

and extending the Constitution in its logical meaning to the challenges of the moment, from the end of the Progressive Era through the Depression, through World War II, through the beginning of the cold war under Harry Truman, through the New Frontier and the Great Society down to the present day.

I don't think anyone questions the fact that our country is stronger today than it was 5 years ago because we have worked hard, not always succeeding, but succeeding far more often than failing, to bring to the country a new direction consistent with the age-old meaning of our obligation to form a more perfect Union.

I am very proud of that. I am enormously grateful for the chance that I have had to serve. And I am very comforted that someone of Evan Bayh's quality would present himself to serve in the United States Senate, to join Bob Torricelli and Bob Kerrey and our other hardy band, who often stand alone against some honest philosophical differences and some downright political chicanery, from time to time, for what I believe is necessary to move us forward.

I wish we had more like him; then I could get Bill Lee confirmed as head of the Civil

Rights Division. I wish we had more like him; then you wouldn't see mainstream judges with impeccable credentials held up purely for political reasons. I wish we had more like him; then we could see the right kind of entitlement reform and the right sort of policies to enable our people to balance work and family and the right sort of policies to expand trade but help people who are left behind put their lives together and become a part of the American mainstream again.

But it's a good thing for our country that Evan Bayh is presenting himself for the Senate. I think he'll be elected. And I think he'll do just as good as that as Joe DiMaggio was at baseball. *[Laughter]*

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:16 p.m. at the Hotel Carlton. In his remarks, he referred to senatorial candidate Evan Bayh, former Indiana Governor, and his wife, Susan; former Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana; and Lt. Gov. Joe Kernan of Indiana.

Remarks Announcing the Appointment of Togo D. West, Jr., as Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs and an Exchange With Reporters

December 2, 1997

The President. Good morning, everyone. Togo and Gail West, and Hershel Gober and the distinguished representatives of our veterans organizations—we have people here from the American Legion, the VFW, Disabled American Veterans, Am-Vets, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans, Gold Star Mothers and Gold Star Wives, Retired Officers Association, and the G.I. Forum. I thank you all for coming.

Before I begin I think it is important that I say just a few words about the tragic killing of the three high school students in Paducah yesterday. Like all Americans, I was shocked and heartbroken by the terrible news, which I followed very closely when it broke. Of course, we still don't know all the facts surrounding the tragedy or why a 14-year-old boy would take a pistol and open fire on his classmates in a prayer group. We may never know, but

we must redouble our efforts to protect all our children from violence and to make sure our schools are free from violence and the means to wreak it.

I believe that I speak for every American in sending our thoughts and prayers to the parents of Kayce Steger, Jessica James, Nicole Hadley, and the wounded children and the entire community of West Paducah.

Today I have the pleasure of appointing Togo West to be Acting Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. When Congress reconvenes, I will nominate him to become Secretary. I know he will bring the same excellence and leadership to the Department we saw under the stewardship of Secretary Jesse Brown and Acting Secretary Hershel Gober. These men are truly dedicated to our Nation's veterans. They help

us every day to do right by the men and women who have served the United States.

Togo West's entire life has been dedicated to excellence and commitment. From his experience as an Army officer, to his work in the Ford and Carter administrations, to his outstanding work as Secretary of the Army, he has always understood the special responsibility we owe to our men and women in uniform both during and after their years of service.

Three years ago, Secretary West told the graduating class at West Point, "You teach the life you live." As long as I have known him he has lived this idea, teaching all around him by his example of his devotion to family, church, and country.

I'm grateful for his exceptional service as Secretary of the Army. So are the men and women in the Army. His leadership helped make the Army part of the greatest, best prepared, most modern fighting force in the world. And he's made sure we take good care of our Army families. They, too, serve with our soldiers.

Having supported our men and women in uniform, Togo West will now turn to the equally important task of taking care of the veterans whose deeds ensured the survival of America's ideals. I'm confident he'll bring a strong voice to the Cabinet on these and other matters and that he will ably champion the enduring interests of our veterans.

Would you like to say a word?

[At this point, Secretary West thanked the President and made brief remarks.]

The President. Thank you, Togo.

Attorney General Reno's Decision

Q. Mr. President, have you already been informed of Janet Reno's decision on whether to recommend that an independent counsel be named?

The President. No.

Q. Well, could you tell us how you feel, in these hours before you're officially informed, over this apparent rift between two of your appointees, Janet Reno and the FBI Director, Louis Freeh, who seem to be disagreeing strongly on whether or not there should be an independent counsel?

The President. I don't have any particular feelings about it. All I know about it is what I've seen in the press. I think what I would like to emphasize to you is what I have said all

along here: This is a decision of law vested in the Attorney General, which should be made based on the law. I don't believe people outside the Department should attempt to influence the decision, and I have not. And I think that the Attorney General just has to make the decision, consulting with anyone, including the FBI Director, whom she chooses, and then making the decision she believes is right.

That's what a lot of these jobs involve. I've made a lot of decisions that not everybody who works for me agrees with. That's part of life. And I think we should let her make the decision and then, whatever the decision is, we should get on with the business of America, and the Justice Department should get on with the business of protecting the people of America.

Medicare Commission

Q. Mr. President, how do you view this "no new tax" pledge that Speaker Gingrich is demanding of those that he has chosen for the Medicare commission?

The President. Well, I don't know exactly what to make of it and exactly what it covers. In terms of taxes, per se, I personally don't know that we need any taxes to reform the Medicare system. I hate to see the commissioners themselves have their hands tied at the outset, because I think we want them to be free to look at this Medicare system over the long run.

After all, we now have—in the balanced budget agreement and with the savings incurred back in '93, we now have put more than a decade of life on the Medicare system. The Trust Fund is secure now for a decade, and perhaps more, depending on how well the reforms that we enacted this year work. And so what we want this commission to do is take a look at what the impact of the retirement of the baby boomers will be, what the impact of increasing lifespans will be, and the new technologies and all the opportunities also to save money with preventive strategies under Medicare and take a long look at it.

I had not assumed that they would actually recommend any tax increases in Medicare, which, to me, is different from the cost that consumers have when they buy into the program. But I don't want to tie their hands unduly. I want them to look at it and be free to look at it, and I hope that that's what they'll do.

I think we're going to have an interesting commission of a large number of Members of

Congress, because both the Republicans and the Democrats appointed significant numbers of Members of Congress but also some from outside as well. And we've all pretty well had our members, I think, for some time. We've been trying—I haven't named mine yet, by and large, because we were trying to reach agreement on exactly how the chairmanship would be handled. We haven't quite got that done yet, but I expect it to be done within the next day or two.

Attorney General Reno's Decision

Q. Mr. President, when you said you didn't think that any outsiders should impact on Attorney General Reno's decision, whom were you referring to? Were you referring to Freeh or to Members of Congress or—

The President. No, no. No, he's an insider. I mean, he—and of course, there is the Justice Department division; there's a whole division of professionals who deal with these kinds of cases all the time. And I'm sure that—at least I assume that they've made recommendations to her as well. They should all make their recommendations, and then she has to decide.

But I believe it should be a decision based strictly on the law and not outside political pressure. And I have scrupulously avoided saying anything one way or the other, publicly or privately, that would be that kind of thing. I just don't think the rest of us should be involved in this. This is a legal question.

Q. Are you still uncertain on whether you made any calls from the White House—fund-raising?

The President. I've met with the Justice Department, as you know; I've answered them all. I don't have anything to add to what I've already said on that.

Press Secretary Mike McCurry. Thank you, Mr. President.

Q. Mr. President, can I just elaborate—despite Mike McCurry's suggestion that I—[laughter]—on this relationship that you have with Louis Freeh and with Janet Reno. You've in

the past suggested that the strains resulting from all these investigations has hampered your ability as President to deal with the other chief law enforcement authorities in the country. Has this become a real problem, and how will it play out irrespective of Janet Reno's decision?

The President. Well, after the decision is over, when she makes a decision, whatever the decision is, I would expect that things will return to normal because we'll go back to work. I just want everybody to go back to work here. We've got serious law enforcement challenges both beyond our borders and within our country. And the most important thing is that everybody does the people's work up there, that we get back to the business of protecting the American people and dealing with those challenges.

And I think that that's what we're expected to do, that's what we got hired to do, and we shouldn't let anything interfere with that. And I don't intend to let anything interfere with my efforts there. But I thought it was appropriate to limit any personal contacts I had during this period of time because I didn't even want the appearance to be out there that there would be any attempt to influence a decision. I don't think that's right. This is a legal decision; it ought to be made on the facts.

And a lot of the political rhetoric that's been in the press in the last several months I think is entirely inappropriate because there is a legal—there's a statute here, and we cannot get in the position in this country of basically bringing politics to bear on every legal decision that has to be made. That's not the right way to do this.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:50 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Kayce Steger, Jessica James, and Nicole Hadley, Heath High School students killed by gunfire following a prayer meeting in West Paducah, KY; and Michael Carneal, the alleged gunman.