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Remarks to Media Executives at a White House Briefing on Drug Abuse

March 7, 1988

I'm delighted all of you could come by today. The question before us is a simple one: What value do we place on human dignity and on human worth? I realize that's rather bluntly put. But you know, one of the things I've been intrigued by while I've held this job is an attitude in government that says every approach to public policy issues must be complicated and indirect. Now, come to think of it -- and I know this will come as a surprise -- it kind of reminds me of an anecdote from back in the days when I was also in the media business, in radio.

And most of you will remember for those radio dramas the sound-effects man and all of the things that he devised, from coconut shells that he would pound on his chest to be a horse galloping and so forth. This one particular time at WHO-Des Moines, rehearsing for a play there, and there was a sound effect that called for water falling on a board. And the sound-effect man went to work. He tried sand on a drum, and he tried rice on cardboard and peas on something else. And he was going on, and he couldn't get anything that sounded, through the microphone, like water on a board. And it was getting near show time, and somebody suggested trying water on a board. [Laughter] And you know, it sounded just like water on a board.

Well, that may seem a long way from the drug problem, but it isn't. Trying water on the board is really what we've tried to do with America's problem. You see, so much has changed during the past few years that I'm not sure many of us remember the skepticism that greeted early antidrug efforts. There were even those who questioned whether drugs were that much of a threat to society. Well, we're wiser now, and sadly so. We know that the price our society and our

children have paid for laxity about what is quite simply a public health menace of the first order. Which is what brings us here today.

I know most of you in the media are cautious about being part of joint efforts with any government agency, and as a general rule, I think this caution is well-advised. But on certain matters of life and death, on questions of national survival, I think there's room for common purpose between us. The fact that those of us here today and people from almost every walk of life are now allied on this issue indicates a new public consensus, a consensus that has developed around what we just talked about, a very simple, very direct set of propositions: that drugs hurt, that drugs kill, that each of us must in our daily lives just say no to drug use and drug users. And saying no doesn't just mean a private refusal to use drugs: It also means taking active steps against drugs or drug use whenever it occurs and whenever we see it.

Now, this set of very direct propositions has had impact. For the first time, we're seeing progress -- progress measured in statistics, but also in something much more profound: a change in awareness across America, a change that puts the goal of a drug free generation within our grasp. The most recent survey of the Nation's high school seniors is indicative of the change. Even more revealing than the fact that one-third fewer seniors acknowledged current use of cocaine in 1987 than the year before, almost all the students said it was wrong even to try a drug like cocaine. So, America, and especially young people, are realizing that we have a drug abuse problem and that illegal drugs are deadly and wrong.

It's gratifying to see that in homes, schools, businesses, and communities across the United States the wall of denial is crashing down. We're also recognizing that individual freedom does not include the right to self or social destruction. Drug use is not a victimless crime; it is not a private matter. While we must be concerned with the personal consequences for the individual, we must demonstrate our great concern for the millions of innocent citizens who pay the high price for the illegal drug use of some. These costs are measured by crime and terrorism. One recent study suggests as much as 50 to 75 percent of crime is drug-related. There is also lost productivity, increased health care costs, continuing threats to worker and public safety, the transmission of AIDS, and an overall degradation of our society.

If I could interject right here: In a community in California several years ago, before we began to get as serious as we are about this problem, the Santa Barbara Police Department -- they were pretty much aware of the users and so forth, and on a weekend they rounded all they could

gather, rounded them up, and put them in the hoosegow for the weekend. And they did it as an experiment. The burglary rate in Santa Barbara dropped to virtually zero while those users were off the street.

So, we're also overcoming an erroneous perception of the illicit drug user as powerless to act against drug availability, peer pressure, or his or her general lot in life. In fact, our nation's law enforcement officers, while hitting the pushers and suppliers with a force greater than ever before, acknowledge that the drug abuse problem will ultimately be solved by preventing nonusers from ever starting to use illegal drugs and getting current users to quit.

Finally, we're having to face squarely those things which we've built into our culture that enable illegal drugs to exist in our society. As citizens and individuals, we're realizing that, although government must do everything possible to help, a solution to the drug problem will only come when each of us directly confronts and rejects the cultural acceptance of illegal drug use in our daily lives.

In 1981 there were a lot of people who believed drug abuse was so rampant that we were defenseless to do anything about it. But as I said, we're taking down the surrender flag that has flown over so many drug efforts; we're running up a battle flag. We can fight the drug problem, and we can win. This call was answered by concerned citizens from around the country who were committed not only to fighting drug use but to achieving that drug free generation of young Americans that is now our goal.

Last week Nancy and I spoke to over 2,000 such individuals at the White House Conference for a Drug Free America. Believe me, not so long ago, this conference would not have been possible. And there are still those who continue to say that, because we have not quickly solved a problem which took decades to develop, we should throw in the towel. Let's remember that our actions today are an investment in the future.

We know there are a large number of individuals, primarily those who acquired their drug-use habits in the sixties and seventies, who persist in using illegal drugs. And this persistent demand for illegal drugs is met by sometimes seemingly limitless supply. But a surge in drug-related crimes, deaths by overdose, births of drug-addicted and drug-impaired babies, and even the destabilization of national governments by traffickers should not be viewed as harbingers of defeat in our war on drugs. These events should instead strengthen our resolve to stop this insidious evil once and for all.

No, America's awakening to its drug problem has not come easily. We remember a nation stunned after the death of Len Bias. The same rude awakening has occurred only recently in the Washington, DC, area and nationally as to the stranglehold of drug criminals on foreign governments. But believe me, with each jolt into reality, we strengthen our offenses and move closer to a drug free America. Remember, the shock of recognition is not a sign of defeat; it's the beginning of victory.

Many important campaigns are now underway. Businesses are taking strong action against drug use in the workplace. Several States, such as New Jersey and Missouri, have enacted stricter laws against illegal drug use and trafficking. A number of important initiatives are underway to achieve drug free schools, drug free public housing, and drug free transportation. Our law enforcement officials have aggressive offenses underway. We're working to improve treatment and to increase the drug users' incentives for seeking help. And we're working internationally with the individual countries and organizations, like the United Nations, to stem growth, production, and transit of narcotics.

And here your own work has been particularly important. Long gone are the days when drug coverage focused on what the Government was --or too often, was not --doing to solve the drug problem. Today drug abuse is the subject of major industry initiatives and in-depth specials on the nightly news, daily newspapers, and weekly magazines. Also gone are the days when drug use was frequently glamorized in movies and television, on radio, and in print. Today the media is revealing the deadly truth about drugs and why each of us must take a stand.

So, in addition to your individual efforts, I hope you will keep up your tough reporting on this story. This means holding government officials accountable, of course, but it also means keeping a close eye on trends in drug use in America and reporting to your readers fully and fairly about those efforts. Let me assure you that when Nancy and I see stories about how far we have to go in this battle, we welcome them.

I also want to mention at least some of your individual programs. The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences is actively promoting an ongoing awareness of the drug abuse problem to be reflected in everything which is broadcast. The National Association of Broadcasters is now in its fifth year of the NAB on-air initiatives, which include a variety of major programs against drug and alcohol abuse. The Media-Advertising Partnership for a Drug Free America, the largest antidrug use advertising campaign ever attempted, is working toward a \$1½ billion in

volunteered media time and space to "unsell" illegal drugs. The 3 major TV networks, 13 cable networks, 13 radio networks, and the Nation's newspapers and magazines are donating space and time for the media-advertising partnership antidrug use advertisements. The Miami Herald has published more than 175 anti-drug use public service ads, many of them full-page, since joining the campaign just last year. Capital Cities/ABC broke with its tradition of local autonomy for its many print and broadcasting properties in 1984 after the death of an employee due to a drug overdose. They implemented a companywide substance abuse policy.

In addition, ABC contributed 482 commercials, half in prime time, to media-advertising partnership spots in the past 9 months. The Boston Herald launched "Say No To Drugs," a major community-based drug education campaign designed to help combat drug abuse among young people in the greater Boston area. The Chicago Sun-Times has teamed up with WLS-TV Chicago in "Say No To Drugs." The Motion Picture Association has produced a series of antidrug messages, which are shown before their feature films in movie theaters across the country.

I don't want to brag, but one of these PSA's features my own leading lady. All of these initiatives liberally [literally] represent billions of dollars in expertise and coverage, which has been invaluable in moving toward a drug free America. And this is just to mention a few examples of the excellent work that all of you are doing.

So, on behalf of the next generation of Americans -- the many lives that will be saved and whose futures will be bettered -- I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to each one of you. Thank you, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 1:30 p.m. in the Indian Treaty Room of the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Len Bias, a University of Maryland basketball player who died of a drug overdose in 1986.

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