

Statement on U.S. Sentencing Commission Action on Penalties for Drug Offenses

April 29, 1997

I commend the Sentencing Commission for moving forward with recommendations to Congress to reduce the disparity between crack and powder cocaine penalties. My administration will give them very serious consideration. I have asked Director McCaffrey and Attorney General Reno to review the recommendations and to report back to me in 60 days. I look forward to working with the Congress on this issue.

In October 1995, I signed legislation disapproving the Sentencing Commission's recommendation to equalize penalties for crack and powder cocaine distribution by dramatically reducing the penalties for crack. I believe that was the wrong approach then and would be the wrong approach now.

Current law creates a substantial disparity between sentences for crack and powder cocaine. This disparity has led to a perception of unfairness and inconsistency in the Federal criminal justice system.

The sentencing laws must continue to reflect that crack cocaine is a more harmful form of cocaine. The Sentencing Commission's new recommendations do so. Trafficking in crack, and the violence it fosters, has a devastating impact on communities across America, especially inner-city communities. Any change in penalties must ensure that more dangerous offenders receive tougher sentences.

As I have stated before, however, some adjustment to the cocaine penalty structure is warranted as a matter of sound criminal justice policy. Federal prosecutors should target mid- and high-level drug traffickers, rather than low-level drug offenders. An adjustment to the penalty scheme will help ensure this allocation of resources and make our Federal efforts in fighting drugs more effective. That is why the legislation I signed directed the Sentencing Commission to undertake additional review of these issues and to report back with new recommendations.

I am also pleased that the Sentencing Commission has increased penalties for methamphetamine offenses pursuant to the legislation which I signed into law last year. This law asked the Commission to toughen penalties on this emerging drug to prevent the kind of epidemic we saw in the 1980's with cocaine use. We will carefully study these new penalties.

My administration has fought to stop drug abuse and its destructive consequences. Overall, drug use in the United States has fallen dramatically—by half in 15 years. And cocaine use has dramatically decreased since the high point in 1985—the number of current cocaine users is down by 74 percent over the last decade. While these are encouraging figures, I am fully committed to doing more to keep bringing drug use down—particularly among our children.

Remarks Prior to Discussions With President Jose Aznar of Spain and an Exchange With Reporters

April 30, 1997

President Clinton. Well, let me begin by welcoming President Aznar and his group of leaders from Spain. Spain has set an example for the world now for quite a few years in its transition to a remarkable and healthy and vibrant democracy, which produced your recent election, and has been a very valuable ally and partner of the United States in Bosnia and now in Guatemala and, of course, is going to be the host

of our summit on NATO in July. So we're looking very much forward to being there. And we appreciate you very much.

Yes, we have our fingers crossed. [*Laughter*]

Budget Agreement

Q. Have you got a budget deal, Mr. President? And why did Chelsea pick Stanford? [*Laughter*]