

Remarks at the Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner March 18, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Jim. I want to thank all the officers for making me feel so welcome. Evelyn, thank you for the great dinner conversation—Mr. Speaker, Members of Congress, my fellow Americans. I want to thank you for your invitation to come have dinner with 2,000 members of the Washington press corps. [Laughter] I accepted. If this isn't contrition, I don't know what is. [Laughter]

I know you can't really laugh about this. I mean, the events of the last year have been quite serious. If the Senate vote had gone the other way, I wouldn't be here tonight. I demand a recount. [Laughter]

Look, this is just the beginning of my week with the press. Tomorrow I've got a press conference and then the Gridiron dinner the day after that. You'd think I was selling a book. [Laughter] Now, I know it's been a long time since I had a press conference, but I remember it well. [Laughter] All those questions that day about the nomination of Zoe Baird. [Laughter]

Look, you can probably tell I'm a little nervous being around all these reporters tonight. So if you will forgive me, I'd like to employ a method that has worked pretty well for me over the last year.

[At this point, a fanfare was played and the "Prime Minister" of a fictitious nation, played by actor Nick Olcott, was announced.]

The President. Your Excellency, welcome to the United States. [Laughter] The podium is yours. [Laughter]

[The "Prime Minister" spoke briefly in a "foreign language."]

The President. Well, your Excellency, without my headphones, I have no idea what you just said. [Laughter] But it sounded very much like words of praise. I want you to know that they mean more to me than I could possibly express. [Laughter]

[The "Prime Minister" replied briefly in a "foreign language."]

The President. I agree with that, as well. [Laughter]

Now, your Excellency, this is just a dinner with the press. Tomorrow is the real press conference. I look forward to seeing you there. [Laughter]

Now, I know that the press corps has been busy preparing questions for me. So I've been working on the answers. Never mind the questions; here are the answers. [Laughter]

"Yes, Helen." "She was first, Sam. I'll get to you, Sam. Not yet, though." "The longest peacetime expansion in history." "No, I didn't watch it." [Laughter] "No, I haven't read it." [Laughter] "Yes, Wolf, I am doing this press conference because Joe made me do it."

Your Excellency, why don't you just have a seat right here, just listen to the translation, and I'll ask you to join me again if I need some cover. [Laughter]

Now, I know there's been a lot of interest in the future political career of the First Lady. I honestly don't know what she'll decide, but I can tell you this. Yesterday at breakfast, she was complaining that it is impossible to get a decent bagel in Washington. [Laughter] By the way, I'm from Arkansas. You know, what is a schmear? [Laughter]

The "Prime Minister." [Unintelligible]—Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

The President. Cream cheese. Thank you very much. I got it.

And you know, the Vice President's been busy, too. When I was in Central America, I turned on my trusty C-SPAN, and I saw the Vice President talking about how rough it is to travel on airplanes these days, the delays, the lost baggage, the disgusting meals. [Laughter] Al, I didn't know it was that bad on Air Force II. [Laughter] I think he's due for an upgrade.

Aren't you glad Garrison Keillor is here? I welcome you, sir, to Washington, where all the lobbyists are strong, all the politicians think they're good-looking, and all of the lawyers are above average. [Laughter] I'm glad Governor Ventura let you out of the headlock, and I hope he lets you go home to Minnesota.

Folks, I was going to make jokes about the House Republicans tonight, about the managers. It wouldn't be fair; they're not here to defend

themselves. They're all at the "Taliban Correspondents Association Dinner." [Laughter] You know, the House managers were really unhappy with the Senate verdict. In fact, they're appealing it to the judges in the Holyfield-Lewis fight. [Laughter]

This is a pretty tough time for the right wing. The president of the Council of Conservative Citizens had to resign because of his alleged ties to Bob Barr. [Laughter]

Now, look, as I have often said, politics aside, this is truly a great moment for America. Since I took office, more than 18 million new jobs—opportunity abundant. But there are pockets of our economy that have been hurt by change—

The "Prime Minister." Oh, Bob Barr! [Laughter]

The President. He and I liked it better than you did. [Laughter]

Anyway, as I was saying, in spite of all this prosperity, there are some pockets of our economy that have really been hurt by change. For example, now that the trial is over, we have a responsibility to do something about the growing ranks of dislocated pundits. [Laughter] You know, in this era of technological change, the average worker will change jobs 7 times. And now we know that for a full 50 percent of them, one of those jobs will be a short stint as a panelist on MSNBC. [Laughter]

My friends, when their time in Washington is up, we simply must help displaced pundits make the most of the opportunities of the 21st century. This is a challenge best met at the State level. [Laughter] So I propose a new relocation grant to move Washington's pundits out to our 50 States, the laboratories of democracy—[laughter]—to give them new, fresh, vibrant opportunities to torment our Nation's Governors—[laughter]—from Trenton to Tallahassee and Albany to Austin.

I also want you to know that I am absolutely firmly committed to passing the long overdue Pundits' Bill of Rights: You have the right to a fresh danish in the green room, the right to interrupt others, the right to shout down Chris Matthews—I think that's an obligation, myself—[laughter]—and never, never should you have to make the painful choice between the beat you cover and the talk show you love. [Laughter]

Now, the cable networks have to fill 24 hours of news programming with 24 minutes worth of actual news. [Laughter] That's pretty tough.

Anyway, here are a few of the better ideas for new shows: "MSNBC in Crisis"—[laughter]—"Inside the Politics of 'Burden of Proof'"—[laughter]—"Totally Subpoenaed Videos." [Laughter] But just for you tonight, we got our hands on a preview of cable news' next really big show. Here it is; look on the video screen.

[At this point, a video called "Punditubbies" was shown, with journalist Robert Novak hosting characters from the children's television program "Teletubbies."]

The President. I'll explain it to you later, your Excellency. [Laughter]

Well, there has been some real news this week. The DNC announced it will hold the 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles. But what you may not know is that the Los Angeles planning committee insisted on some minor changes in the convention format. For example, the Democratic candidate must start his acceptance speech by thanking the Academy and saying what an honor it is just to be nominated. [Laughter] In addition to the red-meat rhetoric of usual, there will be a fabulous vegetarian plate prepared by Wolfgang Puck. Tough questions will now be handled by stunt doubles. There'll be a fundraiser at Grauman's Chinese Theater. And basically—even after it's over—in Hollywood, Oscars will still be bigger than the convention.

Speaking of the Oscars, everybody's got his or her own pick for Best Picture. Now, I like some in particular, but none of these were nominated. But there were a lot of pictures about Washington this year, and I think they deserve a little consideration.

There was "Leaving Los Alamos," "You've Got Subpoenas"—[laughter]—"Throw Momma in the Grand Jury." One of my favorites, the prequel to "Starr Wars," "The Robert Fiske Story"—[laughter]—and "Saving Private Life." [Laughter]

Now that this speech has gone on long enough, I know we should work together to bring it to closure. So I want you to let me say something, just for a moment, serious.

There are three journalists here tonight from Radio Free Asia who sought to cover my trip to China last year but had their visas canceled by the Chinese Government. I was pleased to sit for an interview with them before I left and took the opportunity to say that China had made a serious mistake.

This, of course, is part of a larger problem, because around the world, still, journalists are barred, harassed, imprisoned, sometimes even murdered, for the crime of seeking and speaking the truth. When leaders in China or anywhere else do this, it is a cause for dismay. And what leaders everywhere must realize is that a robust and independent press actually strengthens a nation. It promotes debate. And in a free society, given enough time, the people pretty much always get it right.

Together we must continue to state forcefully our belief that free expression and independent journalism are absolutely essential to building better societies and protecting the rights of all people. In the daily push and pull of our jobs and lives, we should never lose sight of that one goal, which I know every person in this room shares, not only tonight but every night.

All in all, this hasn't been too bad. I'd do it again. In fact, I'm dumb enough to do it again tomorrow. So I'll see you tomorrow in the East Room. Look for me. I'll be the guy without the red sash. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, and good night.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton. In his remarks, he referred to Jim Mills, president, Radio and Television Correspondents Association; Evelyn Thomas, CBS News; former Attorney General nominee Zoe Baird; Helen Thomas, United Press International; Sam Donaldson, ABC News; Wolf Blitzer, CNN; radio entertainer Garrison Keillor; Gov. Jesse Ventura of Minnesota; boxers Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis; Chris Matthews, CNBC; chef Wolfgang Puck; and Radio Free Asia journalists Arin Basu, Patricia Hindman, and Xiao Ming Feng.

The President's News Conference *March 19, 1999*

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, as all of you know, we have been involved in an intensive effort to end the conflict in Kosovo for many weeks now. With our NATO Allies and with Russia, we proposed a peace agreement to stop the killing and give the people of Kosovo the self-determination and government they need and to which they are entitled under the constitution of their government.

Yesterday the Kosovar Albanians signed that agreement. Even though they have not obtained all they seek, even as their people remain under attack, they've had the vision to see that a just peace is better than an unwinnable war. Now only President Milosevic stands in the way of peace.

Today the peace talks were adjourned because the Serbian negotiators refused even to discuss key elements of the peace plan. NATO has warned President Milosevic to end his intransigence and repression or face military action.

Our allies are strongly united behind this course. We are prepared, and so are they, to carry it out. Today I reviewed our planning with my senior advisers and met with many Members of Congress. As we prepare to act, we need

to remember the lessons we have learned in the Balkans. We should remember the horror of the war in Bosnia, the sounds of sniper fire aimed at children, the faces of young men behind barbed wire, the despairing voices of those who thought nothing could be done. It took precious time to achieve allied unity there, but when we did, our firmness ended all that. Bosnia is now at peace.

We should remember the thousands of people facing cold and hunger in the hills of Kosovo last fall. Firmness ended that as well. We should remember what happened in the village of Racak back in January—innocent men, women, and children taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt, sprayed with gunfire, not because of anything they had done but because of who they were.

Now, roughly 40,000 Serbian troops and police are massing in and around Kosovo. Our firmness is the only thing standing between them and countless more villages like Racak, full of people without protection, even though they have now chosen peace.

Make no mistake, if we and our allies do not have the will to act, there will be more