

May 4 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1994

And if you guys will do this—if the men and women of law enforcement in America will call the Congress in the next 24 hours and say, “Do this one for us, and don’t believe all those people telling you that we don’t know our own best interest and we don’t really know what’s good for people on our streets. We do. We have been on the wrong end of those weapons, and we know we’ll be better off without having to look down those barrels anymore. Help us. Help us. Stand up for law enforcement. Stand

up for safety. Stand up for the kids of this country”—we’ve still got a chance to win this thing, and we need your help. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:20 p.m. in the Indian Treaty Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vince Lane, chairman, Chicago Housing Authority. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks on Signing the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994

May 4, 1994

Hey, Chris, just go on and sit in my seat. If you keep talking like that you’ll occupy it someday anyway. [*Laughter*]

My goodness, he was good. You know, all of us, I think, carry around inside progressive impulses and conservative impulses that send us different messages from time to time. And one of the conservative impulses that has been honed in me over time is always be careful what you do because of the law of unintended consequences. Well, when I think of the enormous bipartisan support this legislation has had, it didn’t seem to me that there could possibly be any adverse unintended consequences. But do you realize what Chris Brady has done today by telling us what he does? Do you have any idea how many criminals all over the world have always wondered who monitored those \$10,000 transfers for the IRS? What the heck, it was worth it to get the bill and to meet him. [*Laughter*]

You know, when a President signs a bill into law, normally he just needs the bill, a pen, and a desk. And ordinarily, the bill and the pen get the top billing; he signs the bill, hands out the pens. Today we’re going to try to give the desk a little higher billing. It’s no ordinary desk, and its presence here today, as much as any speech or ceremony, symbolizes what this bill is all about.

Last month Janet Swenson gave her students at the Manufacturing Technology Project in Flint, Michigan, an assignment: Suppose the President wanted you to design a desk and build it to use at a White House ceremony. It couldn’t

look like a typical desk. It had to be inexpensive. It had to be easy to move and reassemble. Within an hour, eight of her students had formed a project team, drawn up rough blueprints, and even called a supplier to check on the availability of materials.

Then they went to work. They drew on their knowledge of geometry and applied math to tinker with the blueprints. They negotiated with the vendors and bought the proper supplies. They built the desk at their center in Flint, Michigan. Then they broke it down, packed it up, and brought it with them to Washington. Yesterday, with a few Allen wrenches, they put it back together again here on the White House lawn, and here it is. This is a custom-made piece of furniture, developed, designed, built, delivered, and assembled by eight young people, none of whom is older than 20 years of age. I’d like to ask them to stand, along with their teacher. Where are they? Stand up. Here they are, these eight. Give them a hand. [*Applause*]

This bill is not the end of a journey. It’s not a problem that has been solved. Instead, it’s a whole new approach to work and learning. Hillary and I were talking up here, as we looked out across this vast sea of faces of those of you whom we have known and worked with for so many years on this issue. I was thinking about how many nights I have talked to Bob Reich about this subject over the last 10 years, long before he ever dreamed he’d be Secretary of Labor and certainly before even his fertile imagination could have figured out how I might be able to appoint him someday. [*Laughter*]

The whole time I served as Governor of my State, I kept in my office a little silver box that Dick Riley gave me way back in 1979, the first time I went to South Carolina to meet with him and talk with him. I see in this audience the sea of faces of people with whom there is some story, some connection about this great endeavor on which we are embarked. The last major initiative I supported as the Governor of my State before I began campaigning for President was one designed to create a school-to-work network and a higher quality of training for young people who didn't go on to 4-year institutions of higher education and ultimately to degrees.

This is the work, my fellow Americans, that we will have to continue for a lifetime. If you want to keep the American dream alive, we must not only create more jobs, we have to make it possible for people who work hard and do the right thing to become members of our middle class society.

You heard Hillary mention the Grant commission report way back in '87 about the forgotten half, the young people who don't go on to further education and training, or the Carnegie report, "America's Choice: High Skills and Low Wages." These are things that she and I and all of our people for years talked about because we knew the people personally who were affected by it. If you were fortunate enough to represent people from a small State, like me or Senator Mitchell, who never comes to the White House without at least one person from Maine—I've now met half the population, Governor—[laughter]—thanks to his coming here—you actually know people who work harder every year for lower wages. You know people who lose their jobs and then they can never get a job that good again. You see what's happened in stark terms to people whom Senator Riegle represents in the automobile industry. There are millions of people like that everywhere.

And so I want to begin just by thanking the Members of Congress who put aside partisanship and regionalism and everything else to pass this bill. And they have already been acknowledged, the leaders have, by Secretary Reich, but let me just acknowledge the people who played a major role in the various committees, whose names I now have: In addition to Chairman Ford, the minority leader of that committee, Congressman Bill Goodling; Congressman Dale Kildee; Congressman Steve Gunder-

son; on the Senate side, in addition to Chairman Kennedy and Senator Mitchell, Senator Durenberger, Senator Jeffords, Senator Metzenbaum, Senator Pell, Senator Simon, Senator Wofford, Senator Hatfield. And I know Senator Ford and Senator Riegle are here, but there are a slew of Members of Congress here whose names I don't have. But I want you to see the depth of support this bill has, so I'd like to ask every Member of Congress here present to stand so the rest of you can see how much they cared about this.

We have probably more than 10 percent of the entire Congress here today. I thank Secretary Riley, and I'm glad that Secretary Reich could tear himself away from Jay Leno long enough to show up today. He was funny last night; did you see him? Probably wants a raise today. [Laughter] He needs further training before we do that. [Laughter]

I want to thank the people from business and labor and education and the community activists, all of you who are here. And most important, I want to honor the young men and women who are now seizing the opportunity provided by existing programs to make sure they don't become part of America's forgotten half. Each of the young people who are here today will receive a certificate, but I think we ought to give them another hand and say we're pulling for their future. [Applause]

Creating this national network of school-to-work programs is our common attempt to address perhaps the greatest challenge of our times for Americans: how to make the dramatic economic changes occurring all over the world work for our own people, how to put their interests first and reward their efforts and give life to their aspirations. We can revive our economy. We can bring the deficit down, increase investment, create jobs; we can expand trade. We can do all these things, but if we don't give our own people the change to reap the rewards of economic progress, we will have failed.

The last two decades have been especially hard on the working people of America—all of you know that—especially on the 75 percent of our people who don't actually finish getting a 4-year college degree. We are now in a global economy where, to use my buzz phrase, what you earn depends on what you can learn, not even what you know. We now see that we passed the decade in the eighties where the gap between the wages of college graduates and

high school graduates literally doubled because of global economic forces.

For too long, we were the only country that did not have a system to provide this sort of education and training and opportunity for young people who don't go on to 4-year colleges. Oh, a lot of people were doing a great job of it and, interestingly enough, as so often happens to people, were way ahead of the system. And you can see that in the explosion of enrollments in high-quality 2-year programs all around the country and more and more high schools trying to come to grips with their responsibilities to train young people who weren't going to college. But we didn't have a way of providing these opportunities to all of our people.

The legislation that I will sign is both innovative in structure and ambitious in scope. It doesn't simply throw a lot of new money or create a lot of new bureaucracy. Instead, it enables us in the National Government to be a catalyst, to bring together workers and businesses, parents and students, the experts and the doers, the designers and the implementers to create programs that work for every American in every community in this country. It will provide development grants for each State to plan comprehensive training and education and apprenticeship systems. And it will do what I think we ought to do: It will set national standards for what these programs must accomplish, grassroots reforms, national standards.

The Federal Government is not very good at regulating or operating things like this, but we can know through readily available information what standards all programs ought to meet, and then we can empower people at the grassroots level to decide how they can most easily meet those standards. That's the sort of reinventing Government the Vice President is always talking about and working on. It's a small seed that will give us quickly, I predict to you, a national network of school-to-work programs.

In the years to come, our young people will be able to know with confidence that their learning will not end when they leave high

school, but they won't leave high school without enough learning to go on to further training and to be productive citizens.

This new law, as important as it is, is a part of a larger piece. Just a few weeks ago, I signed the Goals 2000 legislation, and a lot of you worked hard on that, setting national performance standards for the first time for our schools and again supporting grassroots reforms to achieve those standards. Now we're working cooperatively again in a bipartisan spirit with Congress to refine and to enact the last significant piece of this lifetime learning agenda, the reemployment act, that will change the unemployment system to a reemployment system in recognition of the fact that most people don't get called back to their old jobs when they are on unemployment.

The average worker will now change jobs seven times in a lifetime, and in a workplace where ROM's and RAM's and robotics are the rage, there will never, ever be a time again when our workers won't need to learn something new. The reemployment act will, therefore, complement this school-to-work act and the Goals 2000 bill. And as the American people, with all their energy and ingenuity and ability, implement them, it will be a lasting tribute to those of you from all corners of America and all walks of life and both political parties who have known for many years that this was the thing we had to do.

It will also be another chance to keep alive the dream that has driven so many of us to this place and this lawn today, the chance to make a good living, the chance to reach for the brass ring, the chance to achieve the American dream. That is, after all, what we were given and what we clearly owe to the young people here today and to their children.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:40 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chris Brady, a school-to-work student from Boston, MA. H.R. 2884, approved May 4, was assigned Public Law No. 103-239.