

President Bill Clinton's Remarks Following a Walking Tour Of Tornado Damage in Del City, Oklahoma May 8, 1999

Thank you very much. Governor Keating and Mrs. Keating; Congressmen Istook and Lucas; I don't know if Senator Nickles and—there he is, over there. Thank you very much.

We have, obviously, James Lee Witt, our FEMA Director, here with me, and Buddy Young, his Regional Director, and many others here: our SBA Administrator, Aida Alvarez; the Deputy Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Saul Ramirez; Mayor Lewis; Mayor Nelson; Mayor Reed; and a lot of other Oklahoma State officials who are here.

Let me say to all of you, I was talking last night to my wife, and we were remembering all the tornadoes that we dealt with when I was Governor of Arkansas. You may know that our two States have the highest incidence of tornadoes in the entire country. I have been going to these sites for 20 years, most of them with James Lee Witt, and this is the most devastating tornado I have ever seen. I have never seen so much complete destruction of homes over so wide an area. And of course, you know that at least for a couple of communities, the measurement of the tornado was virtually off the charts.

And I just want you to know—and I came into this neighborhood today, and I saw all these American flags sticking up, all the people rooting around in the rubble of their houses, looking for those family photos and the marriage licenses and the other records of family life, but with a strong spirit. It was profoundly moving to me.

And I want to say that our hearts go out to those who have lost so much and, obviously, especially to the families of those people who lost their lives. But we also thank you for setting an example of what is very best in this country, the way you have reacted to this.

I want to say a special word of thanks to the police and fire personnel, the National Guard, the Red Cross, all the people who volunteer, the young AmeriCorps volunteers over there, everybody who's been a part of this. I am very grateful. And I'd like to thank the citizens of Oklahoma. When the Governor said there had not been a single incident of looting, even though there had been no curfew, I think that says it all. And again, let me say to all of you, I am profoundly grateful.

There are a couple of things that I'd like to say that we're trying to do in addition to what you know already. FEMA has got a 1-800 number. We're trying to get in touch with all the businesses, as well as the homeowners and the people who have lost their cars and other things. But we also are today going to make available about \$12 million from the Department of Labor, which will provide 3,500 temporary jobs that will be directed to people who lost their jobs because their businesses were taken out by the tornado.

And these jobs—though obviously they pay better, a lot better than unemployment compensation—so we can put several thousand people to work in the reconstruction process, everything from delivering water and food supplies to doing cleanup to actually helping on some of the construction crews. We'll be able to do that. We talked with your congressional delegation today, and we're going to look and see if we can do more.

But there will be several people here who will be out of their own jobs for months while the rebuilding occurs. And we're going to go back to Washington, try to figure out exactly how many people are going to be out of work, for how long, and try to make sure we can provide funding for work that actually needs to be done. We don't have to make up these jobs. You can look around. There's a lot of work that needs to be done here. So we'll try to do that.

The second thing that I wanted to mention, that the Governor has talked a lot about, is that I want to thank everybody who was involved in the weather warning because hundreds of lives were saved by that: the people at the weather service; the people here in Oklahoma who worked on this; the law enforcement people that went up and down the streets and blared

their sirens and were on loudspeakers; the television stations that showed the pictures and the patterns and predictions. Over and over and over, people say how grateful they are for that. We are working—and one of the things that is in the balanced budget this year that I very much hope will pass is several million dollars more to develop the next system of Doppler radar, which the Governor reminded me was developed here at the University of Oklahoma. And I think it's very important that we continue to improve that.

I also very strongly support establishing a national weather center with the help of Federal funds at the University of Oklahoma, to see what we can do not only to provide even better warning but perhaps to dilute the strength of some of these very powerful tornadoes before they hit, and we'll be working on that.

The last point I would like to make is something I'd like everyone who lost a home to think about. We believe—no, I take that back—we know that lives can be saved under almost all conditions if there is at least one room properly encased and protected with concrete in a house. Now, in the loans which will be given for rebuilding the homes, 20 percent of the loan money can be used for protective purposes, for preventive purposes. Isn't that right? Yes—to make safe rooms. The average cost of one of these safe closets, if you do it with a closet, is only about \$2,000. The Governor will have discretionary funds available from the Federal Government that will actually permit him to contribute some of that money to families whose incomes are so modest they can't afford it on their own.

So if you don't remember anything else I say today, remember this: For goodness sake, build a safe room in your house when you rebuild. Go in and do the—any kind of alterations you have to do. It will be the cheapest \$2,000 you ever spent. If you don't have the money, get in touch with the right people at the State. We'll try to get them enough money to provide some help. But we will be able to save nearly everybody if we can do this. And in this rebuilding, once again, Oklahoma can show the way for America, if the word gets out that everybody here is determined to have one of these safe, reinforced closets in their homes.

We can't promise you that there will never be another tornado. We can promise you we'll do our best to continue to improve the warning. We'll see if the frontiers of science can widen to the point where we can dilute the strength of the storm. We'll put Oklahoma at the center of that.

But you can do something to help and to set an example for people throughout the United States in the areas that are vulnerable to tornadoes, by rebuilding with these safe and reinforced rooms.

Again, I'm sorry. Our hearts are with you. We'll be with you throughout the rebuilding. But thank you—thank you for once again showing the whole country what is best about America.

God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:40 p.m. in the Del Aire neighborhood at the corner of 42d Street and Angela Drive. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Frank Keating, and his wife, Cathy; Federal Emergency Management Agency Region VI Director Raymond Lloyd (Buddy) Young; Mayor Glenn Lewis of Moore, OK; Mayor Harry L. Nelson of Del City, OK; and Mayor Eddie O. Reed of Midwest City, OK.

