

Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Dinner September 14, 1996

Thank you, Congressman Payne. He was up here talking about me and our administration and laying it on so thick, it sounded so good I wasn't quite sure who he was talking about. [Laughter] And Alexis Herman, sitting over there with me—and he got down to the end, she said, “He’s talking about you. This is your introduction. Stand up; stand up.” [Laughter] Thank you so very much.

Thank you, Congressman Don Payne, for your leadership of the Congressional Black Caucus and for your passion for the people of America and indeed for people around the world. Thank you, Congressman Bill Jefferson, for chairing this dinner for 2 years in a row. [Applause] That is worth more than applause, folks. Thank you for being my friend for so long and way back in the beginning when only you and my mother thought I could be elected President. [Laughter]

Thank you, LeBaron Taylor, for chairing the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. To all the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, honored guests. I'd also like to recognize and thank for their service the retiring members of the CBC: Kweisi Mfume, Cardiss Collins, Cleo Fields, Barbara Rose Collins, and my neighbor Harold Ford from Tennessee. Please give them all a big hand. They have served our country well. [Applause]

We have a lot of members of our administration here tonight: our Energy Secretary, Hazel O'Leary; the Commerce Secretary, Mickey Kantor; Assistant Attorney General Deval Patrick—thank you for sticking up for the civil rights of all Americans, Deval; Federal Highway Administrator Rodney Slater; Assistant to the President for appointments Bob Nash. If you get one, credit me; if you don't, blame him. [Laughter]

I'm glad to see my friend Mayor Dinkins here tonight. The Director of the office of drug policy control in the White House, General Barry McCaffrey; former deputy chairman of the African National Congress Walter Sisulu is here. Thank you, Walter. And the future Speaker of the House of Representatives is here, Dick Gephardt, and we're glad to see him.

This is my fourth CBC dinner. I enjoy each one better than the last. I thank all of you for coming up here to shake my hand, and I apologize for everyone I didn't get to see.

Let me begin by recognizing your outstanding awardees tonight. Thank you, first of all, for honoring Alma Brown and for what you have done also to honor the memory of Ron Brown, who was clearly the greatest Commerce Secretary in my lifetime, perhaps in the history of the United States. I congratulate Mary Frances Berry, Ingrid Saunders Jones, Toni Fay, Elaine Jones, Congressman John Conyers, Congressman Donald Payne, LeBaron Taylor, Wade Henderson, and my good friend Andy Young. All of you in your own way have moved our country toward greater justice, equality, and opportunity. Not only the members of this foundation and the people at this dinner but all Americans are in your debt, and we congratulate you.

Ladies and gentlemen, last Monday I had the privilege of awarding the highest honor our Nation can bestow on any citizen, the Medal of Freedom. One of the honorees, John Johnson, is clearly a legend in the African-American community, a man who started with nothing in my home State, moved to Illinois, and made a pretty good career for himself. I enjoyed seeing him there, and I was glad to honor him.

But unfortunately, because of Hurricane Fran, one awardee did not make it to the White House to receive her award in person. So earlier this evening, in a ceremony in the Oval Office, I presented the Congressional Medal of Freedom to a woman whose quiet dignity ignited the most significant social movement in the history of the United States, Rosa Parks. At this time I'd like to ask Congressman Bill Jefferson and Congressman Don Payne to escort Rosa Parks to the stage so that we can present her to you on this great night of her recognition.

I would like to read the citation which I presented to Rosa just a couple of hours ago, along with this magnificent medal. Please be seated. It says, “On December 1, 1955, going home from work, Rosa Parks boarded a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and with one modest act of defiance, changed the course of history. By refusing to give up her seat, she sparked the

Montgomery bus boycott and helped launch the civil rights movement. In the years since, she has remained committed to the cause of freedom, speaking out against injustice here and abroad. Called the 'first lady of civil rights,' Rosa Parks has demonstrated, in the words of Robert Kennedy, that each time a person strikes out against injustice, she sends forth the tiny ripple of hope, which, crossing millions of others, can sweep down the walls of oppression." Presented at the White House in Washington, September 9, 1996, to you, Rosa Parks. Thank you, and God bless you.

Even one of the photographers said, "You're lovely, Ms. Parks." [Laughter] You guys never say anything like that to me. [Laughter]

Ladies and gentlemen, in the last couple of weeks, as you may have noticed, I have been out in the country meeting with our fellow Americans. I took a train to the convention in Chicago. And by the way, to all of you who are here from Chicago, thank you for a magnificent convention, for all you did.

We started in West Virginia and went into Kentucky, all through Ohio, through Michigan, ending up in Indiana. Then afterward, Hillary and I and Al and Tipper Gore took a bus trip from Missouri back into southern Illinois, across into Kentucky, down through Tennessee. And I went up to Wisconsin for Labor Day. I have just been in Arizona and California.

Everywhere I go the crowds are large and enthusiastic, full of hope and conviction. It is so different from 4 years ago when we had high unemployment, the slowest job growth since the Depression, stagnant wages, rising crime, a country that was becoming even more cynical about the political system, with rising division. I said then that I wanted to create a country in which we had opportunity for all, responsibility from all, and a community that includes all Americans. I said that I thought that Washington had become too caught up in the politics of who is to blame and we'd forgotten that what the main purpose of our work here, which is not to say who is to blame but to ask what are we going to do about it?

Thanks to a lot of the people who are in this room, we have been trying to do something about it for 4 years now. And after 4 years, as Don Payne said, we've got 10½ million new jobs, 4½ million new homeowners, a record number of new small businesses, including in every year record numbers of new businesses

owned by women and minorities. We have for the first time since before the Civil War cut the deficit in each one of the 4 years of my Presidency. And we did it without gutting Medicare, Medicaid, education, the environment, and our commitment to the proposition that everybody in this country is entitled to be treated fairly and justly.

Last year the African-American unemployment rate was in single digits for the first time in two decades. Crime has gone down for 4 years in a row. Twelve million Americans can take some time off when their babies are born or when their parents are sick without losing their jobs because of the family and medical leave law. Fifteen million American families got a tax cut to stay off welfare because they were working hard with children under the earned-income tax increase that was passed by the Members of Congress in this room today.

Forty million Americans have had their pensions protected. We shut down more toxic waste dumps in 3 years than were shut down in the 12 years before. Fifty million Americans are breathing cleaner air. We have standards for safer food. We've increased the immunization of children. We've increased the number of children with Head Start. Our health care reform—the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill—now says to 25 million Americans you can't lose your health insurance anymore just because somebody in your family got sick; that's what insurance is for.

Even though I was roundly criticized for it in the most amazing quarters to me, in the so-called progressive quarters of this community when I became President, saying that I wanted to prove we could have diversity and excellence and that I thought we had an obligation to try to construct a Government that would look like America, could relate to America, and could work with America, I think it's worked out pretty well. Forty-two African-Americans have been nominated to the Federal court since I became President. We've nominated more women and minorities to the Federal bench by far than any President in history, and they have the highest ratings collectively from the American Bar Association of any nominees in history. Don't let anybody tell you you can't have excellence and diversity. It is not true.

I'm grateful for the service of people like Hazel O'Leary, Jesse Brown, Frank Raines, our new Director of the Office of Management and

Budget, the first African-American ever to hold that position. I'm grateful for those who went before them in our Cabinet, of course Ron Brown but also Lee Brown and Mike Espy. I'm grateful for the difference that people like Deval Patrick and Jim Joseph and Rodney Slater make. I'm grateful that for the first time ever there are three top assistants to the President in the White House who are African-American, Alexis Herman, Maggie Williams, and Bob Nash.

I'm proud to announce tonight that the Clinton/Gore campaign has appointed to serve as honorary campaign chairs Alma Brown and Congressman John Lewis, along with Terry McAuliffe; Senator David Pryor; Governor Roy Romer; the former Governor of Texas, Ann Richards; and Linda Chavez-Thompson. They will lead our effort to spread the message and organize our reelection efforts around the country. Thank you, John, and thank you, Alma.

Now, that is a pretty good start. I guess I should also mention what Don Payne said, that we had to say no to some things we couldn't just say yes to. We said no to the attempts to balance the budget by raising taxes on poor working people, raiding workers' pension funds, breaking our commitments to education, breaking our commitment to poor little children, seniors in nursing homes, families with disabilities by essentially ending Medicaid's guarantee; no to the effort to create a two-tier system of Medicare which would have hurt the oldest and the poorest and the sickest of our seniors; no to the attempts to undermine 25 years of bipartisan support for environmental protection.

But that is not enough. We have to do more. We have come a long way, if you look at where we are now compared to where we were 4 years ago. Then wages were dropping; now they're rising. There are lots of things that are better. But every one of you knows that we are not yet prepared for the enormous transition to the 21st century that we're all facing.

And we will not be prepared until we can honestly say with a clear head and a clear conscience that every single person in this country who is willing to work for it can achieve the American dream. Until we can say that, until we can say, "We know we're still going to be the strongest force for peace, freedom, and prosperity in the world," until we can say, "And we know that our American community is not going to go the way of all these other countries where people spend all their time fighting each

other because of their racial, their ethnic, their religious, their tribal differences—in this country, all you've got to do is believe in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence and show up. And we're for you, you're a part of our America, and you're walking on our bridge into the 21st century," until we can say that, we have work to do.

So I ask you to support our efforts to balance the budget and keep the economy growing and keep those interest rates down but to do it in a way that continues to invest in the people and the places that still don't fully participate in the promise of America. And I ask you to support a tax cut, but it ought to be the right kind, focused on childrearing and education and health care and buying that first home. And it ought to be paid for. And people like me who don't need it shouldn't get it, blow up the deficit, and turn right around and go back to the past and what we did before, which caused our wreckage in the economy and drove the unemployment rate up and left too many of our people behind. So I want you to help me to build the right kind of bridge to that 21st century.

I want to build a bridge where every 8-year-old can read a book on his or her own, where every 12-year-old in every classroom in America can log in on the Internet. And for the first time, I want the kids in the poorest urban classroom and the most isolated rural classrooms to have the same educational opportunity at the same level of quality in the same time as the children in the richest classes in America can. And we will do it in the next 4 years if we can build the right bridge to the 21st century.

I want you to help me build a bridge where we make 2 years of college just as universal in 4 years from now as a high school education is today. Now, that's a tax cut worth giving. Give people a tax cut for the cost of community college tuition. Let them have those 2 years of education. We will see the incomes go up. We will see people getting good jobs. And it will make a difference if we build the right kind of bridge to the 21st century. And I hope you'll help me do that.

I also want you to help me in this election period to remind America that for all of our 10½ million new jobs, there are still people in places that have been left behind. I want you to remind America that you can't require

people on welfare to go to work unless they have work.

I want you to help me to spark a vast new round of investments in our isolated inner-city areas which have been left behind, help me give the mayors and the others the power to create those jobs and create those opportunities by cleaning up the environment, creating investment incentives, and putting people to work. We cannot ever forget that there are still too many Americans who could no more come to this dinner than a man in the Moon because they're still looking for a job and they need one tomorrow, and we need to do our best to make sure that they have their part of 21st century America as well.

Let me just say, for those of you who don't think we can do that, look at what's been done in the empowerment zones that have been created. Look at what's happened in Detroit where, when they became one of our empowerment zone cities, they raised \$2 billion in private investment to go with our tax incentives and cash grants, and the unemployment rate in 3 years in Detroit—Detroit, a city I used to hear was gone—has dropped from 8½ percent to less than 4 percent in Detroit, Michigan.

We can do this, folks. We can turn this around if you are committed and I am committed and, I might say, if we get the kind of Congress that will support the kind of policies that will enable us to move this country forward.

And let me say one last thing. I just was with a group of people right before I came over here—this is an interesting story—I was with a small group of Americans who are from India. And it's very interesting, of all the groups in America—they're relatively small, only a half a million of them, but they have the highest average educational attainment, the highest average income, and the highest average incidence of two-parent families of any group of Americans, including WASP's like me. But they were supporting what we were trying to do, and they were glad I was coming here to be with you, because they understand that we have to build a bridge we can all walk across. And they understand, unlike some, that in order for them to be really successful, it does take a village where we all work together to lift all of our children up and give all of our kids a better opportunity.

And that's the last thing I would like to say to you. Yes, I refused to end affirmative action, even though it was a popular thing at the mo-

ment. I think the popularity has sort of faded now because the few incidents of things that didn't work didn't prove that we should throw away something that had plainly worked overwhelmingly for so many people over the last 25 years and because there is still evidence that we have a ways to go.

I feel the same way about any form of discrimination. And I think if we're going to stay on the right track we need to make sure we have less discrimination, not more of it.

Just imagine what the future is going to be like. Ten years from now those of you who are eating here tonight have children who will be doing jobs that have not been invented yet. Just 10 years from now some of our children will be doing jobs that have not been imagined yet. Your Government is now doing a research project with IBM to build a supercomputer that will do more calculations in one second than you can do tonight if you go home and pick up a hand-held calculator in—listen to this—30,000 years. That is how fast things are changing. That is the magnitude of change we are facing.

And yet there is no nation in the world so well-positioned for the 21st century as the United States, in no small measure because of you and because of the hard, often bitter lessons we have learned in coming to grips with the problems rooted in the division of the races from the beginning of our country. Why? Because now we are the most diverse big country in the world. And if we can maintain our commitment to staying on the cutting edge of change and making sure everybody gets a chance to go there, no one will do as well as American children will in the 21st century if we can just remember that we are blessed by our diversity just as much as other countries have been cursed by theirs.

Today the world is looking at the elections in Bosnia, the first halting step to moving from the absence of war—which is what they have had since we went in there—to the beginning of peace again. But how tragic it is that that little country, where the Muslims and Croats and the Serbs are actually biologically indistinguishable and happen to be in separate groups because of the developments of history—how sad it is that in that little country, for 4 years, after decades of getting along, they just set on each other and started killing each other, even killing the children. Why? Because the darker

side of human nature was put on a pedestal. Because they were told the most important thing about them is that they weren't the other guys.

And you look around the world and see where all that's happening. Now we're worried about Burundi breaking out again and having what happened in Rwanda happen in Burundi. Why? Because the Hutus and the Tutsis think the most important thing about them is they're not the other guy.

I went to Ireland a year ago, and the streets were lined with the Catholics and Protestants, the young children cheering and yelling because they didn't want any more war over there. But the grownups didn't have as much sense as the kids did. And they started fighting again over things that happened 300, 400, 500, 600 years ago, telling the most important thing about them was they weren't Catholic or they weren't Protestant.

How long did South Africa suffer for the same reason? And we have to remember—that's why I act so strongly when I see things like the church burnings or synagogues or Islamic centers being defaced—any of this is wrong. We

can never define ourselves as Americans by saying we are so good because we are not the other guy. The other guys are us, too. We are all Americans.

And I saw where one of our friends in the other party the other day was saying, "Boy, we really need to jump on this affirmative action out in California; we can take the President down on this. This is one of those wedge issues." Well, let me tell you something, folks, those wedge issues nearly did us in. We have had about all the wedge issues we need. And I'd like them to take their wedges and go someplace else and let those of us who believe in unity get on with the business of making America a great place for every American to live in. And I want you to help me build that kind of bridge to the 21st century.

Thank you, and God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:34 p.m. at the Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Alexis M. Herman, Assistant to the President and Director of Public Liaison; David Dinkins, former New York City mayor; and Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado.

Remarks on the Elections in Bosnia and an Exchange With Reporters September 15, 1996

The President. Good morning. A year ago Bosnia was racked by the bloodiest war in Europe since World War II. Yesterday Bosnians went to the polls in peace to cast their votes for their future. The road ahead will be hard, but yesterday was a remarkable step forward. The Bosnian people, the international community, and the American people should be proud.

Our observer delegation, led by Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, reports that the elections generally were orderly and calm. Close to 70 percent of Bosnia's registered voters cast a ballot freely at one of 4,400 polling places all across the country. And nearly 80 percent of the registered refugees abroad voted by absentee ballot.

I want to thank IFOR, the international police task force, and the more than 1,200 international election monitors for helping so many Bosnians take part in these elections. By voting yesterday, the Bosnian people gave life to the institutions

of national government: a presidency, a parliament, a constitutional court, key government agencies. These institutions can bring the country together instead of driving it apart. Now we have to get them up and running and help the Bosnian people in the hard work of building a unified, democratic, and peaceful Bosnia.

Our commitment to Bosnia does not end with these elections. We will continue to do our part to hold Bosnia's leaders to their commitments and to turn the promise born 9 months ago at Dayton into a reality.

Thank you.

Iraq

Q. Mr. President, there are reports that Iraq has fired more missiles at U.S. planes. Do you know if those reports are true, and if so, do you plan to respond?

The President. I can't confirm that now.