

Q. But do you think that you hadn't examined the practical problems—

Q. Sir, I just wonder, do you think in retrospect that—obviously, you didn't intend the first week—I'm sorry, you want to—

The President. No, I had always planned to allow some period of time during which policies would be developed to deal with what I think are the significant practical problems. This, in effect, may reverse the process over what I intended to do, but there has to be a time in which these issues, these practical issues are developed and policies are developed to deal with them.

Q. Obviously, you didn't intend the first week of your administration, given your promise to have the laser focus on the economy, to be seen around the country as military gay rights week. I wonder if in retrospect you think you could have done things differently to have avoided that happening?

The President. I don't know how I could have done that. The Joint Chiefs asked for a meeting about a number of issues, in which this was only one. We spent a lot of time talking about other things. This issue was not put forward in this context by me; it was put forward by those in the United States Senate who sought to make it an issue early on. And I don't know how I could have stopped them from doing that.

Q. You don't think that in making the promise and then in promising to follow through on it early that you might have given rise to this, do you, sir?

The President. Well, I think it was pretty clear to me that we were talking about some sort of 6-month process days and days ago. And the people who wanted it debated now were not deterred by that, and probably a lot of them won't be deterred by the agreement announced today. I think that we must—they have the perfect right to do this. But the timing of this whole issue was clearly forced by the people in the Senate who were opposed to any change of the policy no matter what the facts are. And I think that was their right to do, but they control the timing of this, not me.

Q. Two questions. First of all, just to make sure that we're clear on this: July 15th this happens, period, regardless of what comes out at these hearings, is that correct? The ban will be issued, or will be lifted, rather?

The President. That is my position. My position is that I still embrace the principle, and

I think it should be done. The position of those who are opposed to me is that they think that the problems will be so overwhelming everybody with good sense will change their position. I don't expect to do that.

Q. So you definitely expect to do it. And secondly—

The President. I don't expect to change my position, no.

Q. What do you think is going to happen in the military? There have been all sorts of dire predictions of violence, of mass coming-out, whatever. What do you think the impact of this is going to be, practically?

The President. For one thing, I think if you look at the last 10 years of experience here, according to the reports we have, this country spent \$500 million in tax dollars to separate something under 16,500 homosexuals from the service and has dealt with complaints, at least, of sexual abuse, heterosexual abuse, largely against women, far greater volumes. But during this period, we have plainly had the best educated, best trained, most cohesive military force in the history of the United States. And everybody, ask anybody, and the Joint Chiefs will tell you that.

They agreed that we should stop asking the question. This single thing that is dividing people on this debate, I want to make it very clear that this is a very narrow issue. It is whether a person, in the absence of any other disqualifying conduct, can simply say that he or she is homosexual and stay in the service. I do not expect that to spark this kind of problem. And I certainly think in the next 6 months, as people start to work it through and talk it through, a lot of legitimate, practical issues will be raised and dealt with in a more rational environment that is less charged. That is certainly what I hope will happen.

Thank you.

Q. Want to tell us what the other problem was you were working on, Mr. President, on the Middle East, sir?

The President. No, tomorrow or the next day.

NOTE: The President's first news conference began at 1:44 p.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House.