

Jan. 9 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998

But we must make sure that more of our young people stay in school, graduate from high school, and when they graduate, they know what they're supposed to know. There are still too many of our children who graduate from high school not knowing that. That's why I have pushed our national goals of making sure every 8-year-old can read, every 12-year-old can log on to the Internet, and every 18-year-old can go on to college with high standards, proven reforms, hooking up every classroom and library to the Internet by the year 2000, making sure that every eligible child has a chance to be in a Head Start program or another good pre-school program. We have to do these things so that all of our children can learn.

Let me also say that one of the most troubling things to me is that the high school graduation rates in America now are getting quite high—they're well above 80 percent, moving toward the 90 percent level they should reach—for every ethnic group in America except Hispanic young people. Too many of our Hispanic young people still drop out of high school, very often out of good motivation. They think, "I ought to drop out. I ought to go to work. I can support myself. I won't be a burden on my family. I can help my family make a living." That has been true for generations. That is simply not true anymore, and we have to change that attitude. It is not true anymore.

It has been clear now for at least 10 years that there is a huge and growing gap in the job prospects and the earning prospects of people who have 2 years or more of college and people who drop out of high school. It is imperative that we get 100 percent of our kids to stay in school, get their high school diploma,

go back and get their GED if they have already dropped out, and then go on to at least 2 years of college. The financial obstacles have been removed. We have to tear down the walls in the minds of people that are keeping them from doing this.

I have asked Secretary Riley to work with Mickey Ibarra and Maria Echaveste, two Assistants to the President, and Gene Sperling, Director of my National Economic Council, to help us do everything we can do to deal with this. I have talked to Representative Hinojosa and Representative Ortiz about this, but I'm telling you, you folks have got to change this at the grassroots level. Every single child has got to stay in school, graduate, and they need to know what they're supposed to know when they get their high school diploma.

You can make it happen. We can open the doors. We can have the opportunity. We can set the standards. You have to make it happen. That's the way we can build a bridge to the 21st century that every single American can walk across. I want you to help me.

Thank you. God bless you. It's great to be back.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. in the Confederate Air Force Museum Hangar at the Brownsville South Padre International Airport. In his remarks, he referred to Alma Garcia, principal, Yturria Elementary School, Brownsville; Texas State Representatives Rene O. Oliveira and Jim Solis; Cameron County Judge Gilberto Hinojosa; Brownsville City Commissioners Carlton Richards, Ernie Hernandez, and Harry E. McNair, Jr., and City Manager Carlos Rubenstein; and Mayor Henry Gonzalez of Brownsville.

Remarks to High School Teachers, Students, and Parents in Houston, Texas

January 9, 1998

Thank you. Let's give Ronald another hand. Didn't he do a great job? [Applause] Thank you very much. Let me say, first of all, thank you for the warm welcome; thank you for coming. I welcome all the students here from all the schools around the area, the college and the university presidents. And I understand we

also have the student body presidents from the University of Houston, Texas Southern, Prairie View, and I believe the University of Texas at Austin. I welcome all of them here.

I also want to say a special word of thanks to the AmeriCorps volunteers because I believe all of us should serve, and I believe we should

give more young people the chance to serve in their community and then help them go on to college if they do.

I'd also like to thank Secretary Riley for his work and for being here with me today. And I want to say a special word of appreciation to your Congresswoman, Sheila Jackson Lee. She is a remarkable person. She has supported the efforts that I have done my best to make on your behalf to improve education and to improve economic opportunities, to reach out to the rest of the world and make America strong in the 21st century. She has done a remarkable job, and I'm honored to be in her district today.

I'd also like to thank Congressman Lampson for coming. And I want to say a special word of appreciation to your new mayor, Lee Brown, and thank him publicly for his service in my Cabinet. We could nearly have a Cabinet meeting today, we almost have a quorum because our former Treasury Secretary, your former Senator, Lloyd Bentsen, and his wife, B.A., are here, clearly one of the most successful Treasury Secretaries in the entire history of the United States. You should be very proud of that.

And lastly, of course, I want to thank your immediate former mayor, Bob Lanier, and his wonderful wife, Elyse, for their friendship to me and for their service to the city of Houston. I have told people all across the United States, I have never met a more gifted public servant than Bob Lanier.

Before I get into my comment about education, let me try to put it into some larger context. I wanted to have all the young people here today because I wanted this to be a meeting about your future. I thank my friend Jennifer Holliday for coming here to sing and for that magnificent song she sang just before I came out. There really is a dream out there with your name on it, but you have to go get it. And I want you to see your dreams and your life against a larger landscape of America's dream and America's life.

We already have one foot in the 21st century, and it's a time that will be very, very different from the immediate past. How will it be different? Well, you know and you see and you feel it here in Texas. First of all, there will be the phenomenon of globalization. People and products and ideas and information will move rapidly across national borders, both the borders that touch us like Texas and Mexico and the

borders that are beyond the oceans that require us to fly or to communicate in cyberspace.

Secondly, there is a phenomenal revolution in information and science and technology. Not only can children in Houston communicate with children in Australia on the Internet or go into libraries in Europe to do research, but the very mysteries of the human gene are being unraveled now in ways that offer breathtaking possibilities to preserve the quality and the length of human life, to fight back disease, and to bring people together at a higher level of humanity than we've ever known. That's all very encouraging.

We also know that as the borders between people break down, we're more vulnerable to the problems of other people, and our neighbors are more than just the people that live next door to us. People all around the world are our neighbors now. We see a remarkable spread of malaria, for example, around the world, and a lot of people getting it in airports and bringing it to other countries as they travel between airports. We know that chemical and biological weapons can be made in small quantities and can do a lot of damage, and people can carry them around across national borders. So we know that not only with our possibilities but also with our problems, our challenges, we are more interdependent. And yet, we have to depend more on ourselves, as well. That's why education is so important.

My goal for your country, when I'm gone from the Presidency and all you young people are living out your lives, is that you will live in a new century in which the American dream is alive and well for every single person who's responsible enough to work for it; in which your country is still the world's leading force for peace and freedom and prosperity, recognizing that we can't do it alone, that we have to do it as partners on good terms with as many people who share our values as possible; and finally, and key to the whole thing, that we will go forward as one America, across all the lines that divide us—the racial lines, the regional lines, the income lines, the lines of ethnicity and religion—every single separation.

We'll say, okay, we've got a lot of differences in this country, and that makes us more interesting. It makes life more interesting. We respect those differences. We celebrate those differences. But there are fundamental values that

bind us together as America, that make us one country, stronger than ever in a new world.

That's why I was profoundly honored when your former mayor, your present mayor, the Congresswoman, Phil Carroll, and so many others banded together to defeat Proposition A, and I was glad to actually come out and do my little part in that, not because I held all the answers to all the problems regarding all of our racial differences but because I know one thing: As your President, I have spent an enormous amount of time, the time you gave me to be President, trying to do what I could to save lives and stop people from killing each other over their racial, their ethnic, and their religious differences.

I see people in nations in Africa engaging in tribal warfare, when they're all so poor it breaks my heart, and I think, if only they would join hands to try to lift their children up, how much better would they be. I see my people in Northern Ireland still arguing over what happened 600 years ago between the Catholics and the Protestants, when the young people say, "We worship the same God. It's about time we started acting like it. Let's build a better future together." I see people in Bosnia—Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Western Christians, Orthodox Christians, and followers of Muhammad—who shared the same piece of land for hundreds of years and lived for decades in this century in peace, slaughtered each other for years, and now we're trying to get them back together. And they have to learn to lay down their hatreds.

If we want to lead that kind of world away from that sort of thing, we have to set a good example. We have to prove that on every street corner in this country, in every school in this country, in every workplace in this country, in every apartment house in this country, we not only say we believe we are one America and none of us are any better than anybody else in the eyes of God, we have to live like it. We have to live like it.

And finally, just in a few days, I'm going to see the Prime Minister of Israel and the head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Mr. Arafat, to try to end the longstanding differences in the Middle East. The beginning of the world's monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all in that little piece of land—nearly everybody in America, not all of us but most of us, trace our faith's roots

to that place. Isn't it unbelievable that people still are fighting over that, when if they would say, "We are the children of one God. Why can't we be one people and share this land of milk and honey together?"

So I say that one of the reasons I challenge people to engage in citizen service, one of the reasons I was so proud to be introduced by Ronald Cotton, is not just because he's a valedictorian, not just because he's going to be a doctor, not just because I might need him to fix my heart one day—[laughter]—but because as busy as he is, he still does his citizen service. That's what we all should do. If he's got time to do it, the rest of us should have time to do it.

Now, what's all that got to do with education? You need to understand all this if you're going to make the most of the 21st century. It can be the brightest, best time in all of human history, but it will only work for America because this is a democracy, where we think everybody should have an opportunity. It will only work if everybody has a chance to walk across that bridge to the 21st century together, if we all have a chance.

That's what's special about America. That's how we got started. We believe nobody ought to get an unfair advantage, everybody ought to have a chance, and if people need a hand up, we ought to give it to them. That's what we believe as Americans. Now, the problem is, in this world we're living in, where the pace of change and the scope of change is greater than ever before, where the world is crowding in on you as never before, there is nothing anybody else can do for you unless you're willing to make your own dream by the development of your own mind.

Therefore, the 21st century will not only be known as the information age, the age of science and technology, it will also be known by ordinary people as the education age because what you know will depend—will determine in large measure the scope of your life in the new era. It's always been an advantage to have an education. But what I want you to understand now is it's not just an advantage; it is a necessity.

Let me just give you a couple of statistics. Two decades ago, college graduates made about 40 percent more than people with a high school diploma. Today, in less than 20 years, the gap has gone to 75 percent. Over a lifetime, people who have 2 years of college will make a quarter

of a million dollars more than high school graduates. Each additional year of college after high school means a 10 percent increase in yearly earnings for people. If you graduate from college, you're much, much, much more likely now to get a job with a pension, with health care, with other benefits, and where the income goes up, instead of staying the same or actually declining, as against inflation.

We have learned as a people, therefore, that the more we invest in education and the higher the quality is, the faster our economy grows as a whole. In the last 2 years—one of the things I'm proudest of is not only that we're now over 14 million new jobs in the 5 years I've been privileged to be your President, with a 24-year low in unemployment, but in the last 2 years, more than half of the new jobs coming into this economy have paid above average wages. That's the good news. But the challenging news is, you can't get those jobs unless you have the requisite education.

And let me say again, this is about more than money. This is not just about money; this is about our ability to be strong as a nation. You want America to lead the world? Do you really believe we can maintain the world's strongest defense, the world's strongest economy, the world's strongest diplomatic force unless we are the world's best educated people? There is no way. Do you want us to set an example for other people about how we should live and have good values? We also have to have smart enough minds and be sophisticated enough to figure out how to handle the honest differences that we have.

We have honest differences. That's what makes life interesting. We wouldn't have to have elections if we didn't have any differences. [Laughter] We have honest differences, but we have to figure out, how do we handle our differences in ways that we grow stronger, we grow richer, we improve the quality of life, and we strengthen our values?

It is not just about money. We will not succeed in the world of the 21st century unless we dramatically improve the quality of education that all of our children get from kindergarten through high school, and unless we have larger numbers of people going on to college and succeeding, not only because you have to know more but because—well, look what's happening. Look at the Internet. How many of you young people have ever used the Internet? How many

of you have ever logged on to the Internet? Look at all these hands up.

Now, let me tell you something. Five years ago, when I became President—just 5 years ago—the Internet was still virtually the private property of research scientists. It started out as a little Government project so that research scientists could communicate with each other and share the latest data. And a young person in his twenties basically figured out that this thing could have great commercial applications, great educational potential. It was unbelievable. And all of a sudden, all these young people in their twenties were becoming multimillionaires, some of them worth hundreds of millions of dollars, figuring out how to use the Internet for education and for business purposes.

Now, it's staggering. Hundreds of thousands of new homepages are added to the Internet every month. It's probably the fastest growing communications institution in all of human history. And just 5 years ago, nobody knew what it was. I say that to make this point. The reason you need a good education is not just so when you get out of college you know what you're supposed to know; you have to be able to learn for a lifetime, and then to apply what you know. So that education is much more dynamic than it used to be. Think of the Internet. That's a good model, more and more things coming on. It's hard to keep up. You've got to keep learning about it. That's the way all work is going to be.

And that's why we're here. Now, we've worked hard to do what we could to improve our schools, to say: We ought to have high standards; we ought to push proven reforms; we ought to connect every classroom and library to the Internet by the year 2000; we ought to make sure that nobody gets out of the third grade without being able to read independently—that's what the America Reads program is all about; we ought to make sure that everybody that needs it is in a good Head Start program or other pre-school program; we ought to make sure that after school and on the weekends our young people have something to do and something to say yes to so they have good lives and don't get in trouble. Houston was a leading force in proving that works.

But then after all that is said and done, we have got to get more people to go on to college. Now, I have done my best to fulfill a commitment I made to the American people when I

ran for President, which is that we would open the doors of college to everyone. Last year when we passed the balanced budget agreement, we agreed for the first time in 50 years to have a huge increase in help for people to go to college, the biggest increase since the GI bill when the soldiers came home from World War II, 50 years ago.

Here's what it does, here's what you can look forward to, every one of you, now: For the first 2 years of college, a family can get a \$1,500-a-year tax credit per person in the first 2 years of college. That makes community college virtually free to virtually all Americans. In the junior and senior year, for graduate school, you can get another \$1,000 tax cut.

If parents begin to save for their children's education in an education IRA, they can not only save the money, and it won't be subject to taxes when they save it, but then they can draw it out and what it earns, and it won't be subject to taxes either. I don't think we need to tax the money people save for a college education. It will enable ordinary people to save for a college education.

We had the biggest expansion in Pell grant scholarships in 20 years for deserving students, kids who need that. We rewrote the student loan program so you can get the loans quicker, and you can pay them back easier. I don't know how many young people I used to meet when I was Governor that said, you know, "I'm going to have to drop out of college because I'll never be able to afford to pay my loans back. I want to be a teacher. I want to be a police officer. I'm not going to make a lot of money. I can't pay my loans back." Now, under our direct loan program, you get to pay your loans back limited to a percentage of the money you earn when you get out of college, so it will never bankrupt you. We have opened the doors of college to all Americans.

A hundred thousand young people now have been in the AmeriCorps program earning money to go to college and serving in their communities. And today I announced that in the budget

I am going to send up to Congress next month, we will actually ask for funding for 1 million work-study students, for people who are trying to work their way through college. We have opened the doors of college for all Americans.

That's opportunity, but opportunity never works without responsibility. So I want every young person here to remember this. We can open the door, but you have to walk through. And that means, first of all, you've got to finish high school, and you've got to make sure when you finish you know what you're supposed to know so the diploma you have means something. And then you have to keep your sights high. Remember, there is a dream out there with your name on it. And we're trying to open the door to the dream, but you've still got to walk through and seize it. You still have to walk across the bridge to your own future. You still have to build your own future.

But what I believe with all my heart is that you will live in the most interesting, exciting, kaleidoscopically diverse time in human history if we are wise and good and we continue to be the nation that is the world's best hope for peace and freedom, the nation that reaches out to others in principled interdependence, a people that learn to live together as one America, a people of responsible citizenship who can seize the opportunities that are out there. That's the America we're trying to build for you. But in the end, you will determine whether that's the America that lives in the 21st century. You can do it, and I know you will.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:55 p.m. in the General Assembly Hall at the George Brown Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Ronald Cotton, student, Robert E. DeBakey High School for Health Professionals; Philip J. Carroll, president and CEO, Shell Oil Co.; Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel; and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.