

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT WILLIAM J. CLINTON IN ACCEPTANCE OF HUMAN RADIATION FINAL REPORT

October 3, 1995
Old Executive Office Building

Let me begin with a simple thank you to everyone who participated in this extraordinary project and to everyone who supported them.

I want to thank Secretary O'Leary for her extraordinary devotion to this cause. And you heard in her remarks basically the way that she views this. It's a part of her ongoing commitment to finish the end of the Cold War. And perhaps no Energy Secretary has ever done as much as she has to be an advocate, whether it is for continued reforms within the Energy Department or her outspoken endorsement of the strongest possible commitment on the part of the United States to a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which I believe we will achieve next year in no small measure thanks to the support of the Secretary of Energy.

And, of course, I want to thank Dr. Ruth Faden for her extraordinary commitment of about a year and a half of her life to this unusual but important task.

And all of you who served on the committee—I remember the first time we put this committee together. I do thank you so much for the work you have done.

I saw this committee as an indispensable part of our effort to restore the confidence of the American people in the integrity of their government. All of these political reform issues to me are integrated. When I became the President, I realized we had great new economic challenges, we had profound social problems, that a lot of these things had to be done by an energized American citizenry, but that our national government had a role to play in moving our country through this period of transition. And in order to do it, we needed to increase the capacity of the government to do it through political reform, but we also needed, as much as anything else, to increase the confidence of the American people that, at the very least, they could trust the United States Government to tell the truth and to do the right things.

So you have to understand that, for me, one reason this is so important is that I see it as part of our ongoing effort to give this government back to the American people—Senator Glenn’s long effort to get Congress to apply to itself the same laws it imposes on the private sector—the restrictions that I imposed on members of my administration in high positions for lobbying for foreign governments; and when the lobby bill failed in the Congress, I just imposed it by executive order on members of the Executive Branch. All these efforts at political reform, it seems to me, are important.

But none of these efforts can succeed unless people believe that they can rely on their government to tell them the truth and to do the right thing. We have declassified thousands of government documents, files from second world war, the Cold War, President Kennedy’s assassination. These actions are not only consistent with our national security, they are essential to advance our values.

So, to me, that’s what this is all about. And to all those who represent the families who have been involved in these incidents, let me say to you, I hope you feel that your government has kept its commitment to the American people to tell the truth and to do the right thing.

We discovered soon after I entered office that with the specter of an atomic war looming like Armageddon far nearer than it does today, the United States government actually did carry out on our citizens experiments involving radiation. That’s when I ordered the creation of this committee. Dr. Faden and the others did a superb job. They enlisted many of our nation’s most significant and important medical and scientific ethicists. They had to determine first whether experiments conducted or sponsored by our government between 1944 and 1974 met the ethical and scientific standards of that time and of our time. And then they had to see to it that our research today lives up to nothing less than our highest values and our most deeply-held beliefs.

From the beginning, it was obvious to me that this energetic committee was prepared to do its part. We declassified thousands of pages of documents. We gave committee members the keys to the government’s doors, file cabinets and safes. For the last year and a half, the only thing that stood between them and the truth were all the late nights and hard work they had to put in.

This report I received today is a monumental document—in more ways than one. But it is a very, very important piece of America’s history, and it will shape America’s future in ways that will make us a more honorable, more successful and more ethical country.

What this committee learned I would like to review today with a little more detail than Dr. Faden said, because I think it must be engraved on our national memory. Thousands of government-sponsored experiments did take place at hospitals, universities, and military bases around our nation. The goal was to understand the effects of radiation exposure on the human body.

While most of the tests were ethical by any standards, some were unethical, not only by today's standards, but by the standards of the time in which they were conducted. They failed both the test of our national values and the test of humanity.

In one experiment, scientists injected plutonium into 18 patients without their knowledge. In another, doctors exposed indigent cancer patients to excessive doses of radiation, a treatment from which it is virtually impossible that they could ever benefit.

The report also demonstrates that these and other experiments were carried out on precisely those citizens who count most on the government for its help—the destitute and the gravely ill. But the dispossessed were not alone. Members of the military—precisely those on whom we and our government count most—they were also test subjects.

Informed consent means your doctor tells you the risk of the treatment you are about to undergo. In too many cases, informed consent was withheld. Americans were kept in the dark about the effects of what was being done to them. The deception extended beyond the test subjects themselves to encompass their families and the American people as a whole, for these experiments were kept secret. And they were shrouded not for a compelling reason of national security, but for the simple fear of embarrassment, and that was wrong.

Those who led the government when these decisions were made are no longer here to take responsibility for what they did. They are not here to apologize to the survivors, the family members or the communities who's lives were darkened by the shadow of the atom and these choices.

So today, on behalf of another generation of American leaders and another generation of American citizens, the United States of America offers a sincere apology to those of our citizens who were subjected to these experiments, to their families, and to their communities.

When the government does wrong, we have a moral responsibility to admit it. The duty we owe to one another to tell the truth and to protect our fellow citizens from excesses like these is one we can never walk away from. Our government failed in that duty, and it offers an apology to the survivors and their families and to all the American people who must—who must be able to rely upon the United States to keep its word, to tell the truth, and to do the right thing.

We know there are moments when words alone are not enough. That's why I am instructing my Cabinet to use and build on these recommendations, to devise promptly a system of relief, including compensation, that meets the standards of justice and conscience.

When called for, we will work with Congress to serve the best needs of those who were harmed. Make no mistake, as the committee report says, there are circumstances where compensation is appropriate as a matter of ethics and principle. I am committed to seeing to it that the United States of America lives up to its responsibility.

Our greatness is measured not only in how we so frequently do right, but also how we act when we know we've done the wrong thing; how we confront our mistakes, make our apologies, and take action.

That's why this morning, I signed an executive order instructing every arm and agency of our government that conducts, supports, or regulates research involving human beings to review immediately their procedures, in light of the recommendations of this report, and the best knowledge and standards available today, and to report back to me by Christmas.

I have also created a Bioethics Advisory Commission to supervise the process, to watch over all such research, and to see to it that never again do we stray from the basic values of protecting our people and being straight with them.

The report I received today will not be left on a shelf to gather dust. Every one of its pages offers a lesson, and every lesson will be learned from these good people who put a year and a half of their lives into the effort to set America straight.

Medical and scientific progress depends upon learning about people's responses to new medicines, to new cutting-edge treatments. Without this kind of research, our children would still be

dying from polio and other killers. Without responsible radiation research, we wouldn't be making the progress we are in the war on cancer. We have to continue to research, but there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

There are local citizens' review boards, there are regulations that establish proper informed consent and ensure that experiments are conducted ethically. But in overseeing this necessary research, we must never relax our vigilance.

The breathtaking advances in science and technology demand that we always keep our ethical watchlight burning. No matter how rapid the pace of change, it can never outrun our core convictions that have stood us so well as a nation for more than 200 years now, through many different scientific revolutions.

I believe we will meet the test of our times—that as science and technology evolve, our ethical conscience will grow, not shrink. Informed consent, community right-to-know, our entire battery of essential human protections—all these grew up in response to the health and humanitarian crises of this 20th century. They are proof that we are equal to our challenges.

Science is not ever simply objective. It emerges from the crucible of historical circumstances and personal experience. Times of crisis and fear can call forth bad science, even science we know in retrospect to be unethical. Let us remember the difficult years chronicled in this report, and think about how good people could have done things that we know were wrong.

Let these pages serve as an internal reminder to hold humility and moral accountability in higher esteem than we do the latest development in technology. Let us remember, too, that cynicism about government has roots in historical circumstances. Because of stonewallings and evasions in the past, times when a family member or a neighbor suffered an injustice and had nowhere to turn and couldn't even get the facts, some Americans lost faith in the promise of our democracy. Government was very powerful, but very far away and not trusted to be ethical.

So today, by making ourselves accountable for the sins of the past, I hope more than anything else, we are laying the foundation stone for a new era. Good people, like these members of Congress who have labored on this issue for a long time, and have devoted their careers to trying to do the right thing, and having people justifiably feel confidence in the work of their representatives. They will continue to work to see that we implement these recommendations.

And under our watch, we will no longer hide the truth from our citizens. We will act as if all that we do will see the light of day. Nothing that happens in Washington will ever be more important in anyone's life affected by these experiments, perhaps, than these reports we issue today. But all of us as Americans will be better off because of the larger lesson we learned in this exercise and because of our continuing effort to demonstrate to our people that we can be faithful to their values.

Thank you very much.