

Interview With Tavis Smiley of Black Entertainment Television August 4, 1997

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, thanks for joining us. I'm glad you could take some time to talk to us today.

The President. Glad to do it.

Balanced Budget Act of 1997

Mr. Smiley. Thank you. Let me start by asking you whether or not—let me rephrase that. I know I'm preaching to the choir when I tell you that African-Americans still lag far behind white Americans in every single leading economic indicator category. As you well know, some of your African-American critics have accused you, so to speak, of talking the talk but not walking the walk when it comes to your budget priorities. I'm wondering specifically what's in this budget that you're set to sign tomorrow, I suspect, specifically for African-American families that will help them shrink that economic gap.

The President. Well, there are several things. Let's look at a few of them.

First of all, this budget has \$24 billion in it for health insurance for families, for children, for families of modest means—disproportionately minority families. We're talking about people here who are working for a living but don't make much money, don't get health insurance for their children at work, but aren't poor enough to be on Medicaid. And it's the biggest expansion of health care for needy people since Medicaid passed in 1965—the single biggest one.

Second, the bill has a \$500-per-child tax credit that goes even to working families that get the earned-income tax credit, that is, that make modest incomes, that make under \$30,000 a year, which are the vast majority of African-American families—have children in the home—police officers, nurses, firefighters, folks like that, they'll get \$500 a year per child.

Third, this bill has the biggest increase in spending for education from Head Start through college since 1965, in over 30 years, and the biggest increase in help for people to go to college since the GI bill passed 50 years ago, the biggest increase in Pell grants in over 20 years—and that's going to really help—college tax credits, all kinds of other financial provisions to help people to go to college.

Fourth, the bill remedies everything I promised to fix in the welfare bill. It restores benefits to legal immigrants who are hurt through no fault of their own. It keeps children who are no longer classified as disabled eligible for Medicaid. It expands food stamp benefits to single men who are looking for work. It provides \$3 billion to the cities, to help the cities put people who are on welfare to work.

And finally, the bill has a huge, broad array of economic incentives for people who invest in the inner cities. It triples the number of empowerment zones. It more than doubles the funds for community development banks to loan money to people who start businesses in the inner cities. It provides tax incentives and other investments to clean up 14,000 so-called brownfield sites in urban areas that are otherwise attractive for development but have environmental problems.

So it's a stunning budget. It's been at least 30 years since a budget this good for working Americans, lower income Americans, and minority Americans has passed.

Welfare Reform

Mr. Smiley. My time with you is limited, and there is so much I want to talk to you about, but let me follow up very quickly if I can. Since you mentioned welfare, I suspect tomorrow around here at the White House there will be handshakes and smiles tomorrow as the Republicans and Democrats come together to watch you sign this bill. But I'm wondering what specifically you're going to do to follow up on what the Republicans have already threatened to do; that is to say, they want to, on Wednesday, I suspect, come after you in terms of gutting the welfare provisions that you insisted be a part of this bill. They specifically do not want to pay minimum wage to welfare workers who you want to move from welfare to work. How are you going to deal with what their next strike is going to be? And they've already indicated what it is.

The President. Well, I think some of them are upset because of the stories which indicate that we got about a 100 percent of what we were looking for out of this budget. But they got what they wanted. They got a capital gains

and the changes in the estate tax and things of that kind.

I believe that everybody who works ought to get the minimum wage. And I'm going to hang tough, and unless they can get enough votes to override a veto, then the people that go to work are going to get the minimum wage. I don't think there's a problem with that.

Now, to be fair, they say that the Governors are saying that some employers, even community nonprofits, which you might consider liberal employers, are reluctant to hire people off welfare who may be hard to place and may have—take time to train, if they also have to pay all the accompanying costs of employment like the unemployment tax and the Social Security tax and all of these other taxes. And they say they're looking for help on that. Well, I expect we'll have some dialog about that, but I simply don't think that they ought to be able to take the minimum wage away from working people. I just don't.

President's Advisory Board on Race

Mr. Smiley. You've said, and you've of course undertaken—put together a commission to undertake getting this country to have a conversation about race, the issue that you've called America's constant curse. In the first public meeting of your race commission, a small dispute erupted in that the commission Chairman, Dr. John Hope Franklin, and commissioner Angela Oh, a Korean-American commissioner from Los Angeles, had a dispute about what the focus, what the mission, the work of the commission ought to be. Dr. Franklin believes that the focus and the mission ought to be around the black-white conflict, which he sees as the nucleus for every other race problem this country has endured and continues to endure. Angela Oh, commissioner Oh suggests that the work of the commission really ought to be about multiracialism and multiculturalism.

As the leader, the President who put this commission together, what kind of leadership are you going to provide? How are you going to get them on the right track? If the commission can't have a clear-stated mandate, how do we talk about it as a country?

The President. My sense is that the division was not as great as it appeared. First, I agree with John Hope Franklin that if you don't understand the black-white issue, you can never understand how race works in America. If you

don't understand the history and if you don't know what the facts are now, you can never understand the rest. And I think that's really the only point he was making, and I think that's important. I think we have to deal with our unfinished business, if you will.

There are some other issues. If you don't understand that Mexican-Americans first came to this country, if you will, by annexation because of the war we had with Mexico, it's hard to understand the unique history of the United States with its Mexican-American population. But there is something special about the whole legacy of slavery and all of that, and we have to understand that. So I agree with that.

On the other hand, I also believe that one of the most important things this commission can do when there is no riot in the cities, when there is no real social dislocation, when unemployment is coming down and incomes are finally going up again, and we seem to be making some progress on crime and other issues, I think that it's time that we say, Gosh, we're going to be in this new century in only 3 years; within 5 years, California will have no majority race; within 30 to 40 years, the United States will have no majority race. What does that mean? What do we want America to look like in 35 years? How are we going to get along? How are we going to avoid these problems that have so bedeviled other countries when they didn't have a majority race, these tribal fights in Africa or the religious-based conflicts of the ethnic groups in Bosnia? Or what's going on in the Middle East; how are we going to get around that?

I think that if we think about it now and we sort of make it a part of our project as we start the new century and we kind of empower our young people especially to talk about it and work through it, my guess is that when we do become the first truly multiethnic, multi-racial democracy in the world, it will turn out to be a huge advantage for us, a huge advantage, because of the global society we're living in, as long as we say we respect, we even celebrate our differences, but we're still one America. I mean, that's the trick. And I think that ought to be the future focus of this.

Affirmative Action

Mr. Smiley. You mentioned California. As you well know, you gave a race relations speech at UC-San Diego. And as you probably know, 200

African-Americans have applied to med school in San Diego; none were accepted. In Texas, at the University of Texas, admissions of African-American students are down 26 percent. It's an ugly picture, and I can make it uglier if I had more time, but I won't do that. But the question I do want to ask is—

The President. They shouldn't have passed that 209.

Mr. Smiley. I totally agree with you on that. The question I want to ask is, there is a bill that's pending in the Texas Legislature that suggests that if scores—test scores are going to be the sole criteria for all students being admitted to college, why not include athletes in that regard? I'm wondering how you feel about that. I actually think it may help the Razorbacks, because the kids that can't go to school in Texas may go up to Arkansas. [Laughter]

The President. What a low blow. [Laughter]

Mr. Smiley. Well, no, I just—it may help the program. But what do you think about including athletes, though, seriously?

The President. I think if you did it, people would bring back affirmative action. I mean, that would make the point. I couldn't help thinking, when they explicitly excluded athletes, that you could have, let's say, an Hispanic young athlete who was a C student out of high school get in the best university in the State, and another young Hispanic who was an A-minus student in high school that wore Coke-bottle glasses and was an academic, who couldn't get in. I mean, the whole thing is bizarre. It's all mixed up.

Mr. Smiley. You think it ought to include athletes?

The President. Well, I think universities ought to have a right to develop their athletic programs, but I think that it is ridiculous to say that a great university needs to have different academic standards for athletics so you can have diversified athletics but doesn't need a diversified student body when it comes to race and ethnicity. I think it's just an absurd argument. It is completely absurd, I think.

So I would say you've got to—you can pick one. You can have it one way or the other, but you can't have it both ways. That's kind of what I—it's like these people who put this together saying, "Well, if these folks can entertain us, we'll let them come to school. But if they're not entertaining to us, never mind that

they're going to be a big part of our future; they can't come to school." I think it's a mistake.

Of course, I believe—I don't think there was ever a constitutional problem with affirmative action in college admissions and professional school admissions, as long as no one who was unqualified—that is, someone that clearly couldn't meet high standards and couldn't do the work—was admitted, because there are measures other than test scores and grades which are pretty valid indicators of whether people can do good work in high-quality institutions. And you want the students themselves to have valid experiences when they're going through school.

And I personally believe, since we're going to live in a multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious society, if I were running a private university, I'd certainly want one to be like that. And I think it's a cruel irony that in some of these States they seem to be moving toward putting it all on the private universities to have a diverse student body, at least in the graduate level.

Now, Texas is trying to overcome this now with their so-called 10 percent solution—you may know about that—saying that anybody who graduates in the top 10 percent of any high school can go to any State university. The problem with that is it doesn't deal with the professional schools, number one, and number two, it might work for Texas because of the racial distribution of people throughout the State in high schools. It wouldn't necessarily work in other States. I think—you know, my own view is we need an effective, constitutional affirmative action program.

Cocaine Sentencing Guidelines

Mr. Smiley. Let me get to a couple of other quick areas before my time runs out here. You recently recommended—your administration recommended that the disparity between the crack and cocaine—powder cocaine sentencing be reduced from 100 to 1 to 10 to 1. I'm wondering, why not 1 to 1? And apparently the CBC, the Congressional Black Caucus, was quite upset that they were not consulted before that decision was announced. Your thoughts?

The President. On the second issue, I don't know about that, and I was surprised because I had just had a very long meeting with the Black Caucus in which we'd gone over a huge number of issues. And we had given them good followup on everything, and I was personally

stunned to understand that they had not been consulted on this. And I found that hard to believe. What I think happened was someone involved in this in one of those departments leaked the decision before it was ripe to be made and kind of cut off all the consultations before it got in the newspaper. That's not an excuse. We should have done better.

Now, on the merits, let me say, we came to 10 to 1 for two reasons. One is all the senior people at the Justice Department and in the office of drug control believed that there had to be some difference because of the difference in violent crime associated with powder and crack. None of them believe that the 100 to 1 was justifiable. They all thought it was totally unconscionable. And they all thought it ought to be reduced dramatically. So they recommended 10 to 1.

Secondly, prison sentences are longer than ever now. And it was—the conclusion was reached that if they recommended anything lower, what Congress would do in reaction would be to try to raise the minimums for everybody and leave everyone worse off. And so I think we need to take a hard look at that Federal prison population anyway to see whether there are too many nonviolent offenders in there. And I think this should be viewed for just what it is, a major step forward. Let's see. Hopefully, we'll be permitted to implement it, and if we are, we'll see if it works.

Slavery and Reparations

Mr. Smiley. Your challenge to America to have a conversation about race has certainly spun off a number of conversations, including conversations about slavery and reparations. And I'm wondering whether or not, since you've had more time to reflect, you think an apology to African-Americans is warranted. And more specifically, what do you think of at least having a commission to study the feasibility of reparations, regardless of what your opinion is?

The President. Well, I don't believe that—what I think I should do now is let this advisory board do its work and see what they have to say about the apology issue and all the related issues. The one thing I did not want to do is to define the work of this commission, which I hope will be quite broad, as I explained, in terms of any particular issue early on. I just don't think I should do that. So I'm going to let them have their hearings. I'm going to go

to some of the hearings with them. We're going to go around the country. I'm going to keep announcing special initiatives like our big scholarship fund to move teachers into the inner cities and pay for their college if they go back to inner cities and teach. I'm going to keep doing those things and just see how it comes out. And if the board wants to recommend that—and Dr. Franklin, I think, is in about as good a position to judge that as anybody in America—I'll wait and see what they say.

Dialog on Race

Mr. Smiley. Two last quick things and I'll let you go. I'm wondering whether or not you think that an apology to African-Americans might reenergize this debate. I'm talking to some African-Americans over the last few days who think that since your speech in San Diego, the conversation has kind of gotten quiet. You don't really hear a lot about this race discussion. Don't you think that apology might reenergize this debate?

The President. Well, I don't know. I keep trying to do something about every 2 weeks to juice it up. Today I talked to—I gave a speech to the Urban League, in terms of what was in the budget for African-Americans and minorities, just like I did with you a few moments ago. And I previously gave a speech saying that we were going to offer scholarships to people and pay their way through college if they'd go teach in distressed areas. I'll keep trying to do that. But I think there will be a lot of interest in it. It's hard to keep the media's interest all the time unless there's conflict. You know that. *[Laughter]*

Mr. Smiley. Absolutely.

The President. But I'll keep trying to find innovative ways to do it.

President's Future Visit to Africa

Mr. Smiley. Let me ask you finally—and I respect you and appreciate the time you've spent with us today—let me ask you whether or not there's any truth to the rumors, and I underscore the word rumors, that you may, in fact, be heading to the continent of Africa at some point in the near future. Does the President care to confirm that, or do you want to disabuse me of that notion?

The President. No, no. I want to go to Africa next year. And I hope it won't be too long into next year. We're looking at the calendar

now, and I'll just—and we'll have to pick. I've got—I owe a number of visits. I'm trying to work out a lot of different conflicts next year, but I very much want to go to Africa next year. And I intend to go, and if something doesn't happen, I will go.

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 5:28 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House.

Remarks on Signing the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 and the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997

August 5, 1997

Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, Senator Lautenberg, Members of Congress, ladies and gentlemen. We come here today, Democrats and Republicans, Congress and President, Americans of good will from all points of view and all walks of life, to celebrate a true milestone for our Nation. In a few moments I will sign into law the first balanced budget in a generation, a balanced budget that honors our values, puts our fiscal house in order, expands vistas of opportunity for all our people, and fashions a new Government to lead in a new era.

Like every generation of Americans before us, we have been called upon to renew our Nation and to restore its promise. For too long, huge, persistent, and growing budget deficits threatened to choke the opportunity that should be every American's birthright. For too long, it seemed as if America would not be ready for the new century, that we would be too divided, too wedded to old arrangements and ideas. It's hard to believe now, but it wasn't so very long ago that some people looked at our Nation and saw a setting Sun.

When I became President, I determined that we must believe and make sure that America's best days were still ahead. After years in which the deficit drained our economy and dampened our spirit, in which our ability to lead the world was diminished by our inability to put our own house in order, after years in which too many people doubted whether our Nation would ever come together again to address this problem, we set off on a new economic course to cut the deficit, to create the conditions in which business could thrive, to open more foreign markets to our goods and services, to invest in our people so that all Americans would have the

tools they need to make the most of their own lives.

Today, our budget deficit has been cut by more than 80 percent. It is now among the smallest in the industrialized world, as a percentage of our economy. Our businesses once again lead in world markets, now made more open, more free, more fair than ever before through our efforts. Our workers are clearly the most competitive on Earth, and we have recast our old Government so that a new one can take shape that does give our people the tools to make the most of their God-given abilities.

This year we, Democrats and Republicans alike, were given the opportunity and the responsibility to finish the job of balancing the budget for the first time in almost 30 years and to do it in a way that prepares Americans to enter the next century stronger than ever. By large bipartisan majorities in both Houses, we have risen to that challenge.

The balanced budget I sign into law today will continue our successful economic strategy. It reflects the most fundamental values that brought us together. It will spur growth and spread opportunity. Even after we pay for tax cuts penny by penny, there will still be \$900 billion in savings, including half a trillion dollars in entitlement savings over the next 10 years. It opens the doors of college to a new generation, with the largest investment in higher education since the GI bill 50 years ago. It makes it possible for the 13th and 14th years of college to become as universal as high school is today. It strengthens our families with the largest expansion in health care for children since the Medicaid program 32 years ago. It modernizes Medicare and extends the life of the trust fund