

Apr. 22 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1998

## Memorandum on Citizen Service

April 22, 1998

*Memorandum for the Heads of Executive  
Departments and Agencies*

*Subject:* Strengthening Our Commitment to  
Service

Citizen service is one of the most important ways we demonstrate that we care for and are responsible for one another. It is also an American tradition that we meet our challenges as members of a true community, with all of us working together. Thus, citizen service should not just be a temporary pursuit of only a week or a month. The ethic of service must extend throughout a lifetime.

Over the years, great numbers of Federal employees have been generous with their time and talents and have made positive contributions to their local communities, even as they have fulfilled their official responsibilities. At the same time, as the Nation's largest employer, the Federal Government has a responsibility to set an

example by helping to make it possible for its employees to dedicate time to serve others.

Therefore, I am today directing Federal departments and agencies to explore additional measures to expand service opportunities for Federal employees. Each department and agency should review its work scheduling practices and make maximum use of existing flexibilities to allow Federal employees to plan and take time off to perform community service as the public business permits. Each department and agency should also inform its employees of the various flexibilities available to them to participate in volunteer activities. The Office of Personnel Management should provide information to departments and agencies in support of this effort. Each department and agency should then report to the Office of Personnel Management within 90 days on the measures taken to implement this memorandum.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

## Remarks at the Third Millennium Evening at the White House

April 22, 1998

*[Moderator Ellen Lovell, Director, White House Millennium Council, welcomed the participants and introduced a short film about the Poet Laureate Consultant Program at the Library of Congress. Following the film, Hillary Clinton discussed the influence that poets and their works have had on American culture and welcomed poets laureate Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, and Rita Dove. Mr. Pinsky, Mr. Hass, and Ms. Dove then read selected poems by various American poets and commented on the importance of poetry on America's past and future.]*

*The President.* I don't mean to be heretical, but I was transported by Robert and Robert and Rita. And I was thinking, this really is a historic moment: first, there were the three tenors—*[laughter]*—then there were three sopranos, but nobody ever had three such poets before, and we thank them.

A few years ago there was an interesting article in the Atlantic Monthly, which asked whether poetry could matter in the 21st century. I reread it a few moments before coming down tonight. You know, in this crazy world we're living in, everything's running around so fast. If it could matter, how could we revive the human value of poetry, its importance to our culture, to our sense of who we are and who we are becoming as individuals and as a people?

Well, tonight there is a poet who was not an American but was very much of the Americas, and I think we would be remiss not to acknowledge. Here's what Octavio Paz said about his craft:

Between what I see and what I say,  
Between what I say and what I keep silent,  
Between what I keep silent and what I dream,  
Between what I dream and what I forget,  
poetry.

That is what we celebrate here tonight. Does it have any value? Of course, it does. It made us happy. It made us nostalgic. It made us sad. It made us wiser tonight.

When I was a boy in high school, I was once required to memorize 100 lines from Macbeth, hardly designed to entice me to a public career. [Laughter] But then again, I learned about the dangers of blind ambitions—[laughter]—the fleeting nature of fame—[laughter]—the ultimate emptiness of power disconnected from higher purpose. Mr. Shakespeare made me a better President. [Laughter]

Something quite a lot to be said for all this, and I welcome you here tonight. Tonight we have honored the poetry of our Nation's past. Now I'd like for you to see some of the poets of our future, people whom Hillary and our poets laureate visited with today at Johnson Junior High School.

[At this point, a video about the junior high school was shown.]

*The President.* Now I'd like to turn the discussion over to the Director of our White House Millennium Project, Ellen Lovell.

[Ms. Lovell invited audience members and Internet participants to read their favorite poem selections and to ask the three poets questions. The President was then asked to make closing remarks.]

*The President.* Let me say, first of all, I thought the people who were in the audience who read their poems were absolutely fabulous, and I'd like to thank you all. You were great. Thank you.

Well, I'm supposed to end. I suppose the first thing I should say is that poets help me get over Macbeth. [Laughter] When I was about 21 and despairing, I came across those wonderful lines from Carl Sandburg:

A tough will counts; so does desire.  
So does a rich, soft, wanting.  
Without rich wanting, nothing arrives.

We want these children to have ambition. We just want it to be well connected.

A lot of Presidents have wanted to be poets. [Laughter] George Washington actually tried his

hand at poetry, writing that "true happiness depends upon a quiet soul," as I told our poets laureate on the way out. And John Quincy Adams actually wanted to be a poet; he wanted to do that, but he just couldn't quite get there. [Laughter] So he settled for a lesser path. [Laughter] But still he composed verses all his life. Even when he was an old man in Congress, waiting to vote, he would write out little verses. He once wrote in the Congress, "We must seize the moments as they pass, and snatch the retrieveless sunbeam as it flies."

Lucky for you, I haven't written any poetry in over 20 years. [Laughter] And the poems I wrote to Hillary so long ago, I would still be a little embarrassed to read today. [Laughter]

But I would like to close with a particularly American poem about love of country, sacrifice, the conflict between mortality and the timeless value of a deed well done. It is Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn," written to honor the completion of the Battle Monument commemorating the battles of Lexington and Concord in the Revolutionary War.

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood,  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

The foe long since in silence slept;  
Alike the conqueror in silence sleeps;  
And Time the ruined bridge has swept  
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,  
We set to-day a votive stone;  
That memory may their deed redeem,  
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare  
To die, and leave their children free,  
Bid Time and Nature gently spare  
The shaft we raise to them and thee.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The White House Millennium Evening program began at 7:30 p.m. in the East Room at the White House.