

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Peace Efforts in Guatemala City March 10, 1999

President Clinton. Thank you very much. Mr. President, first let me say how much I appreciate this opportunity that has been provided for me to meet with citizens of your country to hear about the progress of the peace process and the challenges ahead. Because of the involvement of the United States, I think it is imperative, as we begin, for me just to say a few words about the report of the Historical Clarification Commission.

The commission's work and the support it has received from the government shows how far Guatemala has traveled in overcoming that painful period. I have profound respect for the victims and the families who had courage to testify and for the courage of a nation for coming to terms with its past and moving forward.

For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engage in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake. We must and we will, instead, continue to support the peace and reconciliation process in Guatemala. As many of you know, we provided \$1½ million in support for the commission. We declassified over 4,000 documents at the commission's request. Now we will encourage the translation of the report into indigenous languages and its wide dissemination. Consistent with the commission's recommendations, we also will continue our support of development programs in those communities which suffered most from violence and repression. This year, we plan to provide an additional \$25 million to support the peace accords through aid to the justice sector, to education, to literary training, to the generation of income, and to citizen participation in government.

You have come a long way, as President Arzu just said, in forging a consensus in support of democracy and human rights and in finding a way to discuss your differences openly and peaceably. I applaud the difficult but essential effort you have undertaken.

Beyond the commission issues, I would also hope to discuss other matters critical to peace and to development and reconciliation, including

economic liberalization, market-opening measures, increased trade and investment, all of which are crucial to the overall well-being of the people of Guatemala. Now that you have chosen democracy and peace, it is imperative that the United States be a good partner in making sure that it works for all your people.

And again, Mr. President, I'd like to thank you and the Government and the people of Guatemala for the road you have taken and for making me feel welcome today. Thank you, sir.

[At this point, the discussion proceeded.]

President Clinton. Well, first of all I would like to say how very impressed I was by the presentations. And I would like to say a few things at the end, but for now, I was asked a couple of questions, so I would like to respond.

First, I was asked about possible opportunities, greater opportunities, for women and young girls and children, generally. I think that the model which has worked best throughout the world for economic empowerment for women has been the whole—particularly rural women and indigenous populations—has been the whole concept of microcredit, as I'm sure my wife talked about quite extensively when she was here.

But I think even more important is getting schooling going and providing—you know, I'm involved in this effort to try to end child labor that's abusive, worldwide. But it's not as—it's also important to get the children into schools—all kinds of children—including the children of indigenous people, and girls as well as boys, for a longer period of time. This is a big problem not just in Latin America; it's a huge problem in Asia; it's a huge problem in Africa. But I think the United States should be heavily involved, particularly in light of our past. We have a heavy responsibility to Guatemala and, indeed, to all of Central America to do more in this area.

I have asked the Congress of the United States to pass an aid package, tied to what happened in the hurricane, of something over \$950 million. A lot of it is designed just to support the rebuilding that has to be done, and that is important. But there is quite a lot of money

for education and economic development and, to go to another point you made, for the efforts to institutionalize the rule of law, both for commercial and economic reasons and for human rights reasons.

This is an area in which I think those who have and those who have not, in Guatemala and throughout Central America, have a common interest, because the rule of law is essential to get more investment and more economic opportunity and to protect the investments that exist. It is also essential to establish, in an orderly way, human rights and the institutions of justice.

So, Mr. Atwood, our AID Director, is here, and he can talk more about that with you. But we have worked quite hard to put together a package that I hope will be helpful. And I will be prepared, over the next couple of years, to try to do more.

On the question of trade, I sent last Friday to the Congress another bill to try to provide more parity between our trading relationships with Mexico and Canada and our trading relationships with Central America and the Caribbean. And I believe we have a reasonable chance to pass that bill this year. And if we do, it obviously will lead to more opportunities for the sale of Guatemalan products in the United States, and more jobs, therefore, for the people here. I will work very hard to pass it.

I was asked about the immigration issue, and I would like to speak briefly about that. I gave a more extended statement today to the National Assembly of El Salvador, but I will briefly say what I said there.

I think it's important for every country to enforce its immigration laws and try to protect its borders. We have very generous legal immigration laws, and we have many, many immigrants from Central America making a major contribution, positive contribution, to the United States. On the other hand, most of the illegal immigrants from Guatemala and other Central American countries are not lawbreakers by nature; they're people who are seeking a better life. It's hard to leave your family and your home and take the risks inherent in coming to a strange land without the approval of the law. And people do it because they want a better opportunity for themselves and their families.

I think there are two things that should be noted as we do try to enforce our immigration laws. The first is that we have to be sensitive

and act with justice and understand the impact of recent events. The second is that the present American law is completely unfair in that it treats different—people from different countries in Central America differently. And it is a vestige of our, sort of—kind of, our cold war mentality and how we were involved here.

I can do two things about that. The first is to try to change the law. And we will aggressively work to try to change the law to get parity, equal treatment for all people from Central America, without regard to the political past and whether the difficulties of the past were seen as coming from the right or the left. I think that's irrelevant. We should treat all countries the same.

The second is to use, to the maximum extent possible, whatever flexibility I have under present law to achieve the same goal. I will do that. But in the end, the problem cannot be fixed—the immigration problem cannot be completely fixed until there is a change in the law so that all countries would be treated the same under the law. And I will actively seek that this year.

Anyway, I think that responds to the questions that were asked of me. If I were to ask a question—if I could ask one question, I would like to say that, one of you said that we needed a dignification program, with priority given to the widows and orphans. And I would like to know whether you have specific suggestions, over and above the programs I have already mentioned, for what the United States could do to be helpful to deal with the large number of orphaned children and widows you have. What else could we do? What specific suggestions do you have for me, over and above what has been mentioned?

[The discussion continued.]

President Clinton. Well, I think it is in the nature of such meetings that you only scratch the surface of what needs to be done and what the possibilities are. I will say again, I intend to go back home and do my best to pass the aid package, to pass the trade parity bill, and to get improvements in the immigration difficulties. Within the aid package, we will be able to support education initiatives and economic power initiatives like the women's credit program that President Arzu mentioned.

I think it is important that, after I leave Central America, the United States develop with

every country the most specific possible plan for what it is you want to achieve that we can help you achieve, whether it is in dealing with the specific problems of the widows and orphans; the need for the education of the children; the need for the economic empowerment of women; the need for greater efforts with indigenous groups; the need to go further in the search for human rights, the rule of law; how to come to terms with the issues related in the commission report.

And I guess what I would like to leave you with is my commitment that I am willing to continue to push, Mr. President, to have these sorts of specific commitments on the part of the United States so we know we have a good roadmap for where we're going into the future, and you know what you can expect of our partnership. And of course, tomorrow, we'll have a greater chance to talk about what we can do regionally when you get all the Presidents together.

I would like to just leave you with this one thought. For all of your terrible suffering and the continuing difficulties you face, please do not underestimate how far you have come and what you have done. It is my responsibility as President of the United States to travel the world to deal with all of these problems that I see cropping up in other places. You know this, but I would like to just say, the last few years have brought a floodtide of changes in the way people work and live and in the political and social and economic relationships of people—the end of the cold war, the growth of the global market, the explosion in information technology—it has changed everything. And all over the world, people are searching for a new balance.

Most of these changes are good, but there are—not all of them are good. And they all present people everywhere with dilemmas. There is the question of integration versus disintegration. And I'll give you—you have it in Guatemala. You want—how do you balance the need for the nation to be sovereign with the legitimate rights of individuals and groups? How do you balance the need for the nation to be sovereign with the need to have greater cooperation with other countries? How do you balance the need to develop your economy with the imperative of preserving your natural resources? How do you balance the need for security and order with the imperative of individual rights

to privacy and liberty and the rule of law, for both commercial and human reasons?

All of these challenges you face are being faced by other people elsewhere. In South Africa, for example, to go back to what many of you talked about, they had this Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which perhaps went a little further than your report. And I thought that they—we think they're making real progress there. But in the last week, four different political leaders have been killed. In central Africa, where there was tribal slaughter in Rwanda and Burundi, I met with indigenous peoples. I met a woman whose husband and six children were all killed, and she woke up and for some miracle reason she didn't die from the wounds she sustained. And she, like the woman here, is devoting her life to this reconciliation. And I thought we were making progress, and just last week the majority tribe killed a bunch of Americans and other people.

So I say, as awful as this is for you and as frustrating as it is, it is astonishing how much has been done in Guatemala and in the other countries of Central America, and the direction you have taken. For all the economic frustrations you face, you're doing better than many much larger countries in Asia and in Latin America, because you've shown greater discipline and innovation.

So I urge you to not get discouraged, and I urge you to—I have tried very hard to change the historic relationship between the United States and Central America, to be a genuine partner and to think about the future in different terms. And we won't solve all the problems today or tomorrow, but I think we have to say we are on a different track. We have turned a real corner. And I came here as much as anything else just to express my respect for you and to ask you not to get too discouraged.

You think about Europe as being a very rich continent, but look at these problems we're having in Kosovo and Bosnia, where they haven't been able to, in Kosovo, do what you have decided to do. They still think they can shoot their way out of their difficulties. And we're hoping and praying they will take a different decision in the next few days.

So I thank you for talking to me and, before me, to my wife when she came here and for all the work you are doing. But I just want you to know that I am committed to changing our relationship over the long run in all these

areas we have mentioned. And I will do my best to make sure that we have the kind of partnership that will make both our countries stronger and address the specific concerns you have outlined today.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:45 p.m. in the Reception Hall in the National Palace of Culture. In his remarks, he referred to President Alvaro Arzu of Guatemala.

Radio Remarks on Proposed Airline Passenger Protection Legislation *March 10, 1999*

Our country's airlines serve millions of Americans a year, but as more planes are taking off, so are passenger complaints. That's why I'm proposing a new law requiring all airlines to spell out how they will address problems such as delays, overbooking, and missing baggage. This airline passenger protection act has overwhelming bipartisan support. With its passage,

we can make the best airline system in the world even better.

NOTE: The President's remarks were recorded at approximately 4:15 p.m. on March 5 in the Oval Office at the White House for later broadcast. These remarks were also made available on the White House Press Office Radio Actuality Line.

Statement on the Kennedy-Murray Amendment to Proposed Education Flexibility Partnership Legislation *March 10, 1999*

I am pleased that the Senate leadership has finally agreed to allow an up-or-down vote on an amendment to hire 100,000 teachers to reduce class size in the early grades. Last year, with bipartisan support, Congress enacted a downpayment on this class size initiative, and school districts across the country will soon receive funds to begin hiring teachers. It is now time for Congress to finish the job by making a long-term commitment to class size reduction. I call on every Senator to vote for the Murray-Kennedy amendment to bring every class in the early grades down to a national average of 18.

I will vigorously oppose any Republican amendments to undermine the bipartisan agreement we reached last year on class size by diverting those funds to other uses, including spe-

cial education. While we should increase funding for special education—as we have done in past years and as my budget recommends continuing to do in the future—we should not take this money from the recently enacted class size initiative. We should not pit our children against one another or change the rules now on our critical efforts to reduce class size. Smaller classes will help all students do better and will reduce the need for special education services by helping teachers identify and assist as early as possible children who have learning problems. I call on every Member of Congress to reject these efforts to tear down what we accomplished last year, and call on them instead to build on that significant bipartisan achievement.