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Administration of William J. Clinton, 1995 / Apr. 23

Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma
April 23, 1995

Thank you very much. Governor Keating and Mrs. Keating, Reverend Graham, to the families of those who have been lost and wounded, to the people of Oklahoma City who have endured so much, and the people of this wonderful State, to all of you who are here as our fellow Americans: I am honored to be here today to represent the American people. But I have to tell you that Hillary and I also come as parents, as husband and wife, as people who were your neighbors for some of the best years of our lives.

Today our Nation joins with you in grief. We mourn with you. We share your hope against hope that some may still survive. We thank all those who have worked so heroically to save lives and to solve this crime, those here in Oklahoma and those who are all across this great land and many who left their own lives to come here to work hand in hand with you.

We pledge to do all we can to help you heal the injured, to rebuild this city, and to bring to justice those who did this evil.

This terrible sin took the lives of our American family: innocent children, in that building only because their parents were trying to be good parents as well as good workers; citizens in the building going about their daily business; and many there who served the rest of us, who worked to help the elderly and the disabled, who worked to support our farmers and our veterans, who worked to enforce our laws and to protect us. Let us say clearly, they served us well, and we are grateful. But for so many of you they were also neighbors and friends. You saw them at church or the PTA meetings, at the civic clubs, at the ball park. You know them in ways that all the rest of America could not.

And to all the members of the families here present who have suffered loss, though we share your grief, your pain is unimaginable, and we know that. We cannot undo it. That is God's work.

Our words seem small beside the loss you have endured. But I found a few I wanted to share today. I've received a lot of letters in these last terrible days. One stood out because

it came from a young widow and a mother of three whose own husband was murdered with over 200 other Americans when Pan Am 103 was shot down. Here is what that woman said I should say to you today: "The anger you feel is valid, but you must not allow yourselves to be consumed by it. The hurt you feel must not be allowed to turn into hate but instead into the search for justice. The loss you feel must not paralyze your own lives. Instead, you must try to pay tribute to your loved ones by continuing to do all the things they left undone, thus ensuring they did not die in vain." Wise words from one who also knows.

You have lost too much, but you have not lost everything. And you have certainly not lost America, for we will stand with you for as many tomorrows as it takes.

If ever we needed evidence of that, I could only recall the words of Governor and Mrs. Keating. If anybody thinks that Americans are mostly mean and selfish, they ought to come to Oklahoma. If anybody thinks Americans have lost the capacity for love and caring and courage, they ought to come to Oklahoma.

To all my fellow Americans beyond this hall, I say, one thing we owe those who have sacrificed is the duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil. They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life.

Let us teach our children that the God of comfort is also the God of righteousness. Those who trouble their own house will inherit the wind. Justice will prevail.

Let us let our own children know that we will stand against the forces of fear. When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life. As St. Paul admonished us, let us not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Yesterday Hillary and I had the privilege of speaking with some children of other Federal employees, children like those who were lost here. And one little girl said something we will never forget. She said we should all plant a

tree in memory of the children. So this morning before we got on the plane to come here, at the White House, we planted that tree in honor of the children of Oklahoma. It was a dogwood with its wonderful spring flower and its deep, enduring roots. It embodies the lesson of the Psalms that the life of a good person is like a tree whose leaf does not wither.

My fellow Americans, a tree takes a long time to grow, and wounds take a long time to heal.

But we must begin. Those who are lost now belong to God. Some day we will be with them. But until that happens, their legacy must be our lives.

Thank you all, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:32 p.m. at the Oklahoma State Fair Arena. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Frank Keating and his wife, Cathy, and evangelist Billy Graham.

Interview on CBS' "60 Minutes"

April 23, 1995

Oklahoma City Bombing

Steve Kroft. Thank you, Mike. Mr. President, you said this afternoon that our one duty to the victims and to their families is "to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil." Can you bring the country up to date on the status of the investigation?

The President. Well, as you know, another person was arrested today, and the investigation is proceeding aggressively. I have always tried to be very careful not to reveal any evidence and to let the Justice Department, the Attorney General, and the FBI Director decide what should be released when. But I can tell the American people we have hundreds of people working on this. They are working night and day. They are doing very well. We are making progress.

Response to Terrorism

Mr. Kroft. You said immediately after the attack that we will find the people who did this, and justice will be swift, certain, and severe. If it had turned out that this had been an act of foreign-sponsored terrorism, you would have had some limited but very clear options. You could have ordered bombing attacks. You could have ordered trade embargoes. You could have done a lot of things. But it seems almost certain now that this is home-grown terrorism, that the enemy is in fact within. How do we respond to that?

The President. Well, we have to arrest the people who did it. We have to put them on trial. We have to convict them. Then we have to punish them. I certainly believe that they

should be executed. And in the crime bill, which the Congress passed last year, we had an expansion of capital punishment for purposes such as this. If this is not a crime for which capital punishment is called, I don't know what is.

Capital Punishment

Ed Bradley. Mr. President, this is Ed Bradley in New York. There are many people who would question our system of criminal justice today in the United States—in fact, many people who have lost faith in our criminal justice system. With so many people languishing on death row today for so many years, how can you say with such assurance that justice will be certain, swift, and severe?

The President. Well let me say first of all, it's been a long time since there has been a capital case carried through at the national level. But our new crime bill permits that. Now, when I was Governor, I carried out our capital punishment laws at the State level. We just pursued the appeals vigorously. I do believe the habeas corpus provisions of the Federal law, which permit these appeals sometimes to be delayed 7, 8, 9 years, should be changed. I have advocated that. I tried to pass it last year. I hope the Congress will pass a review and a reform of the habeas corpus provisions, because it should not take 8 or 9 years and three trips to the Supreme Court to finalize whether a person, in fact, was properly convicted or not.

Mr. Bradley. But without a change in the law, you think that is what will happen?

The President. It may not happen. We can still have fairly rapid appeals processes. But the Congress has the opportunity this year to reform