

in the Executive Office Building. And all of the departments you see here represented and leaders you see represented around this table will be represented in that room. And we are going to work constantly, day and night, until we have a health care plan ready to submit to the Congress that we believe we can pass.

Finally, let me say I am committed to doing this in a partnership with the Congress. I will ask the leadership of the Congress to work with me on a bipartisan basis and to do whatever we can to make sure that as we present the plan, we have also maximized its chances of early passage in the Congress.

I thank all these people for their willingness to serve and to work together. I hope the American people will see just how passionately I personally am committed to doing something about health care reform. We've talked about it long enough. The time has come to act, and I have chosen the course that I think is most likely to lead to action that will improve the lives of millions of Americans.

*Q.* Mr. President, can you provide universal coverage without driving up the deficit?

*The President.* I think you can do it if you control the cost of health care. You have to really—let me just—I don't want to get into one of these things that provoke a lot of cartoons about my policy wonk weakness, but we're at 14 percent of our income on health care now. The next most expensive health care system in the world is Canada's. It's at about 9.2 percent of income. That is a huge difference, massive. And yet, every other major country with which we compete provides some basic health care to everybody, something we don't do. So the answer to your question is, in my judgment, if we do this right over the next 8 years, you're going to see huge savings in tax dollars and even bigger savings, more than twice the savings, in private dollars that will free up hundreds of billions of dollars literally between now and the end of the decade to reinvest in economic growth and opportunity.

In the short run, our tough call will be, how do you take the savings and phase in universal coverage, or should there be some other way to pay for that? We've got some short-term calls to make. But there's no question that in the medium term, 5 to 8 years, you're looking at massive savings with universal coverage, in both tax dollars and private sector dollars, if we do it right.

*Q.* Mr. President, do you intend to pay the First Lady for her efforts?

*The President.* No. No. I never have paid her for her public service efforts. I don't want to start now.

*Q.* Is 100 days hard and fast, or are you willing to be flexible on that if it's not quite ready?

*The President.* If it were 101 days I wouldn't have a heart attack, but I don't want to—I want it done now. I think we know what the major alternatives are. What we have to do now is something nobody's done, and that is to meld them into the best possible legislation, taking account of some of the problems that exist with every course.

And let me make one acknowledgment on the front end about this. Legitimate objections can be raised to any course of action in this area. That is, there is no such thing as a perfect solution. So whatever course we choose to take, somebody can say, "Well, it's not perfect for these reasons." To that, I have two answers, and I'm going to say this until I'm blue in the face for this entire year until we get action. Number one, the worst thing we can do is keep on doing what we're doing now, because more and more people are falling out of the system and the cost is becoming more and more burdensome to those who are still bearing it. So whatever course we take, we will preserve what is best about American health care, some consumer choice and the quality of care. So whatever problems we have, they won't be as bad as the ones we've got now. Number two, this is not going to be the end of the line. Whatever problems are there can be fixed later. But we will never, never get anywhere if we stand paralyzed, because there's no such thing as a perfect alternative.

*Q.* What factors did you consider in giving this high-profile position to Mrs. Clinton?

*The President.* Of all the people I've ever worked with in my life, she's better at organizing and leading people from a complex beginning to a certain end than anybody I've ever worked with in my life. And that's what I want done here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:02 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House at a meeting of the Health Care Working Group.