

Mar. 8 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

Rolland, who died after she was shot by 6-year-old classmate Dedrick Owens in Mount Morris Township, MI; and her mother and stepfather,

Veronica and Michael McQueen. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Message to the Congress Transmitting the National Money Laundering Strategy March 8, 2000

To the Congress of the United States:

As required by the provisions of section 2(a) of Public Law 105–310 (18 U.S.C. 5341(a)(2)),

I transmit herewith the National Money Laundering Strategy for 2000.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,
March 8, 2000.

Remarks on Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters March 9, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Good morning. Thank you, Senator Daschle. Thank you, Senator Akaka, Senator Breaux, Senator Bryan, Senator Dorgan, Senator Sarbanes, and Senator Wyden, for joining us today. And thank you, Secretary Shalala, for the leading role you've played in the development of our proposal to provide a voluntary prescription drug benefit for seniors under Medicare.

Minimum Wage Legislation

I want to make a few comments on Senator Daschle's very fine statement and the principles he outlined. But first I'd like to say a word about another debate going on in the House today over the minimum wage. Once again, the Republican leadership has derailed what should be a simple vote on the minimum wage, with a maximum of political maneuvering. The vote is yet to be taken, but we all know the results are already in. The special interests will win, and the national interests will wait.

We will raise the minimum wage but not with the Republican bill that stacks the deck against our workers. It is loaded with poison pills that penalize workers and with risky tax cuts that threaten our prosperity and the future of Social Security and Medicare.

The combined actions of the majority in the House and the Senate on all their tax cuts is now far in excess of what I have recommended and in excess of what we can afford and still pay down the debt and reform Social Security and Medicare and continue to invest in education.

Congress should send me a bill I can sign, not one I'll have to veto, a clean, straightforward bill that raises the minimum wage by a dollar over 2 years. If you remember the incredible day we had yesterday with Cheryl Costas, there are 10 million people that deserve this, and they ought to get it.

By the end of the day, two things will be clear about the minimum wage: We do have the votes to pass it, but the Republicans still have the votes to kill it. Today's vote, however, is not the final word, and I will continue to work with a bipartisan majority in the Congress that supports a real increase in the minimum wage.

Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit

Now, with regard to the statement Senator Daschle just made, the Senate Democrats have come today to say that they are together on principles for a voluntary Medicare prescription

drug benefit, something so many seniors need and far too few have. There have been a lot of proposals on the table, a good number of good ideas. Today we are moving forward together by uniting around common principles, setting standards that any prescription drug plan should meet. That is a significant step, moving us further toward the day when every older American has the choice of affordable prescription drugs.

More than three in five seniors and people with disabilities still lack prescription drug coverage that is dependable, coverage that could lengthen and enrich their lives. Our budget would extend them that lifeline and create a reserve of \$35 billion to build on this new benefit to protect those who carry the heavy burden of catastrophic drug costs.

Most important, our plan, as Senator Daschle said, embodies the essential principles articulated here today and embraced by the Senate Democrats. I think any plan Congress passes should do the same. It should be optional, affordable, accessible to all. It should use price competition, not price controls. It should boost seniors' bargaining power to get the best prices possible. It should be part of an overall plan to strengthen and modernize Medicare.

I think the bargaining power issue is especially important when we read story after story of American senior citizens crossing the border into Canada to buy drugs, made in America, in Canada at much less cost. And if this is not done, then sooner or later, the voters of this country will vote with their feet, and the Congress will have a follow suit, and you will see huge numbers of people bringing those drugs in from Canada.

No American can understand why you can go to Canada and buy a drug made in America for dramatically less than you have to pay for it in America. And if our seniors had the bargaining power they deserve under this proposal, that gap in prices would evaporate quite quickly.

We owe it to our people, especially to our seniors, to pass a good prescription drug plan. We shouldn't be satisfied with half measures. Keep in mind that a tax deduction would help only the wealthiest seniors, and a block grant, which some in the majority have proposed, would help only the very poorest. Neither alternative would do anything for the seniors with modest middle incomes between \$15,000 and \$50,000 a year.

As Secretary Shalala reminded me today, over half of the seniors who lack prescription drug coverage, especially a lot of them in rural areas—and you have a lot of these Members here who represent—these Senators—States with significant rural areas—over half of those without the coverage have incomes in excess of 150 percent of the poverty rate.

So I would like to, again, urge the majority to work with us on something that covers everyone, that people can buy into. There is no better time to get this done. The economy is strong. People have a sense of purpose over this. People talk to me about this everywhere I go. And we have an opportunity now not just to pay down the debt and extend the life of Social Security and Medicare but to extend the lives of a lot of seniors by adding this prescription drug benefit. And I certainly hope we'll do it. Thank you.

Eliau Gonzalez

Q. Mr. President, today is the day that the case of Elian Gonzalez, after many delays, is being heard in a courtroom in Miami. I would like your opinion on the subject. You've always said it must go to the courts. Do you think we'll get a solution soon?

The President. Well, I hope so. I can't believe it's in the young man's interest for this to be dragged out much longer. But it is in the courts, and I think while it's in the courts, we shouldn't comment.

John [John Palmer, NBC News].

2000 Presidential Election

Q. We'd like to get your comments on the Bradley decision to pull out of the race and his decision to not release his delegates. We're curious to what you think about that.

The President. Well, I thought, first of all, he made a very fine statement. I heard most of it this morning before I had to pull away, and I was very moved by his statement and very grateful for the tone and tenor of it and for his support for the Vice President.

The second thing that occurred to me was that if you looked at the issues he raised and the way in which he raised them, it recalled again how very much more substantive, in my judgment, the debate was on the Democratic side on the issues and how much more agreement there was. On the Republican side, there was far more disagreement, I think, and it was

far less rooted in issues that will really affect the American people and move forward. So I'm very grateful.

As to the delegates, I think that he knows the Vice President will have enough votes to win on the first round. He wants those people to be able to go to the convention pledged to him. They ran pledged to him. And then what typically happens at a convention is that if there is a united party, is at the appropriate time the vote is made unanimous.

But I can understand why a lot of them probably—I imagine he was talking to—a lot of them called him and said, "Look, we'd just like to go pledged to you. We're all going to be together. We're going to honor your wishes. We're going to support the nominee of our party." But this is, I think, a matter of pride for what they have accomplished to date. I don't think you should read too much into that. I certainly didn't. I thought he gave a very fine statement, and I wish him well.

President's Upcoming Visit to Pakistan

Q. Mr. President, your trip to Pakistan, is this some kind of an endorsement to the military government? That's what he said in Karachi. And also, if it's support for his government, how can you still, Mr. President, answer to Nawaz Sharif, who's in jail, and he came specially on a special trip to Washington on the Fourth of July? And he did say that—and I think Mrs. Sharif also wrote a letter to you, and you have spoken with all these leaders. Sir, what do you expect from this visit also?

The President. Well, first of all, it's certainly not an endorsement of the military coup. I've made that clear. We made it clear yesterday. But it is a recognition, in my judgment, that America's interests and values would be advanced if we maintained some contact with and communications with the Pakistani Government. And I think that our ability to have a positive influence on the future direction of Pakistan, in terms of the restoration of democracy, in terms of the ultimate resolution of issues in the Indian subcontinent, and in terms of avoiding further dangerous conflicts will be greater if we maintain our cooperation.

After all, Pakistan was our ally throughout the cold war. Since I've been President, Pakistan on more than one occasion has helped us to arrest terrorists, often at some risk to the regime. And as you pointed out, the then-Prime

Minister, Sharif, pulled the Pakistani troops back across the line of control after a July 4th meeting with me last year. So I think it would be a mistake not to go, but it would be a grave mistake for people to think that my going represents some sort of endorsement of a non-democratic process which occurred there. That's not true.

You, and then the little boy there.

Minimum Wage Legislation

Q. You said that there will be some room for negotiation on the minimum wage issue in terms of—obviously, your plan, the Democrats plan is for 2 years, the Republicans is for 3 years with a tax cut. Do you think ultimately we'll see a compromise?

The President. I would like to see a bill we can all sign. Our side—not just me but our Members of Congress—we offered them some very helpful small-business tax cuts. We're not unmindful of the fact that one of the reasons we've had this recovery is that every year we've had a record number of new small businesses starting, that not all of them make a lot of money, especially in the early years. And we responded to their desire to have small-business tax incentives and cuts with a rather generous proposal, and we got nowhere. They, instead, put this highly regressive, overly expensive program through that would increase inequality in America at a time when we're trying to reduce it and having nothing to do with the minimum wage.

There are also—let me say, there are other provisions in this bill which actually try to make the rest of America's work force pay with reductions in worker protections in return for the minimum wage workers getting a pay increase, and I don't think that's right, either. We shouldn't be pitting one group of workers against another.

And are we willing to talk? Of course. Always. Keep in mind, I had the conferees here on the gun safety issues this week, and we're trying to get the conference up and going there, and we're working our hearts out on it. But we have to—yes, we're willing to work on it. But I'm telling you, it is wrong, as well as this country is doing, with the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, more wealth being created than any time in history, any time in the history of this country, any time in the history of the

world, not to raise the minimum wage. It's wrong.

Young man, did you have a question?

President's Autograph

Q. May I please have an autograph for my little sister?

The President. Absolutely. [Laughter]

Gays in the Military

Q. There is a report this morning that there is a rise in the military of harassment, both physical and verbal, of gay and lesbian members of the military. First of all, are you concerned about that report? And do you believe that the military is doing enough to prevent this from happening?

The President. Well, I'd like to make a couple of points. I'm concerned about the report. I haven't read it. Secretary Cohen hasn't read it. We will read it and take appropriate action. I do want to point out that in the last several months the Pentagon has issued new guidelines for implementing the policies related to gays in the military, specifically designed to reduce harassment. They have started new training programs, and the Secretary of Defense has made it absolutely clear what the policy is and is not.

So if—I expect—let me just say, if this report is accurate, I would expect to see a substantial improvement this year—substantial. But I also want to make sure that we study the report in the White House, that the Secretary of Defense studies it, and that we take any appropriate action that might be called for. But I knew nothing about the report until I read the morning press reports, so I can't comment further than that.

Yes.

2000 Census

Q. Mr. President, the census has started, after being politicized over the last couple of years. At some point, should this debate of statistical sampling versus pure enumeration be resolved so that there's a consistency between congressional funding—between Government funding and the congressional redistricting?

The President. Well, of course, it should be. But I think it ought to be resolved in favor of what will give us the most accurate count. Look, the only reason I favored statistical sampling is because the National Science Foundation said that was the most accurate way to

count people and that we undercounted large numbers of Americans in many States last year. I'm for whatever's most accurate.

And I don't think it should be a political deal. I remember one prominent House Member, who should remain unnamed, I think, once suggested to me that I was taking a foolish position here, that I ought to be for hiring 2, 3, 4, million people who were overwhelmingly Democratic voters, in an election year, to go out and knock on doors and count people, that this didn't make any sense. And I said, if he thought that was such good politics, why was he on the other side of it? And he confessed that it was because he thought they would count fewer than were actually there, that the statistical sampling would give us larger numbers.

I don't think this ought to be a political issue, not for us, not for them. We ought to try to find what is the most accurate way. And of course, then these constitutional issues have been raised, but I can't believe that can't be dealt with.

Go ahead, John [John Roberts, CBS News].

White House E-Mail

Q. Sir, what's your response to Congressman Burton on the issue of these E-mails?

The President. Well, I just got the letter, and my understanding is that there will be a response to him, and that it will all be handled in an appropriate way. And I have referred all the questions to the Counsel's Office, but I think they will handle it just fine.

Yes, go ahead.

Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit

Q. On prescription drugs, have you had any, in light of the principals here, have you had any conversation with the Republican leadership, either in the House or Senate, on this, and do you have any sense of how close you might be?

The President. I haven't talked to them in the last couple of weeks. But earlier, I did when we were getting the year started off. And I think that we might be able to do something. There is some interest there in doing something.

Now, some of the Republicans said they wanted to do a very limited program only for very low income seniors, and the problem for that, as I said, is that half the people that can't get coverage are above 150 percent of the poverty line. If you've got a substantial drug bill and

you're 75 years old and you're living on \$15,000, that's not all that much money.

Look, this is, again, this is like this gun issue. This is something that, if we want to get an agreement that moves the American people forward and makes this a more just and a more healthy society, we can get an agreement. Everybody wanted an agreement in '96 on welfare reform. We got it. We wanted an agreement on the minimum wage. We got it. We wanted an agreement on the balanced budget in '97, which had substantial tax cuts that benefited middle class American families, and we got it. If they want an agreement, we'll sit down, and we'll work through this, and we'll get an agreement. We can do this.

Q. Will the pressures of an election year work for or against getting something done on prescription drugs?

The President. I think, on balance, in favor, if we all work at it. That is—that's what I think. Do you agree with that? I'm not—see, I haven't given up on Medicare reform yet. I haven't given up on getting big things done here.

Minimum Wage Legislation

Q. Mr. President, do you think that most Republicans who do vote for a higher minimum wage will do so confident in the knowledge that you would veto the bill, and that, in fact, they don't really want the higher minimum wage?

The President. First of all, I've always been reluctant in politics to evaluate other people's motives. I think you have to judge their actions and evaluate what they do. I think it's a very hazardous thing, talking about people's motives. But my belief is based on what I have heard said, is, I think some of them may be doing that, and some of them may really believe in both the weakening of worker protections that's in this bill and the shape and structure of their tax cut.

But I have to add up all these tax cuts they're passing, as well as evaluate them on the merits, and as I said, I can't allow one group of American working people to be pitted against another.

I don't think a price for raising the minimum wage should be weakening worker protections for others in the work force.

So they may believe these things, but I don't, and I can't let it happen. I don't think it's right. And so if they believe in the minimum wage, the best thing to do is to send a straightforward minimum wage bill. If they want tax relief for small business, the best thing to do is sit down and negotiate with us, and we'll give it to them, but it will be at a more affordable level in a more targeted way. But it will be very helpful, generous, and positive. So I'd like to see that done.

But it's not just me—the Congress, the Democrats in Congress have offered a small business tax relief package that I thought was quite good and one that wouldn't undermine our goal of paying the debt off and having the funds to save Social Security and Medicare.

Thank you.

Judicial Nomination

Q. Mr. President, do you have anything to say to Congress on the Paez vote?

The President. It's time, he's waited long enough. It's 4 years, and it must be a happy day for all of us. I hope that, and I believe, we have the votes.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:50 a.m. on the South Grounds at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to minimum wage earner Cheryl Costas; Cuban youth Elian Gonzalez, rescued off the coast of Florida on November 25, 1999, whose custody the Immigration and Naturalization Service decided in favor of his Cuban father; former Senator Bill Bradley; former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan; and Richard A. Paez, nominee, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. A reporter referred to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, army chief of staff, who led a coup d'état in Pakistan on October 12, 1999. A portion of the exchange could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.