cause for division, but rather one of our greatest strengths.

The Congress, by Senate Joint Resolution 44, has authorized and requested the President to issue a proclamation in recognition of the minority veterans who served in World War II.

Now, Therefore, I, William J. Clinton, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim May 25, 2000, as the Day of Honor, 2000. I call upon all Americans to observe this day with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities paying tribute to the service and sacrifice of the minority veterans of our Armed Forces who served during World War II.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-fourth day of May, in the year of our Lord two thousand, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-fourth.

William J. Clinton

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 8:45 a.m., May 30, 2000]

NOTE: This proclamation was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 25, and it will be published in the *Federal Register* on May 31.

Remarks on Proposed Medicare Prescription Drug Benefits and an Exchange With Reporters

May 25, 2000

The President. Thank you very much. Senator Daschle, Congressman Gephardt, Members of the House and Senate leadership, and Secretary Shalala. Let me say how much I appreciated the meeting we had this morning and how much I support the agenda they outlined. I'd like to say a few words about it, myself. But before I do, I'd like to put it into some larger context of our overall strategy.

We just have some new evidence that our long-term strategy of fiscal discipline, investing in our people, and expanding opportunities for American markets' products around the world is working. Revised GDP figures released today confirm that our economy grew at 5.4 percent in the first quarter and that business investment soared by 25 percent. This strategy has now given us over 7 years of growth and investment, the longest economic expansion in history. We ought to stay on the path that got us here and continue to invest in our people and their future, as our leaders have outlined today.

Last month—I want to emphasize this—just last month the distinguished investment firm in New York of Goldman-Sachs estimated that that turnaround from record deficits to record surpluses has kept interest rates 2 full percentage points lower than they would have been without this strategy. Therefore, if we turn away from it and go back to the deficits, we can expect a corresponding rise in interest rates. A 2 percent cut in interest rates on home mortgages, car loans, college loans, credit card bills, has been an enormous, effective tax cut to the American people and has done a great deal to strengthen our economy.

That's why we feel so strongly that we should use this moment of unprecedented prosperity to lengthen the life and modernize Medicare with a prescription drug benefit, to strengthen Social Security, to invest in key priorities, especially education, to have a tax cut we can afford, and keep paying that debt down to keep those interest rates down.

Now, as you've heard already, we mostly discussed providing prescription drugs for America's seniors in that meeting. I want to thank these leaders for standing with us on this important issue. This is a show of unity and a demonstration of resolve. There is no reason that Congress cannot take the necessary steps to ensure that every older American has access to the lifesaving, life-enhancing prescription drugs they need.

Now, just a few weeks ago Senator Daschle and Congressman Gephardt came here to announce that the Democrats were united in a single strategy to provide these prescription drugs. Today they will be joined by leading architects and backers of the plan—all these people behind me who have worked on the details. So we now know exactly how we would do this. We know we can afford it, and we think the time to act is now. I'll just say this one more time. If we were creating Medicare today, there is no way in the wide world we wouldn't provide prescription drugs.

Some of you were with me last Sunday afternoon when I went up to Hyde Park. Then I landed in the Poughkeepsie Airport—there were probably 300 people there, so I had an impromptu town meeting. I went down and shook hands with everybody and just sat there and visited with them. And the only issue that was mentioned to me more than once—spontaneously—over and over and over again, was this prescription drug issue. It is a big issue, and it's a big hole in America's social safety net. It is totally voluntary; it is driven by the market, and we ought to do it.

We're talking more than three in five of our seniors, who are like the Lachnits Tom talked about. They may be a particularly egregious case, but over 60 percent of our seniors don't have affordable prescription drug coverage.

Now, I think that the case has been made. I don't know how in the world we can deny the fact that with the funds we have, with the evident obligations we have, with the fact that anybody who lives to be 65 in America today has a life expectancy of 82 or 83 years—and that is only going to increase, and therefore, their need for life-enhancing and life-preserving prescription drugs will only increase—this is the best chance we will ever have to address this. And we have to do it.

Now, the budget I presented to Congress will continue our efforts to pay off the debt in 13 years; it will make Medicare more competitive as many in this group have urged. But it will also provide this kind of voluntary prescription drug coverage.

Now, last month—or earlier this month—the Republican leaders in the House did put forth the plan that had the stated goal of providing affordable prescription drugs for seniors, but the policy falls far short of the promise, suggesting a private insurance benefit that insurers, themselves, say they will not offer; and no one will buy if they did offer it because it would be too expensive is an empty promise. Limiting direct financial assistance for prescription drugs to seniors below the $12,500 income will leave out over half, including the Lachnits. Their drug bills alone, if my math is right, are $16,800 a year, and that's about what their income is. They wouldn't get a nickel under the Republican plan. That's not right, and we can do better.

So we're here to say we have a full-time obligation to deal with the big opportunities and the big challenges of this country, and Congress should feel that obligation, even when they go into recess. There is no heavier evidence of that today than the need to provide voluntary, affordable prescription drug coverage.

Let me say there are many other priorities, and I want to just mention them. The announcement we had on new markets a couple of days ago ought to give some impetus to raising the minimum wage, passing commonsense gun legislation, expanding health insurance for the parents of poor children, passing a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights. And I hope that we will see more action in all these areas.

Now, today the House and Senate conferees are meeting again on the Patients' Bill of Rights. Again, this is like the prescription drugs. This ought not to be a bill that's held up by interest groups; it ought to be a bill that is passed in the public interest. That's our commitment, and you will see it nowhere more intensely than our efforts to get this prescription drug coverage in the closing days of this Congress.

Thank you very much.

New Markets Initiative/Working With Congress

Q. Mr. President, since you mentioned the new markets initiative, some Republicans say that that was the product of intense private negotiations between your staff and Hill Republicans. And there were substantial differences when those debates began. There were no public podium events dealing with new markets, and yet they say there have been numerous public podium events on these issues—prescription drugs and HMO—but no intense private negotiations. Can you tell us why, sir, you and your staff have tried to use the podium more than intense negotiations?

The President. No, I'm more than willing to engage in private negotiations, but I don't think that's a fair representation of exactly how these issues developed. We did have

some interest on the part of some Republicans with new markets—I know some of you have to go vote, so as long as you don't say they're abandoning me on the—[*laughter*]—on the Patients' Bill of Rights, I'm going to give the Senators who have to leave a pass.

We did have a lot of interest on the front end in that, and I made some calls around myself. But I have actually tried—I have actually had several private conversations on these issues, and I will continue to do it. I think—I believe we could pass the Patients' Bill of Rights. We already passed a strong bill through the House with virtually 100 percent of our caucus and a pretty good group of Republican votes with us. We're having trouble in the Senate, manifest in the conference committee, because some of the interest groups are still fighting what I think everybody who's looked at this believes is necessary to make a good bill.

But I'm trying to negotiate on that. I had a private meeting on the gun safety legislation. I've had several conversations about that. I will—I'm willing to do anything to resolve these things. But what we can't do here is to—let me just say what the difference is in blunt terms.

There is no great, powerful special interest out there trying to beat the new markets legislation. And therefore, what we had was people—Washington was able to work the way it ought to work, because all we had were our philosophical differences. But we had a common goal. So we agreed in the best tradition of the Founding Fathers to let the Republicans try their ideas in 40 of their enterprise areas—whatever the proper name is—renewal community areas, and 40 for our empowerment zones. We agreed to provide for poor areas all over the country, including those that aren't here, in either one of those two groups—these special incentives of the new markets.

It was a wonderful example. And if all we ever had to do was reconcile our philosophical differences, we could pass all kinds of bills up here. But when you have an independent, powerful interest group that won't let them go, then we can have all the private talks that we want until we're blue in the face, it's still hard to work it through. I haven't given up. But if you want to know the difference in new markets and those things, it's not that we haven't had private talks; it's that there's no overwhelming interest group trying to beat this thing.

Support for Democratic Party/Legislative Agenda

Q. Mr. President, the labor unions are threatening to withhold support from Democrats, including Vice President Gore, who opposed them on the China trade deal. Do you think those are empty threats?

The President. Oh, I think—no. I don't know. You'll have to ask them about that. What I think is that there's much more that unites us than divides us. And I think that as far as I know, there are no divisive issues out there that have remotely the power that the issues we talked about today do, particularly the prescription drugs and the Patients' Bill of Rights and these other issues we're talking about.

So I think what we need to do is play it straight, put our issues before the American people, and let everybody decide who they're going to be for. But I think that you'll see a very united Democratic Party in the fall, and I'll think you'll see a united Republican Party. I think we'll—and we'll take our debate to the American people, and we'll see what happens.

Q. May I follow up on that, sir?

Q. ——you talk about the differences, the interest groups. There are only 24 legislative days left. Realistically, sir, how can we expect to get this done, and do you think we'll accomplish any of these things you just itemized for us?

The President. Oh, I think the only time that the power of the interest groups fade here is when the majority believes—if the interest groups are involved—is when the majority believes that the public interest is so intense that action has to be taken. And I think there's a fair chance that will happen on one or two of these issues. And there are some people in their party who really would like to work with us on these, and I think we'll just keep working at it and see.

You just never—look, for the last 5 years, we've surprised everybody, including ourselves, a time or two, and really had breakthroughs and gotten stuff done. I'm here opening—asking for cooperation, and I think that I speak for our leaders and our Members—we're interested in doing something, so we're willing to do what we can to do our part on that.

Yes.

Peruvian Elections

Q. Mr. President, you've been a great proponent of democracy, especially in Latin America. Peru is going to supposedly hold elections on Sunday. An OAS mission is there. There are a lot of problems. There have been a lot of criticism from your own government toward the Peruvian elections. What do you say at this moment?

The President. I think what I should say at this moment is that, first, obviously, it's troubling that one of the candidates said he didn't really want to participate on the runoff election; and, secondly, I think we should wait until we get a report from the people that are monitoring the elections, and then I'll have more to say about it.

Yes.

Permanent Normal Trade Relations With China

Q. Mr. President, a followup on the China trade matter. What can you say to American workers in industries that will continue to lose jobs to China, perhaps in spite of the pact, but who will continue to lose jobs to China and elsewhere, and in particular, the textile industry workers, who feel they're the sacrificial lambs of the trade pacts you've worked out?

The President. The first and most important thing is that nothing in this legislation, in this debate, proposed to close our markets to imports that are coming in from China or anywhere else, so that there was nothing in this vote that would have affected them one way or the other. And if you look at—what we have to do is to hold as many jobs as we can by doing whatever we can to support the industries that are competitive. And if people lose their jobs, we believe—all of us believe we ought to spend more money more quickly to retrain our workers and to get more investment into areas that lose them.

One of the things that I think that will be most helpful with this new markets initiative is, we'll be able to say to investors all across America, if a plant closes down, for example, in a rural area, "Hey, now if you go back and invest and give these people another job, we'll give you a 30 percent tax credit to do it. If you have to borrow money, we'll guarantee two-thirds of the money you borrow, and you get lower interest rates." And if we have an adequate, intense, immediate effort to retrain people, and we have that, I think that the dislocation periods will be shorter, and their ability to get good jobs if plants close will be greater.

But there was nothing in this bill—what this bill did was to lower tariffs for other products so it will save other manufacturing jobs. And it didn't—no one has suggested raising any barriers.

We've got to do a better job in our country of making sure that we shorten the period of dislocation and increase the likelihood that people get a job as good or better than the one they lost. And that's what we're working on. All of us have worked on that for 7 years, and we're making some progress there.

Working With Congress

Q. Mr. President, as a followup to my first question, are you saying on the prescription drug and HMO issue that there are no philosophical differences from Republicans, and they're simply beholden to special interests?

The President. No, no, no, no, no, no. There are genuine philosophical differences. I would never say that. No. What I said is, when all we have are philosophical differences, we have an easier time of working through them and accommodating them, as we did on new markets, than we do if there are both philosophical differences and very powerful interest group resistance.

Oh, no, I would never say—no, they have honest philosophical differences on these things. But you asked me why we couldn't work them through, and I don't think it's lack of private meetings. I think it's philosophical differences plus an interest group anchor.

Death of American Journalist in Sierra Leone

Q. Mr. President, Kurt Schork, the American journalist killed in Sierra Leone yesterday—do you have any thoughts on that and ideas on its significance?

The President. First of all, I knew that journalist over 30 years ago; we were in Oxford together. And I'm very sad today. He was a good man, and if you look at all the many posts that he occupied, he was a brave man. He went to a lot of places, a lot of the troubled and dangerous places of the world, to bring the news to people. And I am very sad about it.

But let me say, in a larger sense, I think it shows how important it is for the United Nations missions to succeed. I appreciate very much the willingness of the Nigerians to go back in there, and we are aggressively committed to providing the support necessary to take the Nigerians and other troops into Sierra Leone and to support the United Nations mission in other ways and to contribute our share and maybe a little over that to try to stabilize the situation.

I think that it's obvious that the RUF have—these are just the last in a long line of their victims, many of whom are innocent children who had their limbs chopped off. And they had a chance to participate in a peace process which was more than generous to them in terms of giving them an opportunity to walk away from what they had done, and they didn't take it. And I think the United Nations mission has to prevail. I will do everything I can to support it.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:52 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Medicare recipients Ronald and Eunice Lachnit; and Peruvian Presidential candidate Alejandro Toledo. The President also referred to RUF, the Revolutionary United Front. A reporter referred to OAS, the Organization of American States.

Remarks on Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month

May 25, 2000

The President. Thank you. Thank you very much, and good afternoon.

I want to welcome all of you here. And a special word of welcome to a former Congressman, and now our chair of the Commission, Norm Mineta. Daphne Kwok, Jin Sook Lee, Karen Narasaki, Senator Akaka, Senator Thomas, Representative Becerra, Representative Eni Faleomavaega, Representative Underwood, to Bill Lann Lee and all the members of the administration who are Asian-Pacific Americans. We just had a picture of over 60 of us, about—not quite—90 percent of the total.

I want to thank those of you who work in the White House and to say a special word of appreciation to Laura Efurd, who worked very hard on this event. And to our Director of Public Liaison, Mary Beth Cahill, for her work and support. And I want to say a special word of appreciation to the Asian-Pacific American whom I have known the longest in this group, Maria Haley, who helped me put the Commission together. I thank her for her work.

I am very proud that I've had the opportunity to appoint more Asian-Pacific Americans than any President in history. I am proud of the difference you make every day, whether you're enforcing our civil rights laws, administering our Medicare program, representing America overseas, or in many other countless ways, you make a profound difference.

This month we celebrate the accomplishments of more than 10 million Asian-Pacific Americans in every aspect of our Nation's life from engineering to education, science to sports, public service to the performing arts. You might be interested to know that one of the performing arts is speechmaking, and the speechwriter who prepared this was Samir Afridi, one of the Asian-Pacific Americans in our administration.