Remarks at the Democratic Governors Association Dinner

February 5, 1996

Thank you. Thank you for that wonderful welcome. Governor Caperton, thank you for that wonderful introduction. When he started all that business about Jefferson and Truman, I turned around to the guy next to me, I said, “Who’s he introducing now?” [Laughter] I’m very grateful to you for your friendship. Thank you, Governor Dean and Governor Carnahan, the immediate past chairman; and all of my fellow Governors; and my colleagues, former Governors who are here tonight; to all the officers of the DGA and those of you who work so hard for them, Mark Weiner, Katie Whelan, and the other members of the staff; and most of all to all of you who have come here to support them. I thank you for being here, and I thank you for your support for the Democratic Governors.

If tonight’s dinner and its success is any indication, after the 1996 election there will be more than 19 people standing up on this stage. And let me just say, while there will be a great deal of focus in this election year on the President’s race, as there should be, there will be a great deal of focus in this election year on the races for Congress, as there should be. And I hope and believe we will make some real progress there.

Remember that no matter what happens, there is an inexorable move to push more basic jobs of the public back to the State level. And if that is so, it matters more than ever before who is the Governor of each and every American State. And I can tell you, given the responsibilities the Governors will have for the foreseeable future, it is more important than ever before that we elect good Democratic Governors to the statehouses all across this country.

It was so cold in Washington for these last 2 weeks, I had to have a break last weekend, so I went to New Hampshire. [Laughter] Well, anyway, I got outside the Beltway. For those of you who live here, you’ll be happy to know that I not only got a good dose of old-fashioned American values, I saw in action the fine art of snow removal, and I—[laughter]

To be fair to the people here in Washington, DC, who have that responsibility, Washington is still viewed by many people as sort of a Southern city. I mean, we have a half-inch snow, they close every school within 50 miles. [Laughter] And the kids like it, but it’s not so great for the economy.

Let me tell you, I also saw some very encouraging signs in New Hampshire that have more to do with what I want to visit with you about tonight. When I went back to New Hampshire, a place where I made 75 scheduled appearances between January 1st and February 18th, 1992, and countless unscheduled ones, I was profoundly moved to see the number of people who would still come out to an event where you just tried to talk sense and deal with the real challenges before the American people, people who did not want a 30-second sound bite and were tired of negative ads.

We had an event in New Hampshire surrounding the administration’s community policing initiative, showing what happens when people in a neighborhood that had been riddled by crime and drugs and gangs decided to take their streets back and had some help from community policemen who had a little office in the neighborhood and rode bicycles and knew the schoolchildren by their names. We saw people telling us that they could walk the streets at night again for the first time in years, and they didn’t worry about the safety of their children anymore. And they knew that there was a connection between what we do in Washington and what happens on their streets, in their neighborhoods, and in the lives of their children.

We saw a great State school-to-work program where we got all these people together, and they understood that you didn’t have to have a big Government program to have the National Government play a helping hand in bringing employers and schools together so that young people could understand that in the world we’re living in there can no longer be an artificial division between the world of work and the world of learning and that they had to be brought together.

I visited a fine company that, among other things, makes some defense equipment we use on Marine One, my helicopter, and other aircraft in the United States military fleet, and works on civilian communications satellites,
against the joys of the market. The real choice is whether we are going to meet our challenges together or go back to a time when everybody was left to fend for himself or herself.

I would remind you that the whole reason the American people started to live together in communities is because they knew they could do things together they could never do alone. Whenever we work as a team as a country, we do well. This country has never, ever been defeated by any problem abroad or within when we work together. Our only defeats come when we permit ourselves to be divided—when we permit ourselves to be divided. Therefore, we must reject any political message that says, “Vote for me because I'll make you so miserable you will be divided; you will put me in, but I will divide your country.” We must say no to that.

After 3 years of working here for you and the American people, doing everything I could every day not only to help advance the cause of our country and its people but also trying to come to grips with the phenomenal changes that are going on in American life, that is the single, simple lesson I bring to you tonight, that you can determine—every single thing we have done is to help the American people make the most of their own lives and work together to solve their problems. That is the great issue of the present day.

This is, to be sure, as I said in the State of the Union, a great age of possibility. Most of us have benefited from it. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to afford to be here tonight. And it is literally true that there has never been a time in the history of our country or the world when there were so many different opportunities for so many different kinds of people to live out their own dreams and to bring their God-given capabilities to fruition. And that is the great joy of this time.

It is also true that, as with any time of great change, there is a lot of uprooting, a lot of upheaval, a lot of uncertainty. There is increasing inequality in income. There is stagnation of wages for those who are not able to take advantage of the age of possibility. There is greater insecurity among millions of working people. And it exists side by side with the lowest combined rates of unemployment and inflation in 27 years, highest homeownership in 15 years, an all-time high in trade, an all-time high in new business formation, an all-time high in each of the last 3 years in new, self-made millionaires,
not people who inherited it but people who
took advantage of the opportunities this country
affords to make it.

And the great challenge we have today is to
keep the good things going, to keep the dyna-
mism of our country working in a way that will
make us stronger, but to do it in a way that
extends the American dream of opportunity for
all the American people and that pulls our coun-
try together. You can be proud of the work
that Democrats did in Washington to cut this
deficit in half in the last 3 years.

I met with the Secretary of Agriculture today
and—as I try to do from time to time to keep
up with how things are going on the farm—
and I won't bore you with all the details, and
some of you, it may not mean much to you,
but corn is at $3.60, wheat is at a 15-year high,
and soybeans are at an 18-year high because
we have opened new markets for American agri-
culture all over the world. You can be proud
of that kind of thing.

You can be proud of the fact that we have
almost 8 million new jobs and a million of them
in automobiles and construction alone. You can
be proud of the fact that your country has been
able to be a leading force in the world for
peace and freedom and democracy, from the
Middle East to Haiti to Northern Ireland to
Bosnia. You can be proud of the fact that the
welfare rolls, the food stamp rolls, the poverty
rolls, the teen pregnancy rolls, they're all down.
You can be proud of that. The crime rate is
down. You can be proud of that.

But you also must know that because of the
way work is changing so that more and more
work is dependent upon information and tech-
nology and knowledge and not just what you
know but your ability to continue to learn
throughout a lifetime, because the nature of the
workplace is changing as productivity gains
that are unimaginable permit large, centralized bu-
reaucracies and almost mandate them to slim
down so that more and more jobs are being
created in smaller units and bigger units are
doing more with fewer and fewer people. And
the nature of the markets are changing, the fi-
nancial markets and the world markets for goods
and services. All these things have caused the
upheavals that have caused the anxiety that
many American working families feel to exist
right alongside of all this good news.

As Democrats we know in our bones that
what makes this country great is our ability to
hold out the promise of opportunity for every-
one who is willing to work for it. And it is
our understanding that when we all do well to-
gether, each of us individually does better than
we otherwise would do; to understand that it
is important to support families and childrearing,
but that when all of our families do better it
helps our family to be stronger.

And so I say again, the central question facing
us is no longer big Government or small Gov-
ernment. There is no more big Government.
This Government's the smallest it's been since
1965, and by the end of this year, it will be
the smallest since the Kennedy administration.

And it cannot be that Government is bad
and the market is good because we see now
from what's happening to so many of our fellow
Americans that the market is a wonderful thing,
but it certainly doesn't solve all problems, and
it creates some as it changes. We know that
as well.

So what we have to do is to ask ourselves,
what is it that we are going to do as Democrats
to stand for the proposition that we believe in
work and family and the future, we believe in
opportunity and responsibility, and we know we
have to do it as one community. That is what
I tried to address in the State of the Union.
That is the challenge I leave you tonight.

We clearly have to follow policies that will
strengthen our families and raise our children
better. We clearly have to do something to ad-
dress this gnawing economic security. And we
must begin by dealing with the conditions of
changed work. We have to give people access
to a lifetime of education immediately when
they need it. We have to make sure that every-
body can afford to buy health insurance and
they don't lose it when they change jobs or
when someone in the family gets sick. We have
to make sure that people can get a pension
and they can carry it around with them if they're
going to change jobs five or six times. We have
to make sure that working families have access
to decent health care so they can succeed at
work and at home.

And if we want to, by the way, reform the
welfare system, we have to make sure that we're
going to have people succeed as independent
workers and good parents. You can't be forced
to make a choice in this country. If we have
to choose between being good workers or good
parents, the country will lose either way. It has
to be both. And we can only solve this together.
For all the progress we've made in bringing the crime rate down—I talked to the mayor of my capital city and Governor Tucker's capital city the other day, and he was saying they had the lowest crime rate in 8 years there, and it was dropping like a rock because of community policing. For all of that, you and I know that this is still a country with inexcusable and unacceptable levels of crime and violence. And a big part of people's insecurity is the feeling that they are not free as Americans if they can't walk the streets, if they worry about their children, if they worry about their security in their homes. And I tell you, the Democratic Party must be on the cutting edge of this until we reach our real goal. And our real goal should be to return to the time when crime is the exception, not the rule. That should be the goal in the United States.

The other great domestic challenge we face is to finally break this idea which still has too much of a hold on people here in Washington, that the only way we can grow the economy is to sacrifice the environment. The truth is, if you look at all the information, from brownfields in our inner cities, to cryptosporidium in the water supply of some of our cities, to the problems we had with E. coli in the Pacific Northwest, to what everybody knows global warming is doing now, which is making our winters worse, as well as our temperature hotter in the summer, we cannot sustain a strong and growing economy unless we find a way to do it while enhancing the quality of the environment, and the Democrats ought to take the lead in promoting that idea.

And finally, let me say I know that it isn't particularly popular to say, particularly at a time when people have so many of their own problems, but the United States must not withdraw from its world leadership. We must continue to be the world's leading force for peace and freedom, for democracy and prosperity.

The Secretary of Commerce is sitting out there. I don't want to embarrass him, but he is the finest Secretary of Commerce in my lifetime. But he would be the first to tell you that he could not take these trips and sell America's products and sell America's services and get investments for America all around the world if we were not perceived as being willing to lead the cause for peace and freedom, if we were not also working to continue to dismantle the nuclear threat until it doesn't exist anymore, to work with countries to end the threat of biological and chemical warfare, to work with countries to end the terrible scourge of these god-awful landmines that are in the millions in the ground, not just in Bosnia but Angola, in Cambodia, and throughout the world. We have to do that.

You may think it shouldn't be that way, but that is the way it is. Maybe there will come a time in the next few years when regional associations of freedom-loving people will be able to solve all their problems, and we'll just have to carry our own little bit of the load. But for now, people look to the United States.

And if you believe that it matters, then I ask you to understand that we have to make difficult decisions still, and we have to invest some money still in our leadership for these causes. Our economic strategy is working in part because it is going hand in glove with our commitment to peace and freedom and democracy. And we cannot afford to walk away.

And finally, let me say, all of these challenges to be met will require us to generate a higher level of trust and confidence and common sense and civility among our people as they relate to each other and to our governments.

So I end where I began. That's why it's so important who the Governors are. It's why it's so important what is done. We have shrunk the size of Government. We are getting rid of 16,000 of the 18,000 pages of regulations. We have done all that downsizing, and we will do some more.

More importantly, we have dramatically increased child support collections, and we've cut the default rate in student loans. And as I said, we doubled the SBA loan volume. And I could give you a lot of other examples. But in the end, our ability to succeed consists in our ability to readjust the responsibilities of the National Government with the States, with the localities, with the private sector, with individuals, and to build a new partnership for a new era.

Part of that is some changes we still have to make here, like campaign finance reform and the line item veto, which I'm sure this Congress will eventually give me. [Laughter] But a big part of it is learning to work together in a way that is affirmative, is positive, that lifts people up.

You know, when I go to other countries, if they're conversant with American politics, very often leaders of other countries will say to me,
"I frankly don’t understand why people in America could be so negative feeling. Your unemployment rate is lower than ours. Your growth rate is higher. You have the lowest deficit in the world of any advanced country. All the rest of us look up to you.”

Well, we have to pierce that cynicism, because cynicism in the end is a lousy excuse for inaction. It’s a lousy justification for failure. It’s a lousy explanation for disappointment in life. And I am convinced that if we Democrats go out there in 1996 with a commonsense, compassionate, intense commitment to the family, to the work, to the future of America, to the idea that the Government can play a role as a partner in creating more opportunity and people have to assume more responsibility, and to an uncompromising position that we must do this together—we have no intention of going back to the time when people were left to fend for themselves, because we believe the age of possibility is for all Americans—I believe that our efforts will be rewarded. They must be rewarded in the President’s race and the races for Congress and in the races for the statehouses.

By being here tonight, you have shown that you believe this. My challenge to you is that it’s a long time between now and November. Don’t quit now. Go out and preach this message, and make sure it’s clear what we stand for and what we’re trying to do.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:12 p.m. at the Omni Shoreham Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to the following Democratic Governors Association officials: Gov. Gaston Caperton of West Virginia, chair; Gov. Howard Dean of Vermont, vice chair; Gov. Mel Carnahan of Missouri, former chair; Mark Weiner, treasurer; and Katie Whelan, executive director. He also referred to Mayor Jim Dailey of Little Rock, AR, and Gov. Jim Guy Tucker of Arkansas.

Remarks to the National Governors’ Association Conference
February 6, 1996

Thank you very much. Thank you, Governor Thompson, Governor Miller, fellow Governors and friends. It is always good to be back here, and I very much appreciate what you said, Governor Thompson. I must say, I also enjoyed standing outside in the hall and listening to the last three or four speakers discuss the last resolution. It made me homesick and proud that I once was a member of this body.

Let me begin, Governor, by congratulating you on the work that you have done on Medicaid, on welfare, and on a number of other issues. And let me also thank the lead Republican and Democratic Governors who worked on the Medicaid issue. I see you around this table. You were good enough to work with us in the White House to keep us up with what you were doing, to enter into intense discussions with us, and I’ll have a little more to say about it in a minute. But this is, in any case, a very impressive accomplishment that all of you have voted for a new framework that will preserve the guarantee of health care coverage to the people who need it and give the States the flexibility they need to operate the program.

Let me also say, in general, this Governors’ conference has, I think, been in the best tradition of the National Governors’ Association, as people have worked together in good faith across party lines to find real solutions to real problems.

I’d also like to express my appreciation to Senator Dole for what he said earlier here today, and the genuine spirit of cooperation that he evidenced in his remarks, I must say, was also evidenced in the more than 50 hours we have spent together in discussing the budget. And, like him, I believe we will get a budget deal. I didn’t like everything he said about wanting to spend some more time around the White House next year. [Laughter.] But then again, I was a little concerned the other night when Gary Morris was singing at the White House, and I discovered that Governor Thompson and Governor Engler and Governor Voinovich were checking out Al Gore’s office. [Laughter] But it’s good for America, this kind of competition.