

Remarks on the 150th Anniversary of the Department of the Interior March 4, 1999

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, it's wonderful to be here today. I want to thank the great American Indian dancers. I got to watch on the screen, off the stage, and I thought they were wonderful. And I want to thank Dagmar and Mark for their presentations and for the employees they represent.

Mark, that was a pretty shameless pander to Bruce Babbitt, though. *[Laughter]* If that doesn't get you a raise, nothing will. *[Laughter]*

And I would like to say Secretary Babbitt has spent a lot of his time putting out fires, both figuratively and literally, some of which I lit. *[Laughter]* And I thank him for that and for his remarkable loyalty to this Department. I got kind of tickled when he said that talking to one of you reminded him of drinking water from a fire hydrant. Sometimes I feel like the fire hydrant looking at a pack of dogs. *[Laughter]*

For 6 years I have declined to tell these kinds of jokes because I have been told repeatedly it is not Presidential. *[Laughter]* But I feel kind of outdoorsy today, you know. *[Laughter]*

I would like to also say to all of you, I really appreciated the Secretary both featuring these two fine employees and talking about the other appointees. I know we have some previous administration appointees who have left to go on to other things here in the audience. I thank all of you who have served by my appointment and all of you who serve by choice in this Department.

I have some remarks to make, but I hope that you will forgive me if I mention a few words about a great American citizen who deeply loved the natural beauty of his native Minnesota. Justice Harry Blackmun died this morning, at the age of 90. In 24 years on the Supreme Court, he served with compassion, distinction, and honor. Every decision and every dissent was firmly grounded in the Constitution he revered, and his uncanny feel for the human element that lies just beneath the surface of all serious legal argument.

You can see his mind and heart at work in the landmark decision he wrote protecting women's rights to reproductive freedom, and in his decisions to make the promise of civil rights

actually come alive in the daily existence of the American people.

Hillary and I were deeply privileged to know Justice Blackmun and his wonderful wife of 58 years, Dottie, for quite a long while. I saw up close Harry Blackmun's intense passion—his passion for the welfare of the American people, for defending our liberties and our institutions, for moving us forward together. We send our respect and our prayers to Dottie and to his three daughters.

To the millions of Americans whose voices he heard and whose rights he defended, to the countless numbers of us who knew and loved him, Harry Blackmun's life embodied the admonition of the prophet Micah: He did justice, and he loved mercy. And now, he walks humbly with his God. Thank you very much.

Now, let me say that I've been wanting to come over here to thank you for a long time. I don't know that there has ever been a President who has benefited more, in personal ways at important times of his life, from the Department of the Interior. I was raised in Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas, the first city in America to contain a national park. I spent my first 18 years in a State that is more than half-covered with pine and hardwood forests, which is why Mike Gauldin had a little trouble appreciating Arizona. *[Laughter]*

When I finished law school, I went home to the hills of northwest Arkansas and spent some of the happiest days of my life on the Buffalo River, the very first river set aside under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Today, my family and I have the great honor of living in the most beautiful home under the care of the National Park System. Sometimes it feels more like a zoo than a park, but I love it. Now, my lease is up in one year, 10 months, and 16 days—*[laughter]*—but who's counting? *[Laughter]*

Perhaps more than any other department of the Federal Government, the Interior Department really does embody the history of our country: the story of manifest destiny and the great western expansion; the story of fertile fields rising from arid desert, of people rising from the depths of the Great Depression, of

the nation marshaling the resources to win two World Wars; a story of scientific discovery and relentless exploration; a story of our country's struggles to recognize the dignity and independence and sovereignty and expand the opportunity of our first citizens, our Native Americans; a story of the efforts of this country to expand the horizons and make real the promise of America for all Americans, as Secretary Harold Ickes did when he invited the incomparable Marian Anderson to sing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial 60 years ago, in 1939. Most of all, as Secretary Babbitt has proved every day, it is the story of our intensifying determination as a people to conserve and restore our precious natural resources.

In 1849 when this Department was launched, with a headquarters staff of 10 and a budget of \$14,200, it lacked a unifying purpose—hard to imagine you could do much more than one thing with that kind of money. [Laughter] Today, with a much larger staff and a considerably larger budget, the contrast is remarkable.

Under Bruce Babbitt's leadership, everything this Department does is guided by the unifying purpose of stewardship. As wise and dedicated stewards, you act in the recognition that all of us are but brief visitors on this small planet. You understand that everything we want for our children depends on protecting the forests, the streams, the deserts that were here so very long before we came along. Today, the "Department of Everything Else," as it was once called, is and forever will be the "Department of Stewardship." And for that, I thank you all.

Using a skillful touch, but not a heavy hand, you have achieved remarkable things. Many have been mentioned today, but because they're so important to me, I want to thank you personally for them.

Three years ago, we set out on a mission to preserve California's Headwaters Forest, the world's largest unprotected stand of old-growth redwoods. Three days ago, you did it. We did it. And aren't we glad? [Applause] Thanks to the tireless efforts of so many people here and at your sister agency NOAA, not one of the magnificent trees of Headwaters Forest will ever be logged. Anyone who has ever strolled through a grove of redwoods—and I have—who have seen the tangle of ferns at your feet and the living canopy reaching high overhead, knows that these ancient forests are as much a part of our legacy, as I said, as the world's great

cathedrals. Thank you for making them safe for all time.

We should also be proud that over the last 6 years we've set aside vast unspoiled areas of the Mojave Desert, designating three new national parks. We put a stop to a massive mining operation that threatened Yellowstone, the world's first national park.

To protect Utah's stunning red rock canyons, we created the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and completed the largest land exchange in the continental United States. And I have to tell you, I just returned from Utah, where the rest of my family went skiing and I thought about it. [Laughter] And I was so pleased that any number of people—after all the flak we took—any number of people came up to me, just on the street, and said, "Mr. President, you might have been right about that. I think this is going to work out fine, and I'm glad we saved that land." [Applause]

And in a project that has been particularly close to my heart because I have also been there, we are restoring the Florida Everglades, the largest restoration project ever undertaken in our Nation's history.

That is quite a legacy. But we have much, much more to do. This year, the last of this century, we must dedicate ourselves not to resting on these accomplishments but to building on them.

First, we must preserve more precious lands. I will soon send the Congress a plan to bestow the highest level of wilderness protection on more than 5 million acres of back-country lands within Yellowstone, Glacier, and other national parks. In these vast regions, the roar of bulldozers and chainsaws never again will drown out the call of the wild.

I'm also proposing an unprecedented \$1 billion Lands Legacy Initiative, which Secretary Babbitt mentioned, on which many of you worked. It will allow us to continue your efforts to protect natural and historic lands across our Nation, such as Civil War battlefields, remote stretches of the historic Lewis and Clark trail, and an additional 450,000 acres in and around Mojave and Joshua Tree National Parks.

It will also allow us to meet the stewardship challenges of a new century. It is no longer enough for our Nation to preserve its grandest natural wonders. As communities grow and expand, it has become every bit as important to preserve the small but sacred green and open

space closer to home. So my Lands Legacy Initiative will also help communities protect meadows and seashores, where children play; streams where sportsmen and women can fish; farmlands that produce the fresh harvest we often take for granted.

We believe this Lands Legacy Initiative must be a permanent legacy. So today I promise to work with Congress to create for the very first time a guaranteed fund for protecting and restoring priceless land all across America.

There are many good legislative ideas for achieving this goal. We think any solution must provide at least \$1 billion annually, with at least half dedicated to helping communities protect local green spaces. It also must recognize the unique environmental challenges of coastal States, without creating any new incentives for offshore oil drilling. Working together, we can ensure that not only our generation, but each generation to come, will have the resources to leave an even better land for those who follow.

Second, as we help preserve more open spaces, we have a great opportunity to help create more livable communities, healthy communities where people don't have to waste a gallon of gasoline driving to get a gallon of milk, where employers have no trouble recruiting workers interested in a high quality of life. The Vice President and I have proposed record funding for public transit and Better American bonds to help communities grow in ways that ensure a clean environment and strong, sustainable economic development.

Third, we must clean up the 40 percent of our waterways that still are too polluted for fishing and swimming. Most Americans don't know that, and many are surprised to hear it. I call on Congress to fully fund my clean water action plan and to reauthorize and strengthen the Clean Water Act.

Fourth, we must do more to meet our most profound, common global environmental challenge, the challenge of global warming. I have proposed a clean air partnership fund to help communities reduce both greenhouse pollution and smog, as well as tax and research incentives to spur clean energy technologies. I want to work with Members of Congress in both parties to reward companies that take early, voluntary action to reduce greenhouse gases.

Let me say just one thing here that's not in the script. A lot of you clapped and a lot of you were smiling, when I said I'd been to

Utah and people came up to me and said this Grand Staircase idea wasn't such a bad idea after all, and you nodded your head because you knew it all along. One of the biggest impediments to human progress in any free society is the persistence, buried deep in the brains of the people at large or people in decision-making positions, of old ideas that aren't right any longer. The biggest impediment we have to dealing with the challenge of climate change is not cheap oil. It is the old idea that we simply cannot have economic growth without industrial age patterns of energy use.

And I see it all over the world. I see it here in the United States. I see it in the United States Congress, where one subcommittee forced us to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars last year trying to defend our climate change plan, which had no new taxes, no big new regulations, was solely devoted to tax incentives and new research and development for new technologies.

Now, the fact is that things we do today to reduce greenhouse gas pollution—with available technologies, not to mention those that are just ahead and almost within our reach—will lower greenhouse gas emissions, will reduce the threat of global warming, and will create more jobs at higher incomes. The old idea is wrong. I ask the employees of the Interior Department to help the American people get rid of an old, wrong idea so that we can do this.

These are the things that we have to do: setting aside more lands; making more livable communities; cleaning up our waterways; dealing with the challenge of climate change. We can do it. I say to the Members of Congress in both parties, please join this crusade. I say to the majority party, the preservation of our natural resources, the stewardship of this great land, should not be a partisan issue.

This country never had a better conservation President than Theodore Roosevelt. For 12 years, I was a Governor. The first Governors' Conference in history was called by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 to talk about conservation of our resources.

When I was out in Utah, I was looking through Roosevelt's four-volume history of the American West, and thinking to myself, why don't we have two parties equally committed to fulfilling his vision? So I implore the Congress: Let us not waste precious time battling over these bad antienvironmental riders, which

I am going to veto anyway; instead, let's go on with the work of America.

Let me say in closing one very personal thing. As I have already explained, I am as deeply indebted to the work of the Department of the Interior as any President could possibly be—to the visionaries like John Wesley Powell and Harold Ickes and Rachel Carson, to the park rangers that I've seen in Yellowstone and Grand Teton and other parks, to the people that were kind to me as a boy when I roamed the trails and the mountains of the national park which was my home.

In one way or the other, almost all of us have come to see nature as a precious but fragile gift and an important part of the fabric of our lives. Probably every one of us could cite one particular example where that came home to us as never before. I remember once in 1971, when I was driving to California to visit Hillary—we had just started seeing each other—and I stopped at the Grand Canyon. And I crawled out on a ledge about an hour-and-a-half or two before sunset, and I just sat there for 2 hours, and I watched the Sun set on Grand Canyon. If you've never done it, you ought to do it. And because of the way the rocks are layered over millions of years, it's like a kaleidoscope. And the colors change over and

over and over again, layer by layer by layer as the Sun goes down. It is a stunning, stunning thing to see the interplay of light and stone and realize how it happened over the ages. I never got over it. I think about it all the time, now, nearly 30 years later.

That kind of moment can't be captured in the words I have shared with you, or even photographed, because the important thing is the interaction of human nature with nature. But we've all felt it. And we all know that part of our essential humanity is paying respect to what God gave us and what will be here a long time after we're gone.

That is what the Interior Department means to me. And after 150 years, it's what it means to all of America's past and to America's great future.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:50 p.m. in the Sidney B. Yates Auditorium at the Department of Interior. In his remarks, he referred to Interior Department employees Dagmar C. Fertl and Mark Oliver, winners of the Unsung Hero Award. The related proclamation on the death of Harry A. Blackmun is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Statement on the Death of Harry A. Blackmun

March 4, 1999

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You can see his mind and heart at work in the landmark decision he wrote protecting women's rights to reproductive freedom and in his decisions to make the promise of civil rights actually come alive in the daily existence of the American people.

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years, Dottie, for quite a long while. I saw up close Harry Blackmun's intense passion—his passion for the welfare of the American people, for defending our liberties and our institutions, for moving us forward together. We send our respect and our prayers to Dottie and to his three daughters.

To the millions of Americans whose voices he heard and whose rights he defended, to the countless numbers of us who knew and loved him, Harry Blackmun's life embodied the admonition of the prophet Micah: He did justice, and he loved mercy. And now, he walks humbly with his God.

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