

Remarks Following a Meeting With Congressional Leaders *December 2, 1998*

Thank you very much, Senator. Ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I want to congratulate the new members of the leadership in the Democratic Senate caucus and thank the returning Members for their service.

I would like to acknowledge the presence and the leadership of one Senator who had to leave, Senator Patty Murray from Washington State, recently reelected. Patty Murray had to go home to a memorial service for General John Stanford, the superintendent of the Seattle schools. And on behalf of the First Lady and the Vice President and myself, I would like to say at the outset that we admire John Stanford. He was a patriot. He was a great educator. His loss is a loss to the children of Seattle and to the people of the United States, and our prayers are with his family. And we thank Senator Murray for going home to that service.

Now, let me say that we just had a good meeting, but it was a good meeting not about what happened last month but about what happened—what will happen in the months ahead and the mandate that we have received to move forward on the American people's agenda.

This is a remarkable moment for our country. We have the strongest economy in a generation. It gives us the opportunity and the obligation to move forward on the deepest concerns of the American people and the great challenges of our time, to move forward in education, to move forward in health care, to move forward on Social Security, to move forward in stabilizing the global economy so we can continue to grow the American economy.

The American people have made it clear that they expect us to focus on modern schools and world-class educations for their children, on a sound Social Security system for the 21st century, on strong patient protections in the area of managed care.

Senator Daschle, his colleagues, and we in the administration are determined to make pas-

sage of a comprehensive Patients' Bill of Rights a top priority in the next Congress. It is a decision that the Congress should be able to make in short order. We must give the American people the peace of mind that comes from knowing that when they fall ill, they will be treated as people, not dollar signs on a ledger.

I have taken many steps to do everything I could to strengthen patient protections. Just last week—or this week, our administration instructed hospitals all across America that waiting for approval from an insurance company cannot be a reason for denying a person emergency care.

We have also extended the protection of the Patients' Bill of Rights to people who are in federally funded health care coverage plans. We have gone to the Supreme Court to help clear the way for patients who have been harmed by health plans' decisions to seek justice under State law.

But now the time has come for Congress to do its part to give all Americans the protections of the Patients' Bill of Rights. With Senator Daschle and his colleagues leading the way, we will make this not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue but an American issue.

Thirty days ago the American people gave all of us our marching orders. They want us to work on their behalf. They want us to work on their business. They want us to go forward into the future with progress, not partisanship. We heard them, loud and clear. And all of us look forward to working with our colleagues, across party lines, to create a new season of achievement and progress for the American people.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:10 a.m. at the South Portico at the White House.