

NOTE: The President's 185th news conference began at 2:36 p.m. in the Dean Acheson Auditorium at the State Department. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; President Hafiz al-Asad and Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara of Syria; Juan Gonzalez, father of Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez;

President Andres Pastrana of Colombia; President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela; former Senator George J. Mitchell, who chaired the multiparty talks in Northern Ireland; President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine; former Senator Bob Dole; former Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr; and President Boris Yeltsin of Russia.

Remarks on Lighting the National Christmas Tree *December 8, 1999*

Thank you. Thank you very much, Peter. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a wonderful ceremony every year, but this year it has been very special. I want to thank Wayne Newton and Renee Fleming, Marty Stuart, Al Roker—he's a good Santa Claus. [*Laughter*] I want to thank the cast from "Chicago" and Ricky Payton and the Urban National Youth Choir and, of course, Colonel Tim Foley and the Marine Corps Band, "The President's Own." The best perk of the Presidency is the Marine Corps Band, and I want to give them all a hand. [*Applause*] They've been wonderful.

For over 85 years now, our country has gathered around our National Christmas Tree to celebrate the beginning of this wonderful season of peace and hope. I am honored once again to be part of a tradition I have come to look forward to every year. For me, Christmas always starts now with the Pageant of Peace and the lighting of this beautiful Colorado spruce. And I am especially honored to be here to light the last tree of the 20th century.

In this sacred season, it is time for all of us to renew our commitment to give of ourselves, to reach out to those who are less fortunate, to reach out to those who are different from us, to build the one America of our dreams. In this Pageant of Peace, we celebrate Christmas, also the season of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and others, all joined by a simple and universal message, that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This holiday season, we Americans have an awful lot to be thankful for: Our Nation is at peace, and all around the world we are privileged to make peace, from Bosnia to Northern Ireland to the Middle East, the land where a

homeless child grew up to be the Prince of Peace.

Just today, in this season, I was proud to announce that after a long, long stalemate, the Israelis and the Syrians have agreed to meet again in just a few days to make their peace.

At the dawn of a new millennium, as we enjoy these wonderful performers and the timeless songs of all of our childhoods, let us rededicate ourselves to the true spirit of Christmas. As we light the National Christmas Tree, let us spread the light of peace and good will toward our family, our friends, our neighbors, and all those across the world, especially those who need it most.

Merry Christmas, happy new year, and God bless you.

I'd like to ask, now, the young scouts to come up and join me in lighting the Christmas tree. Caitlin Fong and Chris Alvarez—they're going to come up here. And didn't they do a good job? Let's give them another hand. [*Applause*]

Unlike the sissies, like me, they did it without any coats on, either. I thought they were wonderful. All right, you put your hands on the switch now, and I'm going to count from three down to one and tell you to flip it, okay? Ready? Three, two, one, go!

Good job.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6 p.m. on the Ellipse during the annual Christmas Pageant of Peace. In his remarks, he referred to Peter Nostrand, chairman, Christmas Pageant of Peace; entertainers Wayne Newton, Renee Fleming, and Marty Stuart; television weatherman Al Roker; and Ricky Payton, Sr., director, BET Urban Nation Voices of Youth H.I.P. H.O.P. Choir; and Col.

Timothy W. Foley, USMC, Director, "The President's Own" United States Marine Band.

Remarks on the Digital Divide and an Exchange With Reporters December 9, 1999

The President. Good morning. I just thought we ought to come out here in the brisk morning sunshine and wake up together. [Laughter] I want to thank the representatives here from all parts of the communications industry, from the foundation world, from various civil rights and other civic groups for being here, and coming in and giving me a chance to make this statement, because I had intended to go to Secretary Daley's conference today on bridging the digital divide, and because I'm going to Worcester, I couldn't do that. So they came in this morning, and we had a visit. I want to thank them for being here and for their commitment and for all those who aren't here but who are at the conference.

This conference is about closing the digital divide. And we have worked hard on that for the last several years in very specific contexts. Under the Vice President's leadership, we have worked to make sure that eventually a digital divide will not deprive business of the technology-savvy workers they need and will not hurt our educational systems today.

We started with the first NetDay in California, back in 1994, when only 3 percent of our classrooms were wired and only 14 percent of our schools were. And we've been working ever since. Now we know that, through the public-private partnerships that have been established all over America, through the Telecommunications Act and the E-rate, which the FCC set to make sure our poorest schools could afford to be connected, we're now up over 50 percent of the schools, from 3 percent, and over 80 percent of the classrooms, from 14 percent, since 1994. And I think that's pretty good.

I'm very pleased by that, and we're on our way to meeting our goal sometime next year of having all of our schools wired and, soon after that, all of our classrooms wired. I want to thank the Vice President and all the people in various industries who have supported us and helped us in this regard.

But as Secretary Daley's most recent "Falling Through the Net" report shows, there is still a lot more to do. We must connect all of our citizens to the Internet not just in schools and libraries but in homes, small businesses, and community centers. And we must help all Americans gain the skills they need to make the most of the connection. So this morning, as they go back to their meeting, I want to announce a series of new plans and partnerships that will expand on both these efforts to use the combined forces of public, private, and nonprofit sectors, finally to slam shut the digital divide.

First, I have decided to lead a prominent delegation, including top CEO's, on a new markets tour this spring to focus specifically on the digital divide out in America. As we've done on our previous tours, we will visit communities that have not fully participated in our Nation's economic growth. And yet, in the communities we'll also see how partnerships between the public and private sectors can unleash the power of the Internet to link children and adults to a lifetime of learning, to provide access to distant medical care, to empower parents, to assist job seekers, to enhance safety, and foster economic development.

Second, I am signing an executive memorandum to ensure that closing the digital divide will be a vital goal not just for Secretary Daley and for us here in the White House but throughout the Federal Government. For example, I'm directing Secretary Daley to work with the private sector to develop a national strategy for connecting all Americans to the Internet and directing Secretaries Daley, Riley, Herman, Cuomo, and Shalala to expand our growing network of community technology centers.

I just ask you all to think about this one thing. What do you believe the economic impact would be if Internet access and usage were as dense in America as telephone access and usage? I think it's clear that we need to keep working until we achieve this goal.