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Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in New York City
January 8, 1998

Thank you very much. The good news is this is the only speech I have. [*Laughter*] And I wrote it in the car on the way over from the airport. I want to thank Steve for what he said and for the extraordinary effort he's put in, in a very difficult and challenging year, as head of our National Democratic Party. I thank Craig and Jane for having us in their home. I have not been in this magnificent historic old building in, oh, about 10 or 11 years. And I'm a very schmaltzy person so I get all choked up when I come here. I keep imagining whether I'm standing someplace where John Lennon was, and all that. [*Laughter*] Thank you very much for letting us come here. Thank you, Judith Hope, for leading the New York Democratic Party.

And I think what I would like to do today is just talk in kind of a larger sense about where I think we are at this moment in history and why what you're doing here matters. And I'd like to begin with two, maybe, apparently, unrelated things.

The first is, you know we're 2 years from a new century in a new millennium, something that only happens every 1,000 years. I expect all the predictions of doom and the end of time to be rising up, and maybe there will be a lot of wonderful, glowing predictions as well. But the time just begs for historic drama. And the good news is you have it, because of the globalization of the world economy and society, because of the explosion in information and science and technology. People are fundamentally changing the way they work, the way they live, the way they relate to each other and the rest of the world. And that is changing everything else in ways that are, more often than not, quite positive, but sometimes quite troubling.

We have a lot of people in the finance community here today. Everybody is trying to calculate what is going on in Asia: Is it going to keep going on; is it going to stop; is there something the United States can do to stop it; regardless, what impact will it have on us? There is a level of interdependence in the world today and a scope and speed of change in the world today that has hitherto been unknown to the American people, and that is changing things. And that will shape the new—in that sense, we already have a foot in the 21st century.

The second thing I'd like you to think about is that—we have a lot of very distinguished actors here today. Hillary and I went to the premiere in Washington the other night of "Amistad," the new movie about the slave ship. It culminates in the work of John Quincy Adams helping a young American lawyer to get these slaves freed so they could be free to go back home to Africa before the Civil War. And they won a case in the Supreme Court on a unique point of property law. But it's a very moving picture, I think.

Why do I mention that? Because at that moment in our history, John Quincy Adams, a man who was a one-term President, got the living daylights beat out of him for reelection by Andrew Jackson, an American hero, and then was humble enough and dedicated enough to go back and serve nine terms in the House of Representatives, where he died in service in his early eighties—a unique American story. John Quincy Adams was the embodiment of the Nation's opposition to slavery, and to something called the gag rule which, believe it or not, was imposed by the Southerners on the Congress before the Civil War so that you weren't even supposed to be able to bring up petitions opposing slavery on the floor of Congress.

Now, at that moment, Adams was the symbol for our country of the idea that the National Government ought to take a stand against slavery, to strengthen the Union and to, in effect, apply the guarantees of the Constitution to the present moment—in other words, to acknowledge that we were wrong when we started as a country and we said that black people were only three-fifths human and they didn't really count as citizens.

What's that got to do with this time? In every period of profound change in the whole history of the country, the debate is always the same. The debate is between those who believe that the period of change requires us to come closer together as one nation and to extend the fundamental principles on which we were founded to the new moment—and there have been four

or five moments in American history which were literally break points, where we were being tested.

First, we got started; we had to decide, are we going to be one country or just a collection of States, kind of like an eating club, and every now and then we'll get together? And we decided to be one country. And then in the Civil War, when slavery and sectionalism threatened one nation and Abraham Lincoln literally gave his life, first for the Union and second to get rid of slavery.

Then in the industrial revolution, where first Theodore Roosevelt and then Woodrow Wilson's administration, and all the way through FDR, had to deal with the consequences of America moving from an agricultural to an industrial society—most of them were good, but not all of them were. How do you get the benefit of all this new wealth and say it's still not okay to work children 15 hours a day, 6 days a week in coal mines? How do you do that? How do you deal with all these people teeming into the cities of America from all over the world, and how do you assimilate them into our country, and how do you make immigrants a part of the American fabric of life? If the whole system breaks down, as it did in the Great Depression, how do you get it back up?

And throughout, there was the debate between—going from Lincoln to Roosevelt and Wilson to FDR—between those who say we have to strengthen the Union in order to preserve and enhance liberty, and those who said, "Ah, the Government, it will screw it up. They will mess up a one-car parade—[*laughter*]—and this country was founded on the principle that we've got to limit it and just let the market take its course." Then we had World War II and the cold war, which was a 50-year battle against totalitarianism, when there was much more of a consensus among the conservatives and the liberals for united policies to make the Nation strong because our very existence was at stake.

Now we literally are facing an era of globalization and information revolution which is upsetting the established patterns of life to an extent never before known. Most of it's positive. Some of it's not.

What are the problems we're facing? Well, first of all, we've got more people in the work force than ever before, more women in the work force than ever before, and nearly every family with children has trouble balancing the demands of work and family, even wealthy people. I don't know a single couple with young children that hasn't felt a moment of guilt at some time in the conflict between the demands of work and the demands of childrearing. That's fundamentally different, and rampant.

Second, there is the question of—the perennial question—how do you get the benefits of these new changes but make them available to everybody, give everyone a chance to participate? America has the lowest unemployment rate in 24 years; New York City has an unemployment rate of 9 percent. How do you bring the benefits of the new market to the neighborhoods that it hasn't reached? We have children who know more about computers than their parents, but not every child has access to a computer. How do you make sure that the benefits of technology are made more universal?

Third question—that you saw debated at Kyoto in the climate change conference—how do you continue to grow the economy and bring all these vast new countries like China and India—the two biggest countries in the world—into the mainstream of economic life to stabilize the lives of the people there and still not only preserve but indeed restore the economy?

Last question—big question—how do you accept the fact that the global marketplace is dominant and the cold war is over and say we're not going to disintegrate into chaos and anarchy? That is, how can you have a social contract where everybody has a chance, at least, and where people who deserve a hand up get it, and where people learn to live with each other amidst all their diversity and localism?

You said your daughter said it was not necessary for Socks and Buddy to like each other, but they did have to get along. Maybe that should be my policy in Bosnia. [*Laughter*] I mean—you laugh, but you think about it. This is a significant thing. How do we deal with the fact that the old structures that people used as magnets for identity in the world are breaking down, giving vast new freedoms, and still find ways for people to integrate and make sense of their lives? These are huge challenges.

I believe—and the reason I ran for President in 1991 and 1992—that we had to take a new direction. The progressive party, my party, I thought, had the right idea about trying to hold the country together, but they didn't seem too willing to change to develop new approaches

to deal with the new challenges. The Republicans had basically abandoned what might have been a basis for being a very successful modern party if they had essentially been like traditional northeast Republicans and modified their position. And instead, they adopted the Reagan position, which was, the Government is always the problem, is inherently bad, and is oppressing people, and what we really need to do is just to get it out of the way and everything will be fine. It seems to me that that is self-evidently untrue.

So what we tried to do was to take an approach that said that Government could not do everything, but it couldn't sit on the sidelines; and what we really should focus on is to create the conditions and give people the tools to make the most of their own lives and to build successful families and communities and to enable America to reach out to the rest of the world in a positive way. That's why we focused on an economic policy that works. That's why we supported local crime policies that work. That's why we've worked on—we've moved historic numbers of people from welfare to work.

And I think we've had a fair measure of success in meeting the new security challenges of the world beyond our borders. And after 5 years, as I said, we have the lowest unemployment rate in 24 years, the lowest crime rate in 24 years, the biggest drop in welfare rolls in history. The air is cleaner; the water is cleaner; the food is safer. We have cleaned up record numbers of toxic waste dumps, and we're tackling the big challenges of our time. So I think we're moving in the right direction.

Now, what are we about to do in Washington? Congress is about to come back to town, and I have to give the State of the Union Address. And I will very briefly tell you what I think is still out there to be done. First of all, we have got to find a way to bring economic opportunity to the areas in this country which haven't received it. We've got to bring economic empowerment and enterprise into isolated inner-city and rural communities. And I won't bore you with the details—you may have better ideas than I do—but we're going to have an agenda to do that.

Secondly, in the area of crime, the crime rate is dropping, but the juvenile crime rate is not dropping as fast. Kids get in trouble—almost all juvenile crime is committed between 2 and 6 o'clock in the afternoon, almost 100 percent of it. It is a very foolish thing for us to keep building prisons to put young people in to become permanent criminals as a strategy to lower the crime rate, when for much less money we could leave the schools open, give them something to say yes to and build their lives around. And so we're going to try to deal with that.

In the area of welfare reform, the fundamental issue is we've reduced the welfare rolls by 3.8 million; all the people that are left are going to be harder to place. Therefore, there needs to be more training, more child care, but also jobs that are created, if necessary, in community service work so that people aren't just cut off welfare.

The other thing we have to examine is how do we make sure that people aren't required to give up their educational programs if they're actually going to school. There's been a lot of publicity about that here in New York. And one of the things we're trying to do there is to make sure that people on welfare can qualify for work-study while they're going to college and they can work their way through school like everybody else does who has to work their way through school. So we're trying to work through that.

On the issue of balancing family and work, the most single meaningful action that I've taken as President, I think, if you took a poll, most people would probably say, "I like the Family and Medical Leave Act." Probably around 15 million people have been able to take some time off from work when a baby was born or a parent was sick.

Yesterday Hillary and I and the Vice President and Mrs. Gore announced the largest child care initiative in the history of the country, to try to make child care more affordable, more available, and of a higher quality and safer than ever before to millions more Americans.

The next big challenge we have to face is all of us around here in this room who are baby boomers—some of you are not, some of you are a little older, some of you are a little younger—but the baby boom generation, until—this generation now in the public schools is the biggest we've ever had, but until they were in the public schools, we were the largest generation. If we don't make some changes in Social Security and Medicare, when we retire we either won't be able to draw them in the way that they're now being enjoyed by seniors, or we will impose incredible tax burdens on our

children to do it, in ways that I think are morally unacceptable. So we have to undertake in the next 2 years a significant review of Social Security and Medicare, and they have to be modernized so that the baby boom generation can actually access them in a way that is universal and fair, but so that they actually work for the 21st century.

Over and above that, we have to recognize that half the people in this country have no retirement savings. And almost no one can maintain their standard of living on Social Security alone. There are very few people living on that little money. So we have to do more to get people to save for their own retirement. We've done a lot of work on that in the last 5 years; we must do more.

The next issue I'd like to mention is education. I spent, in my years in public life, more time on this than any other issue. In the end, a lot of Americans, a lot of you in this room over the last 5 years, have told me that you're very glad you've done well in life, but you're very concerned about the increasing inequality of wealth in America because people in the lower 40 percent of our work force have not had their earnings increase in a proportionate way—for 20 years now. Now, there's some indication, by the way, that that's turning around the last 2 or 3 years, and we've worked very hard on it.

What can a country do if it has great inequality and you don't believe in punishing the successful; what can you do? Well, in 1993 we asked upper income people to pay more and gave lower income working families a tax break as part of our strategy to bring down the deficit, but that's a one-time deal. We can expand trade and try to change the job mix in America, and we're doing that. For the last 2 years, more than half the new jobs in this country paid above-average wages. That's a slow process, since most people are not in jobs that were created last year. The only other thing you can do is to set up a system of lifetime education and training which starts with an excellent primary and secondary education and gives people the chance always to continuously upgrade their skills so they're on the cutting edge of change. In the end, that is the only answer to this. And, therefore, it is imperative that we do that.

History will record that the best thing about the balanced budget bill we passed last August was that we made community college free for all Americans, that we gave tax breaks for any kind of education after high school, from graduate school to workers in factories who have to go back to school to upgrade their skills.

The second thing we did was to launch the debate on whether America should have high national standards. And I want to talk about that a little bit. Fifteen big city school districts, including New York City, said, we support the President's desire to have national standards and national tests and measure kids by how well they do and tell their parents. But there is still an enormous resistance to that in this country. Now, there was a study that's in the paper today—you may have seen it—showing that big city school districts perform at significantly lower levels by any measure than non-city school districts in America.

You can say, well, what do you expect, the kids there are poorer. They may be poorer, but we spend more money on average on them. And I say that to make this point: We cannot pretend, if we have a truly progressive vision of the future, that we can ever achieve what we want to achieve unless we hold our children—all of our children, without regard to their race, their income, or their background—to high standards of learning, and then give them the support they need to meet those standards, and measure whether they do or not, and if they don't, keep on working at it until they do.

Chicago has just undertaken a complete overhaul of its school system in which local parent councils are involved in local school districts, and they have ended social promotion. You have to pass an exam to go on to the next grade. If you don't, you've got to go to summer school. If you get through summer school and you pass the exam, you can go on. If you don't, you have to stay back. But because it's a community-based, parent-based thing, you don't hear one word about it being discriminatory, about it being unfair, about anything else. Why? Because people have taken control of their children's education. They say, our kids have got to learn something.

In the end, when they're 50, their self-esteem will be more harmed by not being able to read and write and learn new skills than it will by having been held back one year in school when they were 10. And we have got to have that kind of commitment to national standards, to rigorous standards.

The survey also reported that children in Virginia, for example, in urban school districts—let me—I live across the river from one, from the most diverse school district in America, Fairfax County, Virginia—children from 180 different national and ethnic groups in one school district. And the survey concluded that the reason that the urban students in Virginia scored better was because they had specific, rigorous standards to which they were held and consequences for failure. So I say to you, I hope you will all support that.

Finally, let me say—in this old world we've got a lot of challenges; I just want to mention two. We need a national consensus to do something on global warming. It is real; it is significant; and what we need is an understanding that we can grow the economy and still preserve the environment. Just with the pressures that—public pressure that has been created in the last few months, look at all the new announcements that Detroit has made about cars that no one had anticipated before. We can do this. But we will pay a terrible price if we do not.

The second issue I'd like to raise is that the wonderful explosion in science and technology and information that allow kids in New York City to get on the Internet and talk to kids in Australia about school projects also mean that crazy people in New York can talk to crazy people somewhere else about how to make chemical weapons or biological weapons. You remember when we had the Oklahoma City bombing trial, the publicity came out that there was a webpage where, if you could hook into it, you could figure out how to make the bomb.

I say that simply to make the point that when you see me on behalf of the United States trying to stand up against the spread of chemical and biological weapons, or trying to devise ways to stop the spread of disease, or more rigorous standards to preserve the quality of our food supply as we import more food and more food goes across national borders—see that as part of this larger issue. We want all the benefits of globalization, but we have to preserve the integrity and the value of our life and that of people around the world.

And since we're in New York, I'll make my last pitch. I need your support for convincing the Congress that they should support and we should pay our way in the United Nations, in the World Bank, in the International Monetary Fund, and all the other international institutions. We live in an era of interdependence, and we have richly benefited from it. We were able to do what we did in Bosnia because others would help us. And I could give you lots of other examples.

Now, why should you be here and why are you doing this? Because we believe that Government is not the enemy, but it has to be an agent of change; because we believe this is an age in which we have to form a more perfect Union by giving people the tools to make the most of their own lives, to serve in their communities, and to build a strong country; and because the evidence is, after 5 years, that this approach is right for America.

You've made it possible for it to continue, and I very much appreciate it. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. at a private residence in the Dakota apartment building. In his remarks, he referred to Steve Grossman, national chair, Democratic National Committee; luncheon hosts Craig Hatkoff and Jane Rosenthal; and Judith Hope, chair, New York State Democratic Party.

Statement on National Education Standards

January 8, 1998

This week, an independent report showed that more than half the students in our Nation's city schools are failing to master the basics in reading, math, and science—the building blocks of all the skills they will need to succeed in the 21st century. And while some city school* systems *are* making progress, all too many are clearly failing our children.

* White House correction.