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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT CEREMONY FOR NATIONAL NURSES WEEK

The Rose Garden

4:27 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Ginny, for that wonderful statement and the introduction. And thank you, Secretary Shalala, for everything you said. I noticed a few groans in the audience when you pointed out that Dorothea Dix worked for nothing. (Laughter.) I don't think she was suggesting that you do that, I think she was volunteering to do that -- don't you think? (Laughter.)

I want to say, I knew nurses were miracle workers, having been raised by one. But I don't see how you staved off the rain today. (Laughter.) When I first heard 100 nurses were going to be here I thought to myself, what else can I do? I've given up junk food, I run every day. What more do you want of me? (Laughter.) I'm doing my part.

I want to say a special word of acknowledgement, too, to the nurses who are in this audience who work here at the White House, who care for me and my family and are available to the other people who work here. They do a wonderful job and I'm very grateful to them. And they're here and there and around, and I thank them for their presence here. (Applause.)

I'd also like to pay a special word of tribute to your president, Ginny Trotter Betts, for hanging it out there with us in the election and bringing the support of the American Nurses Association, and also for being such a forceful advocate for sweeping reforms in our health care system. Hillary and I very much appreciate the work that she and the Nurses Association have done. And I know that she's also an old friend of Al and Tipper Gore's, and they're grateful, too, for her contributions.

I'd also like to recognize some of the other people who are here today, including a remarkable nurse whose presence in the Congress is a symbol of your political strength -- Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, from Dallas and my dear friend. (Applause.) She's really a tribute to the practice of good health. I've known her for 20 years and I look much older and she looks younger than she did the first time we met. (Laughter.)

I also want to thank all the nurses who have advised our Health Care Reform Task Force and brought such a valuable perspective to that effort. You've really made a difference and we're grateful to you.

We're here today to mark the beginning of National Nurses Week, a time for our country to recognize the services that you and your colleagues provide 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. From inner city hospitals to rural clinics, from the Red Cross to the Armed Services, America's nurses always answer the call.

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Today we're reminded that our nation's 1.8 million working nurses are the backbone of a health care system, the largest single group of health care providers in America -- and I might add, a group that will have to do more and should do more in primary and preventive care if we're going to bring the cost of medical care down. (Applause.)

You know better than anyone else what is wrong with this system. You see all the people who show up at the emergency room to get the most expensive care too late because they didn't have a basic primary and preventive health care package. You see the enormous burden of paperwork squandering more and more hours of nurses and doctors, requiring more and more precious health care dollars to be diverted to clerical expenses instead of to investing in the health of our people. Every day you see these kinds of problems as the nation continues to wait for action on a health care front.

I'm here today on this beginning of your week to reaffirm to you my commitment that now is the time to do something about health care and to do it right. (Applause.)

One of the most challenging things we have to do in this city at this time is to break a mind-set that we have one problem at a time and we'll get on it and we'll only think about that. I believe that this country has at least three huge problems that relate one to the other. One is, there are too many people who are unemployed and too many people who are working harder with no gains in their incomes. And it's been that way for a long, long time. Two is, the cost of health care is exploding at an unacceptable rate, and yet, too few people have coverage -- or their coverage is too limited. Third is, we're absolutely being consumed by a massive national debt and a growing deficit. And these things are all related one to the other.

Now, people say to me, well, we just do one thing at a time. Well, look back over time where that's gotten us. People say for a long time -- just say, well, we ought to just spend money and give it to people and maybe that will work. That hasn't worked. Then for 12 years we heard the worst thing in the world is taxes; we'll just cut taxes, especially on wealthy people, and that will make everything wonderful. Well, that hasn't worked out very well either. So the guy said to me yesterday -- said, "I know a bunch of people who got tax cuts last year, because they used to be making \$40,000 a year and now they're making \$10,000; they all got a tax cut."

And what I say to you is that we don't want to just keep trying to give people things in a system that is broken. You can't give people government money, you can't give people tax cuts if the system is broken. What we have to do is to attack all these problems at once, and not keep giving people things, but give them the means to take care of themselves and to create lives that are productive and good and strong for themselves and their families, their children. That's what we have to do.

That's why, yes, we have to reduce spending and increase taxes, mostly on wealthy people who got their taxes cut in the 1980s, to bring the deficit down. But we also have to invest carefully in programs that will create jobs and raise incomes, new technologies for the 21st century and the kind of education and training that will give people work. If everybody in this country who wanted a good job had one, we wouldn't have half the problems we've got.

And then the third thing we have to do is to attack the health care crisis, because if we don't we will never get the government deficit under control. (Applause.) We will never balance this budget, and we will never -- more importantly, we will never

provide the security that most families need and deserve in a rapidly changing and increasingly insecure world.

There are millions of Americans today who cannot change jobs because somebody in their family has been sick. There are millions of others who have no health insurance. There are millions of others who have some health insurance, but very little, because they work for small businesses who cannot afford a basic package of health care because of the insurance system that we have in this country. There are untold billions of dollars being spent that should not be spent by the people who pay the full price and more for health care because they have to pay for somebody else's health care who's not covered when it's too late and too expensive, or because they're paying an unbelievable bureaucratic burden for the paperwork burdens of this system.

So I say to you, these are false choices. People cannot say to us you must choose between having a healthy country, an employed country, a country bringing its deficit down. We must do all three of those things because that's the only way we can -- instead of trying to give people something that's not there to give, empower people to seize control of their destiny and bring this country back. That's what we've got to do. (Applause.)

There will always be defenders of the status quo. It is easy to say, well, let's just write somebody a check. Even easier to say, taxes are evil, they're out to get you.

Right now, you know as well as I do, the lobbyists are lining up strategizing about how they're going to pick this health care proposal to death. But I'll tell you something -- the worst thing we could do, in my opinion, after 400-and-something people have worked their hearts out for months and months and months, is to take a dive on the health care thing, to turn away from it, to deal with the inconveniences of it.

People say, well, it may cost somebody else some money. Let me tell you something, all those people who don't have health insurance today, they're being paid for by everybody else who's paying the bill. What about fairness to them? Who's thinking about them? I'll tell you something else. We've been reducing defense spending quite steeply and about all we can for the last five years. And all the savings we hope to have in the peace dividend have been exploded away by rising health care costs and interest payments on this deficit.

So it is all related. You've got to have a job strategy. You've got to have a deficit reduction strategy. And you've got to have a health care strategy. Because if you don't have a health care strategy, the American people can't stay well, the American economy can't get well, and you cannot reduce the deficit to zero in this decade. Those things must be done together. We cannot be forced to make that false choice.

And so I ask you -- you represent 1.8 million people, who know the heartache, the heartbreak and the problems of this system, and who also know that that which is right about our system makes it the best in the world for those who can access it. We are determined to come forward to the Congress with a plan that keeps the best of America's health care system, keeps the private provider system, keeps a lot of choice in the system, but deals with the awful problems that you know better than anybody. And I ask you to commit today not to let the special interests tell us that we can't deal with health care; not to let the special interests spook and scare the members of Congress away from doing what is our manifest duty to the people of this country who are working hard and playing by the rules and falling further behind, and instead, to give us all a chance to do the work of a generation.

And that is really what's being given us in this time, in this Congress: the opportunity to do something that comes along once in a generation to change the whole course of America's future. By dealing with these things together, providing security and quality and control of cost in this health care system, bringing this deficit down and pursuing a long-term strategy for a high-wage, high-growth, low-unemployment economy. And they're all together. If you'll help me take that message to the Congress, this will be one of the best years the American people ever had.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

Q Have you heard anything from Bosnia, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

Q How quickly are you prepared to move once you do?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let's wait and see what they do first.

Q Mr. President, there is word that the parliament has agreed to the peace agreement. Mr. President, there is --

THE PRESIDENT: I hope they. I'm waiting for a call from Secretary Christopher right now. Let me go take the call and I'll give you --

Q And then what, sir?

Q Sir, what happened to your immunization program on the Hill? Why did you have to dog back on that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Secretary Shalala says we're going to get a program that can immunize a lot more people. We did the best we could with the money we had. I think -- you know, a lot of these things are going to be a function of how much money we have. But I feel pretty good about it. I talked to her about it. She feels good about it. We think it's a big advance over where we are.

Thank you.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

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4:38 P.M. EDT