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Remarks to the City Year Convention in Cleveland, Ohio
June 3, 1998

The President. Thank you. Well, since 600 City Year members like Lesley and Casey wrote and invited me, I thought the least I could do was to show up. I want to thank Lesley for that very wonderful introduction and for the terrific letter. I thank Casey for what he said. When he started talking about his mother, I almost started to cry, too. [*Laughter*]

I'd like to thank Harris Wofford and Eli Segal. I'd like to thank Mayor White and Congressmen Stokes and Sawyer for coming with me today. Father Glynn, thank you for making us feel so welcome here at John Carroll. I thank the City Year Board of Trustees for their service, and the county and city officials and State officials here for their service. Thanks again, Lesley and Casey. And let me also say a special word of thanks to Alan Khazei and Michael Brown, the founders of City Year.

I found City Year, you know, back in 1991, when it was a much smaller program, beginning in Boston. And I was there as a candidate for President with about a one percent name recognition in Massachusetts. And so I had a lot of time on my hands. [*Laughter*] And I spent the better part of a day, as I recall, talking to the young people in City Year.

I wanted to be President because I felt that our country needed to take a new course if we were going to prepare for the 21st century so that for all of you the American dream of opportunity would be alive for everyone who was responsible enough to seize it; so that our country would still be the leading force for peace and freedom and prosperity and security in the world; and so that we would come together across all the lines that divide us into one America, bound in no small measure by citizen service.

Now, since 1991 and the election of 1992, my belief that our country could do better has certainly been vindicated. I am grateful beyond measure that, thanks to people like you and my friends in Congress and Americans throughout the country, we've been able to change America. I'm grateful that we have the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 27 years, the lowest crime rates in 25 years. I'm grateful.

But what I want to say to you today is that all of these achievements basically leave us free to chart the right course for America toward the 21st century. Part of it must be done in Washington; part of it must be done in the hearts and minds and lives of our citizens, where the greatness of America has always resided.

One of the things I think I ought to mention today, because it's so timely in Washington, is that we have a chance to pass comprehensive legislation to protect young people from the dangers of tobacco, and we ought to do it and do it right away. I just came from an elementary school here in Cleveland where I met a lot of City Year/AmeriCorps volunteers. They had worked with young children in this elementary school, the Stephen Howe Elementary School, to write 1,500 book reports this year, to build a new playground.

But one of the things I'd like for every child in that grade school to know is this: Smoking-related illnesses kill more people every year than AIDS, alcohol, car accidents, murder, suicides, drugs, and fires combined—combined. And 90 percent of all smokers started before they were 18, even though it's illegal to sell cigarettes to children under 18. Three thousand young people start smoking every day; 1,000 will have their lives shortened because of it. So I say again, while there are some in Congress who seem determined to stall, stop, or kill the tobacco bill, we will never have a better chance to save 1,000 lives a day and save a million kids in the next few years. And I hope you will help me send a loud message back to Washington, DC, to act and act now.

There are a lot of other things that we are working on back there that will shape the world you will dominate as adults. We're about to have our first balanced budget and a surplus in 29 years, and before we spend a penny of it, I want us to make sure we know how we're going to save Social Security so we don't bankrupt your generation when my generation retires. It's not right.

While we're strong and prosperous, I want us to do everything we can to invest in education so that not only our colleges but our grade schools, our junior high schools, and our

high schools are the best in the country and every child of whatever race or income or station in life can get a world-class education starting at kindergarten.

I want the Congress and the country to accept changes in the Earth's climate as real and commit ourselves to reduce the problem of global warming, even as we continue to grow the economy. We have to face the environmental challenges of the 21st century, and the sooner we get at it, the better off we're going to be.

There are many other things I want the Congress to do in health care and campaign finance reform and adopting the initiative that the First Lady and I have tried to advance for a 21st century fund to put money into research, in biomedical research and scientific research to build the next generation of the Internet, and also to preserve our precious natural heritage.

But I will tell you this. If America hasn't learned anything from you in the last 4 years since we've had the AmeriCorps program going, we should have learned that in the end, we will never be the country we ought to be, we will never meet the challenges that are there before us, we will never fully seize the opportunities that are there, until America believes in and practices citizen service.

As I said, when I started running for President in 1991, I had this idea—but it was just an idea in my mind—that we had two big problems. We needed more idealistic, energetic young people out there working on our communities—helping to solve problems at the grassroots level and touching other children one on one, helping people that would otherwise be forgotten, going to places where the private economy would not otherwise send them—and we also needed to open the doors of college to everyone. So I had this general idea, and then when I went to City Year in Boston, the lights came on in my mind, and I said, "This is what I want to do."

You know, out of the national service of our soldiers in World War II came the GI bill, which educated a whole generation of my parents and created the great American middle class. Out of the all too short service of President Kennedy came the Peace Corps, which took the idea of citizen service around the world. And I still see it as I travel for America, our best ideas and our greatest humanity manifest in these Peace Corps volunteers all across the world. I saw them recently when I was in Africa.

Out of AmeriCorps has come a blending of the two, taking the idea of service and the idea of education. It's almost like the Peace Corps comes home, in larger numbers, with a "GI educational bill" for citizen service. That is what we have done.

In only 4 years, nearly 90,000 young people have served through AmeriCorps in their communities; nearly 50,000 have become eligible for the education benefits. This year alone, more than 40,000 AmeriCorps positions are being filled around the country. And every young AmeriCorps volunteer, as anyone else could see from your enthusiasm, typically will generate 12 more volunteers helping on whatever the service is.

Last year AmeriCorps members taught or tutored 500,000 students, mentored 95,000 more, recruited 39,000 more volunteers, immunized 64,000 children, helped with disasters in over 30 States, worked with over 3,000 safety patrols, with local law enforcement and civilian groups, trained 100,000 people in violence prevention, built or rehabilitated 5,600 homes, helped put 32,000 homeless people in permanent residences, worked with people with AIDS and other serious diseases, and did a whole raft of environmental projects. Because of AmeriCorps, the Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America, America is a better place today.

I am especially proud of our America Reads program, which relies on all our national service programs, because one of the most important things we can do is to make sure every 8-year-old in America—and many of them don't have English as their first language now—can read independently by the time they leave the third grade. It's just terribly important to all other learning.

We now have—I learned this morning just before I came here that we now have over 1,000 colleges and universities that are allocating work-study positions or other volunteers to help make sure that by the year 2000, every 8-year-old can, in fact, read. And a lot of AmeriCorps volunteers have helped to mobilize, organize, and train those tutors, and I am very grateful for that.

I was also proud of the word used in my introduction, "enabling," that I had enabled service. I think that's important because we don't dictate anything about AmeriCorps from

Washington. You know that City Year is a grassroots, community-tied organization, even though it's a national network. We have enabled organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Habitat for Humanity, hundreds of other nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations—6,000 young AmeriCorps volunteers in faith-based organizations this year—to select and use AmeriCorps members to continue and enlarge the work that they are doing.

Here in Cleveland, more than 200 citizens of all ages and backgrounds are serving in 14 different AmeriCorps programs, including those serving with City Year Cleveland. In Cleveland, AmeriCorps does everything from tutoring children to building homes, to organizing neighborhood watches, to cleaning streams. I guess the next message I'd want you to help me send back to Washington today is that AmeriCorps works, and it should be extended by Congress into the 21st century so more young people have the opportunity to do that.

Now, I want to make one other point about AmeriCorps and citizen service. As you bring volunteers to communities in need, you also bring people together. I mean, just look around. The first thing I remember blazed in my mind when I first went to AmeriCorps—to the City Year project in Boston was that there was a young person who had been in an Ivy League school who dropped out of school for a year to work full-time, working side by side with a young person who had gotten in trouble in New Hampshire and the juvenile authorities said, "If you'll go work for City Year, that's the best rehabilitation you could do." They learned a lot from each other, those two young people. And they both did very well in the future as a result of it.

If you look around at this crowd today, it's a pretty good picture of America. And I have always believed that in the 21st century, America would have its greatest days in no small measure because we are growing more diverse as the world grows smaller. So it simply stands to reason that we're better off if we have people who look like people from everywhere in the world, who share their cultures, their language, and their religions, but who are bound together by common devotion to American ideals, to personal responsibility, expressed through constructive citizenship.

I believe that the key to solving a lot of our racial tensions in America is to make sure we keep living together, working together, learning together, and, in some ways most important of all, serving together, giving together. It can unite us across all the lines that divide us. It can even unite us across political lines. And after spending a few days in Washington, I sometimes think those are the deepest divides of all.

Last year I was so honored to be with Presidents Bush and Carter and Ford, Mrs. Reagan, and General Colin Powell at the Presidents' Summit on Service in Philadelphia. Some of you were there. I believe everybody who was there felt this enormous sense of excitement and also a great sense of possibility as we defined an agenda that we wanted every child to be a part of. We wanted every child to have a caring adult in his or her life, a safe place to grow up, a good school to attend, a healthy start in life, and a chance to serve the community.

Now, since that summit we've worked to do our part in Washington. Again, there's some things the Government should do. We've worked to expand health insurance to 5 million children. We've worked to expand access to child care so parents can be more effective at home and at work. We've worked to implement something called the High Hopes mentoring program that will involve young people like you with other kids who are younger, starting in junior high school, for 6 years. And also we'll give you an extra tool; you'll be able to tell those seventh graders, "Look, if you learn, if you stay in school, if you live a good life, I can tell you right now here's how much college aid you will get to guarantee you can go to college when you get out of high school."

We've been helped by corporations, by nonprofits, by other organizations who've committed fabulous sums of money to try to implement this agenda under the leadership of General Powell around the country. We want to do more, because in the end you know and I know from what you're doing that the most important thing we can still do in America with a lot of human problems is to make one-on-one contact and that you can put up all the money in the world, but hands build houses, hands clean streams, hands immunize children. People have to do these things.

So what I want to say today is I'd like to do some more to fulfill the goals of the Presidents' Summit on Service. And the Corporation for National Service is now prepared to commit another additional 1,000 Ameri-Corps leadership

positions targeted only to the goals of the Presidents' Summit. These AmeriCorps volunteers will support these State and local efforts. But you think about it, 1,000 volunteers trained to be leaders of community efforts. Wouldn't you like to know that when you finish and when you start your careers that every American child has a safe place to grow up, a good school, a healthy start, a caring adult, and a chance to serve just like you're doing? I think it's worth our making that effort.

I hope that one of the legacies of this period at the end of the 20th century will be a renewed spirit of community, a renewed sense of idealism, a renewed commitment to service. I hope, in other words, that when I finish my work and you finish yours we will have helped to make real the pledge that you take when you join AmeriCorps in the lives of all Americans. Indeed, I wish every American would take that pledge. I think it might be well again to send that message to the country.

So if you'll help me, I'd like us to conclude with that AmeriCorps pledge. I'll say it, then you say it:

I will get things done for America to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier. I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities. Faced with apathy, I will take action. Faced with conflicts, I will seek common ground. Faced with adversity, I will persevere. I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond. I am an AmeriCorps member. And I am going to get things done.

[*Audience members repeated the pledge line by line after the President.*]

The President. Let me say to all of you, in every generation young Americans are called upon to renew our country, to deepen what it means to be free, to widen the circle of opportunity, to strengthen the bonds of our national community. Because of the progress that has been made in this time, your generation has an incredible opportunity. You can finish the work that was done when I was your age by the people you saw in that video.

Thirty years ago this week, Robert Kennedy was killed. Thirty springtimes ago, we lost both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Their effort to bring America together and lift America to higher ground was delayed by a lot of the things that happened along the way. But now that we have regained our sense of confidence—that we know we can make our economy work, we know we can make our schools work, we know that we can make our streets safe, we know we can take poor people and give them a second chance and give them a chance to work and succeed in raising their children as well as working, we know that America can be more and better and that we can live up to our highest ideals—your generation will have a chance to make that the history of the 21st century.

I am so proud of you. I can't even convey what it feels like for me to stand here and look into your eyes. I know now that one of the best decisions I ever made was to fight to create AmeriCorps and to fight to keep others from taking it away and to fight to give you the chance to serve.

But remember—remember what you promised in the pledge, that you will serve now and beyond. For when you no longer wear these jackets or T-shirts every day, if you continue to believe and you continue to serve and you continue to have the feelings inside toward your fellow human beings that you have today, then you will write a remarkable history for America in the 21st century. We need you to do that, and I believe you will.

God bless you, and godspeed.

[*At this point, Stephen Spaloss, coexecutive director, City Year Philadelphia, made brief remarks and presented the City Year Lifetime of Idealism Award to the President.*]

The President. Thank you. Let's give him a hand; he was great. [*Applause*] I want you to know that I still have Stephen's sweatshirt, and I'll have it with me forever to remember when I first met him and I first met City Year. You keep it with you forever, too.

God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:25 p.m. in the gymnasium at the Don Shula Sports Center at John Carroll University. In his remarks, he referred to City Year members Lesley Frye of Chicago and Casey Hunt of Cleveland; Eli Segal, president and chief executive officer, Welfare to Work Partnership; Mayor Michael R. White of Cleveland; Rev. Edward Glynn, president, John Carroll University; and Gen. Colin Powell, USA (Ret.), chairman, America's Promise—The Alliance For Youth.