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dress, that's a health exception—some terrible things like that.

And I said, no, no, no, I will accept language that says serious, adverse health consequences to the mother. Those three words. Everyone in the world will know what we're talking about. We're talking about these families. I implored them. I said, if you want to pass something on this procedure, let's make an exception for life and serious adverse health consequences so that we don't put these women in a position and these families in a position where they will lose all possibility of future child-bearing, or where the doctor can't say that they might die, but they could clearly be substantially injured forever.

And my pleas fell on deaf ears. The emotional power of the description of the procedure—which I might add did not cover the procedure these women had and did not cover all the procedures banned by the law—but the emotional power was so great that my plea just to take a decent account of these hundreds of families every year that are in this position fell on deaf ears. And, therefore, I had no choice but to veto the bill. I vetoed it just a few minutes ago before I met with these families.

I will say again, if the Congress really wants to act out of a sincere concern that some of these things are done, which are wrong, in casual ways, then if they will meet my standards to protect these families, they could pass a bill that I would sign tomorrow. But these people have no business being made into political pawns.

As I said, and as they said, they never had a choice. This affects staunchly pro-life families as well as people that are pro-choice. They never had a choice. And I cannot in good conscience see their lives damaged and their potential to build good, strong families damaged.

We need more families in America like these folks. We need more parents in America like these folks. They are what America needs more of. And just because they happen to be in a tiny minority to bear a unique burden that God imposes on just a few people every year, we can't forget our obligation to protect their lives, their children, and their families' future.

That is what this veto is all about. And let me say again how profoundly grateful I am to them for coming here today and having the courage to tell their stories to the American people.

Thank you. Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:22 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval Partial Birth Abortion Legislation

April 10, 1996

To the House of Representatives:

I am returning herewith without my approval H.R. 1833, which would prohibit doctors from performing a certain kind of abortion. I do so because the bill does not allow women to protect themselves from serious threats to their health. By refusing to permit women, in reliance on their doctors' best medical judgment, to use this procedure when their lives are threatened *or* when their health is put in serious jeopardy, the Congress has fashioned a bill that is consistent neither with the Constitution nor with sound public policy.

I have always believed that the decision to have an abortion generally should be between a woman, her doctor, her conscience, and her God. I support the decision in *Roe* v. *Wade* protecting a woman's right to choose, and I believe that the abortions protected by that decision should be safe and rare. Consistent with that decision, I have long opposed late-term abortions except where necessary to protect the life or health of the mother. In fact, as Governor of Arkansas, I signed into law a bill that barred third trimester abortions, with an appropriate exception for life or health.

The procedure described in H.R. 1833 has troubled me deeply, as it has many people. I cannot support use of that procedure on an elective basis, where the abortion is being performed for non-health related reasons and there are equally safe medical procedures available.

There are, however, rare and tragic situations that can occur in a woman's pregnancy in which, in a doctor's medical judgment, the

use of this procedure may be necessary to save a woman's life or to protect her against serious injury to her health. In these situations, in which a woman and her family must make an awful choice, the Constitution requires, as it should, that the ability to choose this procedure be protected.

In the past several months, I have heard from women who desperately wanted to have their babies, who were devastated to learn that their babies had fatal conditions and would not live, who wanted anything other than an abortion, but who were advised by their doctors that this procedure was their best chance to avert the risk of death or grave harm which, in some cases, would have included an inability to ever bear children again. For these women, this was not about choice—not about deciding against having a child. These babies were certain to perish before, during or shortly after birth, and the only question was how much grave damage was going to be done to the woman.

I cannot sign H.R. 1833, as passed, because it fails to protect women in such dire circumstances—because by treating doctors who perform the procedure in these tragic cases as criminals, the bill poses a danger of serious harm to women. This bill, in curtailing the ability of women and their doctors to choose the procedure for sound medical reasons, violates the constitutional command that any law regulating abortion protect both the life and the health of the woman. The bill's overbroad criminal prohibition risks that women will suffer serious injury.

That is why I implored Congress to add an exemption for the small number of compelling cases where selection of the procedure, in the medical judgment of the attending physician, was necessary to preserve the life of the woman or avert serious adverse consequences to her health. The life exception in the current bill only covers cases where the doctor believes that the woman will die. It fails to cover cases where, absent the procedure, serious physical harm, often including losing the ability to have more children, is very likely to occur. I told Congress that I would sign H.R. 1833 if it were amended to add an exception for serious health consequences. A bill amended in this way would strike a proper balance, remedying the constitutional and human defect of H.R. 1833. If such a bill were presented to me, I would sign it now.

I understand the desire to eliminate the use of a procedure that appears inhumane. But to eliminate it without taking into consideration the rare and tragic circumstances in which its use may be necessary would be even more inhumane.

The Congress chose not to adopt the sensible and constitutionally appropriate proposal I made, instead leaving women unprotected against serious health risks. As a result of this Congressional indifference to women's health, I cannot, in good conscience and consistent with my responsibility to uphold the law, sign this legislation.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
April 10, 1996.

Letter to Joseph Cardinal Bernardin on Partial Birth Abortion Legislation

April 10, 1996

Dear Cardinal Bernardin:

I want to thank you for your letter on H.R. 1833. I appreciate and considered the strong moral convictions you expressed.

This is a difficult and disturbing issue, one which I have studied and prayed about for many months. I am against late-term abortions and have long opposed them, except where necessary to protect the life or health of the mother. As Governor of Arkansas, I signed into law a bill that barred third trimester abortions, with an appropriate exception for life or health, and I would sign such a bill now if it were presented to me.

Indeed, when I first heard the procedure referred to in H.R. 1833 described, I thought I would support the bill. But as I studied the matter and learned more about it, I came to understand that this is a rarely used procedure, justifiable as a last resort when doctors judge it necessary to save a woman's life or to avert serious health consequences to her.

In the past months, I have learned of several cases of women who desperately wanted to have their babies, who were devastated to learn that their babies had fatal conditions and would not live, who wanted anything