

Mr. Jackson.—and built a bridge there. And our State's almost a nation.

The President. Well, I think, first of all, I think Governor Davis is doing a terrific job. And I suppose I've learned as much from him as he's learned from me. But I think the thing that Californians can be proud of is that he will, in my view, he will keep the State focused on the future. He'll keep working on the big issues, and he'll get results. He will stay at something until he gets results.

And I personally thought his decision to go to Mexico and establish a relationship with the President there, who is a progressive, able person and an honest person, was a very smart decision for the people of California. But it's one of many smart decisions he's made. And I think that when we come there for the convention, it will give America a chance to see a lot of the good things that are going on in California.

Mr. Jackson. Mr. President, thank you very much indeed for your time, sir.

The President. Thank you. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 3 p.m. in Room 415 of the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, the President referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks to the Legislative Conference of the International Association of Fire Fighters

March 15, 1999

Thank you. That's a true story. [Laughter] But the truth is that Al didn't need to have any fear because by the time I called him, Harold had gone over the whole list, and I had written it down. Do you remember that? I mean, he had been very tough, very specific, very firm. And I actually wrote it down. And I think if I hadn't written it down, he would never have let me off the hook. [Laughter] I just called Al because sometimes people get better care in the hospital after I call them. [Laughter]

I was with a guy over the weekend—I went home to Arkansas over the weekend—I was

with a guy over the weekend who is about 83 years old. And he literally was at death's door. And I called him in the hospital, and I don't—this sounds more insensitive than it is, but this guy is like a brother to me, and we've been friends for 30 years. And I call him up, and I say, "You old coot. You can't die. I'm not done with you yet." [Laughter] And all of a sudden, everybody rushed into his room. The next thing I know, 2 weeks later he's at a Democratic event, last weekend. So if you get in the hospital and you don't think they're doing right by you, let us know, and I'll see what I can do. [Laughter]

I want to thank Al and Harold and Vince and all the officers of the IAFF for working with us. I want to thank my good friend James Lee Witt, and Kay Goss, who has now worked with me as my liaison to firefighters as Governor and as President. Thank you very much. I want to thank Congressmen Neil Abercrombie and Bill Pascrell, both of whom are here and are good friends of the firefighters and good friends of mine.

You know, I was thinking about how much we have in common on the way over here. When I was a boy, like most kids I used to love to go to the fire station, slide down the pole, crawl on the truck, do all that. I never became a firefighter, but I believe I've learned about as much as you have about putting out fires in the last few years. [Laughter]

I'm working on about 20 years now, of working with firefighters, working with the IAFF. When I was Governor, I worked with our local IAFF members to create a state-wide fire and police pension system and to establish death benefits for firefighters killed in the line of duty. And I asked Al where Pete Reagan was standing over there because he's the president of the Arkansas Professional Fire Fighters, and whenever I go back to northwest Arkansas, he still leads the motorcade.

I haven't been asked to pick up a hose or anything on any of these trips, but a few years ago when we were in Fayetteville, where I used to teach and where Hillary and I were married, I asked him if we could go by and see the home where we first lived in and where we were married. Pete redirected the entire motorcade to go past the

house. You cannot imagine how this traumatized the Secret Service. *[Laughter]*

Everybody else—I just said, “I want to go by my house.” And so, boom, boom, boom, all of a sudden we’re going by the—then, they had to take us down a dirt road in order to get back on the motorcade route, which makes the point I want to get into, which is that now people who are firefighters have to do a lot more than battle fires.

You all know that Benjamin Franklin started the country’s first fire department in 1736. It was called the Union Fire Company, but it was not a union shop. It was a private company. And in those days, different companies would actually show up at a fire, and then they would fight over who would put it out, because you actually got paid if you put the fire out. Meanwhile the building would burn down. Kind of the way Washington works today. *[Laughter]*

That bickering system ended with the rise of municipal fire departments in the 19th century. And ever since, I think that almost every American would agree that firefighters have embodied the best values of this country: teamwork, professionalism, helping your neighbor, showing courage when it’s necessary. These things are at the core of this country’s character, and they’re what we think about—the rest of us—when we think about you and the people you represent.

But the job has changed. From reviving heart attack sufferers, to cleaning up hazardous chemical spills, to rescuing victims of earthquakes and floods—firefighters have been called upon to assume ever-broadening responsibilities for helping our fellow countrymen and women.

As we approach a new century, we have to ask our firefighters to meet yet a new challenge: to protect our citizens from terrorists armed with chemical and biological weapons. Today I want to talk about these new threats and about the efforts we’re undertaking to equip and train our Nation’s firefighters to deal with those threats, thanks in large part to the IAFF.

America’s municipal firefighters are already the best trained and best equipped in the world. All Americans benefit from that. The number of Americans killed in fires has dropped by one-third since 1988. I don’t

think the American people know that, and since the press is covering it, I want to say that again—I hope this gets on, if nothing else does—the number of Americans killed in fires has dropped by one-third since 1988. Thank you very much.

This is due, of course, to the prevention measures you have tirelessly advocated, to your bravery and skill. With the help of better safety equipment that you have fought for, such as flame-retardant suits, firefighters have been able to get to the heart of fires quicker and pull more victims to safety.

Firefighting is still extremely dangerous. Firefighters are 6 times more likely to be injured on the job than the average private sector worker. That’s why I have worked very hard with your leaders to better the lives of firefighters. We’ve improved the pay system for Federal firefighters, supported efforts to give all firefighters the right to join unions and bargain collectively, strengthen Federal rules—*[applause]*—thank you. Thank you. And we strengthened the Federal rules that protect the lives of firefighters. But we have to do more.

The 21st century will be a fascinating time. I envy those of you who are in this audience who are younger than me, which is most of you, because you’ll live to see more of it. It will be a century in which limitless opportunities will be linked to dangerous new threats. Here’s why: Open borders and fast-paced technological change fuel our prosperity; they create new job opportunities, new business opportunities every day; they also make life more interesting and they spread the message of freedom quickly around the globe.

You may have noticed last week I was in Central America visiting four countries that were ravaged by the hurricane. All these countries once were gripped by horrible civil wars. Today, they’re all governed by freely elected leaders, people sitting in the assemblies who fought each other for years. There’s a lot of good things going on.

But the more open and flexible societies are, the more vulnerable they can become to organized forces of destruction. They give new opportunities to the enemies as well as the friends of freedom. For example, scientists now use the Internet to exchange

ideas and make discoveries that can lengthen lives. But fanatics can also use it to download formulas for substances and bombs that can be used to shorten lives.

In most instances of domestic terror, the first professionals on the scene will be the firefighters. They're becoming the frontline defenders of our citizens, not just from accidents and arsonists but from those who would seek to sow terror and so undermine our way of life. The truth of this is apparent to anyone who saw that unforgettable photograph of firefighter Chris Fields, cradling in his arms a tiny victim of the Oklahoma City bombing.

Since 1996, the number of weapons of mass destruction threats called in to firefighters, police, and the FBI has increased by fivefold. The threat comes not just from conventional weapons, like the bomb used in Oklahoma City, but also from chemical weapons, like the nerve agent that killed 12 but injured thousands in Tokyo in the subway just 4 years ago, and even from biological weapons that could spread deadly disease before anyone even realizes that attack has occurred.

I have been stressing the importance of this issue, now, for some time. As I have said repeatedly, and I want to say again to you, I am not trying to put any American into a panic over this, but I am determined to see that we have a serious, deliberate, disciplined, long-term response to a legitimate potential threat to the lives and safety of the American people. *[Applause]* Thank you.

The only cause for alarm would be if we were to sit by and do nothing to prepare for a problem we know we could be presented with. Nothing would make me happier than to have people look back 20 years from now and say, "President Clinton overreacted to that. He was overly cautious." The only way they will say that is if we are over cautious, if we're prepared, we can keep bad things from happening.

Now, last fall the Attorney General announced plans to create a national domestic preparedness office, a one-stop shop where State and local first responders can get the equipment, the training, the guidance they need from a variety of Federal agencies. I proposed and Congress agreed to a 39 per-

cent increase in resources for chemical and biological weapons preparedness.

In the budget I submitted last month to Congress, I asked for \$10 billion to combat terrorism, including nearly 1.4 billion to protect citizens against chemical and biological terrorism here at home, more than double what we spent on such efforts just 2 years ago.

Today I want to talk about the specifics of our domestic antiterrorism initiative that will most affect the people in this room and those whom you represent.

First, equipment: Later this year, the Justice Department will provide \$69½ million in grants to all 50 States and the large municipalities to buy everything from protective gear to chemical/biological detection devices. Next month, we'll be asking you to tell us what you need.

Second, training: This year, the Departments of Justice and Defense, along with FEMA, will invest nearly \$80 million in new and existing training efforts for firefighters, EMS personnel, and other first responders. We want all of these resources to be accessible to the National Domestic Preparedness Office.

Third, special response teams: The Department of Health and Human Services has helped 27 metropolitan areas develop specially trained and equipped medical response teams that can be deployed at a moment's notice in the event of chemical or biological attack. These teams, composed of local medical personnel, will get to the scene quickly, work closely with firefighters and police and ensure that patients are safely transported to hospitals. Our goal is a response team in each of the Nation's major metropolitan areas, and my new budget moves us in that direction.

But the need is too urgent to wait for Congress to act on the budget at the end of the year. Therefore, Secretary Shalala will notify Congress today that she plans to spend an additional \$11 million this year to create medical response teams in 12 more metropolitan areas, including Salt Lake City, the home of the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Fourth, advice from the front line: Later this year, the Department of Defense will name members of a new weapons of mass destruction advisory panel. Three of the 17

panel members will be firefighters. [Applause] Thank you. Next month, the National Domestic Preparedness Office will hold a conference with fire and police chiefs and hazardous materials experts to develop guidelines for dealing with biological and chemical threats and incidents.

With action in these four areas, to better equip and train local firefighters and other first responders, we can save lives and show terrorists that assaults on America will accomplish nothing but their own downfall.

Let me tell you again how grateful I am to have had the chance to work with you over these last 6 years, and for the next 2, how important I think it is that we always be preparing for the future, how strongly I believe—I was glad when you—and touched—when you stood up when I said I believed in the right of firefighters to organize and bargain collectively. I do. I think most people don't understand, until they go through a fire or some other emergency exactly how many different things you do and how dangerous it can often be.

I also think that because you are leaders of your community, because your kids play on the ball teams, because you show up at the PTA meetings, because you're involved in the civic clubs, and the other activities, you can help to sensitize people to this issue I've talked with you about today.

And again I say, I don't want any American to go around in mortal fear of a biological and chemical attack. But you have—a lot of you have kids that are better on the computer than you are. As a matter of fact, anybody here who is better than his or her child on a computer deserves a medal. [Laughter] But you know there are millions of websites now. You know what people can pull up. Now, it's not unusual now for children to turn in term papers where they never have to go to the library, and every single source they cite came off the Internet. And with that sort of access to information, people who want to do bad things with elemental chemical and biological products that can be poisonous or spread disease, is a legitimate possibility. I will say again, the best chance we have for this not to be a problem is to understand the dimensions of it and prepare for it, with discipline, in the quickest possible way.

And so I hope you will talk to your friends and neighbors about it, again, not to overly frighten them but to sensitize them so they expect their elected officials and their other leaders to take appropriate steps. That is the way to deal with it.

You know, I remember, it wasn't so many years ago that people were panicked that every airplane they took might be hijacked. And then we had the airport metal detectors. And then some people said, "Well, is this too much of an infringement on our liberty?" I can only speak for myself; I never once minded being stopped and asked to empty my pockets when I set off the metal detector, because I knew it was a way that we could prepare for a problem so that we wouldn't have to go around frightened all the time.

That's all we've got to do here, to deal with this in an aggressive, comprehensive, professional, disciplined way. And I really think that you understand this. And I ask you when you go home, try also to make sure in all kinds of ways, perhaps formal and informal, that your fellow citizens do as well.

Al said today that this is the first time a President has ever addressed the IAFF in person. The others made a mistake; that's all I can say. [Applause] Thank you. And I was a little slow off the mark. [Laughter] But I would like to point out that IAFF has hardly gone unnoticed by past Presidents. One I particularly admire, Harry Truman, sent this letter on August the 1st, 1952, to the then-president of your organization, John Redmond. He described you and your union in plain words that I cannot improve upon. So I would like to close with them.

"Your members are at their posts, day and night, ready to accept the call of duty, to protect the lives and property of their fellow citizens. They do so at risk of life and limb. For their devotion and heroism, they deserve the praise of all Americans." Amen.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:05 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Alfred K. Whitehead, general president, Harold A. Schaitberger, executive assistant to the general president, and Vincent J. Bollon, general secretary-treasurer, International Association of Fire Fighters.

**Statement on Signing Legislation
Providing Guaranteed Loans for
Farmers and Ranchers**

March 15, 1999

I am pleased to sign into law H.R. 882, a bill that will accelerate the availability of federally guaranteed loans to our Nation's farmers and ranchers to give them continued access to credit that is necessary to operate their farms and ranches.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that it will soon exhaust the funds available to guarantee loans for farm ownership and operations. This bill will make available more than \$450 million in guarantees to qualified farmers and ranchers. Normally, these funds are reserved for beginning farmers and ranchers until April 1, when they are made available to all qualified farmers and ranchers. This bill will not affect a separate reserve for minority farmers.

These additional amounts, however, will not fully address the unprecedented increase in demand for USDA financing caused by low commodity prices, which are expected to continue. For this reason, I recently submitted to the Congress an emergency supplemental request for an additional \$1.1 billion in USDA loan authority. I call on the Congress to work expeditiously to include these amounts in a supplemental bill I can sign that does not include unwise and unnecessary off-sets.

William J. Clinton

The White House,
March 15, 1999.

NOTE: H.R. 882, approved March 15, was assigned Public Law No. 106-2.

**Statement on the Killing of
Rosemary Nelson in Northern
Ireland**

March 15, 1999

The killing today of Rosemary Nelson, a leading human rights lawyer in Northern Ireland, was a despicable and cowardly act by the enemies of peace. Our deepest sympathies go out to her family and friends. It

is long past time for the bloodshed to end once and for all. We urge all the proponents for peace to unite to condemn this act and reject the violence. We urge the parties to move forward with implementing the Good Friday accord.

**Statement on Senator John H.
Chafee's Decision Not To Seek
Reelection**

March 15, 1999

For more than a generation, Senator John Chafee has been a strong leader for his beloved Rhode Island and for America. He has been a tireless champion of our environment—helping to lead the fight against global warming, promoting wetlands conservation, and crafting legislation for clean air and safe drinking water. On behalf of all Americans, I thank him for his many contributions, including his leadership in expanding health care to more women and children and improving services for people with disabilities. It is truly a rich legacy for America. Hillary and I wish John and his family all the best in the years to come.

**Statement on the Cuban
Government's Sentencing
of Human Rights Activists**

March 15, 1999

I am deeply disappointed that the Cuban Government has sentenced four courageous human rights activists—Vladimiro Roca, Felix Bonne, Rene Gomez Manzano, and Marta Beatriz Roque—to prison terms. They did nothing more than assert their right to speak freely about their country's future, call on their Government to respect basic human rights, and seek a peaceful transition to democracy for the long-suffering Cuban people. They were tried without a fair process, behind closed doors. I call on the Cuban Government to release them immediately.