

country, and we'll respect your faith, we'll respect your differences, and we'll find a way to work together, then I believe the preeminence of the United States will be assured throughout the next century. And I think you have to think about it in long terms like that.

What causes a society to rise and fall? We clearly are proving that we're getting back to our basic values. The crime rate is going down. You saw the—has gone down now for several years in a row for the first time in 25 years. We have inequality among working people going down—and I'm very proud of that—for the first time in 20 years. We have a lot of our other social problems being ameliorated, the teen pregnancy rate dropping substantially for the first time in a good while. Drugs, alcohol, tobacco are still a problem for very young people. Drug use is going down in society as a whole but still going up among young people.

So we're on the cusp here, maybe, of turning a lot of our social problems around. We know what we ought to do. Can we do it in the right way, in a spirit of reconciliation? And can we recognize that in this exciting new world there's no way in the world for us to know the answer to all these questions that are out there before us?

And that's the last point I'd like to make. If we do things in the right way, we'll get enough of the right answers to keep moving our country forward and to keep doing the right thing for the rest of the world. And we won't be right all the time, but that's just because

we're human. So that's the last thought I would like to leave with you.

The beginning of wisdom, I think, is humility and respect for what you may not know. Now, we were talking around the table here about the last speech Cardinal Bernardin gave in which he said that the precious gift of time should not be wasted on acrimony and division. And he said that knowing he just had a little bit of time left. The truth is, all of us just have a little bit of time left. He just knew it, and we don't. And 3 weeks or 30 years, it's a little bit of time in the life of a country, the life of the world.

So I say to you—I ask for your guidance, for your prayers for our country, for the efforts that all of us are making. I ask for your specific involvement, particularly in the two issues I've mentioned, on the welfare and immigration issues. But most important of all, I ask for your help in creating a sense of reconciliation, the right sort of spirit in which we can deal with these issues. As people of faith on this Epiphany, I think we should all ask that that be made evident to us.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:59 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. Robert G. Stephanopoulos, Holy Trinity Cathedral, New York, NY, who gave the invocation, and the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, former Archbishop of Chicago.

Remarks on Receiving the Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses and an Exchange With Reporters

January 7, 1997

The President. Thank you very much to Dr. Lashof and the members of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Illnesses; Secretary White; Secretary Brown; Secretary Shalala; Deputy Director Tenet. I'd like to say a special word of thanks to Dr. Jack Gibbons for the work that he did on this. I thank Senator Rockefeller, Senator Specter, Congressman Lane Evans for their interest and their pursuit of this issue, and all the representatives of the military and veterans organizations who are here.

I am pleased to accept this report. I thank Dr. Lashof and the committee for their extremely thorough and dedicated work over 18 months now. I pledge to you and to all the veterans of this country, we will now match your efforts with our action.

Six years ago hundreds of thousands of Americans defended our vital interest in the Persian Gulf. They faced a dangerous enemy, harsh conditions, lengthy isolation from their families. And

they went to victory for our country with lightning speed. When they came home, for reasons that we still don't fully understand, thousands of them became ill. They served their country with courage and skill and strength, and they must now know that they can rely upon us. And we must not, and will not, let them down.

Three years ago I asked the Secretaries of Defense, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs to form the Persian Gulf Veterans Coordinating Board to strengthen our efforts to care for our veterans and find the causes of their illnesses. I signed landmark legislation that pays disability benefits to Gulf war veterans with undiagnosed illnesses. DOD and VA established toll-free lines and medical evaluation programs.

I am especially grateful to the First Lady who took this matter to heart and first brought it to my attention quite a long while ago now. I thank her for reaching out to the veterans and for making sure that their voices would be heard.

To date, we have provided Gulf war veterans with more than 80,000 free medical exams. We've approved more than 26,000 disability claims. HHS, DOD, and the Veterans Department have sponsored more than 70 research projects to identify the possible causes of the illnesses.

But early on, it became clear that answers were not emerging fast enough. Hillary and I shared the frustration and concerns of many veterans and their families. We realized the issues were so complex they demanded a more comprehensive effort. That is why, in May of 1995, I asked some of our Nation's best doctors and scientists, as well as Gulf war veterans themselves, to form a Presidential advisory committee that could provide an open and thorough and independent review of the Government's response to veterans' health concerns and the causes of their ailments.

Since that time, we have made some real progress. The Department of Defense, with the CIA, launched a review of more than 5 million pages of Gulf war documents, declassifying some 23,000 pages of materials and putting them on the Internet. Through this effort, we discovered important information concerning the possible exposure of our troops to chemical agents in the wake of our destruction of an arms depot in southern Iraq.

The committee made clear and the Defense Department agrees that this new information

demand a new approach, focusing on what happened not only during but after the war and what it could mean for our troops. Based on the committee's guidance, the Department of Defense has restructured and intensified its efforts, increasing tenfold its investigating team, tracking down and talking to veterans who may have been exposed to chemical agents, and devoting millions of dollars to research on the possible effects of low-level chemical exposure.

I'm determined that this investigation will be comprehensive and credible. We haven't ended the suffering. We don't have all the answers, and I won't be satisfied until we have done everything humanly possible to find them. That's why I welcome this committee's report and its suggestions on how to make our commitment even stronger. I also take seriously the concern regarding DOD's investigation of possible chemical exposure. I'm determined to act swiftly on these findings not only to help the veterans who are sick but to apply the lessons of this experience to the future.

I've asked the Secretaries of Defense, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs to report to me in 60 days with concrete, specific action plans for implementing these recommendations. And I am directing Secretary-designate Cohen, when confirmed by the Senate, to make this a top priority of the Defense Department. I'm also announcing two other immediate initiatives.

First, I've asked this committee to stay in business for 9 more months to provide independent, expert oversight of DOD's efforts to investigate chemical exposure, and also to monitor the Governmentwide response to the broader recommendations. The committee's persistent public effort has helped to bring much new information to light, and I have instructed them to fulfill their oversight role with the same intensity, resolve, and vigor they have brought to their work so far. Dr. Lashof has agreed to continue, and I trust the other committee members will as well.

Second, I'm accepting Secretary Brown's proposal to reconsider the regulation that Gulf war veterans with undiagnosed illnesses must prove their disabilities emerged within 2 years of their return in order to be eligible for benefits. Experience has shown that many disabled veterans have their claims denied because they fall outside the 2-year timeframe. I've asked Secretary

Brown to report back to me in 60 days with a view toward extending that limit.

And we will do whatever we can and whatever it takes to research Gulf war illnesses as thoroughly as possible. Every credible possibility must be fully explored, including low-level chemical exposure and combat stress.

I know that Congress shares our deep concern, and let me again thank Senator Specter, Senator Rockefeller, and Congressman Evans for being here. Caring for our veterans is not a partisan issue. It is a national obligation, and I thank them for the approach that they have taken.

As we continue to investigate Gulf war illnesses, let me again take this opportunity to urge the Congress to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention which would make it harder for rogue states to acquire chemical weapons in the future and protect the soldiers of the United States and our allies in the future.

This report is not the end of the road, any more than it is the beginning. We have a lot of hard work that's been done, and we have made some progress, but the task is far from over. The committee's assessment gives me confidence that we are on the right track, but we have much yet to learn and much to do.

As we do make progress, we will make our findings public. We will be open in how we view Gulf war illnesses and all their possible causes, open to the veterans whose care is in our hands, open to the public looking to us for answers. I pledge to our veterans and to every American, we will not stop until we have done all we can to care for our Gulf war veterans, to find out why they are sick, and to help to make them healthy again.

Thank you very much.

Q. Mr. President, this has been studied to death. Do you believe that there is a Gulf war illness?

The President. I believe that there are a lot of veterans who got sick as a result of their service in the Gulf. And I leave it to the experts to determine whether there is one or a proliferation of them and exactly what the causal connec-

tions were. That has been apparent for some time. That's why the Congress agreed to support our efforts that for the first time gave disability payments for people with undiagnosed conditions.

But let me say that I think that this committee has done a good job. I think—I want to compliment the work that has been done in the last few months by John White in the Defense Department in facing up to the things which were not done before. No one has ever suggested that anybody intentionally imposed—exposed American soldiers to these dangers, and there is nothing—there is no reason that anyone in this Government should ever do anything but just try to get to the truth and get it out and do what is right by the veterans.

And there are also—I think we need to be a little humble about this. There are a lot of things that we still don't know. That's what Dr. Lashof said. And that's why these research projects are so very important.

And the final thing I'd like to say is we don't know all the answer here. You heard that—Dr. Lashof said that sometimes, when people are exposed to substances that can cause cancer, it may not be manifest for 10 years, which is why I want to thank Secretary Brown for urging that we scrap the 2-year rule. We have to be vigilant about this. And my successor will be working on this. We will be monitoring this for a long time to come.

But we've got a process now the American people and the veterans and their families can have confidence in. We've got the appropriate commitment of personnel and money. And more important, we've got the appropriate commitment of the heart and the mind. And I'm convinced now that we will do justice to this issue and to the people that have been affected by it.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Joyce Lashof, Chair, Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses.

Jan. 8 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1997

Message to the Congress Transmitting the Report of the Department of
Housing and Urban Development
January 7, 1997

To the Congress of the United States:

Pursuant to the requirements of 42 U.S.C. 3536, I transmit herewith the 31st Annual Report of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which covers calendar year 1995.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,

January 7, 1997.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 8.

Message to the Congress Transmitting the Report of the Department of
Energy
January 7, 1997

To the Congress of the United States:

In accordance with the requirements of section 657 of the Department of Energy Organization Act (Public Law 95-91; 42 U.S.C. 7267), I transmit herewith the Annual Report of the Department of Energy, which covers the years 1994 and 1995.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,

January 7, 1997.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 8.

Message to the Congress Transmitting a Report on Hazardous Materials
Transportation
January 7, 1997

To the Congress of the United States:

In accordance with Public Law 103-272, as amended (49 U.S.C. 5121(e)), I transmit herewith the Biennial Report on Hazardous Materials Transportation for Calendar Years 1994-1995 of the Department of Transportation.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,

January 7, 1997.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 8.