

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:15 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Representative Xavier Becerra, chair, and Carmen Votano,

vice chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute; and Carolina Reyes, wife of Representative Becerra.

Remarks on Proposed Tobacco Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

September 17, 1997

The President. Thank you very much. Mr. Vice President, Secretary Shalala, Secretary Glickman, thank you for your work. Thank you, Bruce Reed. I'd like to say a special word of thanks to David Kessler for the work he did—historic work he did at the FDA when he was here. Thank you, Dr. Koop, and members of the public community who are here. To Members of Congress, the attorneys general, the representatives of plaintiffs in the private litigation—and we have one of the injured parties here representing all of them—we thank all of them for coming today.

This is a time of prosperity and hope and optimism for America, with our economy improving, making progress on our social problems, our efforts to lead the world to a more prosperous and peaceful future making headway. But I think we all know that this country still has some significant challenges, especially in the health field. And if we think about what we want America to be like in the 21st century, the health of our people and especially the health of our children must be paramount in our thinking, in our vision, and in our efforts. That's why a year ago I worked with the FDA and we launched this nationwide effort to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco by reducing youth access to tobacco products, by preventing companies from advertising to our children.

The purpose of the FDA rule was to reduce youth smoking by 50 percent within 7 years. Earlier this year, a Federal judge in North Carolina said that the FDA has the authority to regulate tobacco products to protect the health of our children. There have also been other examples of litigation progress, as you know, brought by private plaintiffs and by the attorneys general. Now, these victories for public health drove the tobacco companies to the bargaining table. They

extracted concessions that would have been literally unthinkable just a short time ago.

I want to say a special word of thanks to the attorneys general and the other parties who worked hard to negotiate this settlement. Everyone knows we would not be here had it not been for their foresight, their determination, and their relentless efforts.

Now we have this unprecedented opportunity to enact comprehensive tobacco legislation, working with all the parties involved, the Members of Congress, the attorneys general, the representatives of injured parties, the public health community, the tobacco farmers, and others. We have moved from confrontation and denial and inertia to the brink of action on behalf of our children, and that is all to the good.

Today I want to challenge Congress to build on this historic opportunity by passing sweeping tobacco legislation that has one goal in mind: the dramatic reduction of teen smoking. In the coming weeks I will invite congressional leaders from both parties to the White House to launch a bipartisan effort to enact such legislation.

There are five key elements that must be at the heart of any national tobacco legislation. Reducing teen smoking has always been America's bottom line. It must be the industry's bottom line. That is why I believe the first thing any tobacco legislation must include is a comprehensive plan to reduce teen smoking, including tough penalties. These penalties should be non-tax-deductible, uncapped, and escalating to give the tobacco industry the strongest possible incentive to stop targeting children as new customers.

One of the surest ways of reducing youth smoking is to increase the price of cigarettes. Today I call for a combination of industry payments and penalties to increase the price of cigarettes by up to a dollar and a half a pack

over the next decade, as needed, to meet our youth reduction targets. And I call upon the House to follow the lead of the United States Senate and repeal the provision giving the tobacco industry a \$50 billion tax credit.

Second, any legislation must affirm the full authority of the FDA to regulate tobacco products. I believe the FDA's jurisdiction over tobacco products must be as strong and effective as its authority over drugs and devices. In particular, legislation cannot impose any special procedural hurdles on the FDA's regulation of tobacco products.

Third, effective legislation must include measures to hold the industry accountable, especially in any efforts to market products to children, while insisting on changes in the way it does business. I ask the industry again to make a voluntary commitment to stop advertising to children. And I call upon Congress to pass legislation providing for broad document disclosure so that the public can learn everything the tobacco companies know about the health effects of their products and their attempts to market to our children.

Fourth, Federal tobacco legislation must aim not only to reduce youth smoking but to meet other health goals as well. These include the reduction of secondhand smoke, the expansion of smoking prevention and cessation programs, the strengthening of international efforts to control tobacco, and the provision of funds for medical research and other important health objectives. We must build on the bipartisan agreement to fund children's health care in the recent balanced budget.

And finally, any tobacco legislation must protect tobacco farmers and their communities. We know that tobacco farmers are honest, hard-working people, most of whom live and work on small, family owned farms. In some States, entire communities rely on income from the tobacco crop. Any legislation must protect these farmers, their families, and their communities from loss of income.

Let me say in closing, I want to thank the Vice President especially, who cares so passionately about this issue. He's played a key role in our efforts to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco. I've asked him to take the lead in building broad bipartisan support around the country for our plan. I also want to thank Secretary Shalala, Secretary Glickman, and Bruce Reed, and all those who worked so hard

on our administration's analysis of the proposed settlement and where we are.

And finally, let me say again, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for all the people in this room and the countless others they represent around the country. To me, this is not about money. It is not about how much money we can extract from the tobacco industry. It is about fulfilling our duties as parents and responsible adults to protect our children and to build the future of this country. We are doing everything we can in this administration to give parents the tools they need to raise their children, but parents have to be our partners as well. If this is not just about money, we have to recognize that even beyond the tobacco companies and all of us in this room, every parent in America has a responsibility to talk to their children about the dangers of tobacco, illegal drugs, and other things that can hurt them. We know if we have strong parental responsibility here, they can make a great deal of difference in protecting our children as well.

If we take responsibility, if we pass this legislation, if we do what we should here, if the tobacco industry will work with us, if other Members of Congress in both parties will work with us, we will have gone a very long way toward creating the state of health for our children that will make America an even greater nation in the new century.

Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, what are the chances of the Congress adopting your policy? And why is the industry so conspicuously absent?

The President. Well, first of all, I was encouraged by some of the comments that were made by some industry representatives. I think that they know that they have to have Federal legislation. They have an interest in that as well. And I would hope that they would be willing to work with us. But we cannot have the FDA crippled here, and we have to have real and meaningful penalties if the targets for youth smoking are not met. And so I feel very good about that.

I think the Congress—I think it's highly likely that they will take action. When they take action depends, I think, upon when they can work through the issues for themselves and how they decide how to divide up the work among the committees. But it's not too soon to start. We could have hearings on this fairly soon, and I

would hope to work with the Congress to develop a bill that would embody these principles.

Q. Mr. President, you haven't said what you're willing to agree to for the tobacco industry. Are you willing to agree to immunity from future liability?

The President. Well, I don't think they've asked for future liability, I think they've asked for immunity from liability for past suits. And the question there would be, what are they willing to agree to? They need to come and meet with us. We need to discuss it, and we need to see whether we can embody these five principles. These are the things I'm interested in.

To me, I'll say again, this is not primarily about money. This is about changing the behavior of the United States, both the behavior of the tobacco companies, the behavior of the American people, the future behavior of our children. I'm trying to create an environment here with these five principles that I believe would achieve that. And if they want to be our partners in it, I think we can get there. And I hope they will be.

Q. Are you willing to put your prestige on the line to ensure that this becomes law?

The President. Well, I think my personal prestige on this has been on the line for more than a year now. [Laughter] There for a while, I thought more than my prestige was on the line. [Laughter] You know, for a person involved in public life in Washington today, personal prestige may be an oxymoron. [Laughter] But at least you still have your neck most days.

Q. What do you say to the people—

Q. Mr. President, how do you protect the well-being of tobacco farmers—sounds like you're going to take away their livelihood.

The President. Well, there are a number of things which can be done, and I don't want to get into the details. Secretary Glickman can talk about it. But we have had farmers in various sectors in our agriculture society facing constricted incomes before, and we have done things which helped them. There was a—for example, I remember a few years ago something that affected dairy farmers in my State. There was a massive buyout program for dairy farmers, and in a lot of States like Arkansas, there were any number of small farmers that were having a very difficult time who had a chance to start their life on a different basis.

I don't want to minimize this. Tobacco has a very high return per acre. So it's not a simple

thing. You can't just say to a tobacco farmer to go plant soybeans, even if the soil will hold them. This is, from an agricultural point of view, economically complex. But nonetheless, we have a responsibility to these people. They haven't done anything wrong. They haven't done anything illegal. They're good, hard-working, tax-paying citizens, and they have not caused this problem. And we cannot let them, their families, or their communities just be crippled and broken by this. And I don't think any member of the public health community wants to do that. And the Agriculture Department and I am personally very committed to this part; to me, this is one of the five things we have to do.

We're trying to change America and make everybody whole. And they deserve a chance to have their lives and be made whole and go on with the future as well, and I'm determined to see that they're a part of this.

Q. What do you say to the attorneys who thought this was a good deal and very proudly proclaimed it?

The President. Well, first of all, they were a part of all these ongoing reviews. Everybody was heard in this review process. And secondly, they all recognize, too, that this agreement has to be ratified by Congress. The tobacco companies recognize that. That means that all of us who are part of that process are, in effect, parties to this case, too. And that's the way you need to look at this. We're building on their deal. We're not rejecting their agreement. We're building on it. We're not rejecting what the attorneys general did. We're building on it. Look, if it hadn't been for what they did, we wouldn't be here.

I realize that there were two great things that started this. One is what Dr. Kessler and what we did at the FDA, and the fact that our administration was the first one ever willing to take this on. The other was the actions by the attorneys general and the private lawsuits that got the disclosure of the documents that created a total change in the public attitude and the public efforts here. And then long before that, there were the efforts of all of these people here from the public health community who have been telling us all this for years. And they had the public primed for it. Then the lawsuits brought about the disclosures, and then the FDA was moving.

Those three things together, I think—and of course, now there have been a lot of congressional hearings. Representative Waxman had a full head of hair when he came to Congress before he started on tobacco. [Laughter] And so I think you've got to give—to me, we're building on this progress, and that's the way you have to look at this. We are trying to do the best thing for the country in a way that is consistent with the agreement they made. We're building on the agreement. We're not tearing it down. We're building on it. And I think we can get legislation that will reflect it. Thank you.

Military Aircraft Accidents

Q. What do you think about the string of air crashes, Mr. President, that have happened—Bosnia, the German representative that was killed?

The President. It's a terrible thing. We don't have all the facts yet. I was briefed early this morning on it, and obviously I'm profoundly concerned for the diplomat and the people that were on the aircraft and their families. But I can't comment on the facts of it until we absolutely know what the facts are.

Q. What about the other crashes?

The President. I must say, we're making—on balance, we're making some progress in Bosnia again. The events of the last several weeks are hopeful for the peace process and the Dayton accord.

Q. What about the other air crashes here in this country, this string of air accidents? What do you have to say about the air safety, and what are you going to be doing about that?

The President. I had a talk with the Secretary of Defense about them the day before yesterday, and I think we have to, first of all, analyze each and every one to see whether there is some pattern that would require some kind of review by the Air Force or whether it's just an unfortunate stream of coincidences that they all happened at the same time. I noted one that I learned about this morning involved Air National Guard planes, for example. That may or may not have anything to do with any problem with planes or anything like that.

I wouldn't over—jump to conclusions about this. Remember, every year—I try to say this once a year, so I want to say it now—it is easy for the American people to forget the risks

that our men and women in uniform undertake. Every year we lose a couple hundred people serving the United States in the military in peacetime. It is dangerous work. They have to be well-trained. They have to be skilled. They have to be brave. It is a difficult thing. I am heartsick about the plane we are missing off the coast of Africa that took a demining team in there to continue our work against landmines.

But I don't want you to jump to a conclusion that there is something wrong because all these things occurred within a short space of time because, if you look over the course of a year, we may go months and months and months and nothing happens, but over the course of a year, we lose a significant number of people every year who serve our country in uniform because of the inherent risks involved in what they do.

We will do everything we can to make sure that they're as safe as possible, and if there is a pattern here that has to be looked into on air safety, you can be sure that the Air Force will do that.

Thank you.

Chelsea Clinton's Departure for College

Q. Are you dreading Chelsea leaving home tomorrow?

The President. Yes. This morning—the first thing I did this morning was go look through the boxes and make sure we had all the right things in the right boxes. [Laughter] But there's nothing I can do about it now. [Laughter] That's what you raise them for. I'm happy and sad at the same time.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Bruce N. Reed, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy; David A. Kessler, former Commissioner of Food and Drugs; C. Everett Koop, former Surgeon General; and the late Gerd Wagner, Senior Deputy High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, who was killed September 17 in a helicopter crash in Bosnia.