

The White House,
September 26, 1996.

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Remarks on the Middle East and an Exchange With Reporters *September 26, 1996*

The President. Good afternoon. I'd like to say a few words about the situation in the Middle East. I deeply regret the injuries and the loss of life we've seen in the West Bank and Gaza in the last few days. It points to the urgency for both sides not only to end the violence but to take positive steps to resolve the issues that divide them.

Over the past 24 hours we have been in constant touch with the Israelis and the Palestinians. Our message to them is this: It is in everyone's interest to resolve their differences peacefully, to work together on security, and to avoid any actions that could make progress on the peace between Israelis and Palestinians more difficult.

The events of the past 2 days stand out precisely because we have made so much progress toward peace in these past few years. Violence was becoming the exception, not the rule. The overwhelming majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace, and they have been doing the hard work to build it.

So again, let me say: I ask both sides to end this violence, to get back to the business of peace, to implement the agreements they've reached, to resolve their differences through negotiations.

Q. Mr. President, are the Israelis wrong to open this tunnel? It seems like to some people it may have been really a provocation.

The President. Let me say, I have said repeatedly, and I would like to just repeat what I have said consistently: I think that all the parties should avoid any actions which are likely to undermine the progress of the peace. And now, the important thing is to end the violence and to get back to implementing those peace agreements.

Wolf [Wolf Blitzer, Cable News Network].

Q. Do you think, Mr. President, the Israelis should seal up that tunnel since that seems to have started this chain of events?

The President. What I think is, they need to end the violence, and they need to discuss these matters between them, and they need to

ask themselves, all of them do: What can we do to avoid unnecessarily provocative actions?

Let me also say to you that in a larger sense, what is important is that some progress be made on the issues that are the subject of the agreement. Now, we were supposed to have talks begin again this week to resolve those larger issues, and I had hoped that those talks—and I had some indication, some reason to believe that those talks could lead to some concrete progress which would diminish these tensions instead of seeing them aggravated.

So all I can tell you today is, I hope again that everyone will heed our position, which is to do nothing that will provoke a disruption and instead to get back to the talks and to the business of resolving the differences.

Q. Mr. President, have you spoken with Chairman Arafat or Prime Minister Netanyahu, and what have they told you?

The President. Secretary Christopher has talked with Prime Minister Netanyahu more than once, and we have been in touch several times with Chairman Arafat through the channels that we always use, through our team there, to talk with him, and I have had extensive and regular reports over the last 2 days about this.

So we are working with them, and we are working with them to try to work this out to restore order and peace, and then to get on with the talks. We are prepared to do anything we can that will be of assistance, and I've made that clear, that I personally was prepared to do anything I could. The Secretary of State has worked hard on this. He's done a fine job as always in these matters. And I've been kept completely informed by him of everything that is going on. So, we're working hard.

Q. Mr. President, do you have any plans to talk with Prime Minister Netanyahu today?

The President. You know, he was in Europe, and he cut his trip short to go back to the Middle East, which I think was a very good thing for him to do. And when I come back from the Hill today, I'm going to get another

update, and then we'll make a decision about what's the most helpful thing I can do. I'm certainly prepared to put in whatever time and effort I can on this to be a constructive force. That's the most important thing.

Thanks.

Q. Have you offered to send a U.S. delegation over there if that's necessary, sir?

The President. Well, I think—let me just say—I would say on that—let me give you the same answer I did before to the other question. I'm going to be guided very heavily by Secretary Christopher's advice on that.

We are watching these events as they unfold, trying to keep up with them, trying to do what we can to have a constructive impact. And after

I talk to him, if he believes that's the right thing to do, then that's something I would consider. But I do not—I want to do what will be constructive. I do not want to do anything that will not be helpful.

So, we're going to talk again today and see where we are and then see what the next step should be.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:45 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House, prior to his departure for Capitol Hill. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel.

Remarks on the Legislative Accomplishments of the 104th Congress and an Exchange With Reporters

September 26, 1996

The President. Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President. Let me join the Vice President in thanking Senator Daschle and Congressman Gephardt for their strong leadership in this session of Congress. Here at the end we have had a real spate of positive legislation coming out: improving our environment through safe drinking water and the pesticide protection act; health care reform; reforms in the pension systems for people who work for small businesses; the raise in the minimum wage. This has been a remarkable, remarkable last few days, and these leaders have worked very hard to gather support for this legislation and to work in a constructive manner with those in the Republican majority.

But they have also done something else. They have protected Medicare, Medicaid, education, the environment, workers' pension funds, the earned-income tax credit for hard-working people and still continued to work toward a balanced budget, and I came here to thank them for that. I believe the American people want a Congress that will fight for the interests of working families, expand education opportunities, balance the budget in the right way and never, ever shut the Government down again. And I am committed to that; I know that they are.

Let me say that the strategy we have been pursuing for 4 years now is clearly working. The strategy of opportunity for all, responsibility from all, and a community which includes all people who are willing to do their part is plainly working. We not only have 10½ million jobs, the lowest unemployment rate in 7½ years, 4 years of declining deficits for the first time since before the Civil War so that now we've got a 60 percent reduction, but we saw the census numbers.

You heard the Vice President's headlines. Let me read you what today's headlines should be: Typical household income up \$898 in 1995, after inflation; family income up over \$1,600; since our economic plan passed the interest rates dropped and the economy started to grow. The largest decline in income inequality in 27 years—the largest decline in income inequality in 27 years; the largest decline in the number of Americans living in poverty in 27 years. These are remarkable turnarounds from a condition that many people thought was inevitable—from the American people growing apart, now we're growing together as we work together.

We had the biggest drop in the poverty rate in over a decade, the lowest poverty rates ever recorded for African-Americans and for senior citizens, the biggest drop in child poverty in