

their main argument was, if we let him go back to his father before the court rules, he might go back to Cuba. The court has now said he shouldn't go back to Cuba. The Justice Department agrees with that, and he has agreed to that.

So there is now no conceivable argument for his not being able to be reunited with his son. And that is what the lawful process has said. The immigration law is clear, and the determination of the INS and a Federal court are clear. So I think he should be united in as prompt and orderly way as possible.

Q. Well, what about the appeals court suggestion that a 6-year-old maybe has some rights to say where he wants to live and apply for asylum on his own behalf?

The President. Well, even if the appeals court were to say that, which would be a rather dramatic departure from the law, then there would have to be some setup at a trial level for determining that. And in the meanwhile, while all this legal process plays out, as a matter of law the INS determined and a Federal court affirmed that the father should have custody.

So, clearly, he should be reunited. And the argument that he might go back to Cuba before this thing can be finally resolved in the courts is no longer there. That's not an argument anymore.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, did you write a letter for former Prime Minister Netanyahu, promising him that Israel would keep its nuclear or mass destruction weapons in case they reach an agreement with the Palestinians?

The President. I don't believe that issue ever came up in connection with an agreement with the Palestinians, with Mr. Netanyahu or any other Israeli Prime Minister. To the best of my memory, it did not.

I think you all know what the issues are between the Israelis and the Palestinians. They are difficult, but I think they can be bridged. If the parties want to do this, we will do everything we can to help them and to minimize the difficulties and the risks involved. There are risks and difficulties involved for Chairman Arafat; there are risks and difficulties involved for Prime Minister Barak, for the Palestinian people, and for the Israeli people. I believe they are not nearly as great as the risks and difficulties of not making a peace agreement, so I hope they will do it. And if they want to do it, I'll do whatever I can to help them.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:54 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak and former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel.

Statement on the Budget Surplus and Debt Reduction

April 20, 2000

When I came into office, the budget deficit was a record \$290 billion, confidence in the economy was shaky, and unemployment was too high. Seven years of fiscal discipline have turned that situation around, creating an era of record budget surpluses.

Today we received more good news that our economic strategy is working and that the budget surplus is growing. The Treasury Department released Government financial information showing that the comparable budget balance for the first half of this fiscal year improved by more than \$30 billion from the first half of

last year. This keeps us on track to pay down a record \$300 billion of debt over 3 years.

In addition, today, for the third time this year, the Treasury Department is buying back some of our debt. If we maintain our fiscal discipline, we can make America debt-free by 2013 for the first time since Andrew Jackson was President. This will keep interest rates lower, helping to maintain strong investment and growth while saving money for American families.