

Remarks on the EgyptAir Flight 990 Aircraft Tragedy and an Exchange With Reporters

October 31, 1999

The President. Like all Americans, Hillary and I are very saddened by the crash of the EgyptAir flight off the coast of Massachusetts. We are working on the recovery efforts. We know there has been an extensive loss of life, and we don't yet know what caused the accident. So I really think I can't say any more now, except—

Q. Have you talked with anyone, sir?

The President. Only our people. They've briefed me. But we don't know, we don't know what the cause of the accident is. We'll keep working until we find out.

Q. Concerns about foul play, sir?

The President. We don't know. We have no evidence of that at this time, and I think it's better if people draw no conclusions until we know something.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:15 p.m. outside Foundry United Methodist Church following church services. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Interview With Bryant Gumbel of CBS's "The Early Show"

October 31, 1999

Mr. Gumbel. Mr. President, first off, thank you very much for the time. I'm grateful.

The President. You're welcome. I'm glad to see you. Congratulations on your new program.

Mr. Gumbel. Thank you very much.

The President. It's going to ruin your golf game getting up at 4 o'clock every morning.

EgyptAir Flight 990 Aircraft Tragedy

Mr. Gumbel. Well it's not bad, though; you're on the tee by noon, so it's okay. Let me turn serious for a moment.

We meet against the backdrop of the EgyptAir 990 crash. At this point in time, have you any reason to believe this was anything other than an accident?

The President. No. I don't. But I think it's important that we draw no conclusions about it and just let the investigation take its course.

Mr. Gumbel. Given history, given the volatile nature of Mideast relationships, do you see the absence of answers in any way impacting the Mideast talks in Oslo?

The President. Based on what I know now, I don't. I had a good talk with President Mubarak. I called him immediately when I got up this morning, and we talked about it a little bit. We're working together with the Egyptian

Government in every way we can on this crash. So, now, I don't. So, unless there is some question I don't know about that arises in the next day or 2, I don't think it will.

Mr. Gumbel. Would you say President Mubarak shares your view right now that there is no reason to believe this was anything other than an accident?

The President. Well, I think we agree that the evidence doesn't give us any indication that there was, now. But the evidence doesn't say anything one way or the other. We don't know. And I think the honest answer to people who ask is that they shouldn't have a prejudice about it one way or the other. We should just look and see.

Upcoming Middle East Peace Talks in Oslo, Norway

Mr. Gumbel. As you look to Oslo, what are your realistic expectations of what you can accomplish?

The President. Well, I hope that by getting together with Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat in a setting designed to honor the memory and to evoke the memory of Yitzhak Rabin, we can give some new energy to this process. They've done really quite well with

their cooperation on security, with opening the safe passage from the West Bank to Gaza, with agreeing to a very disciplined timetable. But now they're getting into these issues which are all hard. And my strong conviction is that we've known what these issues are for a long time now; they're not going to get any easier. So whatever I and whatever the United States can do to facilitate a timely resolution of these issues I think will be positive. So I think this will have a positive impact on getting the process going along here.

Mr. Gumbel. Is it easier for you to feel a degree of optimism because it's Barak involved right now instead of Netanyahu?

The President. Well that may be part of it. But I think the main thing is that Barak and Arafat have now made an agreement and they're implementing it. And they're also cooperating on security issues. And Barak has made publicly clear that he had a timetable for resolving this, and he's received the support of the Israeli people. So that whole set of circumstances make me optimistic.

On the other hand, I want to say again, we're now down to the hard decisions. When Oslo was negotiated, the Oslo agreement, way back at the very end of '92, they knew what they were doing in saying, "Okay, here is what we're going to do now; here's what we're going to do in the next 4 or 5 years; here is what we're going to do at the end." And they left the hard stuff to the end. It was the right decision, but we're now down to the end, and we have to deal with the hard stuff.

President's Role in 2000 Elections

Mr. Gumbel. Let's move closer to home. Let's talk politics, close to your heart, of course. The two people who have been closest to you for 7 years are about to get out there on the campaign trail while you stay at home and deal with the issues. Is that terribly frustrating?

The President. No. Actually, I enjoy it. I knew when I started that it would come to an end. I was hoping I would be fortunate enough to serve two terms, and I have been. And I've loved every day of it. And now it's important that the work of the country go on and that the direction that we have taken continue and that the changes that still need to be made by the country be made. So I'm actually very—I'm proud of the Vice President, and I'm very

proud of my wife for being willing to stick their necks out and do this. And I wish them well.

Mr. Gumbel. What role do you see yourself playing in their campaigns?

The President. Well no official role, really. And I shouldn't. But I will do what I'm asked to do. I've helped the Vice President at a couple of fundraisers, and we talk with some frequency. And of course, I talk to Hillary all the time, every day. And it's so funny because our roles are almost completely reversed now. All the things that she did for me over more than 20 years, all the encouragement, reminders, helpful suggestions, everything, all the things, we've just kind of reversed roles. And I'm enjoying it. I'm trying to do a good job in my new role.

Mr. Gumbel. How do you view the polls that have suggested that if you're on the campaign trail with them, you may be more of a liability than a positive?

The President. Well, what I think people are saying is we want these people to sell themselves. And we don't want anyone to tell us how to vote. That's the point I tried to make in Philadelphia when I was campaigning for John Street, that I don't want to tell you how to vote. I would like to offer you some reasons about why you should vote.

And I think particularly in New York where Hillary—which has been wonderful to me; I got 58 percent of the vote; we won by 1.8 million votes in New York in 1996, but that doesn't mean that those New Yorkers believe I should tell them who should be their Senator. They want to see Hillary out there committed to them, their issues, their needs, their future. And the more she does that, the more everybody else will be able to make arguments about why she should be elected. But I think—and that's just the way the democratic process works. And it's good.

Mr. Gumbel. Would you welcome the chance to get out there and stump against Rudy Giuliani, or if the case calls for it, George W. Bush?

The President. Well, what I hope that I will be able to do is to remind the American people of where we were 7 years ago, where we are now, where we need to go in the future. I agree with the majority of people who say they still want change. The question is, what kind of change do we want? And the vote of the public in the year 2000—the American people will not decide whether we're going to change

or not; we are. You know, things are changing at a breathtaking pace, and we have to keep up. The question is, what kind of change will we embrace? And insofar as I can offer my observations, not only as the President but as a citizen, as someone who wants our grandchildren to live in the strongest possible country, I will do that.

But you have to be careful. I can't expect anybody to vote for anyone, not just the Vice President and Hillary, not anyone, just because I say they should do it. So the only thing I can do is hope that the position I have will get people to listen to whatever reasons I offer.

Vice President's Candidacy

Mr. Gumbel. Why do you think, turning to the Vice President's campaign for a second, if I might, why do you think the Vice President is having such a difficult time opening up ground between himself and Bill Bradley?

The President. Well, first I think he's doing a good job on his campaign right now. I thought he did a good job in the debate. I think he did a good thing to go home to Tennessee. And I think that if—by historical standards, he's doing quite well. I think Bill Bradley is an intelligent, a compelling man with a good life story and a lot of friends built up in professional basketball and 18 years in the Senate and all the other things he's done. And he's out there running a credible campaign.

But if you look at the last time this happened, when then-Vice President Bush was running against Bob Dole, at this time in that race Vice President Bush was only one point ahead of Bob Dole in the national polls.

People want to see the Vice President out there establishing his own identity with his own program for the future, making clear where he wants to go. If he does, I think he will be nominated. And I think he's doing a good job of that now.

Gov. George W. Bush of Texas

Mr. Gumbel. It would seem that at this point that whoever prevails will be going up against George W. Bush. In style and personality, Governor Bush has been characterized as the GOP's version of you. Flattering? Offensive?

The President. It's certainly not offensive. I think he's got—he's a very accomplished political leader, and he's got good instincts for where the political center is.

Mr. Gumbel. Flattering then?

The President. And I think—well, let me say, and I think he's made a deliberate decision to present his candidacy as sort of a new Republican, kind of a kinder, gentler Republican alternative. What I hope the American people will focus on when they get to the general election—and we're not there yet. Let me say, I don't think Senator McCain is out of this yet. I think he's a very credible alternative. And I think that the fact that he's been willing to participate in these debates, and Governor Bush hasn't, I think is a plus for McCain.

Assuming we get to that point, then I think the issue will be, what does the Republican nominee offer for the future? What does the Democratic nominee offer to the future? What would the combination of a Republican President and Republican Congress bring to our future? Will it bring back this tax cut I vetoed? Does it mean the NRA will continue to control the gun debate? Or will we have somebody trying to have sensible gun restraint mechanisms? Does it mean we'll never get a Patients' Bill of Rights because the health insurance companies don't want it? There are all these issues that I think will become quite clear maybe not even until next August, but in August, September, and October, you're going to see a very vigorous debate that will shape not only the next 4 years but maybe the next 10 or 15 years of America's new century.

Mr. Gumbel. Before I leave the subject of Governor Bush, what's your take on the demarcation line he's drawing on past drug use for his personal life?

The President. I'm going to leave that to—that's up to the public really. The people are in the driver's seat now. And the press will express their views and do what they think is right, and the politicians will express their views and do what they think is right. But in the end, the public has to be the judge of that.

Mr. Gumbel. Let me rephrase. In your opinion, do you believe previous cocaine use should disqualify someone from sitting in this office?

The President. My opinion is that the public will make a decision, that if—most people think they ought to know if there is some serious problem in someone's background, and if so, how that person has dealt with it. The American people tend to be forgiving about many things, but there are some things they want to know and then there are other things they don't want

to know. And they may change their mind from time to time. Maybe they think it depends upon how long ago it was. Maybe they think it depends upon how it was treated.

But I think that if I get in the middle of this debate, it will interfere with having a debate that's free of distraction; that is, my opinion would only be a distraction given the way—the kind of treatment I got from '91 forward from the Republicans and their allies. And I think I should stay out of it and let the people make the right decision.

Mr. Gumbel. New York Times Magazine cover, as I think you probably saw, had a cover a week and a half ago of “Slam, Bam, Sham,” suggesting that modern culture generates Presidential candidates whose lone qualifications are fame and a degree of celebrity. Do you see that as a disturbing trend?

The President. Well, I certainly didn't have any fame or celebrity when I ran. In President Bush's terms, I was the Governor of a small southern State.

Mr. Gumbel. I think the headline was aimed at those who are courting the Reform Party at this point.

The President. Oh, I know. But no, I don't. You know, Governor Bush is in part of the position he's in because his father was President. But in the end, the voters will judge him, I think, based on his own merits.

The Kennedys have spawned, now, two generations, and it won't be long before there will be a third generation, of young people who present themselves for public service. They're aided in the beginning because of their name, but in the end, they're judged on their own merits.

And I don't think someone should be disqualified for seeking public office because they've been in entertainment, or business, or athletics. But sooner or later, the voters look at them and they say, “Well, can this person perform?” So I don't see it as a bad thing. I basically trust the voters on this. As long as they've got time enough to make a good decision, I think they normally make it. That's why we're still around here after 200 years.

And the more—the bigger the country gets, the more people will have an advantage, who for some reason or another, are already known by a lot of people. On the other hand, if somebody really good and is known by no one has a chance to start, the same mass media can

make you famous in a hurry. So I'm not particularly worried about this.

Post-Presidential Plans

Mr. Gumbel. Are you going to miss being President?

The President. I think so, yes. I think I will because I love the job. You know, just today I got up—I do what I did Sunday afternoon, every Sunday afternoon. I went through all my work for the last week that I hadn't done, and all the plans for the next week. I love this job. I've worked at it, and I've loved it, and it's been an honor to serve. So yes, I will miss it.

On the other hand, I'm so focused, almost to the point of obsession, on what we can still get done here. And I'm genuinely looking forward to what I'm going to do when I'm not President anymore.

Mr. Gumbel. And that would be?

The President. Well, I'm going to set up my library and public policy center. And I'm going to try to be a very good citizen without getting in the way of the next President.

Mr. Gumbel. What kind of odds would you quote on you ever running for office again, any office?

The President. Oh, I think they would be pretty long. Although, you know, I used to joke that I might run for the school board someday. I don't know. I certainly have no plans to run for office. And I'm going to have to get out here and earn a little money and try to make sure that my wife and daughter are okay. Maybe something could happen someday and I would want to run. I just don't know.

President's Legacy

Mr. Gumbel. Presidents generally get one line in the history, if they get one line. JFK was shot. Nixon had Watergate. Reagan beat communism. Clinton?

The President. Turned the economy around and prepared America for a new century.

Mr. Gumbel. You would be satisfied if your legacy was erasing the Nation's red ink?

The President. I think that's one of my legacies. But I think the real legacy is America is genuinely transformed from where it was 7 years ago. Look at where we were in '92. We had economic distress. We had social divisions, as embodied in the riot in Los Angeles. We

were in political drift; government was completely discredited. And I said, "Look, give me a chance. I've got some new ideas to create opportunity, to increase responsibility among our citizens, to build a community of America." And we set about changing. Meanwhile, America was changing.

The day I took office as President there were only 50 websites on the Internet in the whole world, 50. That's how much we've changed. So yes, we've got the strongest economy in history. And yes, we're paying off the debt instead of being in debt. But we also have cut our welfare rolls in half. We've got the lowest crime rate in 30 years. We've got the lowest poverty rate in 30 years. We've reversed this wage inequality. All groups are growing. A couple of million children have been moved out of poverty. The air is cleaner. The water is cleaner. We set aside more land to protect it than any other administration except those of Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt.

So the whole Nation has been transformed. We literally have prepared the country for another century. If you compare it from now to then; instead of a distressed economy, you've got a booming economy. Instead of a divided society, you've got the social problems being solved. And instead of political drift and discrediting of government, we've got the smallest Government in 37 years, and it's actually doing things for people, empowering people.

So I think that I have been fortunate enough to serve as President at a time of dramatic trans-

formation, when we really have—in the metaphor I used in 1996—built a bridge to the future. And now the American people are going to have to decide how they want to walk over it.

President's New York Residence

Mr. Gumbel. Final note. If my research is correct, you sign papers next week, final papers, on the house in Chappaqua. Do you happen to know what's the closest golf course to your house in Chappaqua?

The President. I don't, no.

Mr. Gumbel. Whippoorwill Country Club in Armonk. Do you know who is a member there?

The President. Are you?

Mr. Gumbel. Yes, sir.

The President. I would be happy to be your guest any time. I'm easy about that.

Mr. Gumbel. Mr. President, safe travels.

The President. Thanks.

NOTE: The interview was videotaped at 4:08 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House for broadcast on November 1. In his remarks, the President referred to President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Philadelphia mayoral candidate John F. Street; and former Senators Bill Bradley and Bob Dole. A portion of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Remarks on the EgyptAir Flight 990 Aircraft Tragedy and the Budget and an Exchange With Reporters

October 31, 1999

The President. Good afternoon. Before I leave for Oslo, I would like to make a few comments. First, I want to say, as I did earlier today, how deeply saddened I am over the disappearance of EgyptAir flight 990 early this morning off the coast of Massachusetts.

We know there has been a loss of life. The Coast Guard, supported by the Navy, is conducting extensive search and rescue operations in the area. The effort will continue for as long as necessary. We are also working with Egyptian

authorities, and I spoke earlier with President Mubarak of Egypt today to express my condolences and to assure him that we would be working together closely until this matter is resolved.

We do not know what caused this tragedy, but we will devote every necessary resource so that we can understand exactly what happened. At this moment, the thoughts and prayers of all our people should be with the families of the passengers and crew of flight 990 from the