

## **Remarks on the Budget Agreement and an Exchange With Reporters**

*October 15, 1998.*

**The President.** Thank you very much. First of all, I would like to echo much of what has been said. I want to thank the members of our negotiating team. Erskine Bowles' swan song turned out to be quite a show, and I thank him for everything he's done, for me and for our country, but especially for these last 8 days. I thank John Podesta and Maria Echaveste, Jack Lew, Sylvia Matthews, the entire economic team that are back here.

I also want to make it clear that none of this could have been done, in my view, not a bit of it, if we hadn't had a strong, united front from the members of our party in both Houses, led by Tom Daschle and Dick Gephardt, who believe passionately in what we were fighting for for the American people.

And finally, let me say I would like to thank the leaders of the Republican Party who made these agreements with us. And I ask you, as I make my remarks about what I think was most important about them, just think—we didn't even start this work until after the whole budget year was over. Just think what we could do for America if we had these priorities all year long instead of just for 8 days. And I just can't tell you how grateful I am for these achievements.

Let me give you my perspective. First of all, in terms of the priorities I set forth in the State of the Union Address last January, we did save the surplus for the hard work of Social Security reform early next year. Secondly, we made major strides in renewing our public schools, especially with the truly historic commitment of 100,000 new teachers to reduce class size in the early grades. And thirdly, we made a profound commitment to strengthening our own economy here by assuming our responsibility to stabilize the global economy on which so much of our prosperity depends. Now without the perseverance of the people behind me and those whom they represent, none of that could have happened.

Let's look at the education issues. One hundred thousand new teachers will enable us to reduce class size in the early grades

to an average of 18. Over here at this school violence conference that we sponsored all day, one of the things they kept hammering home, all these educators, was we can find the troubled children; we can prevent a lot of these problems if we can have them in small enough classes in the early grades.

We achieved full funding for other important educational initiatives, from child literacy to college mentoring, from after-school programs to summer jobs. We did meet our obligations to the International Monetary Fund. And we honored our obligations to the next generation by strongly protecting the environment, and I'd just like to mention three things: One, we got rid of the most objectionable environmental riders; two, we had a full funding of our clean water initiative, which is very important—remember, 40 percent of our lakes and rivers are still not clean enough for our people to swim in them—and three, as the Vice President said, we received a substantial increase to meet our responsibilities in the area of global climate change. So that's very important.

But let me say that in many ways I am most proud of the decision that this budget reflects not to squander the surplus until we meet our responsibilities to reform Social Security for the 21st century.

Yes, there were some disappointments. I wished that we had passed the school rehabilitation and construction proposal. We have to have school facilities so that we can have those smaller classes. And yes, I wish we'd passed the Patients Bills of Rights and campaign finance reform and the tobacco reform legislation and the minimum wage. But we can now go out and have a great national debate about that. The important thing that we have to recognize is that these hard-fought battles and major accomplishments represent, finally, in 8 days what we did not have for 8 months.

We were able to put the progress of the country ahead of partisanship. We were able to put people ahead of politics. And today every American can take a great deal of pride in knowing that we are going to save Social Security, that we are going to have 100,000 teachers, that we are going to continue to move forward on the environment, and that now we are free here in this administration

to keep our economy going by meeting our responsibilities to deal with the global economic challenges.

This is a very, very good day for America. And I thank all the people behind me for everything they did to bring it about.

Thank you.

### **Legislative Agenda for Education**

Q. Mr. President, you rattled off a list of many of your priorities which this Congress did not give you, priorities from your State of the Union Address. Why did you—and all of you, perhaps—specifically decide to hold the line on the education issue, on the idea of more funding for education, et cetera? Did you think that would have the most resonance with the voters?

**The President.** Well, no, it's what we believed in. We got the entire education program except for three things. First of all, the huge funding increases for education. But they were properly targeted. This 100,000 teachers—this is truly historic. The United States—this is the educational equivalent of what we did when we put 100,000 police on the street. And I will remind you that we now have the lowest crime rate in 25 years. We have never done that before. And we had the same partisan argument then. We were told that it wouldn't work, that it was interference in local government, even though all the police chiefs of the country were screaming, "Give it to us." Now we were told the same thing here.

This is an historic commitment by the United States to put 100,000 teachers out there for smaller classes in the early grades. That, plus the historic commitment we made to after-school and summer school programs, plus the continued funding to hook up all the classrooms to the Internet by the year 2000—these things are truly historic.

Now, I wish we had been able to persuade the Republican majority to give us the school construction and rehabilitation proposal because we need modern facilities, and that proposal is a paid-for-tax cut in the balanced budget that would enable us to build or rehabilitate 5,000 schools. I think that's important. I still think we ought to be a nation which says we should have high standards, and I wish we had had an explicit proposal

on that. And I believe in the empowerment educational opportunity zones to reward schools that end social promotion and fund more after-school and summer school programs.

Now, those are three things that I would like to have. But we can debate those and work for those in the election. We have differences of opinions, and they have more Members than we do. They're against the Patients' Bill of Rights, and we're for it. They were against reforming—passing the tobacco reform legislation and against the campaign finance reform. But when you compare where we were for 8 months with where we are today, and how good this is for America, that the things that I talked about in the State of the Union in education, in the environment, in the international economy, and saving Social Security, these are huge victories for the American people.

We did the best we could, and I think the best we did by staying together was very good, indeed. And I think the American people will believe so, too.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:30 p.m. in the South Lawn at the White House.

### **Remarks at the Plenary Session of the Wye River Conference on the Middle East at Wye Mills, Maryland October 15, 1998**

I wish to welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu, Chairman Arafat, and the members of the Israeli and Palestinian delegations here. As I said earlier today at the White House, there is hard work ahead if we are to reach an agreement here and get the peace process moving again. Secretary Albright and I and our entire team are ready to do whatever we can.

As the press contingent prepares to leave, let me say that all of us are determined to keep our energies focused on the talks themselves. Therefore, we have agreed to confine our dealings with the media on this subject to periodic briefings to be conducted by spokespersons. We have a lot of work to do, a limited amount of time to do it in, but we're ready to get to work.