

## Remarks on Gun Control Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters in Paris

June 17, 1999

*The President.* I would just like to make a brief statement. Sometime today the United States Congress will be called upon to vote on whether to close the gun show loophole. It seems to me there's a very simple, direct question. If we close the loophole and do background checks in a comprehensive fashion at the gun shows, will we succeed, as we have with the Brady bill, in keeping more guns out of the hands of criminals and others who shouldn't have them—at very little inconvenience to legitimate gun owners?

The answer to that question is yes. Everyone knows the answer to that question is yes. Therefore, I hope that this vote will be cast by Congress in the spirit that has gripped the country after the tragedy at Littleton, thinking about those children and other children that we can still save.

Once again, I think that the gun lobby is just wrong about this. And we've seen several gun manufacturers come forward and say that the gun show loophole ought to be closed. We've seen several individual Republicans, and members of the NRA, come forward and say this. They're just wrong here. And I hope and pray that Congress will do the right thing.

*Q.* Mr. President, have you talked to Mr. Dingell, and why is he doing this to the Democrats?

*The President.* I don't think he thinks he's doing this to the Democrats. I believe that this is something on which we have a profound disagreement on. I believe that John Dingell believes he's doing the right thing. But I know that most Members of Congress in both parties agree that the gun show loophole, if closed, would keep more guns out of the hands of criminals. That's what they think. And of course, we have about 80 percent of the Democrats in favor of this, maybe more, maybe 90 percent—I don't know, but way the vast majority. And most of the Republicans are voting the other way, the vast majority. They feel a certain amount of gratitude to the NRA for putting them in the majority in the House in the first place, by frightening people over the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban. And I understand that.

But now we've got 5 years of experience with the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban. All lawful gun owners can still go hunting, can still engage in sport shooting, but we kept 400,000 guns out of the wrong hands with the Brady bill. And now they know that a lot of people with criminal backgrounds are trying to get guns at gun shows and flea markets and things of that kind. It is time to close the loophole. It's a simple, simple, straightforward question on the merits. And if everyone voted on the merits it would carry by 80 percent. And I think we all know that.

### NATO–Russia Negotiations on Kosovo

*Q.* Mr. President, can you report any progress at all in the talks with the Russians and resolving the situation of their role in Kosovo?

*The President.* I just got an update. They're still talking. We haven't resolved all the issues, but they have made pretty good progress today. I'm pleased, and I would urge them to keep working, and I think we'll bring this to a successful conclusion in the next little while—the next day or so I think we'll get it worked out. There has been progress today. I'm pleased with that.

*Q.* Does that progress relate to control of the airport?

*The President.* I think that until we have it all worked out—I don't want to get into what's been done and what hasn't. But I have—I can tell you that there has been substantive progress on very important issues. We've still got, I think, maybe just one issue, maybe two to resolve. But we're making progress. Everybody is working in good faith, and I expect it to be done.

*Q.* When do you think it will get worked out?

*The President.* Soon. They know we don't have a lot of time, and they know that we need to be—all of us need to be putting all of our energies on rapid, comprehensive deployment so that we can provide security to everyone and begin to work on building the institutions of civil government in Kosovo that will treat all the citizens of Kosovo in a fair and equitable

way. And the quicker we get to work on that, the better.

Now, we're doing that now. We've got, as I said, we've got—I told you today, earlier, we've gotten 15,000 of our troops in there; we're deploying as rapidly as we can. We've been working like crazy on this mine problem; we don't want to lose any more of the refugees coming home, to landmines. They desperately want to come home. They love their country. They want to be there. And so that's what I want us to focus on. That's what I want all of us to focus on.

We had a very, very good partnership with the Russians in Bosnia, and I think once these agreements are made, people on all sides will keep all the commitments, and we'll have a good partnership here.

#### *Gun Control Legislation*

Q. Mr. President, you said several times today that the gun vote is difficult for many Members. You've been talking to Members, presumably to Democrats it's most hard for. Why is it so hard for them? What are they telling you?

*The President.* Well, I think that a lot of them who represent rural districts, where there are a lot of gun owners, know that in 1994 the NRA beat somewhere between 12 and 20 of our Members. I mean, let's just put it—and they did it by scaring legitimate gun owners into thinking the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban were going to do terrible things to them and would do no good in fighting crime.

But 5 years later, I'd like to point out, number one, it didn't do terrible things to legitimate gun owners. Number two, it kept 400,000 guns out of the wrong hands. And number three, the country has moved on this; rural people have moved on this. And Littleton galvanized the country. This is crazy for the United States to be the only advanced country in the world that doesn't take comprehensive, sensible, thorough steps to keep handguns out of the hands of criminals. It's just—it doesn't make any sense.

So I think that—my belief is that if a Member in a difficult district is willing to cast this vote and then aggressively defend it, there will be no losses. In fact, they will be rewarded for doing this, even in the difficult districts, in 2000. But I have told them all—you know, I've had very honest, non-pressure-oriented conversations. This is something I care deeply about. I come from a State where this is a big issue.

I was profoundly proud that every Southern Democrat voted to close the gun show loophole in the United States Senate. And that means not only that they know it's the right thing to do; it means that they're confident they can go home to our part of the country and defend it. And I believe that.

And I don't believe—again, I don't believe this is a big partisan issue anywhere but Washington. I think that's at least like the Patients' Bill of Rights. I think—you know, I had a friend of mine from the Intermountain West in Washington last week, whose brother owns an arsenal of weapons, literally, including semi-automatic weapons. He's a big collector of guns. And his brother, he sent me a message, he said, "You know, this ought to be passed. I keep my guns locked. I'm trained to use them. I'm careful about them. I don't want anybody to have any of this stuff they shouldn't have. And this is wrong."

So I think that serious—I'm amazed by how many people have called into the White House on our comment line and identified themselves as NRA members, identified themselves as Republicans, who disagree with me on my things, encouraging us to go forward on this. The country has moved on this. And everybody knows that the only way anyone can get beat on this is if the facts are misrepresented to the voters. Now, there were some voters that were in a—they weren't in a most positive frame of mind in '94, anyway. But the public is in a positive frame of mind now. They know our economy is working. They know our crime rate is down. They know our welfare rolls are down. They know our social problems are diminishing. And they are profoundly moved by what happened at Littleton. They don't want these children to have died for nothing.

And this should not be a partisan issue. There are some people, like Mr. Dingell, who honestly disagree. They ought to have a chance to vote their convictions. But you know and I know and everybody that covers the Congress knows that the overwhelming majority of the Congress believes that if we close the gun show loophole, that we'll keep more guns out of the hands of criminals; we'll save more lives; and we won't inconvenience legitimate gun owners. Everybody knows that's the truth on the merits. So I just pray that they'll go in there and vote on the merits. Then if they'll defend their votes in the

election, none of them, Republicans or Democrats, will be defeated.

Thank you.

NOTE: The exchange began at 6:03 p.m. at the U.S. Ambassador's residence. In his remarks, the President referred to Representative John D. Dingell. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

## Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan in Cologne, Germany

June 18, 1999

*Prime Minister Obuchi.* I look forward very much to meeting you again next summer, in July, when we host the Kyushu-Okinawa summit. I hope to see you there.

*President Clinton.* And I'm very pleased that it's going to be in Okinawa. That's great.

### *Gun Control Legislation*

*Q.* Mr. President, as you know, Dingell won and McCarthy lost, and the NRA is crowing that they beat you. What's your reaction?

*President Clinton.* They did. But they didn't beat me; they beat the American people. When the NRA got the House leadership to put the vote off a month, past the Memorial Day recess, so that the memories of Littleton would fade and they could wear the Members out—from these districts where they were vulnerable—they were given a terrific advantage. And they did what they always do with backroom politics; they made the most of it.

But I noticed even last night they kept putting the vote off. When did they vote, 1:30 a.m.? After, so it wouldn't be on the evening news, in the hope that no one would find out that they are still running the Congress, this Congress, for their own convenience, instead of for the interest of the people.

They did win, and it's a great tribute to their money and their power. But it's not a tribute to the children or the future of America. So one more time the Congress of the United States, with the majority in the lead, says, "We don't care what's necessary to protect our children. We can't possibly bear to make anyone in the NRA mad." And the American people are going to have to send them a signal some way or another. Because the NRA can always produce several hundred telephone calls for every one an ordinary citizen would make. The

people who feel strongly about this are not organized. They don't have a lot of money, and they don't normally threaten people in public life the way the NRA threatens them.

So now they say, "Okay, if you go to a gun show and you'd rather not have your background checked, just walk outside and swap guns and money, and everything is fine." I think when the American people figure out what they did in the dead of night, they will be bitterly disappointed; they'll be shaking their head; and they'll wonder what in the world is going on in Washington. What is going on is business as usual. And it was a great victory for the NRA, but it was a great defeat for the safety of our children.

There's a reason they did this at 1:30 a.m. They will never be able to explain why it's okay not to have a background check if these guys go outside, or why it's okay to have a background check that the FBI has already told them will let over 20 percent more criminals get handguns. They'll never be able to defend it, so they did it at 1:30 a.m.

### *NATO-Russia Negotiations on Kosovo*

*Q.* Mr. President, what do you hear from Helsinki this morning?

*President Clinton.* That they're still working, that they've got almost all the issues resolved, that there are still some matters still to be resolved. When I was briefed this morning it didn't seem to me that it would take too much longer, given the nature of the issues.

*Q.* Mr. President—[inaudible]—you and President Yeltsin to solve the issue?

*President Clinton.* Well, I think the important thing right now, insofar as possible, is to focus on making decisions that will work. I don't think that—it may be necessary for this to be resolved