

Remarks on Congressional Action on Tobacco Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

April 20, 1998

The President. Good afternoon. Today Congress returns to work and to its obligation to act on the most critical public health threat to our children. Over the next 5 weeks, this Congress has an historic opportunity to pass bipartisan, comprehensive legislation to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco. We must not let this opportunity slip away.

The facts are plain as the stakes are high: 3,000 children begin to smoke every day, even though it's illegal in every State, and 1,000 will die earlier because of it. All these children have been targeted by a massive, multimillion-dollar media campaign that preys on their insecurities and their dreams.

For decades, we now know from their own documents that tobacco companies targeted children; and for decades, the industry denied it. Now, the tobacco industry once again seeks to put its bottom line above what should be our bottom line: the health of our children. In today's newspaper, the lead lobbyist for the tobacco industry says, and I quote: "We are fighting for our life." Well, let me be clear: We are fighting for the lives of our children; we are fighting for the public health; and we are fighting against predatory practices by tobacco companies that have targeted our children.

In the days to come, the tobacco industry will doubtless raise objection after objection and will work behind closed doors to persuade Congress to pass half measures that will not reduce teen smoking. But I believe the majority of the American people and, indeed, the majority of Congress, members of both parties in Congress, will see this for what it is, a tobacco industry smokescreen.

I ask Congress and the American people to focus on the real opportunity now within our reach. Over the past 5 weeks, Congress must move forward—over the next 5 weeks, Congress must move forward on comprehensive bipartisan legislation to reduce teen smoking by raising the price of cigarettes, putting into place tough restrictions on advertising and access, and imposing penalties on the industry if it continues to sell cigarettes to children. We can do that

and protect the tobacco farmers at the same time.

The legislation now moving through the Senate, authored by Senator McCain, which was voted out of committee on a nearly unanimous bipartisan vote 3 weeks ago now, is a strong step in the right direction. This is not a time for half measures; that simply won't reduce teen smoking, and it will only play into the tobacco industry's hands. It is a time for the kind of comprehensive approach to the problem that Senator McCain's legislation takes.

We have an opportunity and an obligation now to put aside politics, to turn aside the pleas of special interests, to act in the interest of the health of generations of our children. I call on Congress to do so, and I look forward to working with them in good faith over the next few weeks.

Q. The suggestions that Speaker McCain—rather not, McCain—pardon me.

The President. Is he running for Speaker? [Laughter]

Q. No, but perhaps he should. Speaker Gingrich wants to water down the bill, and House Republicans—there have been those suggestions. What's your reading of Speaker Gingrich's position, and what position should he take?

The President. Well, let me say, before his recent comments I had been encouraged, because he basically said that he would not permit us to take a stronger position than he did. I was concerned by his reported comments; you know, I wasn't here in the country. I didn't hear them; I didn't see the context of them. But I certainly hope that he will return to his former position.

We need this to be a bipartisan effort. We need everybody working together. And we can do this. We can work through all the differences that are out there, and we can pass a bill that will clearly, dramatically reduce teen smoking. We can do it. And we got fresh evidence from the Journal of the American Medical Society—American Medical Association, showing that the role of advertising on children and their smoking habits has been even greater than peer pressure. We've got all this evidence out there, and we

Apr. 20 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998

know what to do; we know how to do it; we can do it. And I'm just hoping and praying that we will.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:13 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Statement on the Energy Star Buildings Label Program

April 20, 1998

I extend my congratulations to the owners and managers of three of America's greatest landmark buildings for pledging to dramatically cut their energy use—an important step to protect our environment. The Empire State Building and the World Trade Center in New York and the Sears Tower in Chicago are long-time symbols of American enterprise and ingenuity. Today they become symbols of leadership and responsibility in ensuring that our Nation tackles the challenge of global warming. These skyscrapers are again hitting new heights by leading the way in curbing the pollution that contributes to global warming.

These American landmarks are charter members of the administration's new Energy Star Buildings Label program—a vital part of our plan to put the Nation on track to curb global warming. Their owners are voluntarily committing to cut their energy use up to 30 percent, thereby reducing the burning of fossil fuels and the related carbon dioxide pollution that causes global warming. These buildings will save energy, save money in electricity bills, and protect

the true bottom line—the environment we leave our children.

I call on all commercial building owners and managers across our Nation to take the same responsible, commonsense, cost-effective step to help meet our most pressing environmental challenge. If all commercial buildings became Energy Star Buildings, we would save \$25 billion a year and achieve over 10 percent of the carbon dioxide reduction needed to meet our Kyoto target.

I am sure the American people join me in thanking the following building owners and managers who have signed up as charter members in our new Energy Star Building Label program: the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; the Helmsley-Spear, Inc.; the Rockefeller Center Management Corp.; TrizecHahn Office Properties, Inc.; LaSalle Partners; the Durst Organization; Amerimar Enterprises, Inc.; MagneTek, Inc.; the Trane Company; Rudin Management Company, Inc.; Tooley and Company; Cushman and Wakefield; Harwood Pacific Corporation; and the General Services Administration.

Letter to Congressional Leaders on Proposed Education Legislation

April 20, 1998

Dear Mr. Leader:

As you consider H.R. 2646 this week, you will have the opportunity to vote for the first time on a version of my proposal to help build and modernize more than 5,000 schools across America. I am writing to ask for your support in this important effort and for your opposition to the expanded Education IRAs in the bill.

Never before have the education infrastructure needs of the Nation been so great. In order

to accommodate record enrollments, move to smaller class sizes, repair aging buildings, take advantage of new technologies, and better educate children with disabilities, States and localities are faced with unprecedented construction and renovation needs. The Federal Government helps build roads, bridges, and other infrastructure projects, but none of that will matter much if we let the education infrastructure come