

June 18 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

Statement on the Ethiopia-Eritrea Cease-Fire Agreement

June 18, 2000

Today in Algiers, Ethiopia and Eritrea signed an agreement to cease hostilities. This is a breakthrough which can and should end the tragic conflict in the Horn of Africa. It can and should permit these two countries to realize their potential in peace, instead of squandering it in war.

I commend the Organization of African Unity, and especially its chair, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, for leading the negotiation of this agreement. I am grateful to my envoy, former National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, to Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, and to my senior adviser on African affairs, Gayle Smith, for their tireless pursuit of a peaceful resolution to this conflict. The United States

has supported the OAU in this effort, and we will continue to do so. I have asked Tony Lake to return to Algiers to work with the OAU as we enter the next round of negotiations.

I hope this commitment by Ethiopia and Eritrea to stop the fighting also signals their commitment to build the peace. I urge them to use the next round of talks to produce a final, comprehensive, lasting agreement, so they can get on with the work of pursuing democracy and development for their people. Ethiopia and Eritrea are America's friends. If they are ready to take the next step, we and our partners in the international community will walk with them.

Remarks at a Southwest Voter Registration Education Project Reception in Houston, Texas

June 19, 2000

Thank you very, very much. Well, I think Representative Noriega did his family proud, don't you? I thought it was great. Thank you. *[Applause]*

I would like to thank all of you who are here, including the folks behind me: my good friend Bill White and my long-time friend Representative Al Edwards and Carlos Truan, whom I've known for nearly 30 years. And Antonio Gonzalez, thank you very much. And Billie Carr is still working her cell phone after all these years. *[Laughter]* Tell whoever it is I said hello, Billie. *[Laughter]* I love this.

I want to thank Representative Sheila Jackson Lee for being here. And Mickey Ibarra, who is my special assistant who works with State and local government around the country, I thank him for coming down here, along with Steve Ricchetti, my Deputy Chief of Staff.

I'm delighted to be with Southwest Voter Registration Project, and I want to thank you for all the work that you have done with me and the Vice President over the years, the work you have done to advance democracy, to bring

Latino voters into the process, to promote education and economic development.

I also appreciate the solidarity you have shown with others who also deserve to be empowered and to have a full portion of the American dream. And I want to acknowledge, again, Representative Al Edwards, who is here, because today is June 19th, which is known in the African-American community in the South as "Juneteenth." It's the holiday that celebrates the emancipation of the slaves in Texas.

And for those of you who don't know, basically, Abraham Lincoln, in what is now the Lincoln Bedroom, signed the Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862. It became effective January 1, 1863. But most of the slaves who were freed did not find out until after the Civil War, because the proclamation ran to the States that had seceded. And formal notice came on June 19th in Texas, and it became known as Juneteenth. In the western part of the Southern States, it's still not uncommon to see these "Juneteenth" celebrations all across the South, particularly in little towns who have family ties going back to that period. And Al

made it a holiday in Texas. We congratulate him. Thank you, old friend.

And let me sort of pivot off of that to say that this day should be a day for rejoicing but also for reflection and for reminding ourselves that there's still a lot of hardship out there and still a lot of discrimination against people because of their race or their sexual orientation or something else that makes them different and therefore makes other people afraid of them or believe that they can look down on them and do things that aren't right.

On the way in here, I met with Louvon Harris and Darrell Verrett, the sister and the nephew of James Byrd. They're right here. Stand up. [Applause] It was 2 years ago this month that James Byrd was killed here in Texas, in a heinous act that shocked Americans in every corner of the country, including all the good people of Texas. It reminds us that crimes that are motivated by hate really are fundamentally different and, I believe, should be treated differently under the law.

In the Federal Government we have Federal hate crimes legislation on the books that I believe should be stronger. But we have prosecuted a number of the cases. We have substantially increased the number of FBI agents working them; we have formed local hate crimes working groups; and for 3 years we've tried to pass a stronger Federal bill and to support similar actions in States across the country.

I know you were disappointed when the State hate crimes legislation didn't pass here. But I am pleased to be able to tell you that the United States Senate has finally agreed, the leadership of the Senate, to allow a vote, up or down, on hate crimes legislation that has now been held up since November of 1997,* when I had the first White House Conference on Hate Crimes. But it's now going to be voted on.

And I want to tell you about it. The bill has been strengthened. The version of the bill that is now going to be voted on will be introduced by Senator Kennedy today on the Senate floor. It strengthens the Federal hate crimes legislation and also gives State and local officials more Federal resources to help to prosecute these crimes.

Now, we believe that most hate crimes should be prosecuted—investigated and prosecuted by State and local officials, with the Federal Gov-

ernment being a partner. But too often Federal officials have literally been prevented from teaming up with local law enforcement, and that has kept communities from being able to do what needed to be done to work these offenses.

Senator Kennedy's bill takes steps to change that by giving State and local officials the assistance they need. It also requires the Attorney General to confer with them before bringing a case in Federal court. So we have actually strengthened the original bill, put some more resources in it, and done it in a way that I hope and pray will get us enough Republican votes to actually pass the bill. And I ask all of you to stand with this fine family. They've been out here working for this for 2 years now. They have worked through their grief and through their pain. They've been willing to stand up and be counted.

And we have a chance now to pass this at the Federal level. And I know that Representative Sheila Jackson Lee cares very deeply about this. I brought two United States Senators down to Texas with me today, Ron Wyden and Bob Torricelli, who are profoundly committed to it. And I just want to ask you to help us. You have shown your solidarity on all these human rights issues. We have people here from the Human Rights Campaign Fund in this room today. I want to ask you to help us. We've got a chance now. We have to pass this legislation.

I'd like to mention one or two other things, if I might. Congress, I hope, will pass some legislation to correct two long-standing injustices that affect immigrants in our country. First, we need to amend our immigration laws to provide equitable treatment for all Central American immigrants. In that connection, we should give migrants with longstanding ties to our country the chance to legalize their status.

As all of you know, we had a huge amount of turmoil in Central America right through the 1980's, into the early nineties. The Federal law actually discriminates against Central Americans who came here for the same reasons, depending on what country they came from and what the nature of the conflict was back home. And I don't think any of us think that is right. And a lot of these folks have been here a long time. They've established families; they've married people from other countries or from our country; they've got kids in our schools. And we need to do this.

* White House correction.

The third thing I'd like to ask your help on is to continue working with us to see that our Federal courts reflect America's growing diversity. [Applause] I appreciate you clapping, but I want you to really help us do something about this.

Representative Noriega said that I had appointed and nominated the most diverse group of Federal judges in history. We've appointed more Hispanic-Americans to the Federal bench than any administration before. Twenty-four of my judicial appointees have been Hispanic-Americans, more than the previous two Republican administrations combined. I'm proud of that. But—yes, but—[laughter]—and the “but” is important—several eminently qualified minority nominees have become casualties of a highly politicized confirmation process.

Let me back up and say that, generally, if you—there have been lots and lots of scholarly articles pointing out that my nominees are the most highly regarded by the American Bar Association professional evaluation in 40 years, that they have by and large not been political, that they have not been on one ideological extreme. They have been mainstream appointees. And they have constantly been attacked in the Senate, because they didn't fit the ideological mold that the Republican majority wanted.

For example, Ricardo Morado, my candidate for the Southern District here in Texas, his nomination has been put on hold. Kathleen McCree Lewis in Detroit—her father, Wade McCree, was one of the two or three most important lawyers in the entire civil rights movement—highly regarded lawyer. Never been an African-American woman on the Court of Appeals there. Can't get a hearing for her.

And perhaps the most egregious case in the entire country, I think, is the case of Enrique Moreno, who I nominated to the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. He has been waiting more than 275 days, without even receiving a Judiciary Committee hearing. And last month Senator Gramm and Senator Hutchinson said they were going to oppose his nomination because he wasn't qualified. They said he wasn't experienced. Well, you be the judge. From humble beginnings in El Paso, he established, first of all, an utterly brilliant academic career—I might add, more brilliant than that of virtually everyone who'd be voting on his confirmation. [Laughter] The State judges in Texas said he was one of the top three trial attorneys in El

Paso. The American Bar Association gave him their highest rating—not just a good rating, their highest rating. But this State's Republican Senator said he's not qualified. And apparently everybody else is going along with it, because there's been no voice to the contrary. Now, I don't know about you, but if he's not qualified, who is?

This is the kind of thing—we've been going through this—I can give you lots of other examples. The first African-American ever to serve on the Missouri Supreme Court was defeated in the Senate by a blatant partisan misrepresentation of his record. And we can't have this kind of thing in our country.

It wasn't as if I said, “Well, I want a quota here, and I'm going to appoint this guy because he's Hispanic.” This guy has a brilliant academic record, a brilliant record as a lawyer. The American Bar Association says they give him their highest rating. And the Senators here say he's not qualified. And this is part of a distinctive pattern.

This should not be partisan. I went out of my way because we'd had 20 years of partisan fights in judgeships. I went out of my way to try to pick people that would not raise partisan hackles, to be totally bipartisan in this. And in spite of that, because there are those in the other party who see the courts as an instrument of partisan policy and want it to be that—not because I've made it there but because neutral is not good enough, fair is not good enough, unbiased is not good enough—that's what's going on here. And if you feel strongly about it, you better be heard.

And the device is always to deny these people a hearing or to deny them a vote. Why? Because they don't want them on the court, but they don't want the people you're trying to register to vote to know they don't want them on the court. Right? So the answer is, blur everything, shift, kind of just sort of waver around here, and let it all die and hope nobody will know what really happened.

So I'm here to tell you this is a good man. If he was involved with me politically, I don't know it. Maybe that's—I don't. I appointed him because the people came to me and said, “We've got a chance to appoint a guy who's superbly qualified, who can get the highest ABA rating and be a good thing for Texas, a good thing for the fifth circuit,” and so I did it. And I think for him to be denied, not because he's

political but because he's not political enough in the right way, is wrong.

Now, let me just say a couple of things in closing. We've got to get everybody to vote in this election, and then they need to know what the stakes are. You want people to register to vote and to make intelligent choices. And I think we're actually quite fortunate in this millennial election, because we don't have to engage in a kind of personal, negative histrionics. I think you've got two good people running for President who have profound disagreements. But it's important people know what the differences are. I think you've got good people running for the Senate all over America, and running for the House. There's one Senate race I'm especially interested in. [*Laughter*] But anyway, you've got all these good people. We don't have to run an election where anybody badmouths anybody else. Just everybody stand up and say where they disagree, and let the voters make up their mind.

But it is important not to think that there are no disagreements and that there aren't any consequences, because there are. Just because we have a bunch of good people doesn't mean there are no consequences to the decisions the voters will make. So people have to make up their mind. And first, they have to register; then they have to vote. And when they go, they need to actually have a clear view of, "If I vote for this set of candidates, this is what I get; these are the decisions I get; this is the direction I get. If I vote for this section, this group, this is what I get."

And I've done everything I could to try to turn the country around. And I'm very proud of the fact that we're paying down the debt instead of running it up, that we've got the longest economic expansion in history and over 22 million jobs and the lowest Hispanic unemployment rate ever recorded and the lowest poverty rate in 20 years and the highest Hispanic homeownership and 2½ times as many SBA loans and all that.

But the truth is, all that matters is, what are we going to do with it? What is it that you propose to do with it?

I'm glad we had a successful empowerment zone in south Texas. I'm glad that we've been able to do these things. But the issue is, what are you going to do with it? What should the economic policy of the country be? Should we continue paying down the debt and protecting

Social Security and Medicare and investing in education? Or should we give all the projected surplus back to you in a tax cut and just hope that we won't run a deficit and hope somehow we'll find the money to invest in education?

What should we do in education? Should we modernize our schools and make sure we hire enough teachers and identify schools that aren't succeeding and turn them around, or change the leadership? Or should we adopt a voucher program and say that public schools probably can't be made to work, so let's go to a voucher system?

I was in a school in New York City this week—let me just give you one example, one example. Two years ago, Public School 96 in Spanish Harlem—2 years ago, 80 percent of those kids in this grade school were reading below grade level—2 years ago. Today, 74 percent of them are reading at or above grade level, and doing math at or above level—in 2 years.

I was in a school in Kentucky the other day that was one of the worst performing schools in the State—elementary schools. There were 5 percent of the kids reading at or above grade level 4 years ago; today, 57 percent of them are. There were 12 percent of the kids doing math at or above grade level; today, 70 percent are. There were zero percent of the kids doing science at or above grade level; today, two-thirds are—basically, in 3 years. It's the 19th best elementary school in the State of Kentucky. And way over half the kids are on free or reduced school lunches.

So what I want you to know is that without regard to income or background, intelligence is equally distributed, and schools can be made to work if we just do what we know works. And that's what I think we ought to make a commitment to do. You know, when I started this school reform business 20 years ago in Arkansas, when I was trying to do it, we didn't really know what worked. But we do now. And it would be a terrible mistake for us to turn away from what works toward something that we don't have any idea whether it works or not but would drain a lot of money off—I think.

What about the economy? Well, I think it's important that we do more to bring the benefits of the economy to people and places that haven't fully participated. That's why I want to increase the earned-income tax credit, something you helped me do before—lifted over a

million Hispanics out of poverty in the years that I've been in office. That's why I think we ought to raise the minimum wage again. That's why I think we ought to adopt this new markets initiative. It's the only really good bipartisan thing we've got going up in Washington now. We are working really well in the House in a bipartisan way. It's really quite touching, and I thank the Speaker of the House for doing it. And I hope we can do it in the Senate. It's why I think we ought to implement a lot of the recommendations of the Southwest Border Initiative Task Force that I got. A lot of you have been involved in that in one way or the other.

What are we going to do about health care? Are we going to have a Patients' Bill of Rights or not? Are we going to let all the seniors on Medicare have access to affordable prescription drugs or not? Are we going to do more to let working families have access to affordable health insurance or not? I've got a big proposal on that. I think Houston has one of the highest percentages of working people without access to health insurance in the entire United States, a lot of them Latino. This is a big issue.

So that's the last thing I leave you with. The country is moving in the right direction. Things are better than they were 8 years ago. But how a nation deals with its prosperity is as stern a test of its character and judgment as how it deals with adversity. And those of us that are old enough to remember different times know that nothing lasts forever. And when you're in the bad times, you can thank God

for that. But when you're in great times, you should be humble and grateful and make up your mind to make the most of them.

We've got the best chance in my lifetime to deal with the big challenges still out there, to seize the big opportunities out there. And that's why it's important that you empower people. They can't take good times for granted. And if they're still in trouble, they shouldn't take that for granted, either. The vote is the voice, just like your sign says.

And it's been a great honor for me to serve. It's been a great honor for me to work with you. I've had the time of my life. This is the first election in 25 years I'm not part of; most days I'm okay about it. [Laughter] But as a noncandidate, the only thing I ask everybody to do is to vote and to be intelligent about it, to make up your mind what you think we ought to do with this moment of prosperity, and then to clearly understand the choices before you and go out and make yours. If we do that, America will be in good hands.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:35 a.m. in the Austin Room at the Four Seasons Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Texas State Representatives Rick Noriega and Al Edwards; Bill White, former chair, and Billie Carr, executive council member, Texas State Democratic Party; Texas State Senator Carlos F. Truan; and Antonio Gonzalez, president, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project.

Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Luncheon in Houston

June 19, 2000

Thank you very much. Senator Torricelli, Senator Wyden, Mayor Lanier and Elise, and Secretary Bentsen and B.A.; Mr. White, we miss you in the administration. I told Lloyd Bentsen when he and B.A. came through the line, I said, "Well, your economy is still humming along pretty good, Lloyd." And I want all of you to know that if he hadn't been my first Treasury Secretary, might not any of us be sitting here

today celebrating the strongest economy in American history, and I thank you very much.

I am here today primarily on behalf of our Democratic candidates for the Senate and those who are presently serving. I suppose that every American who is a reasonably good citizen understands, in general, what the Senate does, and thinks on balance it would be a good thing if good people were there who more or less agree with you.