

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FEBRUARY 14, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY  
(Ft. Myers, Florida)

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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AND  
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

FT. MYERS EXHIBITION HALL

4:07 P.M. EST

Thank you very, very much, Skip, Congressman Louis Frey, Colonel Lou Antol, Cas Peacock, Reverend Browning, ladies and gentlemen:

Let me say it has been a great, great experience to come to Ft. Myers in Southwest Florida. Thank you very much.

Nothing would be more unwise than for me to pass judgment on where the largest crowds were. I love every one of them and this one I love especially. Thank you very much.

I am especially pleased, also to be here in the second home of Thomas Edison. It is clear from the great Pageant of Light Celebration today with the parade I understand you are having this evening, that all of Ft. Myers is proud of Edison's very long association with this great community. Edison, as all of you know, was a truly remarkable man and I can't help but add this feature. Thomas Edison was a friend of a man by the name of Henry Ford. (Laughter.)

I am a Ford from Michigan, but the other Fords would never admit I was a relative. (Laughter)

Well, Edison was a great man. Besides his inventive genius, he was also a man of very clear vision. His views on hard work are legendary. "There is no substitute for hard work," he once said, and he defines genius as one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.

His views on Government were equally forthright. He knew the importance of fiscal responsibility in Government, of holding taxes down and of keeping private enterprise strong. He was a very perceptive man and he once said, "There is far more danger in public than in private monopoly, for when Government goes into business, it can always shift its losses to the taxpayers. Government never makes ends meet. And that is the first requisite of business."

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In those very few words, I think Thomas Edison summed up much of what has gone wrong in this country. Government never makes ends meet. We have had a balanced budget. It is hard to believe, but it is true -- only seven times in the last 44 years. It is a terrible record. No business could match that record and ever hope to survive, much less prosper.

I think we can turn that dangerous trend around. I think we must and I think we will turn it around, because if we don't, if we don't draw the line right now and make ends meet soon, we are going to be in very serious, very deep, very considerable trouble.

You and I know very well, but it looks like it might take another Thomas Edison to make the United States Congress -- the majority, anyhow -- see the light.

I have to concede, it won't be easy. A budget already blotted by years of excesses can't be slimmed down overnight, but it can be put on a rather rigorous diet. If the Congress can resist the temptation to feed it in between meals, I will veto any attempts to do that -- we can get it down to the right size where it ought to be.

And the best part of this budget which I submitted to the Congress in January is that if we do what I recommended this year and what I have proposed would follow on, we can make our ends meet and we can have a balanced budget in three years and have another tax decrease. I think that makes headway.

None of you, as I look across this great audience, would run a household the way the Federal Government has been run in the past. You just could not get away with it. You have to balance your budget at home or you are in darn serious trouble.

When Government does not make ends meet year after year after year, it breeds inflation, and that is real trouble -- and you know it right in your own pocketbooks. You know it precisely every time you buy a very simple item like a jar of peanut butter and compare the price stamped on it with the one jar in your cupboards. Boy, it is obvious -- we have trouble. And those of you on fixed incomes really know when you are giving up not only luxuries, but, unfortunately, in many cases, necessities.

I happen to believe, and believe very strongly, we can win this battle against inflation. When I took office, as Skip Bafalis said, the rate of inflation was over 12 percent per year. We have already cut it in half from what it was just a year or so ago, and with the support of hard-working taxpayers, we can cut it even more in the future.

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Yesterday we got some good news. The Department of Labor announced that wholesale prices were unchanged in January. The facts are wholesale prices have shown no appreciable gain or change, I should say, since last October. And if we can lick the battle against wholesale prices, it will have a truly beneficial impact on consumer prices--the cost of living for all of you. And we are going to keep that pressure on.

In my State of the Union Message, which I delivered to the Congress and to the American people, I spoke of the need for more common sense and a better balance between Government activity and private efforts.

Those are not just slogans -- they are underlying themes and commitments of my Administration, and they are necessary ingredients for the Nation's success in its third century of independence.

Government will do its part, but it is time we face the fact that Government must stop trying to do everything. That won't work. It never has.

I have said it before, some of you may have heard it but it sums up so cogently my basic philosophy. I live by this principle, I think it is sound, and let me phrase it for you very rapidly. A Government big enough to give us everything we want is a Government big enough to take from us everything we have.

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This Federal budget that I proposed for fiscal year 1977 reflects that truth. It arrests the rapid growth in Federal spending, cutting in half the average annual increase or growth rate for the last ten years.

It strikes a better balance between those who pay taxes on the one hand and those who benefit from Federal spending on the other. It proposes tax cuts for individuals and tax incentives for business investment and economic gain.

It strikes a better balance between our national defense requirements and our domestic needs, and makes certain that our national defense will continue to be second to none, as it must be.

It strikes a better balance between Federal control and State and local authority through such programs as general revenue sharing. Revenue sharing has already brought a total of some \$2 million to Ft. Myers since 1972, and I have proposed for a five and three-quarter year extension.

Under that extension, this amount would be increased to \$3.4 million for the period between 1977 and 1982. Dade County has received \$4.3 million since 1972, and I am asking the Congress to raise that to \$10 million in the new extension of the legislation.

With this fine program, which gives Federal money to State and local officials to make local decisions based on your needs and wants, I hope we can restore the truly Federal system which our forefathers envisioned and established under the Constitution.

I don't want to dismantle the Federal Government. I want to make it work better, more efficiently, more humanely, and far more effectively, and we can do it, and we will.

Before answering your questions, which I really prefer to do, let me ask each and every one of you for this: With your help, your support, your mandate, and borrowing some of Thomas Edison's fabled determination, I think we can make Southwest Florida, Ft. Myers, our whole 50 States, a better and better place in which to live, and make us all very, very proud of being Americans and very proud of America.

Thank you very, very much.

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Thank you, that is a great reception, just as warm and just as friendly and just as much appreciated as those wonderful people out on the route as we came into town.

Now, the first question.

QUESTION: I am from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

THE PRESIDENT: I have heard of that place.  
(Laughter)

QUESTION: You served lunch to me at school 43 or 44 years ago. Do you remember me? (Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: I have to get my glasses on. Those lights are bad.

QUESTION: Oh, you know me, Jerry. (Laughter)

Can I shake your hand, then I will leave you.  
Can I?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, have you got a question, first?

QUESTION: I haven't got anything. You are doing a good job.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. (Laughter)

I am glad to see a good Michigander down here enjoying all the benefits and blessings of this area.

QUESTION: Thank you for coming to Ft. Myers, Mr. President,

The question. Now that Susan has left her position and will be joining you in helping in your re-election, do you anticipate any other members of the immediate family to follow suit, hopefully?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Betty is a tremendous asset. She could not come down on this trip. But, I am sure if and when I think we will come to Florida again, she will come on that trip.

And Steve is out training horses in California, and that is a long way from Florida.

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Mike is up in divinity school in Massachusetts. He was with us in New Hampshire and will probably join us the next time.

Jack has a new job, and he has to go to work so -- (Laughter)

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: They are great kids, and I have a wonderful wife, and they are a better asset than I am.

QUESTION: Good afternoon.

First, I would like to thank you for sending me the autographed picture for Christmas, and I have a question. What can you or will you do to speed construction of Interstate 75 throughout Southwest Florida?

THE PRESIDENT: How fast do you want it done? (Laughter)

Well, I have talked to your fine Congressman and others about it. I happen to be a person that believes very strongly that we ought to finish the interstate system as quickly as possible, period.

Now, it is my understanding that there is a bill in the House and in the Senate -- they each have a slightly different version -- one has \$12 million extra for the area and one has \$25 million extra.

Somewhere in between \$12 and \$25 million will be made available to the State of Florida to expedite your interstate system. I would expect that that legislation would be through the Congress in a relatively short period of time.

Unless something happens that I don't foresee, it will be signed by me. It will be made available, or the funding will be made available to the State, and then the State has to make a decision where it wants to allocate that money.

Now, I think with the extra money and a little push from you all and a little suggestion from us, maybe we can get a good share of it over here in Southwest Florida.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, prior to the 1974 elections you indicated a need for special 5 percent increase in income taxes. The only response you got from the Democratic majority was that they used it against you at the election time.

Just a few weeks ago you announced the necessity for an increase of Social Security taxes and the cost of Medicare. Now, no doubt the only response you will get from the Democrats is that they will use it against you again in November elections.

Now, while I agree with you that these increases are a necessity, my question from the standpoint of practical politics, how do you justify the timing of the tax announcements?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that is an excellent question, and it is one that ought to be answered. If we make decisions about the integrity and certainty of the Social Security Trust Fund on the basis of politics, a person does not deserve to be elected President.

The truth is that everybody knows that in this current fiscal year the receipts for taxes for the Social Security Trust Fund are \$3 billion less than the expenditures, and everybody knows that next year there will be \$3.5 billion more going out of the Trust Fund than comes in in new taxes, and it is going to get progressively worse under the present set-up.

Eventually, if we don't do something, there won't be any Trust Fund for the people who are already retired and the people who are going to retire.

Now, I don't think we ought to play politics with that kind of situation, and I don't intend to.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, first I would like to welcome you to Ft. Myers. I would like to know if you have any ideas for programs in which to create jobs to alleviate the unemployment situation.

THE PRESIDENT: I have, I think, the best program for permanent jobs, for jobs that offer a future. I have a program that is not a quick fix--that is a phony answer. I happen to believe because five out of the six jobs in this country are in the private sector, that is where we ought to try and find more jobs for more people.

Now, how do we do that? Number one, we have recommended and we are still pushing for additional tax incentives. Let me cite one. We believe that with a tax incentive, business will build a plant more quickly, so in an area of high unemployment, my recommendation is to give a tax incentive to a company to build a plant to buy equipment. If they will do it within a relatively short period of time, it gives them a more rapid amortization. It is an incentive for them to create jobs right now.

That is the whole philosophy that I think is the right one to get our economy moving. Now there are some other things that we are doing in this temporary hiatus. For example, I have recommended more expenditures for local water and sewerage treatment plants than this year and 90 percent more than last year. This is constructive, beneficial local public works. We have more money put in the budget for the next fiscal year for highway construction than at any time in the history of the United States.

We have more money in the budget for ongoing fully justified public works program, not quick fix proposals that really don't do much. So between incentives for the private sector and responsible public works programs at the local and State level, I think we are going to accelerate the increase in job opportunities and reduce the unemployment rate.

QUESTION: Mr. President, the veterans of the State of Florida and the United States are quite concerned about the deterioration of the veterans benefits and the closing of the veterans hospitals over our country.

Now I understand this deterioration is happening in Washington, D. C. and we are quite concerned about it, and we would like some sort of explanation on it as to where we stand and what is going to happen.

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THE PRESIDENT: First, let me talk about the situation in Florida. I understand you have four VA hospitals here. Today I visited Bay Pines. I went through the hospital facility. It is a 600 bed hospital. They are anxious to get a supplemental hospital to add 900-plus beds.

Two years ago, at the suggestion of the Congressman from that district and others in the area, I directed that we have an immediate study as to the need and necessity for rapid construction of the Bay Pines facility. That report is to be on my desk sometime next week.

After looking at the facility and seeing the need, I am quite sure that the proponents of that facility will not be disappointed with my decision, but I do have to look at the report.

But now let's talk about hospitals generally. I am not familiar with any closing of VA hospital facilities. As a matter of fact, in the budget for the current fiscal year, based on a recommendation of a survey made, I added \$404 million to get quality care for VA hospitals throughout the country and added 7000 more medical personnel, and in the budget right here I added 1700 more medical personnel and \$250 some million to continue the increase in quality care for the veterans throughout this country.

We are going to see it. We are going to demand that it be done.

QUESTION: This is most wonderful, and it is quite a different story than what we have been hearing. This I really love to hear and I certainly appreciate it. I can certainly pass it about. We certainly want to welcome you to the fair city of Ft. Myers and we will see you in Washington next month.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. Nice to see you.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am from Norwalk, Connecticut. Welcome to God's country.

THE PRESIDENT: Where -- Norwalk or Ft. Myer?

QUESTION: Ft. Myer.

I would like to ask a question. You have not been in our State. We would like to have you up there soon, when it gets a little warmer. Right now it is cold. Can I get an answer from you?

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THE PRESIDENT: Well, I would like to stay in Ft. Myers and Southwest Florida for a long time, but it just so happens that I have a quite significant job to do as being President of the United States.

QUESTION: You are doing a good job, Mr. President. Nobody had the guts to take it, believe me.

THE PRESIDENT: Let me be serious for a minute. It is vitally important as we meet the problems, both at home and abroad, for the President to be on the job as long as is required, and it is no eight hour day, I can assure you. But we will do that job and we will get to Florida and we will get to Norwalk, Connecticut, as often as we can.

QUESTION: Bravo -- we expect you.

QUESTION: Good afternoon, Mr. President. I am from Precinct 79. We would like to know what you are going to do about the monopolies in the United States, such as oil and gas and food. Our food prices are atrociously high in our area and we are all concerned about them.

We also would like to know about the taxes that the middle class is paying and why are not some of the other larger income people paying taxes, too, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: On the first question, since I have become President, I have, first, appointed an outstanding Attorney General. That man has put added emphasis in the Department of Justice on antitrust activities, trying to break up monopolies or to eliminate monopolistic practices of any company and this year, again, in this budget he asked me -- the Attorney General -- for extra antitrust personnel and I recommended, as I recall, about 50 extra top grade people to help him pursue antitrust monopolistic developments.

So under the laws we have, you can depend that the Department of Justice will do a good job. And I might add that last year I recommended that the penalties for violation of the antitrust laws be increased. They were ridiculously low. They have been substantially increased so now that those who perpetrate monopolistic trade practices will really be penalized in dollars, as well, if it is criminal, any criminal penalties as well.

Now on the question of food prices, it is true that in 1973, just about the time we had the oil embargo, food prices soared. In the meantime, the farmers of this country have really turned to, and last year we had an all time record of wheat production, an all time record of corn production, and the net result is that instead of the increase in food prices of 15 to 20 percent in 1973, they are down now to an annual rate of about four to five percent. That is still too high.

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But I can tell you that the farmers are producing. Our big problem -- let's be frank about it -- it is the middleman profit. The farmer doesn't get it and the consumer doesn't get it, and one of the jobs that the Department of Justice must do, the Federal Trade Commission must do, and others, is to find out why there is such an abnormally high differential between what the farmer gets and what the consumer pays, and we are going to go after it.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I have a question to ask you. In the interest of stopping inflation and attaining economic stability, what would you say is the primary thing that we citizens can do to help you attain your all important objective of balancing the Federal budget within three years?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me be quite specific. I have vetoed 47 (46) bills which, by the latest tabulation, means we have spent \$10.5 billion less than we would have spent because 38 or 39 of them have been sustained.

We have a new one that I just vetoed yesterday, \$6 billion or more -- extremely inflationary. It will add Federal jobs, if it does, at the rate of \$25,000 a job. The jobs will come after we have come out of the recovery. It is totally unjustified. I would hope that you would write your Senators and your Congressmen and tell them to vote to sustain that veto. That is in the best interest of this country.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, my question is, do you have any idea how long the CETA program is going to last?

THE PRESIDENT: The CETA program -- maybe I ought to explain what it is. It is the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. It was passed roughly three years ago, as I recall, maybe four.

What it seeks to do -- for the benefit of those who don't know what it is -- it provides funds to train people who have lost a job, to train them to acquire a skill in a new job.

In addition, it provides authority for what we call the summer youth employment program. The regular funding of that program is about \$1 billion 600 million, the non-youth part.

I have recommended full funding for that through December 31 of this calendar year, and as I recollect, about 60 percent funding for the remainder of that fiscal year. For the current year, we are spending roughly \$440 million for the summer youth program, and for the following summer, the summer of 1977, I recommended about \$410 million for the summer youth program.

Now, that is as far as we can go under the law. I have recommended that kind of funding for the fiscal year 1977, which ends September 30, 1978. But, that is, I think, a justified program. It really is one of the better programs we have in the Federal Government to meet the problems.

QUESTION: I do want to thank you for CETA because without that, I would be without a job. I really appreciate it.

THE PRESIDENT: I think it is one of the best programs in this area in the Federal Government.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

QUESTION: I would like to know the difference between these different Bars or associations and the difference between unions which continue to raise our prices mandatorily through the years.

They need an increase, but we need a reduction, such as medical malpractice. The insurance rates have soared to the extent that the poor doctors cannot even operate. What is your opinion on this, sir?

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THE PRESIDENT: Well, let's take the problem that affects doctors, the malpractice insurance that they want to have for their protection. The judgments that have been granted in court cases have increased rates very substantially.

It is really a State matter, not a Federal matter. Some States have moved in. In Michigan it has been solved by some cooperation between the medical profession and the State. I can't give you the details except I know it has been settled.

In contrast, we have had a controversy in California between the doctors and the State. Apparently, they can't find an answer. Since it is not a Federal matter, I can't give you any specific solution to it. I do think that we, in the typical American fashion, are getting some reasonably better settlements between labor and management as competition has increased in our economic situation and if we can keep these settlements down and increase productivity, that is the main thing.

I don't think we will have an inflationary impact from the wage settlements in 1976.

QUESTION: Mr. President, we welcome you to Ft. Myers. We are rooting for you, and we are also praying for you.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate both.

QUESTION: This is not a very nice question, but I think it is one that should be asked. What is your opinion, Mr. President, of Richard Nixon as President?

THE PRESIDENT: I think the best answer to that will come when the historians write the pages of history.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I was just wondering when you played football, what team did you play on?  
(Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: That was so long ago, it was back when the ball was round, and I have forgotten. To be serious, I played high school football in Grand Rapids, South High, and at the University of Michigan after I got through South High School.

QUESTION: Can I shake your hand?

THE PRESIDENT: You sure can.

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QUESTION: Thank you very much for coming to Southwest Florida. I was wondering what your ideas about Amtrak rail passenger service are?

THE PRESIDENT: When I was in the Congress, I voted for the Amtrak concept. I think it is important for us, for a wide variety of reasons, including saving energy, and in certain areas saving time, to develop or to maintain or to expand rail passenger service.

We certainly need it in what they call the Northeast Corridor, from Boston to New York to Washington, and I am sure there are other equally important areas throughout the country. Unfortunately, however, there are some cases where the Congress has added -- just pure pork barrels -- in adding or requiring Amtrak to run passenger service where it cannot, under any circumstance, be justified.

Now, if they keep doing that, it will destroy the basic concept, which is sound for Amtrak. So, I just hope we show some restraint and good judgment because we need a good passenger rail system in certain parts of the country, but we can't afford to run it all over the country and strain the taxpayers' pocketbook.

QUESTION: Maybe you could have a few words with Amtrak, too. Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Mr. President, I am the one who wrote the letter to you. (Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: I can't remember that exact one. (Laughter) Tell me about it.

QUESTION: I told you how old I was.

THE PRESIDENT: You have gotten older since then, though.

QUESTION: I know.

QUESTION: James Gorman is my name.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I remember. You did tell me that you were going to send me something, and it is very nice to see it, and I would like to receive it.

QUESTION: Can I shake your hand?

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

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QUESTION: Mr. President, I was wondering if you had any plans to help out the economic systems in the colleges and universities across the country?

THE PRESIDENT: The answer is yes, in this way: I don't think that the Federal Government should put its money in the brick and mortar of State and private colleges and universities.

I think the Federal Government should help students go to school. The net result is that again in this budget I have recommended \$1 billion 100 million for what we call the basic opportunities grants program so that needy and deserving students can go to colleges and universities, plus other various programs such as the work study program, the loan guarantee program, and there are two or three others.

I think we ought to, from the Federal level, concentrate in making it possible for students to have help to get an education. I think it is the responsibility primarily of the State to finance the construction and the operation of State universities and State schools.

QUESTION: Do you think there will ever be a woman President?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, maybe you would. Let me say this. I think it is perfectly feasible. I don't think it is going to come in the relatively short future, but we have got some very brilliant, outstanding women, and I am certain that at some point we will have a lady or woman President. I better say that or my wife, Betty, would really give me a hard time.

QUESTION: May I shake your hand?

QUESTION: Mr. President, I would like to know if you think that we should have better Federal aid going to Americans, such as helping orphanages and needy people, instead of going out of the country to other people?

THE PRESIDENT: I think we ought to do all we can to help the needy at home, but let me just raise a very fundamental question with you, which you have raised yourself, whether we should help other nations throughout the world.

Many people in the audience recall the devastation that existed in Western Europe following World War II. If we had not helped Western Europe rehabilitate itself, I am confident today that all of Western Europe would be behind the Iron Curtain.

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I think that for humanitarian reasons we ought to help disadvantaged people in other areas of the world. We have to have a greater consideration for our own citizens, but a country as rich as ours, a country that has, I think, the destiny of America, ought to look beyond its shores, ought to have a broad vision.

It is a responsibility we have that we ought to accept willingly. America is great because it is good. I think we ought to take that position all over the world.

QUESTION: May I shake your hand?

QUESTION: Mr. President, I personally appreciate the great leadership you are giving to our country. One of the big issues before our country, of course, is spending and cost and it has been one of the issues we have been discussing a lot here today.

Related to it is a major issue before Congress, the B-1 bomber. What is your point of view on this?

THE PRESIDENT: I have from its very inception supported the research and development, and in this budget I have recommended the procurement funds for the B-1 bomber.

Let me tell you why. Our main strategic, high-performance aircraft today is the B-52. We have some B-52s today that are over 20 years old. Would you want your son or your close friend flying on a combat mission in a plane that was over 20 years old? I wouldn't.

I think if we are going to keep America strong -- and I think it is needed and necessary so we can have peace with strength -- we have to phase out those weapon systems as they become obsolete and follow on with other weapon systems, such as the B-1 replacing the B-52.

I think it is an essential for our security. I think it is essential for peace through strength, to have that new high-performance strategic aircraft.

Thank you very much.

END (AT 4:55 P.M. EST)