

Remarks on Campaign Finance Reform Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

October 7, 1997

The President. Thank you very much, Ann, for your work. And I want to thank all the other groups here represented for your labors. I thank Congressman Shays and Congressman Meehan for their work in the House. And I hope we'll have something important for them to do here in just a few days.

I also want to say a lot of the issues that need to be raised have obviously been clearly articulated in the Vice President's statement and by Ann, and all of us know them. But I think it's important to try to put this into some context. This problem has been building up for years. For years the cost of political campaigns have been escalating, as the cost of communicating with people through mass media has gone up and other costs have increased. And that has led to a fundraising arms race that has overwhelmed and consumed both parties and candidates all over our country.

For years there have been efforts to do something about this, bipartisan efforts. And every year of my first term, bipartisan efforts for reform were met by obstruction, opposition, and delay, and specifically died of filibuster in the United States Senate. For years there were interests and there are interests who actually benefit from the present system; we have to acknowledge that. And they like it the way it is, and they would like to keep it. They have been able, until today, to smother campaign finance reform in the shadows, away from the clear light of public evaluation.

That is what has changed this year. This year there is a highly public and increasingly clearly understood moment of truth in Washington. Today, the Members of our Senate have it within their power to strike a blow against politics as usual and a blow for a better future for America. They can pass the first significant campaign finance reform in a generation and give voters the loudest vote in the country, clearly and unambiguously.

The lines are sharply drawn, I will say that; this is much clearer than it has been in years past. Those who are fighting to preserve the status quo have made their position crystal clear. They have said they will use every procedural

device they can muster in both Houses to keep this from happening. They seek to use "poison pill" amendments, proposals that would worsen the current system in the name of reform. And if all else fails, the filibuster is always there to block the majority will.

But this is also clear: The tide of reform is coming in. The one million signatures Ann mentioned is one example of that. It's not just the President who supports McCain-Feingold legislation. It's not just groups that labor here in the vineyards year-in and year-out. The public supports it. And I believe when the voting comes, a majority of the Senate will support it if they are simply allowed to vote on it. All we need now is a fair vote—yes or no, up or down, reform or the status quo. The American people are entitled to that. They are entitled to see that this legislation does not die by procedural maneuvering or "poison pill" amendments.

The choice is plain. A vote for the filibuster is a vote to keep the soft money system. A vote for the filibuster is a vote for less disclosure, for weaker enforcement, for back door campaign spending by so-called independent groups. A vote for the filibuster is a vote to kill bipartisan campaign finance reform. And I hope and believe that will be a vote that will be difficult to explain to the American people.

I know some Senators favor provisions that aren't in this bill. This legislation is a principled compromise. Those of us who support spending limits and free television time had to agree to drop those to get a bill. And I think they're very important, and it killed me to have to drop those. I hated it. But this bill is better than having no reform. So everybody has had to give up something to get this bill in a position where people of both parties in good conscience could vote on it and where we had a chance to pass it. So for those who complain about that, they're not alone. Those of us who favor even stronger and more sweeping legislation had to give up something, as well.

There are many other worthy ideas being advanced, and that's all to the good. But the irreducible fact is, only McCain-Feingold, and its counterpart legislation in the House sponsored

by Congressmen Shays and Meehan, is a vehicle which can move us forward. That is the bottom line, and the one that I hope we can convince the United States Senate to embrace. We need to put aside partisanship, reject pressure, and join in an effort to find common ground here. And the Senate has got to take the lead.

I will say again: This is our best chance in a generation. The debate is now clear, unambiguous, out in the open. I will fight as hard as I can for as long as it takes to keep it right there. And if all of you help, then I think we can fulfill our obligation to renew and strengthen our democracy for a new century.

Thank you very much.

1996 Campaign Financing

Q. Mr. President, given the fact that your former senior aide, Mr. Ickes, is on the Hill today and may lay out the tactics of your last campaign that he admits were some potential errors in judgment, and given the revelations of the past few days about the belated disclosure of the coffee tapes, do you think it's hard for people to follow you as a standard bearer for campaign finance reform?

The President. No. It may be hard for you, but I don't think it's hard for people. I'm not ashamed of the fact that I did the best I could within the present system. I knew we would be outspent badly in 1996, but we weren't outspent as badly as we would have been if I had laid around and done nothing.

I'd like to ask you to go back and review what the reports were that you gave the American people in '95 and '96 about what the Republican majority in Congress was telling people when they raised money from them, things that I was never accused of saying. I never told anyone they had to contribute to me in order to do business with the White House. I never asked anybody not to do anything with the other side.

And we didn't raise nearly as much as they did, from any category, but we were able to continue to fight against what I thought was bad for the country and to fight for what was good for the country. That's why, in this balanced budget amendment, we've got provisions that will insure 5 million children who don't have health insurance, and open the doors of college to all. That wouldn't have happened if the election had turned out the other way. And

I'm not sorry that I did what was available under the existing system.

But I have always been for changing the system. I'm just not for unilateral disarmament. And I expect that Mr. Ickes will go forward and answer the questions and do a good job today. That's what I expect him to do.

Campaign Finance Reform

Q. Mr. President, you say that you're not in favor of unilateral disarmament, but wouldn't this be a time to stake out a leadership position, sir, and swear off soft money and challenge the Republicans to do the same?

The President. No. No, because if I did that, they would do what they're doing now. They would laugh. They would be happy. They would go into the next election, they would outspend our people even more. In the last 10 days of the last election cycle, in the 20 closest races, almost all of which were lost by Democrats, they were outspent 4-, 5-, 6-to-1—in the last 10 days, even under the present system. And you know, I thought about that a lot. It would be easy for me to do, too, because I don't have to run again. And then I could get some of you to say nice things about what I did. It's not up to me. I don't have to run again. I could easily do that.

But I'd like to remind you that there are other issues at stake here. There are other issues at stake here. In 1995, I fought a battle to keep the guarantee of medical care and nutrition—basic nutrition—to children who are poor from being taken away from them. And I could not have won in that battle if I didn't have enough allies in the Congress to sustain my veto. In 1993, because of the composition of the Congress, we passed a budget bill that reduced the deficit by 85 percent before the balanced budget bill had passed. I could not have done that if there hadn't been those people in the Congress to do that.

So, I am committed to this campaign finance reform. But there are other issues, and we have to have allies. People give money in these elections based on what they honestly believe should be done. I don't question the sincerity of those who financed Mr. Gingrich and the Republican revolution. But I disagreed with it. And we had an argument. And we have to have enough capacity to stake out our position, and if we don't have—we have to fight for the things we believe

are important, just as they fight for the things they believe are important.

It's a simple thing. The cost of communications have overwhelmed the capacity of the system as it was intended to operate. The FEC created this soft money loophole. It has become the way of getting access to virtually unlimited communications. We have to close the loophole. And we have to close it for all on a fair basis. For me, I could give it up easily, but I don't think it would be right for me to put the people that agree with me about what's best for Amer-

ica at an even greater disadvantage than they're going to be. And it doesn't affect me personally, but that's been my position.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ann McBride, president, Common Cause; and Harold Ickes, former Deputy Chief of Staff to the President.

Remarks Prior to Discussions With President Ezer Weizman of Israel and an Exchange With Reporters

October 7, 1997

President Clinton. Good morning, everyone. I'm delighted to have President Weizman here, and we had a nice dinner last evening, and we're going to have further talks today about what we can do in the United States to further the peace process. And certainly we are grateful for all that he has done as President and throughout his entire career. It's a great honor to have you here.

President Weizman. Thank you very much.

President Clinton. Thank you.

Jonathan Pollard Espionage Case

Q. Mr. President, thank you. In light of the recent swap between Israel and Jordan, there has also been talk raised again about Jonathan Pollard. I was wondering if you believe justice was served when he received his life sentence, and do you believe he will spend his life sentence in prison?

And to President Weizman, will you be raising this issue today with the President?

President Weizman. You were talking too fast. What did you say?

Q. The question of Jonathan Pollard—will you be raising it with President Clinton today?

President Weizman. It's always in our minds.

Q. Mr. President?

President Clinton. Well, I receive—when Mr. Pollard applies for clemency, I receive recommendations from both my Justice and National Security Advisers, and I take into account

what they recommend, and then I take action. And that's what I'll do if it comes up again.

Assassination Attempt on Khaled Meshal

Q. Good morning. Thank you, Mr. President. What is your reaction to the attempted assassination attempt in Jordan and Mr. Netanyahu's apparent contention that it was a legitimate tool of government?

President Clinton. The United States law is different on that, and our policy is different on this. I believe that, certainly for us, we have the right law. We don't—it's illegal for the United States Government to engage in assassination attempts. But I think that it's very important for countries to fight terrorism. I think that Israel's struggle against terrorism is important, but it's also important to consider the consequences on people who are your allies of whatever actions you take.

I think the important thing now for me is to try to get this peace process back on track. That's really the only way to ultimately get rid of terrorist problems in the Middle East. We've got to keep doing that. And then we can all—have all governments working together against terrorists.

[At this point, one group of reporters left the room, and another group entered.]

President Weizman's Visit

Q. President Clinton, can I ask you a question?