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Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner in Boston, Massachusetts

May 9, 1998

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the warm welcome. I thank Elaine and Gerry more than I can say. This has not been the easiest couple of weeks in their lives, and the fact that they continue to work and to have this event means an especially great deal to me tonight, and I thank you so much.

I'd like to thank all the people who are here tonight. Senator Kerry, thank you for coming, and thank you for your leadership, especially on behalf of our Nation's children in the Capital. I thank Mayor Tom Menino and Angela for being here. When you said that Tom Menino's approval ratings, Steve, were in the eighties, my reaction was what the other 20 percent could possibly be thinking about. [*Laughter*] I don't know how anybody could do a better job as mayor than Tom Menino's doing; I don't think it's possible.

Everywhere I go in America now, when I talk to serious people who care about dealing with our challenges, people want to know how Boston went over 2 years with no child under 18 being killed. And I said it did not happen by accident. And I guess that's part of what I want to say tonight. Of course, this evening didn't happen by accident either. So I want to thank not only Elaine and Gerry but all the other cochairs: Jim and Kathy Daley; Sherry and Alan Leventhal—Alan and Fred have been through the fires for me for a long time, and I thank them for that; Lyle Howland and Jack Manning. And I'd like to say a special word of thanks to Alan and Susie Solomont; Alan did do a fabulous job for us at the DNC. And Steve and Barbara Grossman, thank you. And you can see from Steve's speech tonight that he is not beaten down from the rigors of his job and he's doing a wonderful job. Massachusetts should be very, very proud of him.

I also appreciate Lester Thurow coming tonight. I wish he could give the speech, and I could learn about how to improve the economy some more. [*Laughter*] And my good friend James Taylor, thank you for being here.

You know, when I was standing in front and we were taking pictures, one of you came through the line and said, "You know, Mr. President, Boston has become your ATM machine." [*Laughter*] But she said, "That's okay. We like it; we like it." [*Laughter*] I am profoundly grateful to the people of this city and this State for being so good to me and to Hillary and to the Vice President, to our administration. You all know we've got the highest percentage of the vote we received in any State in Massachusetts in 1996. We had an all-Democratic sweep in our congressional elections. And some of them were quite tough, indeed. And I am profoundly grateful to all of you. And that didn't happen by accident.

You heard all the things that Elaine said. I feel an enormous amount of gratitude for the strength of our economy, for the lowest unemployment rate since 1970 and the lowest inflation rate in 30 years and the lowest welfare rolls in 27 years and the lowest crime rates in 24 years. I'm grateful for that. I think the question is, what do we intend to do with that? And that really is the great question sort of looming over Washington. In that sense, I rather like the fact that the El Nino gods were not too nice to us tonight. It keeps us humble. If you like this, you'll love it if we don't do anything about climate change.

And that makes the point I want to make. When times are really good—in political life when times are good you can have, it seems to me, three responses. You can sort of play more golf and relax, which is appealing to me. [*Laughter*] Or you can think you can afford to be petty and mean and self-serving and groping and divisive politically, which is appealing to some. Or if the times are dynamic and things

are still changing very profoundly and rapidly, you understand that complacence and smallness are not really viable options.

And I've been going around the country trying to convince the American people that these good times give us an enormous opportunity and impose upon us a significant responsibility. The American people have confidence again. They believe this country can work again. They believe we can make things happen again.

But things are changing very profoundly in the way we work, the way we live, the way we relate to each other, the way we relate to the rest of the world. And I believe that this is a time that we should be big, think big, and act big. And I am doing my best, with the help of our Democrats in Washington, to push the country in that direction, because I think the only way you can continue to enjoy good success in a dynamic time is to bear down, not let up.

If you go out to Silicon Valley, for example, where Lord knows how many people have been made millionaires and more people than I can count on my two hands have been made billionaires, you won't find people going to work at noon and leaving at 3 o'clock, because they understand that in an economy of ideas you have to keep working to stay ahead of the curve. Not only that, it's interesting; it's fun; it's more fulfilling. That's the way our country should behave.

And in that sense, I would say to you, for me, we should have a short-term agenda and a long-term agenda. We should be committed to working like crazy this year in this session of Congress, even before this election, to earn our keep for the American people. And as we look to the next 2 years, in the barely 600 days we have until the start of a new century, a new millennium, we ought to promise ourselves that we are not going to start that new era without having seriously addressed what we know right now are the biggest challenges facing us.

So even though we've had a good time, I'd like to be just a little serious for a moment and just briefly tell you what I think we should be doing both now and over the long term. This year the first thing we need to do is to say we're glad we balanced the budget for the first time in 30 years, but it hasn't actually happened yet. We're glad we're apparently going to have a big surplus for the first time in 30 years, but we don't actually have it yet.

And we know we have real, serious, significant challenges awaiting us out there as the baby boomers retire and as everyone begins to live longer in reforming Social Security and Medicare, so we should not—we should not—squander this surplus we've waited 30 years to materialize until we've saved Social Security and prepared financially for the 21st century for the entire country. We should resist the easy temptation to either spend the money or give it back in a tax cut until, first, it materializes and, second, we know how we're going to deal with Social Security and Medicare.

The second thing we ought to do is realize we have a historic public health opportunity and pass comprehensive tobacco legislation to protect our kids from the dangers of tobacco. Now, let me just say again, this is not a small thing. We have more people die from tobacco-related illnesses than all other health problems put together. Three thousand kids start smoking every day, even though it's not legal, and we know 1,000 of them are going to die sooner because of it. What else can you do to save 1,000 lives a day? And we ought to do it this year in this congressional session. And if it's up to me and up to our caucus, that's exactly what we're going to do, and I hope you'll support us.

We have an ambitious education agenda: national standards, national exams to measure them; help the school districts to build more buildings and to hire more teachers so we can have smaller classes in the early grades; we can repair older buildings; we can build new ones where the classes are bursting at the seams.

Finally, we have a group of students in our school years who are bigger than the baby boom generation, for the first time since the baby boom generation. There are cities in this country where the average school building is 65 years of age or older. There are communities—I was down in Florida the other day to do a makeup date for the little school district I was supposed to visit when I tore my leg up over a year ago. In this lovely little school district, there's a beautiful old school building, and outside there are not one, not 5 but 17 trailers housing the children in the school.

Now, you ask yourself—you say, we're Democrats; we want every kid in this country to have a chance. And we know they can't have a chance unless they get good educations. What does it

say to a child from a poor inner-city school if they go to a school building where one of the floors is completely closed because the building is not maintained? How would you feel if you went to work every day and you walked up steps and you looked up at the floor and the first thing you saw as you looked at the building were three or four broken windows that never got fixed? You wouldn't tolerate it. You wouldn't permit your employees to do it. You wouldn't want your children to do it.

We say education is our most important mission. I'm telling you we need to pass an education agenda this year, based on standards, based on choice, based on technology. We're trying to hook up every classroom in the country to the Internet. The mayor says he'll have all the schools fixed here in a matter of a few months. You know that there are huge numbers of school buildings in this country where kids are going to school right now that literally cannot be hooked up to the Internet because they're too deficient in their basic infrastructure.

So we have an education agenda. We have got a families agenda that includes letting elderly people who are not old enough to be on Medicare, or near elderly—people about my age—people who aren't old enough to be on Medicare but are early retired, buy into the Medicare program at cost. Even the Republican congressional analysis says that it won't do anything to hurt the Medicare program. We're trying to pass a Patients' Bill of Rights. With over half the American people in HMO's today, I think it's important. There are lots of other things in the family area we're trying to do.

We have international responsibilities we are not fulfilling. I am trying my best to get the Congress to pay our debt to the United Nations. We get a lot out of being in the U.N. People share our burdens; they work with us. We can't say, "We'd like to be the leading country in the world but, oh, by the way, we're having a domestic political spat so we don't think we'll pay our dues." We say we wanted Kofi Annan to be the Secretary-General. We said we wanted all these reforms in the U.N. They went about enacting our reforms, and now I can't get the Congress to pay our dues.

We say we're worried about the financial crisis in Asia, but I can't get the Congress to pay what we owe to the International Monetary Fund, without which we cannot be an active participant in the long-term rebuilding of a lot of those Asian economies. So we have a short-term agenda.

But over the long term—and just think about it, how you think we ought to spend the next 600-and-some-odd days. I got yesterday—I can keep up with it; I finally got one of these little millennium clocks in the mail. And my wonderful secretary has it up on her desk now: "602 days to the 21st century," you know, how many hours and minutes and seconds and all. And it's exciting right now. It may get boring before the time passes, but it's exciting. [*Laughter*] But it's very helpful to me because it also is, minus about 20 days, all the time I've got left to work for you—no, no, 385 days, since we're measuring at 2000 instead of 2001.

And I think you ought to think about it. What would you do if you were marking off the days every day? What are the big challenges still out there for us? I'll tell you what I think they are. First of all, if you want to hold this country together in a responsible way, we have to reform Social Security and Medicare. When all the baby boomers get into the Social Security system, if we continue to work and retire at the same rates we are now, there will be about two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. If we keep seeing the life expectancy of the American people go up and the wonders of technology come on, the Medicare system as presently structured will not be sustainable after another several years.

So what we've got to do is to change that. I think that all of you would like it if Democrats were making those decisions, but you should insist that the Democrats who are elected be willing to make those decisions. We have proved now that we are the party of constructive change, and that's a big issue for America.

What's the second big issue? We can't stop working on education until our elementary and secondary schools are the best in the world. No person doubts that our system of higher education is the best in the world. No person doubts that our system of elementary and secondary education is not the best in the world. And we could stay here until dawn talking about that, but I can tell you, for 20 years I believe that I have spent more time on education than any other public issue. I believe in it passionately. But I can tell you, we will never, ever, ever be able to say America is a place in which everyone has an opportunity unless we can do something about it.

What's the third big challenge? We have to do something to bring the spark of enterprise and opportunity to the inner-city poor. It is stunning to think that in an economy with a 4.3 percent unemployment rate, there are still neighborhoods in America where the unemployment rate is 15 percent or 20 percent. And it is not necessary. We have a huge program before the Congress right now that will do a lot to bring the spark of enterprise to the inner cities. If it isn't passed in this session, we have to keep working until we've done more.

The third thing we've got to do is to prove we can grow the economy while we improve the environment. I believe the global warming phenomenon is real. I think it is significant. I do not believe we can regulate our way out of it. I think we have to prove that we can grow our way out of it.

I was in California about a week ago at a housing development for moderate- and low-income working people, where the energy usage on average in the homes was 40 percent less than typical because you can now have solar panels on your home that look like ordinary shingles, they're so thin. You can now buy a window for a low-income home that lets in more light but keeps the heat in in the wintertime and the heat out in the summertime. And if you'll pay twice as much money to get light bulbs, they'll last 3 to 4 times as long.

Now, we have to do these things on a huge scale in America. If we get to the point where we can build fuel-injection engines, fuel cells in our cars, we can cut greenhouse gas emissions from transportation by 80 percent. They won't cost any jobs; they'll create jobs. They won't hurt the economy; it will improve the economy. I cannot tell you how important I think that is.

Just two more things I think are big long-term challenges. We've got to prove that we really can be one America. We talk about it all the time. We've got to prove we can do it. And I think the two most critical things are, one, developing not only tolerance but respect and appreciation for people who are different than we are in every way. And you know I've worked pretty hard on that. Some people have made fun of me for doing it; some people have outright condemned me for doing it. But it's not only because I grew up in the South but also because I've been your President. I've seen what happens—from Bosnia to Kosovo, to Rwanda, to Haiti, to Northern Ireland, to the Middle East—when people decide that they only matter when they've got somebody to look down on, and that what is really important in their lives is that thank God they're not like those other people.

I've seen what happens when people believe their lives only have meaning when they descend into an ever-escalating cycle of violence. And I'm telling you, things like that could happen here on a smaller scale. But the flip side is, if we can prove we are the world's most truly integrated diverse democracy, we can be a model for the 21st century that will give us a moral force in the world that cannot be overestimated.

There is one school district across the Potomac River from the White House in Virginia that has children now from 180 different racial and ethnic and national groups, speaking as their native tongues over 100 different languages. It's not just a black-white-Hispanic deal anymore. And that's exciting to me. In a global economy, rooted in ideas and communication, it is a godsend. But we cannot take it for granted.

And the second thing I want to say is perhaps the best way we can help to build that one America is to inculcate in our children a sense of citizen service. Elaine mentioned this, but I'm very proud of the fact that AmeriCorps, which was in large measure modeled on City Year and my experiences here in Boston when I ran for President, will soon have 100,000 young people who will have earned college credit by serving in local communities, helping people to make the most of their own lives.

When people work together and learn together and play together and serve together, they're far more likely to get along together. So this is very important.

The last thing I want to say is, I have done my best as President to convince the American people that there is no reasonable dividing line any longer between foreign and domestic policy, in economics, in security, in many ways.

What are the major security problems of the 21st century? Terrorism, weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands, narcotraffickers, organized crime, people who can get in an airport and fly someplace else. These things require a high level of cooperation and a recognition that we live in an interdependent world. If you want the United States to lead the world, we must be willing to fulfill

our responsibilities. If you want other people to help us share the load, we must do that.

One of the greatest things about what happened in ending the war in Bosnia is that we are there, shoulder-to-shoulder not only with Russian troops but with troops from two dozen other countries. If we want to continue to have that kind of influence, we can't run away from our obligations to trade with the rest of the world. We have to keep expanding trade, not trying to close up trade. Congress ought to give me the authority to have trade agreements. We have to keep cooperating with other countries in environmental matters, in health matters, in all these things. But the American people have got to believe deep in the marrow of their bones that every part of our national life has to require us to have an international global perspective.

I fought very hard to save our space program, which was in danger when I became President. And one of the things I've asked the Congress to do is to invest in the 21st century research fund as a gift to the millennium that will dramatically increase all our research and development budgets. But one of the things that made it possible is that the international space station has European contributors, Japanese contributors, Canadian contributors, and a Russian contribution. And that's good. If you're going to have a place where people can go and stay a long while in space that's bigger than a football field, we need to work together.

And we cannot have an attitude in Congress or in the country that says, we will be involved in the world only when it suits us, only our own terms, and we reserve the right to have some sort of fight here at home which will allow us to walk away from our obligations.

And let me just give you two examples that go to the heart of Boston: the Irish peace process and the Middle East peace process. If I took a vote in Boston about whether I did the right thing to finally get America involved in the peace process in Ireland, even though it required us to break a few eggs at the time, most people would say that we did the right thing and you're glad we did. Yesterday we announced a modest but significant package of initiatives that we want to put into Northern Ireland, and we hope that it will be positive in persuading undecided voters there to vote in the next few days in the Irish referendum for the peace process and for it to implement the agreement that has been made.

I had a great talk with Prime Minister Major, and we talked about whether there is anything we can do when we meet together in just a few days in Europe. Why? Because there are more Irish in Massachusetts than there are in Ireland. Because your heart is there, and you know it.

If I took a vote in this crowd tonight and I said, do you want America to be a positive force for peace in the Middle East, and would you expect us, if the parties could make an agreement, to make more investments there, to grow the economy, and to guarantee the security of the parties so that we can unravel this incredible knot about peace versus security so that everybody can believe they can only have one with the other, whether you agree with everything I've said or everything the current government in Israel does, you agree with both of us or disagree with both of us, that proposition would pass overwhelmingly here in Boston.

Yes, the United States should reach out a hand. Yes, we should be faithful to our friendship with Israel. Yes, we should be faithful to our passion for peace in the Middle East. Yes, if the Palestinians are going to enforce security and stop terrorism, we ought to help them have a decent life, and it's terrible that their per capita income has dropped 30 percent since the Oslo accords were signed. You would all say, "Yes, let's do that."

Now, that's good, but you are also citizens of the world. We're not just Irish-Americans and Jewish Americans. We have to say that America now is composed of people from everywhere. I'm going to India and Pakistan and Bangladesh later in the year. I'm about to leave for China. You don't have to be a Chinese-American to understand how important our relationship with China is. And you don't have to be from the Indian subcontinent to know that in 30 years India will be the biggest country in the world. They already have the biggest middle class in the world. And if somehow the Indians and Pakistanis could unravel their differences, their future potential as an economic market for us and as a force for peace in Asia, bearing responsibilities that otherwise we might have to bear, is absolutely staggering, even though you may never read a newspaper article about it.

So I ask you here in Boston not only to be proud of your Irish roots, not only to be proud of your Jewish heritage but to be passionate about the role that America has for peace and

freedom and prosperity in the world, because the only way we can make the 21st century America's greatest days is if we do the right things at home and the right things abroad.

The last point I want to make is this. I have the great good fortune, being President, that people send me books all the time. Even Lester sends me books from time to time. And because I travel around a lot, I read a lot of them. And one of the things that I've tried to do the last 2 years is to read a lot about periods of American history that most Americans don't know much about.

For example, a lot of Americans know about what happened in the Constitutional Convention and during the Revolutionary War and then in George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's and John Adams' Presidency. And then a lot of Americans know about what happened in Abraham Lincoln's Presidency and immediately thereafter. Most Americans don't know very much about what happened between James Madison and Abraham Lincoln. Most Americans don't know much about what happened between Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Most Americans don't even know a great deal about what happened between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

So I've really tried to read about this. I just read a magnificent biography by Robert Remini of your fellow Massachusetts citizen Daniel Webster, which tells a lot about what happened in one of those gaping periods.

But if you look at all the great breakpoints in American history—how we started, what happened in the Civil War, what happened in the industrial revolution, what happened in the Depression and the Second World War, the civil rights revolution—you look at every time there was a great challenge in this country's history, we always had to do three things over and over and over again as we rose to a higher and higher and higher level of democracy. Every time, we had to deepen the meaning of freedom to include more people and to make their freedom real; we had to widen the circle of opportunity so that citizenship meant your chance at the brass ring; and we had to strengthen the bonds of our Union.

Now, you remember that. The Democratic Party, I'm sad to say, was not always on the right side of all three of those issues in the 19th century. But since Woodrow Wilson became President, throughout the 20th century, we haven't always been right on every issue, but we've always been on the right side of our history. And I am determined that when we start this new century, this country will have deepened our freedom, widened our opportunity, and strengthened our Union. If we do the right things, our kids will have the best America ever.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:30 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to dinner hosts Elaine and Gerald Schuster; Mayor Thomas M. Menino of Boston and his wife, Angela; Fred Seigel, president, Energy Capital Partners; Steve Grossman, national chair, and Alan D. Solomont, former national finance chair, Democratic National Committee; economist Lester C. Thurow; and musician James Taylor.

Statement on the Middle East Peace Process

May 11, 1998

I have just met with Secretary Albright, National Security Adviser Berger, and Ambassador Ross. Unfortunately, there will not be a meeting today with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat to launch the permanent status talks. I regret that.

I have asked Secretary Albright to meet later this week with Prime Minister Netanyahu while he is in Washington. The objective of those discussions will be to seek to overcome the remaining differences so that we can proceed immediately with accelerated permanent status talks.

Secretary Albright will then report to me whether, as a result of her discussions with the Prime Minister, the basis exists to launch those talks in Washington.