

Yet, for all its successes, Medicare has not fully kept pace with the miracles of modern medicine. The original Medicare law was written at a time when patients' lives were more often saved by scalpels than pharmaceuticals, when many of the lifesaving drugs we now routinely use did not even exist.

No one creating Medicare today would even consider excluding coverage for prescription drugs. That's why we've proposed a comprehensive plan to provide voluntary prescription drug benefits that are affordable for all seniors, a plan that ensures that all Medicare beneficiaries, no matter where they live or how sick they are, will pay the same affordable premiums, a plan that covers catastrophic drug costs, a plan that is part of an overall effort to strengthen and modernize Medicare so we won't have to ask our children to shoulder our burden when we retire.

Across the Nation, we've seen a great outpouring of support for adding such a prescription drug benefit. And yet I'm increasingly concerned that efforts in Congress are bogging down. One reason for this is clear: The pharmaceutical industry has unleashed a shameless, scorched-earth campaign to thwart the will of the American people.

An industry-funded group calling itself Citizens for Better Medicare—can you believe that?—has flooded the airwaves with negative ads against our plan. Just this week we learned that the drug companies have enlisted nearly 300 hard-gun lobbyists, more than one for every two Members of Congress, and paid them to do everything in their power to block all meaningful reforms. All told, the drug industry has spent a staggering \$236 million on its lobbying efforts. These millions would be a lot better spent on research for new medicines.

The pharmaceutical industry is pushing Congress to adopt a private insurance program rather

than a Medicare prescription drug benefit. Insurers, themselves, however, say this won't work, and they won't participate. Just today we learned that the State of Nevada is using a private insurance model that's very similar to the plan passed by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives last week. Not surprisingly, it has not found one single qualified insurer willing to participate.

You have to give it to the insurance companies; they have been honest here. They have said that the Republican plan won't work. It's a plan designed for those who make the drugs, not for the seniors who need to take them.

So today I call on Congress to reject that approach and the reckless campaign of narrow special interests, and act together in the public interest. We need a prescription drug benefit that works for seniors and people with disabilities, not just for the pharmaceutical industry.

A few weeks ago I put forth a good-faith proposal to do just that. I said that if Congress will agree to pass a plan that offers affordable Medicare prescription drug coverage to all seniors and people with disabilities, while protecting our hard-won fiscal discipline, then I will sign a marriage penalty relief law of equal size.

At this time of year it's natural that we begin to think ahead to election day, but let's keep in mind, as well, the spirit of common purpose we just celebrated on Independence Day. That's the spirit I hope Members of Congress will bring back to our Nation's Capital when they return to work Monday. At a time when America is once again bursting with abundance, there shouldn't be a limit on what we can achieve.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. from the Oval Office at the White House.

Remarks on the Home Heating Oil Reserve and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs Transition and an Exchange With Reporters

July 10, 2000

Home Heating Oil Reserve

The President. Good afternoon. I want to say a few words in a moment about Togo West

and Hershel Gober and the direction of the Department of Veterans Affairs and its mission.

But first, I'd like to make one brief announcement.

Since March, I have asked Congress to establish a home heating oil reserve in the Northeast to reduce the chance that future shortages will hurt consumers, as they did last winter. Congress recently, again, has failed to act, and time is running out. Winter may seem far off on this hot day, but if we don't do something now, reserve stocks of heating oil may not be in place before the cold weather comes. That's why today I am taking action to establish a home heating oil reserve to help families avoid higher energy costs this winter.

First, I'm directing Secretary Richardson to exchange crude oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve for 2 million barrels of home heating oil to store in the Northeast. Second, we're taking steps to establish this reserve on a permanent basis. The action I take today will leave us far better prepared to face the winter months. But it does not relieve Congress of the responsibility to act.

So I renew my call to Congress: Please, provide the authority so we can tap into this new home heating oil reserve when we need it; take up my energy budget initiatives and the tax incentives; pass comprehensive electricity restructuring; reauthorize the strategic petroleum reserve. These are things Congress can do right now to build a better, safer, more secure, and more affordable energy future. I ask them again to do their part to increase our energy supply, protect the environment, increase energy conservation, and keep our economy strong.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Transition

This morning I accepted the decision of Togo West to step down as Secretary of Veterans Affairs by month's end, after more than 2 years of effective leadership on behalf of our 25 million veterans and their families.

Every day, in every way, Togo West has given his all to make sure America does right by our men and women who have served us in uniform. As Secretary of the Army at the beginning of our administration, Togo West was known as a "soldier's Secretary." His leadership helped make the Army part of the best trained, best equipped, most potent fighting force in the world. He took special care to make sure that America took good care of our Army families. And he brought that same sense of purpose to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Under his leadership, the VA has begun to confront some long-neglected problems head on, reaching out to more than 400,000 veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, pressing for answers to the Gulf war syndrome and proper care for those who suffer from it, beginning the process of building five new national cemeteries, the most since the Civil War, and making a special effort to bring homeless veterans back into the society they did so much to defend.

His leadership and devotion to our veterans helped improve lives and make this country a better place. And on behalf of all Americans, Togo, I want to thank you for more than a quarter century of service and selfless devotion to our Nation.

To carry forward the vital work of the Department of Veterans Affairs, I turn to one who knows the work and the mission of the VA as well or better than anyone ever has, Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober. You all know we've been friends for many years. He did a superb job as the State director of veterans affairs in Arkansas when I served as Governor. He did a superb job as Acting Director between the tenures of Secretaries Jesse Brown and Togo West. There are few people in our country who have ever been as prepared for a job as Hershel Gober is for this one.

He has an ear for the needs of our veterans because he has the heart of a soldier. A veteran of both the Army and the Marine Corps, Hershel Gober served two terms in Vietnam, earning the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, and the Soldier's Medal. A few years ago, I was honored that he agreed to head a delegation back to Vietnam to seek the fullest possible accounting of our men and women still missing in uniform.

Hershel has already made his mark on the critical issue of veterans' health care. Early in our administration, he came to me and recommended that we look for ways to bring health care closer to the veterans who needed it. Since then, we've opened more than 200 outpatient clinics all across America and have more planned this year. That's one of the big reasons we were able to treat—listen to this—400,000 more veterans last year than we did the year before.

Hershel Gober has been a strong partner for both Secretary Brown and Secretary West. He will serve in a great tradition, and I thank him for agreeing to do so. Now I'd like to ask them

both to say a few words, beginning with Secretary West.

[At this point, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr., and Secretary of Veterans Affairs-designate Hershel W. Gober made brief remarks.]

The President. Thank you.

Middle East Peace Summit

Q. Mr. President, the Israeli Government is falling apart. How is Barak going to be able to negotiate a peace?

The President. Well, first, I think it's important to note that, as the news reports this morning in Israel reflect, a solid majority of the people want him to come and want him to pursue peace.

Look, if this were easy, it would have been done a long time ago. This is difficult. It is perhaps the most difficult of all the peace problems in the world, certainly dealing with the most difficult issues of the whole Middle East peace process, on which I have worked for nearly 8 years now. But both Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat have the vision, the knowledge, the experience, and the ability and the sheer guts to do what it takes, I think, to reach an agreement, and then to take it back to their people and see if they can sell it.

And keep in mind, Prime Minister Barak has said that the people of Israel will have their say on this. So this is really, I think, a matter of trying to come to grips with the issues on the merits, asking whether the price of peace is greater than the price of continued conflict and all the associated difficulties and heartbreaks and uncertainties and insecurity that that carries.

And I'm going to do my best to help them. I admire both of them for coming. It's not easy

for either to come. But they have come because they think that the price of not doing it is greater than the risk of going forward. And I hope we'll have the thoughts and prayers and best wishes of all Americans. It's going to be a difficult process. But the fact that they're coming means that we still have a chance.

Q. Mr. President, given the fact that these are the most difficult issues, do you think you can do this in just 8 days? And would you consider delaying your trip or abandoning your trip to Japan?

The President. Well, first of all, let me say, just because they're difficult doesn't mean they're not understood. I mean, I would say the answer to that would clearly be, no, if this were happening in 1993 or '94. But an enormous amount of time and thought has gone into this. I think both sides have a pretty clear idea of what the various options are.

And I don't want to set an artificial deadline for these talks. But I think that they need to listen to each other, and I need to listen to them, and we need to get right after it, because it's not as if we don't know what's out there to be done. And this has been simmering on the stove for some years now, and I think we understand generally what the options are, and we'll go there and go to work, do our very best.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:26 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House prior to departure for State College, PA. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary West and Secretary-designate Gober.

Remarks to the National Governors' Association Meeting in State College,
Pennsylvania
July 10, 2000

Thank you very much, Governor Leavitt, Governor Glendening. And Governor Ridge, thank you for welcoming me back to Pennsylvania and to Penn State. The Governor was kind enough to come to the airport, and we were reminiscing

about the opportunity I once had to come to Penn State to give the commencement address, and we talked about the Creamery. And then I learned all the Governors had been given access to the ice cream at Penn State. That was