything to do with politics. This has been a program that people in both parties have supported, and it ought to be again.

But in the event that Congress does not fix this problem, I am instructing the Secretary of Agriculture to provide temporary funding to help these centers continue to serve meals. And they have—Secretary Glickman can explain to the press later—they have some money that can be put into this meals program to keep it going for quite some time, to make sure that you don't get caught up in this, and we intend to do it.

We've been able to do some other things like this. We got some money through the low-income heating assistance programs to some of the States that are having such a cold winter, where there are a lot of seniors and some younger people who are living in homes that are poorly heated and without a little extra help

would have a hard time dealing with this cold winter.

But I want to make it clear that even if we can solve this problem for an extended period of time, there are some problems that cannot be solved unless the Government is just opened back up. All the furloughed employees—we have one furloughed Federal employee here—they ought to be brought back to work, and those that are working ought to be paid. The services that they are instructed to provide that we all agree are going to be provided when we get a final budget agreement ought to be provided. This has never been done before in the history of the country, and we shouldn't continue to do it now.

This shutdown is hurting people in every State in America. And as I said before, there are some things that I can do to help, like the heating assistance program or like keeping this Meals on Wheels program going. But some of these things require action by Congress. Now, today they said, as Father Darko said, that they might bring the Federal employees back and they might pay them but not let them do very much. And they might continue some of the so-called politically sensitive programs. I don't want to minimize that. That is a step in the right direction. Better to have this than not; that is a step in the right direction.

But you should also know that there are now 20,000 young people who have applications for home mortgages in to the Federal Government who can't close those mortgages because of this shutdown. And they may lose those homes, their chance to buy a home. There are I think now \$40 million—\$40 million in small business loans held up, because the Small Business Administration guarantees those loans, that would prevent people from starting their businesses and hiring people. And we need more small businesses being started. We need to create jobs for our people.

There are any number of toxic waste dumps that large numbers of American children live near that ought to be cleaned up. And all the cleanup work has just been stopped in neighborhoods all across America.

Now, this is wrong. It's wrong. And it amounts to cruel and unusual punishment, not only for all the people who need these services but for all the rest of the people in this country who pay the taxes for them. They are not getting

what they paid for, and the people are not getting the services that have been authorized.

I want to say again this—this is one of the things that came up at our lunch when one of the folks at the table said, "I thank you for standing firm"—this shutdown does not have anything to do with balancing the budget. I have pledged to the Republicans—I gave my word, and I was raised in an old-fashioned home in an old-fashioned time, maybe, but I still think when you tell somebody you're going to do something, you ought to do everything you can to do it. That's the way I was raised. I gave them my word I would work with them to pass a plan which would bring our Federal budget into balance in 7 years, according to the estimates of the Congress. I gave them my word I would do that; I have been doing that.

The last time there was a crisis like this the Government didn't shut down, but there was a budget crisis about 5 years ago and the President at that time was involved in those negotiations for about a half an hour. I have spent days and days and days working with the leaders of Congress, and I will do it some more. I was ready yesterday. We missed a day yesterday.

But this threat of the shutdown—as much as I hate to see people furloughed, as much as I hate to see people working and not getting paid, as much as I hate to see these young people not getting their homes and these businesses not being funded—we've even got businesses that have jobs that depend on their getting permission from the Government to sell their products overseas, and they can't get permission. They may have to lay people off when they could be hiring people.

I hate to see all that. But that cannot affect a single, solitary decision I make on what kind of a balanced budget plan we're going to have. Because that's this year and now, but if we're going to make plans for 7 years I have to know that if we're going to balance the budget, we are going to protect the Medicare program, the Medicaid program, the education of our children, the environment that we all share, and that we're not going to raise taxes on the hardest pressed working families.

Now, we can balance the budget and protect all that. And that's what I'm trying to do. And I am behaving in these negotiations exactly as I would be behaving if the Government was running and if you didn't have to think about the Meals on Wheels program and if nobody

was being furloughed. But I want you to know, as much as I hate to see these problems, I cannot change a single, solitary decision I would make, because you don't want me to make a bad decision for the long run because of a problem we've got in the short run.

So the time has come to stop playing politics with this. Let's do what our country has always done: Let the Government go on and perform its basic services, and let's get back to work. Every day we miss in these negotiations is a day we're putting off balancing the budget. Let's just go back to work, roll up our sleeves, balance a budget, but do it in a way that protects the fundamental interests of the American people. That's what I'm trying to do.

And I hope by coming here today—and I not only got a very good meal—[laughter]—and had a lot of conversations. Lots of days I just eat lunch alone at my desk. I had much more fun today than I normally do. [Laughter] But I hope we will send a message across this country that this is a good and worthy program. And if the House of Representatives votes to put it back into funding today, we will applaud them and give them a pat on the back. But we want to go all the way. We shouldn't have any of the essential functions of Government shut down.

You know, those young people ought to be able to get loans to start their businesses. Those

folks ought to be able to get permission from the Government to sell our products to foreign countries. We're all buying things from other countries here every day. We ought to be selling our things overseas. And those young families that are having a chance because interest rates are low to move into homes for the first time, they ought to be able to do it. We should not leave this work undone.

So again I say thank you. If you need it, we're going to provide the money to keep the Meals on Wheels program going. And we will be there. But I think what we all want is for our country to stop—stop all this political squabbling in Washington, put all the partisanship aside, and get back to the work of balancing the budget in a way that protects our obligations to our parents and our children and to the future of this country.

We can do this. This is a very great country. This is hardly the biggest problem we ever faced. We can do it, and do it right if we'll do it in the kind of spirit that I have felt in this room today.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:34 p.m. in the Rectory Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. Daniel Darko, pastor, St. Monica's Episcopal Church, and Mayor Marion Barry of Washington, DC.

The President's Radio Address *January 6, 1996*

Good morning. Today I want to talk with you about the great debate on the budget. This debate is not just about abstract numbers, and it certainly goes far beyond party politics as usual. It is instead about vital principles and momentous issues for our country. We're addressing profound questions about what kind of country we are and what kind of country we're going to be, about what we owe to each other and what we owe to our children and to America's future. These questions have dominated our politics for quite a long time now. And now it is decision time, time to move beyond arguments and come to conclusions.

For 3 weeks, the Federal Government has been shut down because Republicans in Congress refused to enact legislation to keep it open. This shutdown has had a real and unfortunate impact on the lives of millions of Americans. Now, I'm pleased to report that Congress has acted to bring Government employees back to work and to reopen most services to the public. This sets the stage for constructive, honest, and focused discussions on how to balance the budget while remaining true to our values and true to our future.

America is at a crossroads. One path leads to continual partisan conflict, where nothing is ever really resolved and each decision simply