

Senator Daschle, Congressman Gephardt, and I agree on the need to repair older classrooms and build new ones. We know it should be a top priority this year, and we intend to make it so. We also agree on other priorities as well: a strong, enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights; sensible gun safety legislation; the "Hate Crimes Prevention Act"; strengthening Social Security; modernizing Medicare with a voluntary prescription drug benefit and strengthening it; and raising the minimum wage.

We've seen bipartisan support for all these programs in Congress. We know that outside Washington, none of these are partisan issues. In the first days of the new millennium, there is a new sense of hope and renewal across our country. We can build on that spirit not just to make this a changing of the calendar but to make it a changing of the times. Our New Year's resolution is to reach across party lines to help our children reach for the sky.

Now I'd like to ask Senator Daschle and Congressman Gephardt to say a few words.

[At this point, Senator Thomas A. Daschle and Representative Richard A. Gephardt made brief remarks.]

Q. Mr. President—on that point, Mr. President, how convinced are you—

*Elian Gonzalez*

Q. Can I ask you about the decision of the INS to return Elian Gonzalez to his father in Cuba?

*The President.* Well, the INS followed the law and the procedures and made the decision that they made after an exhaustive review of the facts. And I told you when we started this that I would do my best to keep this decision out of politics. We have done that. We have not been involved in it. And they, I'm convinced, followed the law and the facts, did the best they could with the decision.

*Legislative Agenda and 2000 Campaign*

Q. Mr. President, are you concerned that there may not be as much support within the Democratic caucus as you'd like for your program? Since every issue that is passed is one less issue that can be used in an election to retake Congress.

*The President.* Well, the short answer to your question is no, because I think if you look at the progress we have made in the last 3 or

4 years, it has not weakened the Democrats. The people hire us to come to work here every day. We all draw a paycheck paid for by the taxpayers. And we came to Washington because we wanted to do things for America. I think that it does not hurt the cause of the Democratic Party to pass these reforms.

I think there will always be things that we disagree on that we won't be able to resolve; there will always be differences of opinion that will shape the coming election. And that is in the very nature of democracy. So I don't believe that it in any way weakens the position of my party in the coming elections to do things that are good for America now.

Q. With Social Security and Medicare, are you prepared in either your State of the Union or your budget to propose structural reforms or, as you've indicated in the past, because of the political realities, the political danger of these issues, do you have to wait, get behind closed doors and walk out with Trent Lott and Hastert to announce it?

*The President.* Well, first of all, I think there is a process that has been established that will start in the Senate for dealing with Medicare next year. And I am very hopeful that it will produce an agreement there.

On Social Security, as I have repeatedly pointed out, there is one thing we could do that would take Social Security beyond the life of the baby boom generation, which is simply to dedicate the interest savings in the national debt from the Social Security surplus to the Social Security Trust Fund. If we just did that, a simple bill, we could take Social Security out beyond the life of the baby boom generation.

If we want to go to 75 years instead of 50, then the best way to do that is to continue the work I've tried to do last year. You know, we had a big Social Security meeting. We had over 40 Members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans, over here at Blair House to talk about this. And I am prepared to meet with them and to work with them to try to work through this. And if there is a willingness to do it, I am certainly more than willing to do my part and to meet them halfway on it.

*Residence in Chappaqua, NY*

Q. How often are you going to visit your new house?