

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at the Clinton Global Initiative Annual Meeting in New York City
September 21, 2011

Thank you very much. Thank you. It is wonderful to be here today. It is wonderful to see so many do-gooders all in one room. *[Laughter]* And our do-gooder-in-chief, Bill Clinton, thank you for not only the gracious introduction, but the extraordinary work that he has been doing each and every day. You are tireless, and we are proud of what you've been doing.

I want to thank the outstanding team here at CGI: the CEO Bob Harrison, Deputy Director Ed Hughes, all the dedicated staff. And although she is not part of CGI, she's certainly part of what makes Bill so successful—someone who he does not get to see enough because of me—*[laughter]*—but I'm grateful that he's not bitter about it. *[Laughter]* She's one of the best Secretaries of State that we've ever had, Hillary Clinton.

Now, this is the third time that I've been here. Last year, I was the warmup act for Michelle. *[Laughter]* I just gave a big speech at the U.N. this morning, and so I will not subject you to another one. I wanted to stop by for two reasons.

First, I want to express my appreciation for the extraordinary work that has been done by CGI. It's been said that "no power on Earth can stop an idea whose time has come." And as you know, when Bill Clinton sees an idea out there, he—there's no stopping him. CGI was an idea whose time had come. And thanks to his relentless determination—but also, I think he'd agree, thanks to, most importantly, your commitments—you've created new hope and opportunity for hundreds of millions of people in nearly 200 countries. Think about that, hundreds of millions of people have been touched by what you've done. That doesn't happen very often.

That's the other thing I want to talk about. Around the world, people are still reeling from the financial crisis that unfolded 3 years ago and the economic pain that followed. And this morning at the United Nations, I talked about the concerted action that the world needs to take right now to right our economic ship.

But we have to remember, America is still the biggest economy in the world. So the single most important thing we could do for the global economy is to get our own economy moving again. When America is growing, the world is more likely to grow. And obviously, that's the number-one issue on the minds of every American that I meet. If they haven't been out of work since the recession began, odds are they know somebody who has. They feel as if the decks have been stacked against them. They don't feel as if hard work and responsibility pay off anymore, and they don't see that hard work and responsibility reflected either in Washington or, all too often, on Wall Street. They just want to know that their leaders are willing to step up and do something about it.

So as President Clinton mentioned, that's why I put forward the "American Jobs Act," not as a silver bullet that will solve all our problems, but it will put more people back to work. It will put more money into the pockets of working people. And that's what our economy needs right now.

It hires teachers and puts them back in the classroom. It hires construction workers, puts them out rebuilding an infrastructure that has deteriorated, and we know that that's part of our economic success historically. It puts our veterans back to work, after having served overseas,

then coming home and not being able to find a job, when they sacrificed immeasurably on behalf of our security.

That's what we need right now, we need more good teachers in front of our kids. I was just having lunch over at the General Assembly with the President of South Korea. And I still remember the first time I met him, in South Korea, and I asked him, "Well, what are your biggest challenges right now?" He says, "Education, it's a big challenge." I said, "Well, I understand. We've got a big challenge in the United States as well." He said, "No, you have to understand, my big challenge is, the parents are too demanding." [*Laughter*] "They're coming into my office, they're saying, our children have to learn English in first grade. So we're having to import teachers from other countries and pay them a premium to meet the educational demands that parents are placing on us, because they know that if their children are to succeed in the 21st-century economy, they'd better know some foreign languages." Well, think about that. That's what's happening in South Korea. Here we're laying off teachers in droves.

Now is the time to upgrade our roads and our bridges and our schools. We used to have the best airports, the best roads, the best bridges, the best ports. I've been asking people recently—I've taken a poll in New York—how do you find LaGuardia compared to the Beijing airport? [*Laughter*] We laugh, but that says something. That's not inevitable; that's a choice that we're making.

We talk about climate change, something that obviously people here are deeply concerned about. Talking to the CEO of Southwest Airlines, they estimate that if we put in the new generation of GPS air traffic control, we would save 15 percent in fuel costs: "Reduce fuel consumption by 15 percent, Mr. President." And think about what that would do, not only to potentially lower the cost of a ticket—maybe they could start giving out peanuts again. [*Laughter*] But think what it would do in terms of taking those pollutants out of our air.

So we know what to do. We know that an American should—who puts his life on the line, her life on the line, should never have to fight for a job when they come home. We know that. We know what our values are.

So this jobs bill addresses the terrible toll that unemployment inflicts on people. It helps long-term unemployed keep their skills sharp. It says to young people who are underprivileged, we're going to give you a chance at a summer job that helps to establish the kind of work habits that carry on for generations. Because part of what happens in this kind of recession environment, the disadvantage of this generation coming in and not being able to get fully employed, that lingers for a lifetime. It affects their lifetime earnings. That's contrary to our values.

This jobs bill cuts taxes for every working family and every small-business owner in America to boost demand and to boost hiring. And if you're a small-business owner who hires a new worker or raises workers' wages, you get an extra tax cut.

So this bill answers the urgent need to create jobs right away. And I appreciate President Clinton's strong support of this plan over the weekend. And the reason that that's important is because he knows a good jobs plan when he sees it. He created more jobs in his tenure than just about anybody. And I'm fighting hard to make sure that we get this bill passed through Congress.

As President Clinton said, every idea in there has been supported in the past by both parties, and everything is paid for. There's no reason why we shouldn't pass it right away. And for those of you who are concerned about the international economy and development, keep

this in mind: If the economy is not growing, if Americans aren't getting back to work, it becomes that much harder for us to sustain the critical development assistance and the partnerships that help to undergird development strategies that you care dearly about all across the world.

So this is important, again, not just to the United States; this is important to the world. It will help determine how well we can support what you are doing in the non-for-profit sector. I'm going to be doing everything I can, everything in my power, to get this economy moving again that requires congressional support, but also those things that don't require congressional support.

Consider one of the ideas that we're working on together. Earlier this year, I announced a Better Buildings Initiative to rehire construction workers to make our buildings more energy efficient. And I asked President Clinton and my jobs council to challenge private companies to join us. In June, at CGI America, we announced a commitment to upgrade 300 million square feet of space, from military housing to college campuses. And some of these projects are breaking ground this month, putting people to work right now. Later this year, we'll announce more commitments that will create jobs, while saving billions for businesses on energy bills and cutting down on our pollution.

And it's a good example of what CGI is all about: Everybody working together—Government, business, the non-for-profit sector—to create opportunities today, while ensuring those opportunities for the future. We just need that kind of cooperation in Washington.

I have to say that I do envy President Clinton because when you're out of Washington, it turns out that you're just dealing with people who are reasonable all the time, and—*[laughter]*. Nobody is looking to score points. Nobody is looking at the polls on any particular issue. You're just trying to solve problems. And that's the ethic that people are looking for in Washington.

We've got enough challenges. It is technically difficult to figure out how we are going to deal with climate change, not impossible, but difficult. There are technical challenges to making sure that we're providing enough safe drinking water around the world or making sure that preventable diseases are eradicated in countries that don't yet have a public health infrastructure. These things are all tough stuff, but they're solvable if everybody's attitude is that we're working together, as opposed to trying to work at odds with each other.

And our future depends on fighting this downturn with everything that we've got right now. And it demands that we invest in ourselves, even as we're making commitments in investments around the world. It demands we invest in research and technology, so the great ideas of tomorrow are born in our labs and our classrooms. It demands we invest in faster transportation and communications networks, so that our businesses can compete. It demands that we give every child the skills and education they need to succeed.

And I thank you for the commitment that you've made to recruit and train tens of thousands of new science, technology, engineering, and math teachers. Nothing could be more important.

We can do all this. We can create jobs now and invest in our future and still tackle our long-term debt problems. Don't tell Bill Clinton it can't be done. He did it. When he was President, he did not cut our way out of prosperity; he grew our way to prosperity. We didn't shortchange essential investments or balance the budget on the backs of the middle class or the poor. We were able to live within our means, invest in our future, and ask everybody to pay their fair share.

And what happened? The private sector thrived. The rich got richer. The middle class grew. Millions rose out of poverty. America ran a surplus that was on track to be debt free by next year. We were a nation firing on all cylinders.

That's the kind of nation that we've got to work to build again. It will take time, after the kind of crisis that we've endured. And this is a once-in-a-generation crisis. But we can get through it. But our politics right now is not doing us any favors.

Nevertheless, I believe we can and we will get there, by remembering what made us great, by building an economy where innovation is encouraged, education is a national mission, new jobs and businesses choose to take root right here in the United States. And that's what CGI reflects. It reflects the American spirit, which is big and bold and generous and doesn't shy away from challenges and says that we're all in it together.

And when I think about the contributions that all of you have made, then I'm—that makes me confident. Those of us who have been most blessed by this Nation, we are ready to give back. But we've got to be asked. And that's what I'm hoping Members of Congress recognize. I don't want a small, cramped vision of what America can be. We want a big and generous vision of what America can be. And the world is inspired when we have that vision.

And by the way, that vision is not a Democratic vision or a Republican idea. These are not ideas that belong to one political party or another. They are the things a rising nation does, and the thing that retreating nations don't do. And we are not a retreating nation.

So despite the many challenges we face right now, I believe America must continue to be a rising nation, with rising fortunes. And that makes—that means making sure that everybody is participating and everybody is getting a shot, because when all of our people do well, America does well. And when America does well, that's good for the rest of the world. That's what President Clinton has always understood.

So, Mr. President, thank you for all the opportunities that you help to create every day. Thank you to all of you who are participating in CGI. You are doing the Lord's work. And I can assure you that you will continue to have a partner in the Obama administration for what I expect to be years to come.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:43 p.m. at the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers. In his remarks, he referred to President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea; and Gary C. Kelly, president and chief executive officer, Southwest Airlines Co. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of former President William J. Clinton.

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