

Remarks on the National Cancer Institute's Recommendations on Mammography and an Exchange With Reporters

March 27, 1997

The President. Secretary Shalala has just briefed me on the National Cancer Institute's new recommendations on mammography. These recommendations, based on the latest and best medical evidence, give clear, consistent guidance to women in our national fight against breast cancer. Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women. It affects one in eight women in their lifetimes, and has touched the families of nearly every American, including my own.

We may not yet have a cure for breast cancer, but we do know that early detection and early treatment are our most potent weapons against this dread disease and we know that mammography can save lives. That is why it's important to send a clear, consistent message to women and to their families about when to start getting mammograms and how often to repeat them.

After careful study of the science, the National Cancer Advisory Board has now concluded that women between the ages of 40 and 49 should get a mammography examination for breast cancer every 1 or 2 years, in consultation with their doctors. The National Cancer Institute has now accepted these recommendations. Now women in their forties will have clear guidance based on the best science, and action to match it.

Today I am taking action to bring Medicare, Medicaid, and the Federal employee health plans in line with the National Cancer Institute's recommendations. First, in the Medicare budget I am sending to Congress today I am making annual screening mammography exams, beginning at age 40, a covered expense without co-insurance or deductibles. Second, Secretary Shalala is sending a letter to State Medicaid directors urging them to also cover annual mammograms beginning at 40 and assuring them that the Federal Government will pay its matching share if they do so. And today I am directing the Office of Personnel Management to require all Federal health benefit plans to comply with the National Cancer Advisory

Board's recommendations on mammogram screenings, beginning next year.

The Federal Government is doing its part to make sure women have both coverage and access to this potentially lifesaving test. I want to challenge private health insurance plans to do the same. They, too, should cover regular screening mammograms for women 40 and over.

Finally, we know there has been much discussion on this issue and a lot of confusion. That is why we are launching a major public education campaign to make sure every woman and every health care professional in America, that all of them are aware of these new recommendations. This is a major step forward in our fight against breast cancer.

In addition to Secretary Shalala, I want to thank National Cancer Advisory Board Chairperson, Dr. Barbara Rimer, and all the members of the Board, along with the NCI Director, Dr. Richard Klausner, for the fine job that they did in producing these recommendations.

I also want to thank the First Lady, who could not be with us here because of her visit to Africa. She has devoted countless hours to educating women about the importance of mammography, and this is a happy day for her. She has especially tried to educate older women to take advantage of the Medicare coverage of mammograms, because we know that too few of them still do. And that's the last point I would like to make. These guidelines and this coverage, it's all very good, but unless women are willing to actually take advantage of the coverage, we won't have the full benefit of the recommendations and the findings that have been made.

Now I'd like to turn the microphone over to Secretary Shalala to make a few comments.

[At this point, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala made brief remarks.]

Heaven's Gate Mass Suicide

Q. Mr. President, do you have any comment on the mass suicide in California?

The President. Well, of course, all I know is what I read about it this morning and what I saw last night reported. But it's heart-

breaking; it's sickening; it's shocking. I think it's important that we get as many facts as we can about this and try to determine what, in fact, motivated those people and what all of us can do to make sure that there aren't other people thinking in that same way out there in our country, that aren't so isolated that they can create a world for themselves that may justify that kind of thing. It's very troubling to me. But I don't think I know enough to make a definitive comment about it.

Democratic Party Finances

Q. Mr. President, switching gears on another subject, the Democratic Party emerged from this most recent election in the aftermath of all of these fundraising problems—it seems to be in pretty bad shape financially—enormous debt that they can't repay. What, if anything, can you do about this, and how much responsibility do you have to try to get the Democratic Party back into shape?

The President. Oh, a lot, and I have been doing a lot, and I will do more. We knew that we would have to spend—last year when it became obvious that our congressional candidates were going to be outspent, massively, we did everything we could to raise a good deal of money at the end. But the committees and the Democratic Committee went into debt with money that they could legally borrow in the hope of trying to be competitive. They actually did a pretty good job. They were still outspent, I figure, in the last 10 days, 2 weeks, probably 4 or 5 to 1 in all of the contested races. But we knew that would happen, and we knew it would take some time to pay it back. But I'm not particularly concerned about it. I think we will pay it back. And it was, I thought, important.

Keep in mind, we were at the bottom of the barrel in November of '94, and in 1995, we did a good job, I think, of building our party back and showing what the clear differences were between the two parties. And the previous leadership of the party deserves a lot of credit. We got up to a million small donors, and they're coming back now. They're beginning to make their contributions, and that's very encouraging. So I think we'll get there. I'm not particularly concerned about it.

We made a deliberate decision to kind of downplay the Inaugural and not to try to tie too much of that to fundraising, so we're going to have to work harder this year. But I've been doing some work, as you know, and I will continue to do more.

Q. Do you think Governor Romer has second thoughts about some of the changes that previously eliminating contributions from subsidiaries of foreign companies and also non-U.S. citizens? He seems to be having some second thoughts about some of those proposals you made over the past few months.

The President. Well, let me say, I still don't believe—I think, on balance, it's better policy to say that people who can't vote shouldn't contribute. In terms of the subsidiaries, the real problem there is the law says if the money is made in the United States, it can be given in the United States. The problem is, how do you ever know that? And so I think that he was trying to bend over backwards to get us off on the right foot.

But I'd be willing to talk to him about it. But the main thing is we're just going to have to get together and work hard and rally our troops and remind them of what we're trying to do here, how we're trying to balance the budget, what we're trying to do for education, what we're trying to do to move the country forward and get the efforts going. We've had several successful events this year. We just have to do more. And we knew—what you have to do after an election, when we saw all this third party money and all these other things coming down the pike, we wanted to give our Members of Congress a chance to be competitive, and so we undertook to do so. And I'm glad we did, but we're just going to have to work double hard now to pay the money back, and we'll do that. We'll pay our debts, and we'll make our budget this year.

Ambassador Ross and Vice President Gore

Q. Have you received any updates from Ambassador Ross or the Vice President?

The President. Yes.

Q. And what have they been?

The President. Well, Ambassador Ross had a very good meeting with Chairman

Arafat, and he's proceeding now on his trip. And I don't have anything else to tell you, but he was encouraged by the response of Chairman Arafat to the matters that we discussed here before he left.

I started the day this morning with physical therapy and a talk with the Vice President in China, which was also good therapy. [Laughter] And he said to me that in every aspect, his trip had gone quite well and better than he had anticipated, and he was anxious to get back and give me a report on all the issues that we're concerned about. But I think the trip has been a real validation for our strategy of engagement with China, of taking our agreements, our disagreements, our matters of common interest, our matters of concern directly to them. And he is very pleased with the results so far, and I certainly am very pleased with the work he's done, with the speech he gave on human rights and with all the work that he's done in China so far. I'm encouraged about it. I think the trip has been well worth making.

FBI and Alleged Chinese Efforts To Influence the 1996 Election

Q. Have you seen that Janet Reno gave Louis Freeh a ringing endorsement this morning—every confidence in his leadership at the FBI?

The President. Well, as I said—of course, she works with him every day, and that's why I said yesterday what I did. I was troubled by the headline in the New York Times story, but I did not know the facts. And I think it's important for me not to assume that someone has done or failed to do something that's adverse to the national interest before I know it's true. And she's the one that has to make those calls. And as she said in her comments, the system that we have—the President appoints the Director of the FBI, but the FBI is a part of the Justice Department. It's a part of the justice system. And whenever you have dual responsibilities in the Government, you're going to have some time when you've got to make a close call.

And I still don't know—as I said, I just literally don't know—I could actually tell you whether I agreed or disagreed, if I knew what—if and what information had not been forthcoming to the National Security Council.

I do believe that there should be a—that doubt should be resolved in favor of disclosure to the National Security Council of essential national security information. But the Attorney General has to resolve those things. And I trust her to do it. And so, what she said is fine by me.

Q. Is there a problem if the President of the United States—a lot of Americans simply don't understand—the President of the United States says, "I don't know that there's a problem because I haven't necessarily been given"—

The President. Well, I think there is. Yes, I think there is. If I knew that one existed, I would agree that there was a problem. But I don't know it. And I'm still not sure that there was. I just have to—I have to trust the Attorney General to make sure that the National Security Council gets the information that we need to make good national security judgments here. I think, for example, in the Khobar Towers incident, there is absolutely not a shred of evidence that there's anything that we have been denied. And so, if I knew that there was and I knew what it was and I thought there was a mistake, I'd be happy to say that there's an honest disagreement here, but I just don't know that there is one.

Ambassadorial Nominations

Q. Has your administration been hamstrung in terms of ambassadorial appointments, appointments at the State Department and so forth because of all of these investigations on the campaign?

The President. No, not at all. As a matter of fact, we've been working on getting ready for the next round of ambassadorial appointments. I approved a small number of them, oh, probably a couple of weeks ago so we could move in critical countries. But the others we're trying to do on a schedule which at least guarantees that all the Ambassadors now serving will do the traditional 3-year tour of duty. So we have some time on them. But we've worked very hard for the last month or so on that, and I don't see those two things as in conflict or a problem at all.

Thank you.

President's Health

Q. How do you feel today?

The President. I feel fine. Every day I'm getting a little more mobile, and I'm getting able to, you know, do a little more. I'll tell you one thing, I wouldn't wish this on anyone. But it's been a very enlightening experience, a very humbling experience. And the respect that I feel now for people who spend all day every day in a wheelchair or people who spend all day every day in braces and on crutches is enormous.

The dignity and the strength of character that it takes to kind of organize your life and carry it out if you're always subject to some sort of significant physical disability is enormous. These are things that we all sometimes see, but when you've felt just a little taste of it, when you realize what it means to be able to just navigate and do the basic things in life—just to dress yourself for the first time when you couldn't do it, for example—it just makes you understand that the rest of us in society who have been fortunate enough to have full use of our physical facilities owe an enormous amount of respect and sensitivity to people who don't.

It's just been a stunning experience for me. I mean, I will never again see a person who has to deal with a disability in the same light again. I mean, it's just—it's had a profound impact. It's nothing I didn't know before, but feeling it and knowing it are two different things.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Q. Like your doctor after you all the time?

The President. Yes. She just wants to make sure I don't blow it.

Q. I see her—we see her right here.

The President. There she is.

Q. She's watching.

The President. These crutches are quite good. This way you can walk by putting your bad leg down and keeping the weight here. Otherwise, you have to just do this and then kind of do that. But if you can walk, it's a lot easier; the chances of falling are less.

Q. They're better than the traditional crutches.

The President. Yes, much better.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:17 p.m., in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, general chair, Democratic National Committee.

Remarks Honoring the NCAA Football Champion University of Florida Gators

March 27, 1997

The President. Thank you very much. Please be seated. President and Mrs. Lombardi, Athletic Director Foley, Mayor Jennings, Congresswoman Thurman—I know what a happy day this is for you. Senator Breaux, we're glad to see you here. Senator Breaux thinks he represents anyplace that's perpetually warm. [Laughter] We're honored to have you here.

Let me say, when Coach Spurrier and Danny and I walked in I was hoping, when I hobbled in, that one of you might mistake me for a member of the team who just had a rough time in the bowl game. [Laughter] But I remembered that a few years ago, Danny had a little knee injury, and if I come back from mine as well as he did from his, my future is secure, I think.

I am delighted to be here with you. I look forward to these occasions every year, but I especially want to congratulate you on a wonderful season and an astonishing championship game. The 32-point margin of victory, I'm sure all of you know, against the number one ranked team is the largest in bowl history and something that the University of Florida can always be very proud of.

I'd also note—it's somewhat difficult for me to note this, being from Arkansas, but every year I've been President, Florida has won the Southeastern Conference championship. [Laughter] I was impressed not only by the stars on the team—by Danny Wuerffel and Ike Hilliard, and by the fact that Terry Jackson joined his brother, Willy, in Sugar Bowl history by rushing for over 100 yards—I was impressed by the teamwork of this team.

And I have followed college football very closely for nearly 40 years now, and I really believe that the University of Florida, in the last 5 or 6 years, has written a whole new chapter in college football in much the way that Oklahoma did a few decades ago with the wishbone. You have changed football forever and for the better. It is more exciting than it has ever been before, and you do it better than anyone else.