

Remarks Following a Meeting With Congressional Leaders and an
Exchange With Reporters
January 29, 2001

The President. Mr. Secretary, you better move over before you get trampled by the hungry caterpillar. [Laughter]

I want to thank the two chairmen from the Senate and the House for coming to visit us. I appreciate you being here, Mr. Secretary; of course, the Vice President. We've had a very—we've had a discussion—a couple of key issues. One, I was informing the chairmen that today we're sending up to the Hill our Immediate Helping Hand proposal, which is help for prescription drugs for seniors. I appreciate them hearing me out as to the rationale to send it up.

I was pleased to hear there is some sentiment on the Hill for quick action for Medicare reform, a reform package which would include prescription drugs. And secondly, of course, we talked about tax relief, tax simplification, and tax fairness. They brought a favorable report that members from both parties are beginning to talk positively about tax relief and the positive effects it will have on our economy, on the lives of our average citizens. So I want to thank them for coming.

I'd be glad to answer a few questions. Yes, John.

National Energy Policy Development Group

Q. Sir, on your energy task force, is this seeking political cover, sir, to promote your campaign to open up the wildlife refuge? And also, given the Vice President's past ties to oil, what can you say to consumers that would allay any fears they might have that any deal that you come up with on energy, any national energy policy, may be more geared toward oil companies than to consumers?

The President. Well, Dick Cheney is a person who loves America and cares about the future of the country, just like I do.

And he understands what I understand, that if we don't find more energy supplies to meet growing demand in places like California, the consumer is going to pay a dear price.

During the course of the campaign, we spent a lot of time talking about the need to develop a national energy policy. And that's exactly what we're going to do. There is a short-term issue of California, and we responded quickly to the Governor's request for a 2 week extension on some mandatory allocations of energy and gas. It's now up to the people of California, the elected officials of California, to correct a flawed law, and we're encouraged that they're doing so.

But there's a long-term issue as well, and that is, how do we find more energy supplies? How do we encourage conservation on the one hand and bring more energy into the marketplace? And a good place to look is going to be ANWR. And I campaigned hard on the notion of having an environmentally sensitive exploration to ANWR, and I think we can do so.

Faith-Based Initiative

Q. On your Faith-Based Initiative, could you address the concern that some people have that this is an erosion of church and state, and that this will somehow be an office of evangelicals in the White House?

The President. Right. I appreciate that question, because I, in the State of Texas, had heard a lot of discussion about a faith-based initiative eroding the important bridge between church and state. And I am convinced that our plan is constitutional, because we intend—we will not fund a church or a synagogue or a mosque or any religion but instead will be funding programs that affect people in a positive way.

The charitable choice provision that had been debated in the welfare reform package fully explored the constitutional questions involved with funding people and/or faith-based programs. And I am confident that our program not only is constitutional but, more importantly, our program is going to change America for the better, that we're going to help people, and we're going to help people help themselves, and we're going to rally the great compassion of America.

And I look forward to implementing this program. I look forward to working with Members of Congress to put the required package together.

Prescription Drug Legislation

Q. How do you respond to the Members of Congress who say they would rather see a universal, broad-based approach to Medicare reform rather than your drug plan first and a broader approach later?

The President. Well, if, in fact, what they're saying is that they plan on expediting a Medicare reform that will include prescription drugs for all seniors, then all of a sudden, I begin to say, "Well, gosh, that may make sense that you look at our proposal the way you do." If they're going to drag their feet, if the Members of the Congress on both sides of the aisle don't feel the same urgency that I feel and these two chairmen feel on Medicare reform, then I feel it's very important for us to have an Immediate Helping Hand. There are a lot of seniors who need help when it comes to prescription drugs.

President Clinton's Pardon of Marc Rich

Q. Why did you decide not to challenge the Clinton pardon, sir?

The President. Oh, on Marc Rich? First of all, I didn't agree with the decision. I

would not have made that decision myself. But the ability for a President to make decisions is—a decision on pardons is inviolate, as far as I'm concerned. It's an important part of the office. I am mindful not only of preserving executive powers for myself but for predecessors as well. And that's why I made the decision.

Q. Are you troubled by the appearance, sir? Are you troubled by the appearance of that pardon, sir?

The President. I was troubled by the decision the President made. I would not have made the decision. I would not have made that decision. But nevertheless, he was the President. He had the right to do so, to make that decision, and he did. And I'm going to protect that privilege, not only for me but for future Presidents as well.

Q. Is it a quid pro quo—

The President. I don't know about that. It's going to be up for a good journalist to figure that out—like you, Roberts [John Roberts, CBS News].

Q. I'm just wondering, sir, if you're taking a look at the path that's been laid and said, "It walks like a duck"?

The President. It what—it walks like what? [Laughter]

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:04 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Representative William M. Thomas, chairman, House Committee on Ways and Means; Senator Charles Grassley, chairman, Senate Committee on Finance; Treasury Secretary-designate Paul H. O'Neill; and Gov. Gray Davis of California. The President also referred to ANWR, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.