

The President. Well, we've increased gun prosecution since I've been here, and we have a lot of people in jail for it. All I can tell you is we have a higher percentage of people in jail than all the other advanced countries, and they have a lower gun death rate. Why is that? That's because they don't have an NRA in their country, and they take sensible steps to protect children and society as a whole from people having guns who shouldn't have them, doing things they shouldn't do with them. You've got to keep guns away from criminals and children if you want a safe society.

Look, if the NRA were arguing years ago in this vein, they'd be against airport metal detectors because, after all, everybody—most people that go through airport metal detectors are innocent. Why should we burden them with having to go through and empty their pockets and take out their money clips and all that because there's just a few criminals around? And you know, you're interfering with their individual rights to walk on an airplane. That's the argument they make. You shouldn't burden an individual law-abiding handgun owner, because most of them are lawful, just because there are a few criminals.

But the point is that society takes steps with speed limits, with licensing laws, with airport metal detectors, and any number of other ways, where we all make a little bit of sacrifice in time and effort to comply with a system that makes us all freer. And we still get to do our lawful activity.

So I just think they're wrong about that. They're saying that guns are different. Guns are different than cars. Guns are different than any other area of our national life where we seek for common safety. We protect ourselves from the people who would abuse our liberty, abuse our freedom, and abuse our safety. And I just think they're wrong about this, and I hope that a majority of the Congress will agree, and I hope that more and more members of the Republican Party will agree. As I say, we have had some few brave members of the Republican Party that have joined the vast majority of Democrats in trying to responsibly deal with this without in any way undermining the right of people to

do legitimate hunting or sport-shooting activities.

And we can do this. We can make America a lot safer.

Juvenile Justice Legislation

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, before we go, in closing, when do you plan to invite congressional leaders to the White House to discuss the juvenile justice bill?

The President. Well, I'd like them to come down next week, as soon as we can set it up, because we're running out of time, and we need to get out of this terrible logjam. And I hope that these tragedies will give a little impulse, a profound sense of obligation to do that. As again I say, nobody is trying to interfere with individual rights here. What we're trying to do is to promote the common safety of the American people, and we're not nearly safe enough. All you've got to do is look at these incidents.

Can we eliminate every problem? No. Is there a silver bullet that will solve it overnight? No. Can we save a lot of lives, including a lot of children, 13 every day—13 funerals a day? You bet we can, and we ought to.

Ms. Couric. Mr. President, again thank you very, very much for spending some time with us this morning. We really appreciate it.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 7:08 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Remarks on Patients' Bill of Rights Legislation

March 2, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you, and good morning, Dr. Herald, thank you for your powerful statement. I would like to thank Senator Kennedy, Senator Specter, Senator Chafee for being here; and Representatives Norwood and Dingell, Representatives Berry, Morella, and DeLauro; Secretary Shalala; Secretary Herman.

I especially thank the doctors and nurses who stand with us today, the Patients' Bill of Rights coalition, representing our Nation's

top health, consumer, and provider organizations.

Dr. Herald's testimony was powerful but, unfortunately, as she made it clear, not unique. For more than 2 years, we've heard health care professionals tell us the same thing. For more than 2 years, we've heard heart-wrenching accounts of families across our Nation denied the basic patient protections they need. For more than 2 years, we've worked for a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights that says you have the right to the nearest emergency room care, the right to see a specialist, the right to know you can't be forced to switch doctors in the middle of a treatment, the right to hold your health care plan accountable.

Along the way, with the help of others in our administration, I've done everything I could, through executive action, to extend patient safeguards to some 85 million Americans who get their health care through Federal plans, to provide similar patient protections to every child covered under the Children's Health Insurance Program. But no State law and no executive action can do what Congress alone has the power to do. Only Federal legislation can assure all Americans and all plans get all the patient protection they need.

Thanks to the leadership of Congressman Norwood, Congressman Dingell, and the other Members here, the House of Representatives passed such a bill, with the support of 275 Members, including 68 members of the Republican caucus. It is a truly bipartisan bill.

Later today a conference committee will meet to take up the legislation. Many of the conferees do not reflect the will of the majority in the House or the will of the majority in the country. I told Congressman Norwood right before we came in here that I think this issue is the only issue with which I have dealt since I've been President that generated any controversy where there is, in the country, almost no difference in the level of support between Republicans, independents, and Democrats. Every major national survey

shows that well over 70 percent of all Americans, without regard to their political party, support a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights. The American people support it, and they're entitled to have their elected Representatives ratify it.

The Norwood-Dingell bill is the only bipartisan patient protection bill on the table. So far, it's the only bill that can make its way to my desk. I will not sign legislation, as Dr. Herald said, that is a Patients' Bill of Rights in name only. It's not a real Patients' Bill of Rights if it denies people the right to see a specialist, if it fails to guarantee access to the nearest emergency room care, if it denies the right to stay with a health care provider throughout a course of treatment, and if it has a weak appeals process that's tilted against the patients, if it doesn't include a strong enforcement mechanism to hold a health care plan accountable, or if it leaves more than 100 million of our fellow Americans out. We need a bill that covers all our fellow citizens, not one that provides cover for special interests.

Again I say, this is not a partisan issue anywhere else in the entire United States of America. And I am honored that we have had the bipartisan support we have had. This legislation has the endorsement of more than 300 health care and consumer groups across our country. So as the conference committee gets down to business, I ask them to listen to the voices of people like Dr. Herald, the people who live in the health care system, the people who know how it works, the people whose first concern is for their patients and their families and their future. It is time to reach across party lines and do this.

Let me say that if the Congress will send me a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights today, I'll send every one of them an invitation to a signing ceremony tomorrow. [Laughter] Nothing would please me more than to see this issue removed from the context of partisan political debate and embedded in the daily lives of all our citizens.

It is now my privilege to present the sponsor of the Norwood-Dingell bill, a long-time

dentist, a man who has simply acted on his convictions and his experience. And I think we would all do well to listen to him. It's probably a little harder for him to come out for this bill than it was for me, and I feel particularly indebted to Congressman Charlie Norwood.

Representative Norwood.

[At this point, Representatives Charlie Norwood and John D. Dingell and Senators Arlen Specter and Edward M. Kennedy made brief remarks.]

The President. Well, I just want to end on sort of a cautionary but clarion note. Where I come from, this exercise that we have just engaged in is known as preaching to the saved. [Laughter] And it's very important. But this is one of those examples where the public and the people that really know how the system works are in the same place. And I believe a majority of Members of Congress, if—as Congressman Norwood said so eloquently, if they're permitted—they're given a good bill to vote for, they'll vote for it. So the only way that we won't get a good bill is if this conference committee prevents the Congress from voting on a bill they would like to vote for, that is consistent with not only what the majority of the American people want but virtually 100 percent of the medical professionals in the country and a majority of the Congress.

So that's what the stakes are. I am profoundly indebted to the Members who are here, to all the health care professionals who are here, to Dr. Herald who spoke so well. But I ask you to remember the work is ahead of us. And I think we need to, all of us, each in our own way, go to work to impress upon that conference committee their profound responsibility to give the Congress and the country the bill they want to vote on and the bill they want to live under.

Let's get to work. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11 a.m. in Presidential Hall in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Mary Herald, member, American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine, who introduced the President.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Biotechnology, Foundation, and International Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

March 2, 2000

Vaccine Research

The President. Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, I have a very distinguished group of leaders here in the White House today, and I thank them all for coming—leaders of the international organizations concerned with the health of people throughout the world; Minister of Health from Uganda; the leaders of the pharmaceutical industry and biotech industry and the foundation community in our country who are profoundly interested in joining forces to fight against diseases that kill both people and progress in the world's poorest countries, diseases like AIDS, TB, and malaria, each of which claim over a million lives a year, and others as well.

We agreed that the solution must include the development and the delivery of effective vaccines. That's how we got rid of smallpox and come close to eliminating polio. So today we're beginning a partnership to eradicate the leading infectious killers of our time, speeding the delivery of existing vaccines and getting to the heart of the problem, the lack of incentives for private industry to invest in new vaccines for people who simply can't afford to buy them.

I have attempted to put a comprehensive package on the table so that the United States can do its part to change this: a billion-dollar tax credit to speed the invention of vaccines; a \$50 million contribution to a global fund to purchase vaccines; substantial increase in research at the National Institutes of Health.

I've asked the World Bank to dedicate more lending to improve health, and Mr. Wolfensohn has been very forthcoming here today, and I thank him for that. The private sector is also responding to this challenge, and I want to thank them and recognize the