

have that this is an erosion of church and state, and that this will somehow be an office of evangelicals in the White House?

The President. Right. I appreciate that question, because I, in the State of Texas, had heard a lot of discussion about a faith-based initiative eroding the important bridge between church and state. And I am convinced that our plan is constitutional, because we intend—we will not fund a church or a synagogue or a mosque or any religion but, instead, will be funding programs that affect people in a positive way.

The charitable choice provision that had been debated in the welfare reform package fully explored the constitutional questions involved with funding people and/or faith-based programs. And I am confident that our program not only is constitutional but, more importantly, our program is going to change America for the better, that we're going to help people, and we're going to help people help themselves, and we're going to rally the great compassion of America.

And I look forward to implementing this program. I look forward to working with Members of Congress to put the required package together.

Prescription Drugs Legislation

Q. How do you respond to the Members of Congress who say they would rather see a universal, broad-based approach to Medicare reform rather than your drug plan first and a broader approach later?

The President. Well, if, in fact, what they're saying is that they plan on expediting a Medicare reform that will include prescription drugs for all seniors, then all of a sudden, I begin to say, "Well, gosh, that may make sense that you look at our proposal the way you do." If they're going to drag their feet, if the Members of the Congress on both sides of the aisle don't feel the same urgency that I feel and these two chairmen feel on Medicare reform, then I feel it's very important for us to have An Immediate Helping Hand. There are a lot of seniors who need help when it comes to prescription drugs.

Marc Rich Pardon

Q. Why did you decide not to challenge the Clinton pardon, sir?

The President. Oh, on Marc Rich? First of all, I didn't agree with the decision. I would not have made that decision myself. But the ability for a President to make decisions is—a decision on pardons is inviolate, as far as I'm concerned. It's an important part of the office. I am mindful not only of preserving executive powers for myself but for predecessors as well. And that's why I made the decision.

Q. Are you troubled by the appearance, sir? Are you troubled by the appearance of that pardon, sir?

The President. I was troubled by the decision the President made. I would not have made the decision. I would not have made that decision. But nevertheless, he was the President. He had the right to do so, to make that decision, and he did. And I'm going to protect that privilege, not only for me but for future Presidents as well.

Q. Is it a quid pro quo—

The President. I don't know about that. It's going to be up for a good journalist to figure that out—like you, Roberts [John Roberts, CBS News].

Q. I'm just wondering, sir, if you're taking a look at the path that's been laid and said, it walks like a duck.

The President. It what—it walks like what? [Laughter]

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:04 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Representative William M. Thomas, chairman, House Committee on Ways and Means; Senator Charles Grassley, chairman, Senate Committee on Finance; Treasury Secretary-designate Paul H. O'Neill; and Gov. Gray Davis of California. The President also referred to ANWR, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Bipartisan Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

January 29, 2001

Legislative Agenda

The President. I'm continuing a series of meetings I'm going to have with Members

of the Congress. I'm very serious about sitting down as often as possible with people from both parties to have frank discussions about issues that concern the country. I believe there is a very good opportunity for us to exceed expectations.

Expectations are that nothing will get done. I'm confident that the people here in Washington and Members of the Senate don't agree with that. We're going to talk about education, and we're going to talk about taxes. We'll talk about the patients' bill of rights—a variety of issues that are of concern, and what we call front burner issues, issues that should be making it through the Congress soon.

I want to thank the Members for coming. I'm honored that they would come down from the Hill to visit the Vice President and me. Thanks for coming.

Q. I have one question about——

The President. I'll catch you tomorrow. You missed your chance at the third press availability. [*Laughter*]

Q. When are you going to do your first news conference, Mr. President?

The President. These mini-news conferences count. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:32 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting the Blueprint for Assistance To Help Medicare Beneficiaries Buy Prescription Drugs

January 29, 2001

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)

Enclosed please find the blueprint for my program to provide immediate assistance to help certain Medicare beneficiaries buy prescription drugs. I look forward to working with the Congress to enact these principles into law and to working together on comprehensive Medicare reform.

Sincerely,

George W. Bush

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Richard B. Cheney, President of the Senate.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Republican Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

January 30, 2001

Legislative Agenda

The President. It's an honor for the Vice President and the Secretary of Treasury and myself, and OMB Director, to welcome the leadership in the House and the Senate on the Republican side. We've had a wide-ranging discussion; discussed tax relief and how we can pay down national debt and have tax relief, which all of us around this table firmly believe we can do.

We also discussed the fact that there's a lot of Americans who have got a lot of consumer debt, and we must be mindful of those hard-working Americans. And part of the tax relief package is to allow people to better manage their own finances with their own money. We had a discussion about education.

We discussed, particularly the leader and I and Members of the Senate, discussed the need to get our nominees through the Senate. And I hope, in the spirit of bipartisanship, there will be no further delays on the confirmation process for John Ashcroft and other nominees of ours. I certainly appreciate how fast the Senate worked, initially, but it's time for the delays to end. It's time for a vote on all our Cabinet officials.

This is—will be a series of conversations we'll have throughout my tenure, and I really enjoy this. It's been a good, frank discussion.

Interest Rates/Tax Cut Legislation

Q. Do you think the Fed should cut rates now, sort of stimulate the economy? And in the discussion of tax policy, there has been some disagreement between the White House and the Speaker and others over whether you should have one big package of tax cuts or to do it in pieces.

The President. First, Mr. Greenspan needs to make his decisions, independent of what I think. I learned a pretty good lesson