

that deep down inside it's still the most important public work.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:40 p.m. in the Watson Room at the IBM Palisades Executive Conference Center. In his remarks, he referred

to North Carolina Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr.; Wisconsin Gov. Tommy G. Thompson; Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., chairman and chief executive officer, IBM Corp.; former Gov. Gaston Caperton of West Virginia; Gov. John Engler of Michigan; and Hugh B. Price, president and chief executive officer, National Urban League, Inc.

Remarks on the Nuclear Accident in Japan and Social Security and an Exchange With Reporters *October 1, 1999*

The President. Good morning. This morning before I leave for California, I would like to talk about two issues briefly; first, the tragic nuclear accident in Japan. I have just spoken with Prime Minister Obuchi to express our sympathy to those who have been affected, and our readiness to help in any way we can.

He told me the Japanese authorities have been able to bring the situation under control, and he thanked me for the outpouring of support from the United States. Over the last day we've been providing information to Japan on our experiences in dealing with similar incidents in the United States, and making available our experts in atmospheric monitoring and any other areas that might be useful.

Secretary Richardson has been meeting with his counterparts in Russia and discussing ways we can all coordinate our assistance with them. Japan has been our friend and our ally, and we're ready to work together to address the situation and to prevent future accidents.

I would also like to talk about a new important step we're taking to help more Americans make their retirement years more secure. Through war and peace, from recession to expansion, our Nation has always fulfilled its obligation to older Americans. Thankfully, it's hard to remember the time when growing old usually meant growing poor. It seems impossible to believe, but in many cases, retirement before Social Security meant being sent off to long, lonely years of dependence. The normal aches of aging were accompanied by the unbearable pain of becoming a burden on one's children. That's why Social Security means so much to the life of our Nation. For almost 65 years now it's been an unshakable covenant among genera-

tions, between workers and retirees, between the disabled and the able bodied.

But too many Americans, when planning their retirement, take too little account of Social Security. Of course it's hard to fully plan for tomorrow if you don't know where you stand today. Most Americans receive annual statements of their earnings, their savings, and their private pensions. Until today, however, they've never received annual statements on Social Security, the largest source of income for many, many elderly Americans.

I am pleased to announce that today the Social Security Administration is launching a new effort to help workers know what they can plan on, what they can count on, and if need be, what they can rely on during retirement. One hundred twenty-five million American can now look forward to annual estimates of their Social Security benefits. The first half million mailings go out today. This new Social Security statement will help more Americans understand what Social Security means to them. It will form a vital part of any family's financial planning and help more Americans chart a course to retirement that is clear and secure.

For many Americans Social Security, along with savings and pensions, is the foundation of retirement security. It's a rock-solid guarantee. In this time of prosperity we have our best chance yet to see that it remains so. I hope we will do so and extend the life of the Social Security Trust Fund. I will continue to do all I can, not only to strengthen Social Security but also to strengthen and reform Medicare for the next century, to fulfill our obligation not

only to our older Americans but to their children and their grandchildren. Thank you very much.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Q. Mr. President, do you believe the FBI is being operated professionally, and what makes you think that?

The President. Well, do you already know the answer? [Laughter]

Q. You made a comment about it the other day.

The President. No, I think—I made a comment, I believe, in the context of the Waco situation. And there is now a provision for Senator Danforth to look into it. I think that was the appropriate thing to do. That was, of course, agreed on by both the Attorney General and Director of the FBI. And I think that is the way that it should proceed.

Several years ago, as you know, the FBI director was set up in a different way by Congress, given a term of years, and essentially, I think, it was designed to insulate it more from the executive branch generally, although the Attorney General clearly still has supervisory responsibilities there. And I think that under these circumstances what I have said is all I should say. And I think that both Mr. Freeh and the Attorney General did the right thing in asking for this independent review. I don't think there is much more to say about it.

Republican Budget Proposal

Q. Mr. President, what do you make of Governor Bush's comments that House Republican leaders should not balance the budget on the backs of the poor?

The President. Well, I was delighted to see that he, or that any prominent Republican, finally had joined our position on this. We've been saying this since the proposal was first floated. What they propose to do is unconscionable, and basically, instead of those people getting their tax returns on time like other Americans do, they would get it once a month, and it would cost them a lot of money not only in—they would actually lose some money and then the rest of the money they would get much later in the year. I think it's wrong, and I intend to do everything I can to stop it. And I believe I can stop it.

But I will also say, as I said yesterday, that this is a difficult thing for the Republicans be-

cause unlike us, they don't want to provide reasonable offsets so that we can begin this year to segregate the Social Security surplus from the general revenue surplus and not dip into the Social Security surplus any more. That requires good, firm decisions with reasonable offsets, and we've given them to the Congress. And I hope that the reaction across the country to their idea to raise taxes on the poor will provoke them to reconsider the offsets we have offered.

Let me emphasize again, however, that this only underscores my judgment that I did the right thing in vetoing their tax cut. They can't even pay for this year's spending without getting into the Social Security surplus. They certainly couldn't pay for this year's spending, the spending it will necessitate in the years to come, and the tax cut on top of that.

Japanese Nuclear Accident

Q. Mr. President, are you confident that the kind of accident that happened in Japan can't happen here in America, or do you think that some additional steps need to be taken?

The President. Well, I've asked our people to look at that, the appropriate authorities, to take a look at that. We had a similar incident in this country, I was informed yesterday, I think about 30 years ago. I think that's right. I wish I had the specifics. But we had a general conversation about it, and I said that I thought that we ought to have all of our people learn everything we could about what happened there, analyze our systems here, and make sure we've done everything we can to protect ourselves.

There was a pretty good level of confidence that we had done that, yesterday. But I think that when something like this happens we realize we live in a world where perfection eludes us, and we've got to keep working on this. So that's what I've asked to be done.

I also think, by the way though if I could just reemphasize, that this should again sensitize us to the importance of issues of nuclear safety. And if I could just mention one; once again I'm in a dispute with a majority of Members of Congress over this Yucca Mountain Facility in Nevada. And my feeling that at the time it was selected, there was some science in there but perhaps some politics, too, since Nevada is a small State and I have wanted not to see this issue politicized but to bend over backwards to make sure we do everything we can to deal

with the nuclear safety issue before we adopt this course. I still feel that way.

I hope that generally all Americans will want to see us proceed in every area where we're dealing with nuclear safety.

Social Security and Federal Spending

Q. Mr. President, given the political cross-fire over dipping into the Social Security surplus fund why don't you take the lead and invite GOP leaders down to the White House to discuss reasonable offsets and, as a last resort if need be, agree to spend money together?

The President. Well, I am certainly willing to talk to them, and we are, as I'm sure you know, we're trying to keep the lines of communication open. And I hope that there will come a time when we can get the leaders of both parties in Congress together and agree on a future course. I think that is important.

But they have to be also willing to have that sort of discussion first, and we're working on it. I'm very hopeful that they will decide that, as is usually the case in the United States, that doing the right thing for the American people is the best politics.

They have decided that the right thing to do is to spend money that goes beyond the budget caps of '97, which is certainly understandable, particularly in the Medicare area, that they are too tight and that it would go beyond what the non-Social Security surplus is. As I said yesterday, that has been the case at least since 1983 when the last Social Security reform was done and the revenues of Social Security came in, but no one really noticed it because we were always running a deficit.

Then the Congress decided, and I agreed, that it would be a good thing, since we now project surpluses, to segregate out these two. That's a good thing. But they found out that they had committed to do it a year before they could do that and meet their spending goals.

So, there are three choices here. Either really do harm to the country by not making some of these investments, which they don't want to do and I don't either; or cut some things that I think would be a big mistake, like education or our responsibilities around the world; or find reasonable offsets; or otherwise make a principled agreement and tell the American people what we're doing; or look for the gimmicks.

And I think they've got to move away from the—they chose the third alternative, gimmicks plus television ads, to try to blame us for doing what they are, in fact, doing. And I just think that's a mistake. I am perfectly willing to work with them and talk with them and tell the American people, whatever decision we wind up making, what we did and why if we can reach a principled agreement.

Yesterday, at least, it looked to me like they wanted to stick with the course they're on. I think it's a big mistake, and I think eventually we'll get where we need to go and do the right thing. And they will find when we do, that politically it's almost always the best politics to do the right by the country.

Florida A&M Bombings

Q. You've been sounding out against terrorism, and there is a quiet story coming out of Florida, Florida A&M. Have you heard about the bombings at Florida A&M? And there is supposedly a conclusion today to that situation. What are your thoughts? There have been several bombings at Florida A&M.

The President. Well, I would like to know more about the source of them, whether they're racially motivated, whether they're politically motivated. When I do, then I think I should make a statement. Obviously we deplore violence of any kind and bombings, by their very nature, are terroristic. But I would like to know more about what the roots of it are or what we believe they are, and then I will be glad to say more.

Q. Were you made aware of the incidents before this week?

The President. Just in the general way that you've described them, but no more.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:59 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House prior to departure for Las Vegas, NV. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan; former Senator John C. Danforth, Special Counsel investigating the Justice Department's role in the 1993 siege in Waco, TX; and Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. A portion of the exchange could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.