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The President. I'll do my very best. Only an intervening circumstance stopped me last time. I hope I can come back and do it. He wants the privilege of beating me on the home soil, and I suppose I'll have to let him do that someday.

Q. Are you definitely coming to Dublin in December?

The President. I don't know yet.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:25 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to George J. Mitchell, Special Adviser to the President and the Secretary of State on Economic Initiatives for Ireland; and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Spring of Ireland. A reporter referred to Ian Paisley, Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party leader. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Welfare Reform in Kansas City, Missouri

September 10, 1996

The President. Let me thank you, Clyde and Gayle and Congresswoman McCarthy and Mayor Cleaver, and to all of you who have come here. I was with some of you back in 1994 to talk about what Missouri was doing, and I wanted to come back because, as all of you know, the welfare system is about to change nationwide. And I have worked very hard in the last 4 years to help people move from welfare to work. There are nearly 2 million fewer people on welfare today than there were the day I became President. And we've done it by working with States and giving them waivers from Federal rules.

But this new welfare reform law fundamentally changes the bargain. It basically says, we will continue to guarantee to every person on welfare health care, food for the children and the family, child care if they go to work, but what used to come in the monthly check will now be given to the State either to continue as a monthly check or to be used in some other way to move into the workplace.

And the States have to meet very stiff requirements on getting jobs for people. And I'm convinced that the only way the States are going to be able to really move large numbers of people to work in a short time is with a partnership with the private sector, doing what Missouri has done, using what used to be the welfare check or a food stamp check as an income supplement to a private employer who can then engage in training and work, and do what you've done.

I'm going over to speak to the Southern Governors' Association, which Governor Carnahan is hosting here, to talk to these Governors about what they have to do now. But before I do, I wanted to come back here and listen to all of you and thank you, those of you who have moved from welfare to work, and thank the employers for being involved in this program but also to emphasize to the American people and to the press and, through them, to the American people what has to happen next.

As I've said repeatedly, the whole debate on welfare in Washington was largely a political debate until this law was signed. And I'm sure when you read in the newspaper or saw on the evening news some of the things that were said, it didn't strike you as particularly real, based on your own experience; it's just—a lot of it was politics.

But the politics is over now. The law's changed, and the States and the communities now have a responsibility to create a story like yours for every able-bodied person on welfare in America. That's basically what this law says. And we've got to have help from employers, or we can't make it. So it's very exciting to me.

And let me just make one other point about this. I really believe—and that's why I wanted you to have a chance to tell your story to the country, thanks to the help of these people who are with us here—I really believe that what we should want for people who hit a rough spot in their life and don't have much income is what we want for all American families: What we want is for people to be able to succeed in raising their children and to be able to suc-

ceed in the workplace. And if our country has to make a choice between one or the other, we're going to be in trouble. Everybody's most important job is raising their kids. But if the economy doesn't work, we're in trouble. And if we have to give up raising our kids to make the economy work, we're in trouble.

So, to me, welfare reform is part of a larger agenda to help all Americans succeed at work and at home. We lowered taxes for the lowest income working people in 1993, 15 million of them, so that they wouldn't have any incentive to fall back on welfare. We've tried to help people with immunizing their children and in a whole range of other areas.

And one thing that's become, unfortunately, controversial again in the last couple of days—the first bill I signed was the family and medical leave law which basically says you don't lose your job if you take some time off when a baby's born or a parent's sick. I think it should be expanded in a limited way to let people go to parent-teacher conferences or regular doctor's appointments with their kids. But I certainly don't think it should be repealed. I think that would be a mistake, because what we're trying to do, again, is to create an environment in which people can succeed at home and at work.

And I'm trying to take all these issues out of politics, if I can, and get them down to people. So that's why I'm glad to be here; that's why I thank you for letting me come. And Clyde, why don't you go on with the program and maybe we'll all learn a lot about what you're doing here.

[*At this point, Clyde McQueen, president, Full Employment Council, invited former welfare recipients to share their experiences with the employment program. A participant stated that moving from welfare to work made her a better role model to her children, suggested that more men should participate in the program, and described program services.*]

The President. You made a comment about how it's important to get the men involved. Let me just say—maybe everyone in the press knows this, but let me emphasize, the reason that's important in terms of what they're doing here in Missouri and what we can do under welfare reform is that with certain rare exceptions—some States cover two-parent households with welfare—but basically, single men cannot get welfare in America; if they get any income supplement, it's something they get from the State. What they have been getting from the Federal Government is food stamps, and if they're able-bodied, that's been cut back.

But what Missouri is doing is taking the food stamps income that men could get, along with the welfare income that women could get, and making them both available as supplements to employers if they will hire people either off welfare or idle men who are only getting food stamps. And so this State has really done, I think, a remarkable job of trying to use all the tools available to it.

[*Participants described their experiences with the program, emphasizing the assistance they received in child care and health insurance coverage.*]

The President. Now, under this welfare reform bill we can leave people with their Medicaid health insurance for a year, maybe more. And also with—if their jobs pay a low enough income, they can also get the food stamp supplements. And we have a lot more money for child care than we did before.

Now, it's conceivable we could run out of child care money, but if we do, it will be what I would call a high-class problem. If we run out of child care money, it will be because we've had so many good employers who have taken people and would just—and I think the Congress would probably help us some then, because they—we got the money we thought we would need based on what we thought we could do in placing people in work.

[*Participants continued to relate their experiences with the program. An employer then described his satisfaction with new employees hired under the wage supplement program.*]

The President. Has the wage supplement helped you?

Participant. Oh, absolutely.

The President. I sort of see it as like a premium we can pay to get a private employer not only to train people for the job but also to train people for the workplace, the whole—changing the culture.

[*The participant discussed training new employees. Other employers discussed their participation in the program.*]

The President. Well, the one thing that I wanted to put in here is that even if there's

turnover, that the employers that have participated in this program are doing something very positive because we are really trying to have everybody be able to tell the stories we're hearing around this table. And it's a different journey for some people than others, and it's a longer journey for some people than others. But we're basically trying to break up a mindset and an almost physical isolation from the world of work. That's what Birdella was talking about, how it changes even the neighborhoods, how they work, how they function, how the kids feel.

And the way this new law works, everybody, unless you have a disability or there's a child with a disability or some reason, everybody has a lifetime limit of 5 years you can do this if you're able-bodied, and a limit at one time of 2 years before you have to move into some sort of work environment. So even if there's turnover, even if somebody only makes it 30, 60, 90, 120 days, that's still a work experience they never had before, it's some touching of the world of work they never had before. And it gives you a better chance to make it the next time.

[*Mr. McQueen mentioned the link between the wage supplement program and economic development initiatives in the Kansas City empowerment zone. Mayor Emanuel Cleaver II of Kansas City then discussed an agreement for Harley-Davidson to employ residents of the empowerment zone, with the wage supplement program as an incentive.*]

The President. You see, I think this will be very valuable in—I believe that there will be a movement, particularly of smaller scale, like 300 and down, manufacturing facilities back to urban areas in the next 10 years, because I think the property will be cheaper, and I think the work force will be there. And I think if you have a serious welfare-to-work effort like this, you can really make it work.

Between the funds we're trying to give the cities to clean up environmentally polluted areas to make them attractive for new investments again, the so-called brownfields initiatives, and we're going to try to triple the number of these empowerment zones—I believe that you can have this story repeat itself.

It's going to change your image, Mayor, with Harley-Davidson here; you're going to have to wear one of those neat jackets. [*Laughter*] It will be a major lifestyle change for you.

[*Mr. McQueen, Representative Karen McCarthy, and Gayle Hobbs, executive director, Local Investment Commission, discussed public-private partnerships and the program's benefits for the community.*]

The President. The primary purpose of this bill, in many ways, was to end the waiver process and then to have some standards of performance for the States so they had to actually get it in gear. But the worst mistake that could possibly be made would be to supplant what used to be the Federal rules and regulations with just a State bureaucracy, because this plan, this program had been run by the States for years; it hadn't been run by the Federal Government. And the States have basically had control over the benefit amount while the Federal Government has set the rules governing who could qualify and making sure that people got the food stamps and the Medicaid and the other stuff.

So what I see as absolutely imperative is that every State is going to have to do what has been done here. You're going to have to devolve the ultimate decisionmaking to community groups that involve employers, the nonprofits, and the people who are going to be the ultimate customers of this system, people who are going to move from welfare to work.

And this model, this kind of encounter we're having here, this is going to have to occur in every community in the country if we're going to meet the very ambitious goals of the bill. I think we can do it, but only if we do it in this way.

And I would point out, 2 years ago I went to Vermont to talk to the Governors, and I asked every Governor to ask me for a waiver to do what Missouri was doing and what only—at that time, only Oregon and Missouri had asked to do. Now, since then, Wisconsin has asked to do this, before the welfare reform bill, and one other State—I believe Vermont—in a modified way. But every State in the country can now do this, do what you're doing, and therefore involve people like Tom and Bruce. And it's the only way it's going to work.

[*Participants described how the program addressed the wide-ranging needs of welfare recipients.*]

The President. That's a wonderful story. Let me just say again—I mean, I know I'm beating

this to death, but it's a point I want to make to the American people. The act I signed is the beginning of welfare reform. What it does is it creates very strong incentives for every State to, in effect, empower communities to develop community-based systems like this.

There is no way even a State, much less the National Government, can know how much money any community needs for transportation—that depends on what the facts of the community—much less whether there should be a program for helping people with their dental or clothing needs or anything like that. This has got to be pushed down to the grassroots level, where community people who care about their community and care about the people that they come in contact with as individuals, can fashion solutions that will work. And I think now you've got the tools to do it, and we've just got to make sure we do it right.

But I just wish everybody in America were as far along as you all are. I want to say a special world of thanks to Tom and Bruce, too, for participating, and all of the other employers that you represent here today.

I have two feelings about this that a lot of the skeptics who were worried about me signing this bill didn't. I believe the business community's response will be overwhelming, because I think most people in business would like to end the way the welfare system has worked and would be willing to do their part in doing it. That's what I believe. I think most business people will stretch a little, especially if we're at least sharing the cost of early training and development of work habits. And I have hardly ever met anybody on welfare who did not want to get off once they believed that they could, you know. So you all have strengthened my faith and optimism.

[*Various participants expressed their appreciation for the President's support.*]

The President. Now, in the next couple of days, when people all over America start calling you and wanting their addresses and everything, I don't want you all to be put out with me. I want you to help them do just what you did.

Participant. We'll do it.

Participant. We'll keep moving.

The President. Thank you.

Q. Could I follow up on something you mentioned? Senator Dole says on the family medical leave that it's another example of big Government meddling where it doesn't belong—[*inaudible*].

The President. Well, I just disagree. Look at the evidence. Twelve million people have taken a little time off when a baby was born or when a parent was sick, and small businesses are exempt because of the problems with work schedules. And the American economy has been growing like crazy since we passed the family and medical leave law. We've had a record number of new businesses started; we have had 10½ million new jobs. There is no compelling evidence that this has been bad for the economy.

Anything you do that helps people to succeed at home and at work is a good thing to do. That's basically what welfare reform is all about. It's just what Tom says: We've got to find a way for every American to have a chance to succeed at work and at home, and that's what family and medical leave was all about.

So I just simply—I just respectfully disagree. I think we were right to do it. I think those who opposed us have been proved wrong by the evidence. And I think a very modest and limited expansion—it's like anything else, you could overdo it, but we're talking about a very modest and limited expansion, directed toward helping people go to their parent-teacher conferences and go to regular doctor's appointments. It's not a big, radical step. It's pro-family and pro-work.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:50 a.m. at the Full Employment Council office. In his remarks, he referred to former welfare recipient Birdella Smith; Tom Davidson, president, Davidson Archives; and Bruce Gershon, president, Arrow Fabricare.