

Statement on the Election of Ricardo Lagos as President of Chile *January 17, 2000*

I congratulate Ricardo Lagos on his victory in Chile's Presidential election on Sunday, January 16. I also congratulate the Chilean people for an election that was a model of civic participation and evidence of their strong commitment to democratic government.

I look forward to working with President-elect Lagos and to deepening the friendship and cooperation that have characterized the excellent relations between our two nations.

Remarks on the National Firearms Enforcement Initiative in Boston, Massachusetts *January 18, 2000*

Well, Mayor, I was just thinking that you should hope that Detective Holmes stays in police work and out of politics. *[Laughter]* Didn't she give a good speech? Let's give her another hand. That's great. *[Applause]* I thought it was great.

Mr. Mayor; Senator Kennedy; Representative Joe Moakley; Barney Frank; Mike Capuano; to Commissioner Evans and all the members of the Boston Police Department that are here; representatives of law enforcement who have come to Boston today to be with us—Jerry Flynn of the International Brotherhood of Police Officers, Tom Nee of the National Association of Police Organizations—I thank you all for welcoming us.

I want to say that in addition to the Attorney General, we are joined today by Treasury Under Secretary Jim Johnson; the Director of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Division, Brad Buckles; and of course, as the Attorney General mentioned, our United States attorney, Don Stern.

I also want to thank Lynn Jackson for welcoming us to Orchard Gardens Community Center. She was nervous when she got up here to speak. I said, "Go on, you're supposed to start." She said, "I'm not supposed to start until they sit down." So I said, "You go up there and speak. I'll make them sit down." *[Laughter]* So then when you stood up for Lisa Holmes, she said, "Make them sit down. Make them sit down." I said, "Not on your life." *[Laughter]*

Let me say to all of you, I am profoundly grateful to the people of Boston and the State of Massachusetts for being so good to me and

to my family and to our administration. I've been running over in my mind all the wonderful moments I've had here just since 1991 when I first started exploring whether I should run for President, the first time I visited City Year here in Boston, the day I spent—Commissioner Evans and the mayor took a half a day with the Attorney General and me to explain what you'd done to lower juvenile crime and lower dramatically the fatalities among children in this community—all the other incredible times I have spent in this city and in this State, including the times that Hillary and Chelsea and I have been vacationers here and contributed, I might add, to the tax base of Massachusetts. *[Laughter]*

But this is a special day for me, because it is an enormous source of pride for me to stand up after hearing a community leader, a police officer, the mayor, your Representatives in the United States Congress, and our Attorney General talk about what you have done to give real life and real freedom back to this community.

When I ran for President, the biggest issue on most people's minds was the economy. Here I am in Boston, just south of New Hampshire; 8 years ago, I would have been up there today. But they were all concerned about the banks closing and people having their mortgages foreclosed and all these other problems. But I knew that the challenges facing America were not simply economic and that we had to have a policy to try to move people from welfare to work, we had to have a policy to try to open up educational opportunities to all of our young

people, and we had to have a policy to lower the crime rate.

In Washington, the primary debate then was whether we needed more prevention or tougher punishment and whether the Federal Government ought to just give speeches about it, because it was primarily a local problem, or give money and walk away. Well, I felt that on both counts, we should do both.

The first elected job I ever had was attorney general of my State. Before that, when I was a young lawyer, and even when I was a law student, I used to teach criminal law, criminal procedure, and constitutional law to law enforcement officials. I have always been interested in this, and I have always been convinced that we had to have the proper balance of punishment and prevention and that the police could never do it alone, not without the community, not without the people in the street and the neighborhoods, not without the parents and the kids, people who want the blessings of a normal, safe life in every neighborhood in this country.

And so we've been working to try to give you the tools to do both, to prevent more crime, to save more kids, to effectively punish those who violate the law. In 1993 we passed the Brady bill. The Congress passed it; it had previously passed, but it had been vetoed by the previous President. I signed it and said I wanted to sign it, and I believed in it. And I heard all that talk about how terrible it was going to be and what an awful burden it is. And now we have almost half a million felons, fugitives, and stalkers who have not been able to get handguns because of the Brady bill, and not a single hunter in America who's been inconvenienced. It was the right thing to do. There are more citizens alive; there are more police officers alive today because the Brady law is in effect.

In 1994 the crime bill provided funds for 100,000 police officers over a 6-year period. Thanks to the leadership of the Attorney General and those working with her, we distributed those funds and got those folks hired, under budget and ahead of schedule. We passed the assault weapons ban, cracked down on illegal gun dealing to young people, kept an eye out also for the most innovative local crime-fighting strategies like Operation Cease Fire here in Boston.

Now, the things you have done and the things we've tried to help you do have transformed

life in America. As the Attorney General said, the crime rate's dropped now for 7 years in a row. The overall crime rate's at its lowest level in 25 years. The murder rate is the lowest level nationwide in 31 years; gun crime down 35 percent; juveniles committing homicides with guns down 57 percent; gun prosecutions up at all levels of government, local, State, and Federal. Federal firearms prosecutions are higher today than they were in 1992, but they're up 25 percent just since 1998 to 1999; those convicted of Federal gun crimes serving longer sentences. We are trying to send a message, an unambiguous message, to people who violate the law: If you commit crimes with guns or violate gun laws, you will pay a heavy price.

No city has sent that message more clearly than Boston. But your message is more than that. You have made us know that this is not just a numbers game. You have shown that to reduce crime most and therefore to increase freedom most among your families, your children, and your neighborhoods, prosecutions must be targeted where they'll have the greatest impact—in Boston's case, on violent repeat offenders and on gun traffickers who supply them.

You have also shown that there needs to be a team effort, partnerships with citizens and leaders in every community, focused on saving kids and preventing crime before it occurs. And so after all these years of effort and the leadership of your great mayor and others, you have made Boston one of the safest cities in America. It is essential to making America what we want it to be in the 21st century.

You know, yesterday we celebrated the annual holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. And I was honored to sign the bill that made it not only a national holiday but a national day of service. We call it a day on, not a day off. Yesterday, in keeping with my tradition, I went to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Washington, DC, with a group of citizens called Greater DC Cares and some young AmeriCorps volunteers, and we worked on rehabbing a facility. But in preparation for that day, I thought about all the other King holidays we've had since I've been President and an astonishing opportunity I had back in 1993 to speak in the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee. That's where Dr. King spoke the night before he was killed.

We had all the leaders of that great church in America there, at a time when America was

a much more unsafe place. And I just started thinking off the top of my head, with the crowd. I said, "You know, if Dr. King could come back to Earth today, what would he say?" He'd say we've done a pretty good job of integrating our society, and we have more African-Americans and other minorities moving into the middle class, taking jobs in public service, being fairly compensated for what they do. But he would be sick by the crime and violence that is ravaging all the poor neighborhoods of this country. And he would say, "I want you to know I did not live and die so that children could destroy children, so that children could destroy themselves with drugs and become millionaires destroying the lives of other children."

And a lot of you are nodding your heads about that. This is a different country today because of you. Yes, those things still happen, but now America knows we can make it better. All you have to do is tell somebody the story of Boston and all cynicism disappears, all skepticism disappears. Everybody knows we can make it better. We don't have to give up on our kids. We don't have to give up on our neighborhoods. We don't have to tolerate a level of fear and violence and crime and insecurity that no civilized society will tolerate.

Now, that is the good news, and we can all celebrate that good news. But if I were to ask you this question—and I won't make you do it—but if I were to ask you this question, if I were to say to you, "Now, everybody that now thinks that Boston and Massachusetts and America are safe enough, please raise your hand," nobody would raise their hand, right? Even though we're at a 31-year low in the murder rate, even though the juvenile murder rate with guns has gone way down, even though the crime rate's at a 25-year low, nobody believes that America is as safe as it ought to be. No one who knows anything believes that all of our kids are as safe in their childhood as they ought to be.

And so I say to you, what are we going to do with this moment of promise? We don't have any excuses anymore. You know, maybe 7 years ago people could throw up their hands and say, "Oh, we can't make it better. Just support the police, lock them up longer, and hope someday it'll get better." Nobody really knew.

Now we know. We don't have any excuses now. We know how to drive the crime rate down, down, down. And we know how to keep

kids out of trouble in the first place. We know how to save children. I think it's time we had the real goal we ought to have as a nation. We ought to say, "Okay, we got the crime rate down. Here's our real goal: We want America to be the safest big country in the entire world."

We can do that, not with a silver bullet but by continuing to build on what has worked. And in my new budget and in the State of the Union Address, I'm going to ask the Congress and the country to continue to move forward in the direction that has worked. Today I want to announce to you five specific initiatives that I believe will help us a lot.

First, in my new budget I will call for hiring 500 new ATF agents and inspectors, the largest increase in ATF firearms enforcement ever. These new agents and inspectors will help us to crack down on violent gun criminals, illegal gun traffickers, and bad-apple dealers, a small percentage of the dealers who supply a very large percentage of the guns that go to criminals and to kids.

Second, we will add, as the Attorney General said, 1,000 new Federal, State, and local prosecutors to help take dangerous gun criminals out of our communities and put them where they belong, behind bars.

Third, to strengthen the hand of the prosecutors, we will invest more in the ATF's national gun tracing center and supply local law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to utilize that center, from computers to training. We want to make it possible and we can make it possible to trace the origin of every single gun used in every single crime in the United States.

Fourth, we will create a groundbreaking national ballistics network that eventually will enable us to trace almost any bullet left at a crime scene anywhere in America to the gun of the criminal who fired it.

Fifth, the budget provides local communities with grants to run the same kind of anti-gun-violence media campaigns that have been such an important part of the successful strategy used to reduce gun crime here in Boston or in Richmond or in other cities which have tried it.

All together, these efforts represent the largest national gun enforcement initiative in the history of the United States. They will help communities across America to push violent crime rates down by cracking down harder on gun criminals and, again, by interrupting the flow to prevent more crimes.

But I ask Congress to support them and also ask Congress to start this new century by abandoning another stale debate. For in addition to the old debate about whether we should focus on punishment or prevention and whether the Federal Government should make speeches or give money, there's a debate that unfortunately hasn't died out in Washington, and that's about whether it's better to strengthen the enforcement of the existing gun laws or to have strengthened gun laws.

The truth is, just like the other questions, the real answer is, we should do both. That's what we've done with the Brady bill. That's what we have done with the assault weapons ban. And we should do more. The drop in the crime rate has been due both to changing laws and to better enforcement and better prevention.

Last year we passed some sensible measures in the United States Senate, thanks to the help of Senator Kennedy and with the Vice President casting a tie-breaking vote. As he says, whenever he has to vote, we win. *[Laughter]* So by one vote, we were able to defeat the high-pressure tactics of the NRA to pass an important advance in doing background checks at gun shows and urban flea markets, having child safety locks for all new handguns, a ban on importing large capacity ammunition clips. But we couldn't pass it in the House of Representatives, even after the travesty of Columbine High School. I believe passing commonsense gun safety legislation should be the very first action of this Congress.

I will say again, to all the people who listen to these arguments, there has been no discernible increase in the burden on any law-abiding sportsperson in this entire country with the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, but we've saved a lot of lives of kids, police officers, and citizens. And closing the gun show loophole, which is something I know something about because they're very popular in my part of the country, or the urban flea market loophole or banning the import of these large capacity ammunition clips, which people can't manufacture and sell here at home anyway, or requiring these child safety locks for kids is an important advance, and it ought to be done. It'll have the same impact that the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban did. It won't cause anybody who is law-abiding any hassle, but it'll save lives. It's important that we do this, too.

I also want to say I think it's important that the gun industry take more responsibility in

changing the way it designs, markets, and distributes firearms. *[Applause]* And let me say to all of you who care about this—there was some spontaneous applause there—you should know this. There are responsible citizens in the gun industry who actually want to work with us to find new ways to make sure the guns they sell don't wind up in the wrong hands and that kids aren't killed accidentally with them. Part of the answer may be in new technologies that could reduce accidents.

I want all of you to listen to this. The law enforcement officers probably won't be surprised by this, but this is important that you know this. The accidental gun death rate of children under 15 in the United States is 9 times higher than that in the other 25 biggest industrial countries combined—combined. We don't have to put up with that either. Technologies now exist that could lead to guns that can only be fired by the adults who own them. My budget helps the gun industry accelerate the development of this technology. So we need to support that as well.

In his last campaign in 1968, Robert Kennedy said the fight against crime, and I quote, "is a fight to preserve that quality of community which is at the root of our greatness." We saw something about the root of America's greatness today here in Orchard Gardens: a community leader proud of her center; a police officer who grew up just a stone's throw from here; elected leaders who know the people who live in this area, whom they represent; a mayor proud of the progress that people working together can do; all these people in uniform justifiably proud of what they have achieved. That's what this is all about, all of us working together and helping each other.

I say again, for all the progress we have made, we should never rest, not any of us, as long as there's one more child whose life needs to be saved, as long as there's one more kid that can be turned away from drugs and guns and violence and kept out of prison in the first place, as long as there's one more street to make safe. We shouldn't quit until your country, your State, and your community are the safest places in the world.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:20 p.m. in the Orchard Gardens Community Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Thomas M. Menino

of Boston; Lisa Holmes, detective, and Paul F. Evans, commissioner, Boston Police Department; Gerald Flynn, alternate national vice president, International Brotherhood of Police Officers;

Thomas J. Nee, executive vice president, National Association of Police Organizations; and Lynn Jackson, director, Orchard Gardens Community Center.

Interview With Francine Kiefer and Skip Thurman of the Christian Science Monitor in Boston

January 18, 2000

Elían Gonzalez

Q. Mr. President, I know your time is valuable. Let me start my recorder here. The first thing I wanted to ask you, there have only been a couple of times in this century that Congress has come together, got their heads together enough, both sides of the Congress, to come together and pass legislation to give somebody citizenship. It happened with Winston Churchill, a few other people. I wanted to know if Congress does—it looks like the first thing they're going to do when they come back into town is work on the Elían Gonzalez case. If they did pass a private bill in both Houses and they feel like politically they've got enough backing to do that, what would you do with that bill if it got to your desk?

The President. I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I think it would be—this is not Winston Churchill, for one thing. You know, I don't think that Congress should put it—unless they know more about the facts than I do, I don't think they should put themselves in the position of making a decision that runs contrary to what the people who have had to do all the investigation have done.

I think that, obviously, if they believe the INS made a mistake, their decision is subject to challenge in Federal court. And the Congress—even Members of Congress can petition to be heard there. But I think that we're setting a—I think that it would irrevocably lead people to the conclusion that this was much more about politics than it was whether that little boy ought to be taken away from his father.

They're basically taking a position that if you live in Cuba, if we can take you away from your father, you're better off—your parents. And I think that's—the INS reached a different decision, having exhaustively looked at what was best for that child.

As you all know, I have no sympathy for the Castro regime. I signed the present bill. I think it is tragic how they have blown every conceivable opportunity to get closer to the United States. Just as we were making progress, they murdered those pilots. So I'm not sympathetic there. But I think that we need to think long and hard whether we're going to take the position that any person who comes to our shores who is a minor, any minor child who loses his or her parents should never be sent home to another parent, even if that parent is capable of doing a very good job, if we don't like the Government of the country where the people lived.

And again, I say I am not—I have no brief for the Castro government or for many of their policies. I think the way he has attempted to politicize this is also terrible. It's not just the Cuban-Americans that have attempted to politicize it. He has responded by attempting to politicize it. So this poor little boy is 6 years old. He has scars from his mother's death of which he can only be dimly aware. And making a judgment about what is in his best interest and what is most likely to give him a stable, healthy, whole childhood and allow him to grow into an adult as a solid person, I'm sure, may not be free of difficulty. And I just think that the decision ought to be made, insofar as possible, independent of countervailing political pressures.

State of the Union Address

Q. Mr. President, the State of the Union is right around the corner, so I guess is the State of the Union part of the interview. In the previews that you all have made available of what's coming up, it seems like most of it is beefing up programs that you already have, like today's announcement, and returning to—