

NOTE: The President's remarks were recorded at approximately 3:10 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House for later broadcast. These remarks

were also made available on the White House Press Office Actuality Line.

Statement on the Republican Budget Proposal

April 7, 2000

This new Republican budget combines bad fiscal policy and a flawed economic strategy. It undermines our efforts to strengthen Social Security and Medicare, makes it harder to pay off the debt, and rests on dramatic cuts in education, law enforcement, the environment, and efforts to promote peace in national security.

I remain committed to working with any Member of Congress from either party on a budget that will strengthen Social Security and

Medicare, add a prescription drug benefit, eliminate the debt by 2013, expand access to health coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and strengthen education and other key investments. Let's put this empty political document aside and work together to keep America on a responsible fiscal course that meets our Nation's long-term challenges.

Remarks at a Screening of the PBS Documentary Series "The American President"

April 7, 2000

The President. Thank you very much, and welcome. I want to say a special word of welcome to all the voices of the Presidents who are here—and they were supposed to give me a list of them. I don't know what happened; I just saw it. *[Laughter]* But I know we have Senator Bumpers, Senator Glenn, Senator Simon, Representative Rostenkowski, Governors Weicker and Weld. Bill Ferris, we welcome you here. And a special word of thanks to Sy Sternberg and his family. We appreciate the fact that New York Life has underwritten this.

I also want to thank the coproducers, Philip Kunhardt, Jr., and Philip Kunhardt III and Peter Kunhardt. And there are some other voices here from the series: Ben Bradlee, Walter Cronkite, James Roosevelt, Charlie Rose—I don't know if he's here or not—and Tim Russert.

Tonight this is a fitting way for us to open the first in a series of events celebrating the 200th anniversary of the White House. It is clearly the right thing to do to begin by honoring the lives of individuals who have roamed the halls and carried the burden of the Presidency within the walls of the White House.

This room has not only witnessed historical events, it has played a role in shaping them. It has hosted 42 administrations and 41 different personalities, every President except George Washington. The East Room began as a laundry room for Abigail Adams—an auspicious beginning—*[laughter]*—reminding us that there are certain basic elements to this job.

Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis laid maps and animal skins on this floor where you're sitting and charted the Lewis and Clark expedition. Later, in 1814, a banquet was being held here in this White House and in this room when James Madison sent Dolley word that the Army had miscalculated where the British were going to assault Washington, and he told her to cut Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington down and get out of the house as quickly as possible. She did, and they had to leave the banquet here. The British came in, ate the food, and then burned the White House. *[Laughter]*

Later, this house and this room was the headquarters for battle-worn Union troops during the Civil War. President Roosevelt's children roller-skated here. Over the years, this room and this

house have survived a major fire, two wars, a plane crash, and five weddings. And of course, it has been a gallery for some priceless art which embodies the history of this country.

Each President in his own time has survived unique challenges, striving to fulfill the purpose of our Founders to form a more perfect Union. Tonight we will have the opportunity to see two of these selections from the "American President" series, the first documentary series ever to profile all of our Chief Executives.

The first viewing is on the life of Thomas Jefferson. Every American President has been inspired by Jefferson, affected by his decisions, fascinated by his life story. He spent a lifetime shaping our new and ever-evolving democracy. It would become, as he said, more developed, more enlightened as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, manners and opinions change.

One hundred and fifty years later, our 35th President, John Kennedy—whose sister, Eunice, is with us tonight, and we thank you for coming—brought that same spirit of innovation and progress to the White House. His fleeting time in this house remains a singular story in our history. Our President for only a thousand days, he changed the way we think about our country, our world, and our own obligations to the future. The New Frontier inspired millions of Americans to take a personal responsibility for making our country stronger and more united. As he said, "The New Frontier is not a set of promises. It is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people but what I intend to ask of them."

Many great people have called this house home. All of them, so far, have been white males of European descent. I am absolutely convinced that in the not-too-distant future, there will be a woman President, and a person of color will occupy the White House and the Oval Office. But the Presidency was not built by one person. And in a fundamental way, it has been carried forward by the American people since the beginning.

I have spent a lot of time reading the histories of various periods in the White House and the biographies of some of my lesser known predecessors. One of the things that I hope this series will do is to give people a feel of the mixture of the personality and character and skills of a President and his time, and also a sense of

what personal joys and tragedies surrounded Presidents.

Just for example, Franklin Pierce, one of the only other Presidents who came from a small State and was a Governor, is generally accounted not to have been a very good President. But when you consider the times in which he served, I wonder whether Lincoln could have succeeded in 1853, instead of 1861. And almost never do I hear anyone talk about the fact that when Franklin Pierce was on his way to be inaugurated, with his wife and his only child, he took the train from New Hampshire to Washington, and there was a minor accident in which 10 or 11 people received minor bruises. But his son fell on his head, cracked his spine, and died. He never recovered. His wife never recovered.

I've often wondered why it was that Abraham Lincoln, who would have a hard time getting elected today because he had terrible periodic persistent bouts of depression before he became President, was married to a wife who was bubbly and strong and happy and, as far as I know, has the distinction of being the only woman in American history to have been courted by three of the four candidates for President in 1860. *[Laughter]* For John Breckenridge and Stephen Douglas also pursued her, and clearly she made the right decision. *[Laughter]*

But they had lost a child before they came to the White House. They lost another child here. She lost three half-brothers fighting for the Confederacy. And then all the carnage of the Civil War, the burden of the tragedies they faced broke Mary Todd Lincoln, and in history she is seen as a very different person from the person she really was for most of her life. And yet, in some magical way, all the personal and national trauma of that time was absorbed by Abraham Lincoln in a way that enabled him to become stronger, to overcome his own demons, to leave aside his own depression, and to become, in my view, the greatest President we ever had.

So I hope when this whole series is done, there will be a greater appreciation for people like Rutherford B. Hayes, who Senator Glenn is the voice of in this series. Rutherford B. Hayes was one of four or five Union generals from Ohio who became President. After the Civil War, if you were a Union general from Ohio, you had about a 50 percent chance of

becoming President. [Laughter] It's the only category in our history that has ever been like that. And a lot of the rest of us wish that it had been so easy. [Laughter]

I hope we'll understand those people that we don't know very much about. I hope we'll have a better understanding of the personal circumstances that Presidents face. I hope we'll have a better understanding of how they fit with their times and how they overcame their difficulties, as President Lincoln did.

Theodore Roosevelt once complained that he would never be viewed as a great President because he had the misfortune to serve when there was no great war. He couldn't have been more wrong. And I'm convinced his temperament was absolutely perfectly suited to the times in which he served. Ironically, since he complained about having no war, he's the only President ever to win the Nobel Prize for peace. [Laughter] Which all goes to show you, you've just got to show up every day and do your best. [Laughter]

Now, I'd like to ask Sy Sternberg, the chairman of New York Life, to come up. And again, I think we should all thank him for making this evening possible. [Applause]

[At this point, Seymour Sternberg, chairman and chief executive officer, New York Life Insurance Corp., made brief remarks and introduced coproducer Philip Kunhardt III, who made brief remarks and presented two clips from the series.]

The President. Well, I would like to, first of all, congratulate Hugh Sidey and Richard Neustadt on the marvelous job they have done with this program, and all of you who are involved in it.

When I was watching those two very important pieces of our history, I couldn't help feeling grateful for some of the things which have been passed down to the present day, to me. The day before I became President, I received a copy of the only book that Thomas Jefferson ever wrote, "Notes From the State of Virginia," which is remarkable for its incredibly detailed analysis of everything about the State. But it's most important today because it contained the first known recording of Thomas Jefferson's condemnation of slavery. And it always struck me that every person in this job lives with a certain ambiguity, and I wondered how he dealt with it. But I'm grateful for what he left us.

Shortly after I became President, Pamela Harriman gave me a copy of the ink blotter that President Kennedy used in his office in the White House, that Mrs. Kennedy had given to her husband, Averell, about 12 days after President Kennedy was killed—with the letter that Jackie Kennedy had written. And because it was my great good fortune to know Jackie and her children, it is one of my most precious possessions. About once a month I open the ink blotter and read the letter again, just to remember how fleeting life is and what a great gift every day is.

I think one of the most treasured pictures I have from my time in the White House is the picture I have of young John Kennedy looking at his father's portrait on a visit he made here, when we had a wonderful preview here of the great series on space that HBO did.

So the history of the country goes on, and the families come and go. But you have given us a great gift tonight, and this whole series will be a great gift. And one of the things that I had hoped would occur, you have done, even with people who lived long ago: You have reminded us that for all their achievements and all their failures, they were also people.

The great premise of democracy is that ordinary people will make the right decision most of the time; that no one is irreplaceable, but that freedom is.

I hope you'll all join us now in the Dining Room for a reception. And thank you again to the Kunhardts; thank you again, Sy; thank you again to PBS; and thank you all for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Senators Dale Bumpers, John Glenn, and Paul Simon; former Representative Dan Rostenkowski; former Governors Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., of Connecticut and William F. Weld of Massachusetts; Ben Bradlee, former executive editor, Washington Post; Walter Cronkite, former CBS News anchorman; James Roosevelt, grandson of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Charlie Rose, host of PBS' "The Charlie Rose Show"; Tim Russert, host of NBC News' "Meet the Press"; and Hugh Sidey, narrator, and Richard Neustadt, on-camera scholar, "The American President."