

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

December 29, 1994

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
BY USA TODAY

The Oval Office

1:16 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Let me just make a kind of an opening, a couple of opening remarks, and then I'll answer whatever questions you want. The end of the year is a time when you always think about what happened the last year, what's going to happen next year. And I guess the thing I want most to say is that I end this year with an enormous feeling of optimism and hope about the future and a real sense of gratitude for the opportunities that we've had in the last couple of years to make real progress in laying the building blocks this country needs to move into the 21st century.

I look at what happened in 1994 -- we were able to continue the economic recovery with low inflation. We've now got over 5 million new jobs in the economy since I've become President. We finally are dealing with the wage problem -- beginning to deal with this wage problem which has left so many people angry and frustrated. This year we had more high-wage jobs coming into the economy than in the previous five years combined, and we hope that will be a trend for the future.

We've still got the deficit coming down -- the biggest in history -- we've now removed about \$10,000 worth of debt off of every family in the country through our deficit reduction. We've had the biggest expansion of trade in any comparable time period in American history with the world trade agreement. We're investing in new technologies. We've got this economy going.

In 1994 we passed a lot of very important education legislation -- very important to me -- this whole business of moving forward with everything from Head Start for little children to apprenticeships for people who don't go to colleges to making more affordable college loans. It was a big year for that.

We passed the crime bill, and it had almost to the letter all the provisions that I campaigned on in 1992. And even though there was a lot of controversy about it at the time, and a lot of people who had been for it changed at the end and made a lot of political noise about it, it's a very good bill. And I think it will make a difference as we implement it; and we're working hard to implement it.

We continued the Reinventing Government effort under Vice President Gore; and generally, began solving problems that government had too long ignored. And I think that's one thing that I'm proudest of about this administration is that we take on problems. You know, Mike Espy just left as Agriculture Secretary. He took on the meat safety problem, the crop insurance problem. We opened Japanese markets to American rice for the first time. That's a huge deal where I come from, you know? It's something we never thought would happen.

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reform, almost totally unnoticed here at the end of the year. It was part of the GATT legislation, but that's very important. We got our plan for rebuilding the Pacific Northwest and getting over the environmentalist versus loggers controversy. It's been approved in court. We resolved the fight between the environmentalists and the farmers in California over water. And we're trying to move forward in solving problems. We've now given 23 states permission to get around all these federal rules to pursue welfare reform -- nine states to pursue health care. So that's very important.

Oh yes, the last point I'd like to make is that it was a very good year for American foreign policy -- our role in the Middle East, our role in Haiti, our role in Northern Ireland, our successes with the denuclearization of the former Soviet Union and agreement with North Korea.

So I'm feeling very good about what happened in 1994. It was a big year, a good year for America. And as we -- in terms of my overall objective of restoring the middle class and rebuilding a sense of community in this country and moving us into the future, we're clearly moving in the right direction.

Of course, next year, I want to begin with the focus on this Middle Class Bill of Rights, because I think that people don't feel secure, even in the midst of this recovery. And I think there are economic reasons for it, and then there are non-economic reasons for it. And I would just like to offer a couple of observations for it.

To raise incomes, you have to raise the skill level and get more good jobs in this country.

Q Yes. It doesn't happen overnight, either.

THE PRESIDENT: And it doesn't happen overnight. First of all, it didn't happen overnight -- I was coming into a 20-year trend of stagnant incomes. But if we can pass this Middle Class Bill of Rights, and give deductibility to people for all their educational costs and let everybody put an IRA into place that will let them save every year and then withdraw for education or health expenses or care of a parent or first-time home-buying, and have deductions for their children when they're raising them, then I think we'll be rewarding work and family and education in a way that will help us to rebuild the middle class and restore a sense of security.

I also would say I don't think we can walk away from health care. I've written a letter to the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Congress -- of the coming Congress -- and said I realized that the proposal that I made last year didn't find favor, but the problem's still there. The costs are still going up; another million Americans in working families lost their health insurance. So let's get together and take this on a step-by-step basis; reassure the American people we're not going to undermine their quality of care, their choices, but that we can do more to reform the insurance policies so they don't lose -- people don't lose insurance because of their health. We can do more to cover children; we can do more to move toward providing coverage to all Americans.

And the last thing is, I'm hopeful we can have some bipartisan agreements on a lot of things -- on welfare reform, on a lot of foreign policy. There are some things I do not believe we should do. I don't believe we should explode the deficit again; I think we ought to be fiscally responsible. I don't believe we should just be handing out tax breaks to people who don't need them, unless it creates jobs and raises incomes. I don't believe we should cut funding for these education and training programs. I don't believe we should punish poor people who are genuinely doing the best they can, and willing to work their way into the middle class.

I believe -- I've taken the lead -- another round of Reinventing Government cuts, dramatic. I have no problem with giving more authority to the states and cutting the federal government where it needs to be cut. But we need to keep in mind, we need a national government that's on the side of middle-class families; that there is a role for government in this society; and that we have got to -- our goal should be to move the country into the 21st century, to rebuild the middle class, to rebuild a sense of community in this country.

Q I want to ask you about next year and longer, but first, I'm a little -- I think people will be a little surprised to hear you assessing this year that's just ending in such a positive note because for you it's been a tough one personally with some losses in your family, and politically as well. How does that all fit in to your summary of what the year has been, and how do you deal with it?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it was a difficult year for me personally. I lost my mother at the beginning of the year. And this was our first Christmas without her. And my whole life -- I've had nearly 50 Christmases now, and this is the only one of all those 50 that I ever spent without her.

Q It must have been tough.

THE PRESIDENT: And it was a very difficult thing at one level. Although, it's interesting -- I had my brother here and my nephew and my sister-in-law. He's got a seven-month old son. And I had my brother-in-law -- one of my brothers-in-law and his wife. And this was our second Christmas without Hillary's dad. And we had a lot of laughs; we told a lot of stories about them and tried to be grateful for their lives. But it was -- we have had some significant personal losses since I've been here. But that's a part of living. And I guess if you're President, it's just sort of a -- relief. And the pressure of it may seem more, but I don't know that there's any -- I feel very blessed in the way that I had my mother as long as I did.

Just last week, a man who's been a friend of mine for 25 years -- he's only a year older than I am -- passed away, a magnificent man. And I was thinking, when he came to see me -- he knew he was sick, he came up here and stayed with mother and me right before she died. And he said, I would liked to have lived longer, but I feel fortunate to have lived as well as I did and to have known as much as I did. And I thought it was such a brave thing for him to say.

So the personal losses just come along with it. The political reversals, I think, are -- they've been analyzed to death; no point in talking about them. But they can't reverse the truth. I mean, there is a truth here. We had a lot of problems on our hands when I showed up in '93. And we've begun to get our economic house in order; we've begun to put education first again; we've begun to tackle the tough problems that have been long ignored; we've begun to make the kind of revolutionary changes in the government that need to be made to get us into the 21st century. We've begun to focus on trying to empower people and communities to solve their own problems. And we've just got to keep working on it.

Q But how does it make you feel when you read, as you inevitably must, these stories about approval ratings and people don't want you to run for reelection and speculation about Democrats challenging you? Do you just not deal with that, or how do you --

THE PRESIDENT: There's nothing I can do about it. All people can do is have judgements based on what they see and hear. And my mission is to tell the best -- to do the best job I can to do

the job, and then to take whatever time I can to try to tell the people about what we're doing and try to involve them on the journey.

Q You've been counted out a time or two before, and proved people wrong.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, that's right. But this is not about me, this is about the American people. What they think about me is something I'll leave for the election. The important thing is what I think about them. And they have been subject to a -- it is difficult for them to get beyond their own problems now for too many people. And it's easy for them, I guess, to believe the negative characterization. And maybe I haven't done as well as I should in communicating with them.

But the point is, the country is in better shape than it was when I took office. And we finally -- we have a responsible budget for the first time in ages. We have a responsible trade policy. We have a responsible education and training policy. We have a responsible policy on reducing the size and bulk of the federal government, but focusing on the missions the federal government should pursue; and trying to empower people to take more responsibility for their own lives. We're focused on the future; on middle-class interests and middle-class values; on this new ethic of responsibility as well as opportunity and rebuilding the communities of this country. That is all I can do.

I have no control over the daily polls and what people see about me on the news at night and all the kind of things that affect their opinion.

Q Thing we obsess about.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a bizarre world we're living in in that sense. I mean, people get their information however they get it, and then they draw whatever conclusions they drew from it. My job -- I have to keep my eye on what I know I can affect. And I am very, very upbeat about the future of this country and about the prospects of it.

Q How's the insomnia quotient?

THE PRESIDENT: I sleep every night. But I'm inherently optimistic about America. Anybody -- let me just say this -- anybody who really tries to change instead of talk about it, is going to engender opposition, there will be static in the air; it's ugly to watch laws being made. Who was it? Mark Twain said, nobody should ever watch laws and sausage being made.

You're going to have opposition. But I didn't run for this job with a view toward thinking about the next election. I'm trying to keep my mind on the next generation and on what's good for the 21st century for America; and just keep slogging away at the things that I know need to be done. And I think that is the ultimate strength in our country is that we have -- that for more than 200 years our leaders focused on what had to be done.

Q Let's talk about that just a little bit. A year from today, if we're sitting here -- and I hope we will be -- realistically, how much of your Middle Class Bill Of Rights do you think will have been enacted?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, if the Republicans will work with me and put country first, and politics as usual dead last, as I say we ought to, I think they will enact it. First of all, many of them have embraced the IRA, which former Secretary Bentsen really pushed hard. They have a version of the children's tax credit and that's good, because in '92, when the Democrats were for it, they weren't.

So now you've got the Democrats and the Republicans for the children's tax credit.

The third aspect of the Middle Class Bill Of Rights was to collapse all the federal programs -- these zillions of federal programs in training, instead of just giving states -- just allow workers themselves, people who have lost a job or who are struggling to get a better job -- instead of getting a program to get them money to enroll in their local community college or whatever for job training. I would think that would have great appeal to Republicans who always want to empower people over government. So I think that has a good chance.

But the most important thing is that they -- instead of just having a blanket tax cut we can't afford, I think is to adopt this deductibility for the cost of education -- for college education, for vocational education, for medical school education, for adults who have to go back and get retrained if they lose their jobs. I mean, it is one thing we can do for everybody in this country that will use a tax provision to build America, just like the GI Bill did educating people. And I think that the issue there will be, is if the Congress knows that the country wants this, and if it makes sense to people. And I must say, since I spoke to the country, I've gotten more support from ordinary citizens calling in here, writing in for the deductibility of education expenses than anything else.

Q Struck a chord. A year from today, how much of the Republican contract will have been enacted, and how many pieces of it will you have been forced to veto?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know. I want to help them enact some of it, as I said all along.

Q Tell me which pieces of it you'd like to move on and help them.

THE PRESIDENT: I like the line item veto, and I hope they'll give it to me right away. I have no problem with -- we have our own deregulation initiative. I think theirs goes to far in some ways, but I think -- I would hope that they'd be willing to work with us on that.

We have -- we're going to give them a budget which drastically reduces the federal government even further than we have already, and I hope they'll work with us that. So I think we can work on those things.

I am not in favor of cutting federal investments and education.

Q You don't like their welfare reform. Secretary Shalala was on Today --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, what I think about the welfare thing is I still would hope that we could get a -- after everyone gives their speeches about this -- 90 percent of the American people want welfare reform that promotes work over welfare; that promotes independence over dependence; that promotes responsible parenting over irresponsible childbearing.

Q How do you feel about doing straight block grants to states on it?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the states should be given more discretion. I think that -- I don't want to get into the details now, because I want to have a meeting. I've already met with Republican and Democratic governors; I've talked to the Republican

leaders, as well as the Democratic leaders; and I've worked on this issue myself for 14 years. I gave them a good bill last year. I wish it had passed last year, but we couldn't pass it last year.

I think there are lots of options we can pursue, but the issue should be, will this promote work over welfare; will it strengthen families; and will it promote responsible parenting, not irresponsible child-bearing? I think that's what the American people want us to do. And that's what I will focus on.

Now, within that -- I think that I have tried to reduce the number of federal prescriptions in welfare reform, and to give more states flexibility. I think, I don't know -- I guess Secretary Shalala said that -- we've given 23 or 24 states now, waivers from these federal rules. I don't think we necessarily need a whole new set of federal rules.

I do say, if you're going to require people to go to work, they need to have a job to go to work at. And if you want them to work for themselves -- if you want people to work themselves from poverty into the middle class, they also must be able to get access to training and skills. So there needs to be a theory of how we're going to do this.

But I'm -- I don't agree with the details -- some of the details of their welfare reform, but I think the idea that they want to do it now -- that the Democrats want to do it -- is basically a hopeful thing, because it needs to be done in America. The poverty rate has been going up. It's been going up almost exclusively among young women and their little children. There are almost no families -- I wouldn't say almost -- there are very few families living in poverty where you've got a coherent family with two parents living in the home and -- particularly if both of them are working, or able to work and they're just taking off for childbearing. So this is a very important issue for our country. And again -- so I'm hopeful that we'll be able to work together on it.

Q And crime -- Brady II? Do you think your first veto might be a repeal of the assault weapons ban?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't think they ought to repeal it; I sure don't. I don't think they ought to repeal the Brady Bill. I don't think they ought -- some of them talk about that, too. I don't think they ought to repeal the Brady Bill or the assault weapons ban.

Now, they may feel constrained to do it, because a lot of them believe the NRA elected them. And I think that's right, I think they did elect a lot of them. But I think that the people were basically -- a lot of our people in rural areas felt culturally assaulted. They felt that they might lose some weapon they own to try to take care of a crime problem in urban areas that weren't present in rural areas.

Q Yes, it didn't touch their lives.

THE PRESIDENT: That's basically what they thought. So they saw this as sort of a cultural arrogance by the federal government. Now I believe that the more it's explained in its own terms -- the way Senator Bob Kerrey did in his campaign, or the way Senator Howell Heflin from Alabama did when he spoke about this -- the more the supporters of the assault weapons ban will tend to prevail.

Q And it will make sense to people.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I think this was part of people's madness about government. They were out there -- and particularly these --

Q That's true.

THE PRESIDENT: -- the rural people were saying, my God, I'm having a tough time; I can't make a living, now they're coming for my gun. It was this sort of psychological thing. And my guess is that the public mood will change on it as people have a chance to reflect. None of us make the best decisions in the world when we're angry -- and I think that it will. I feel very strongly that it should not be repealed. I think it would be a big mistake.

Q Ginny is going to give me heads up here, so two fast ones. People are worried about your safety, sitting in this building. Should they be?

THE PRESIDENT: No. I mean, there's a lot of anxiety out there. We had the fellow with the assault weapons out front --

Q Yes, that was serious.

THE PRESIDENT: -- who was apparently angry at the assault weapons ban.

Q Right. Right.

THE PRESIDENT: The guy with the airplane was trying to make a statement. He was --

Q But then there's been this whole spate of stuff. And I think the overall impression left with the people is that you need to be taken better care of.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, they're shooting at the house. (Laughter.) I think the Secret Service has done a fine job. I do not -- it used to be, when Mr. Roosevelt was here, on a Sunday, there was no fence around here --

Q Right.

THE PRESIDENT: -- and families could walk off and picnic in the back yard. Now they've got the fence here; they've got the fence up front; we've got the bullet-proof glass.

Q Do you find yourself looking over your shoulder when you're walking in the dark?

THE PRESIDENT: Never. Never. I never think about it. I believe -- and I don't mean to be careless about it, because I feel a responsibility to my country, as well as to my family, to try to be careful. But the Secret Service does a good job. They are much more able today than they were a few decades ago to protect the President.

But this is a free and open society. We don't want the President living in a closet. The biggest problem with the White House for most Presidents most days is not the danger you get from being exposed to people, it's the danger -- it's the problem you have by developing a tin ear by being isolated from people.

Q Which I know was a big concern of yours.

THE PRESIDENT: -- from the run of -- yes, and it still is. I just -- now as President, there's 255 million Americans, so I mean, I have to speak to them in large measure through you, for example, as we are now. But I think it would be important for any

person who holds this office to be able to do things that would get beyond the confines of the White House, and would be in touch with ordinary citizens. And so I have high levels of confidence in the Secret Service. There is -- it's impossible to have a 100-percent guarantee for anybody, but they have done a terrific job, I think. And I feel good about it.

Q One last question before Ginny runs me out of here. Any developments from Korea? And how long are you willing to be as patient as you're being?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me just say this. All I can tell you today is exactly what I said yesterday. I think he -- our serviceman should be released. The helicopter made a mistake and got into their airspace. But there was -- it was a routine training mission. And I have someone there who is working very hard as we speak.

Q Is he making progress?

THE PRESIDENT: So anything else I say would be premature. I just don't think I can say anything --

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: -- except that I'm very interested in it. I've been getting reports regularly, ever since he's been there.

Q Are you still hopeful he'll be released soon?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm hopeful. I think it should be done, but I don't have any progress report. I certainly don't have a lack of progress report. I just don't want to say anything today while we're working this.

Q Okay. Thank you sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks.

Q Happy New Year to you in Little Rock.

THE PRESIDENT: You too, I enjoyed it.

END

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Q Let's talk about that just a little bit. A year from today, if we're sitting here -- and I hope we will be -- realistically, how much of your Middle Class Bill Of Rights do you think will have been enacted?

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Q You don't like their welfare reform. Secretary Shalala was on Today --

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Q How do you feel about doing straight block grants to states on it?

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Q Yes, it didn't touch their lives.

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THE PRESIDENT: -- and families could walk off and picnic in the back yard. Now they've got the fence here; they've got the fence up front; we've got the bullet-proof glass.

Q Do you find yourself looking over your shoulder when you're walking in the dark?

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Q Which I know was a big concern of yours.

THE PRESIDENT: -- from the run of -- yes, and it still is. I just -- now as President, there's 255 million Americans, so I mean, I have to speak to them in large measure through you, for example, as we are now. But I think it would be important for any

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Q One last question before Ginny runs me out of here. Any developments from Korea? And how long are you willing to be as patient as you're being?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me just say this. All I can tell you today is exactly what I said yesterday. I think he -- our serviceman should be released. The helicopter made a mistake and got into their airspace. But there was -- it was a routine training mission. And I have someone there who is working very hard as we speak.

Q Is he making progress?

THE PRESIDENT: So anything else I say would be premature. I just don't think I can say anything --

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: -- except that I'm very interested in it. I've been getting reports regularly, ever since he's been there.

Q Are you still hopeful he'll be released soon?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm hopeful. I think it should be done, but I don't have any progress report. I certainly don't have a lack of progress report. I just don't want to say anything today while we're working this.

Q Okay. Thank you sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks.

Q Happy New Year to you in Little Rock.

THE PRESIDENT: You too, I enjoyed it.

END

1:42 P.M. EST

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

December 29, 1994

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
BY USA TODAY

The Oval Office

1:16 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Let me just make a kind of an opening, a couple of opening remarks, and then I'll answer whatever questions you want. The end of the year is a time when you always think about what happened the last year, what's going to happen next year. And I guess the thing I want most to say is that I end this year with an enormous feeling of optimism and hope about the future and a real sense of gratitude for the opportunities that we've had in the last couple of years to make real progress in laying the building blocks this country needs to move into the 21st century.

I look at what happened in 1994 -- we were able to continue the economic recovery with low inflation. We've now got over 5 million new jobs in the economy since I've become President. We finally are dealing with the wage problem -- beginning to deal with this wage problem which has left so many people angry and frustrated. This year we had more high-wage jobs coming into the economy than in the previous five years combined, and we hope that will be a trend for the future.

We've still got the deficit coming down -- the biggest in history -- we've now removed about \$10,000 worth of debt off of every family in the country through our deficit reduction. We've had the biggest expansion of trade in any comparable time period in American history with the world trade agreement. We're investing in new technologies. We've got this economy going.

In 1994 we passed a lot of very important education legislation -- very important to me -- this whole business of moving forward with everything from Head Start for little children to apprenticeships for people who don't go to colleges to making more affordable college loans. It was a big year for that.

We passed the crime bill, and it had almost to the letter all the provisions that I campaigned on in 1992. And even though there was a lot of controversy about it at the time, and a lot of people who had been for it changed at the end and made a lot of political noise about it, it's a very good bill. And I think it will make a difference as we implement it; and we're working hard to implement it.

We continued the Reinventing Government effort under Vice President Gore; and generally, began solving problems that government had too long ignored. And I think that's one thing that I'm proudest of about this administration is that we take on problems. You know, Mike Espy just left as Agriculture Secretary. He took on the meat safety problem, the crop insurance problem. We opened Japanese markets to American rice for the first time. That's a huge deal where I come from, you know? It's something we never thought would happen.

We began the long process of healing the pension systems of this country. A big thing for American people -- the pension

MORE

reform, almost totally unnoticed here at the end of the year. It was part of the GATT legislation, but that's very important. We got our plan for rebuilding the Pacific Northwest and getting over the environmentalist versus loggers controversy. It's been approved in court. We resolved the fight between the environmentalists and the farmers in California over water. And we're trying to move forward in solving problems. We've now given 23 states permission to get around all these federal rules to pursue welfare reform -- nine states to pursue health care. So that's very important.

Oh yes, the last point I'd like to make is that it was a very good year for American foreign policy -- our role in the Middle East, our role in Haiti, our role in Northern Ireland, our successes with the denuclearization of the former Soviet Union and agreement with North Korea.

So I'm feeling very good about what happened in 1994. It was a big year, a good year for America. And as we -- in terms of my overall objective of restoring the middle class and rebuilding a sense of community in this country and moving us into the future, we're clearly moving in the right direction.

Of course, next year, I want to begin with the focus on this Middle Class Bill of Rights, because I think that people don't feel secure, even in the midst of this recovery. And I think there are economic reasons for it, and then there are non-economic reasons for it. And I would just like to offer a couple of observations for it.

To raise incomes, you have to raise the skill level and get more good jobs in this country.

Q Yes. It doesn't happen overnight, either.

THE PRESIDENT: And it doesn't happen overnight. First of all, it didn't happen overnight -- I was coming into a 20-year trend of stagnant incomes. But if we can pass this Middle Class Bill of Rights, and give deductibility to people for all their educational costs and let everybody put an IRA into place that will let them save every year and then withdraw for education or health expenses or care of a parent or first-time home-buying, and have deductions for their children when they're raising them, then I think we'll be rewarding work and family and education in a way that will help us to rebuild the middle class and restore a sense of security.

I also would say I don't think we can walk away from health care. I've written a letter to the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Congress -- of the coming Congress -- and said I realized that the proposal that I made last year didn't find favor, but the problem's still there. The costs are still going up; another million Americans in working families lost their health insurance. So let's get together and take this on a step-by-step basis; reassure the American people we're not going to undermine their quality of care, their choices, but that we can do more to reform the insurance policies so they don't lose -- people don't lose insurance because of their health. We can do more to cover children; we can do more to move toward providing coverage to all Americans.

And the last thing is, I'm hopeful we can have some bipartisan agreements on a lot of things -- on welfare reform, on a lot of foreign policy. There are some things I do not believe we should do. I don't believe we should explode the deficit again; I think we ought to be fiscally responsible. I don't believe we should just be handing out tax breaks to people who don't need them, unless it creates jobs and raises incomes. I don't believe we should cut funding for these education and training programs. I don't believe we should punish poor people who are genuinely doing the best they can, and willing to work their way into the middle class.

I believe -- I've taken the lead -- another round of Reinventing Government cuts, dramatic. I have no problem with giving more authority to the states and cutting the federal government where it needs to be cut. But we need to keep in mind, we need a national government that's on the side of middle-class families; that there is a role for government in this society; and that we have got to -- our goal should be to move the country into the 21st century, to rebuild the middle class, to rebuild a sense of community in this country.

Q I want to ask you about next year and longer, but first, I'm a little -- I think people will be a little surprised to hear you assessing this year that's just ending in such a positive note because for you it's been a tough one personally with some losses in your family, and politically as well. How does that all fit in to your summary of what the year has been, and how do you deal with it?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it was a difficult year for me personally. I lost my mother at the beginning of the year. And this was our first Christmas without her. And my whole life -- I've had nearly 50 Christmases now, and this is the only one of all those 50 that I ever spent without her.

Q It must have been tough.

THE PRESIDENT: And it was a very difficult thing at one level. Although, it's interesting -- I had my brother here and my nephew and my sister-in-law. He's got a seven-month old son. And I had my brother-in-law -- one of my brothers-in-law and his wife. And this was our second Christmas without Hillary's dad. And we had a lot of laughs; we told a lot of stories about them and tried to be grateful for their lives. But it was -- we have had some significant personal losses since I've been here. But that's a part of living. And I guess if you're President, it's just sort of a -- relief. And the pressure of it may seem more, but I don't know that there's any -- I feel very blessed in the way that I had my mother as long as I did.

Just last week, a man who's been a friend of mine for 25 years -- he's only a year older than I am -- passed away, a magnificent man. And I was thinking, when he came to see me -- he knew he was sick, he came up here and stayed with mother and me right before she died. And he said, I would liked to have lived longer, but I feel fortunate to have lived as well as I did and to have known as much as I did. And I thought it was such a brave thing for him to say.

So the personal losses just come along with it. The political reversals, I think, are -- they've been analyzed to death; no point in talking about them. But they can't reverse the truth. I mean, there is a truth here. We had a lot of problems on our hands when I showed up in '93. And we've begun to get our economic house in order; we've begun to put education first again; we've begun to tackle the tough problems that have been long ignored; we've begun to make the kind of revolutionary changes in the government that need to be made to get us into the 21st century. We've begun to focus on trying to empower people and communities to solve their own problems. And we've just got to keep working on it.

Q But how does it make you feel when you read, as you inevitably must, these stories about approval ratings and people don't want you to run for reelection and speculation about Democrats challenging you? Do you just not deal with that, or how do you --

THE PRESIDENT: There's nothing I can do about it. All people can do is have judgements based on what they see and hear. And my mission is to tell the best -- to do the best job I can to do

the job, and then to take whatever time I can to try to tell the people about what we're doing and try to involve them on the journey.

Q You've been counted out a time or two before, and proved people wrong.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, that's right. But this is not about me, this is about the American people. What they think about me is something I'll leave for the election. The important thing is what I think about them. And they have been subject to a -- it is difficult for them to get beyond their own problems now for too many people. And it's easy for them, I guess, to believe the negative characterization. And maybe I haven't done as well as I should in communicating with them.

But the point is, the country is in better shape than it was when I took office. And we finally -- we have a responsible budget for the first time in ages. We have a responsible trade policy. We have a responsible education and training policy. We have a responsible policy on reducing the size and bulk of the federal government, but focusing on the missions the federal government should pursue; and trying to empower people to take more responsibility for their own lives. We're focused on the future; on middle-class interests and middle-class values; on this new ethic of responsibility as well as opportunity and rebuilding the communities of this country. That is all I can do.

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person who holds this office to be able to do things that would get beyond the confines of the White House, and would be in touch with ordinary citizens. And so I have high levels of confidence in the Secret Service. There is -- it's impossible to have a 100-percent guarantee for anybody, but they have done a terrific job, I think. And I feel good about it.

Q One last question before Ginny runs me out of here. Any developments from Korea? And how long are you willing to be as patient as you're being?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me just say this. All I can tell you today is exactly what I said yesterday. I think he -- our serviceman should be released. The helicopter made a mistake and got into their airspace. But there was -- it was a routine training mission. And I have someone there who is working very hard as we speak.

Q Is he making progress?

THE PRESIDENT: So anything else I say would be premature. I just don't think I can say anything --

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: -- except that I'm very interested in it. I've been getting reports regularly, ever since he's been there.

Q Are you still hopeful he'll be released soon?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm hopeful. I think it should be done, but I don't have any progress report. I certainly don't have a lack of progress report. I just don't want to say anything today while we're working this.

Q Okay. Thank you sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks.

Q Happy New Year to you in Little Rock.

THE PRESIDENT: You too, I enjoyed it.

END

1:42 P.M. EST