

Remarks to the Democratic Leadership Council National Conversation June 4, 1998

Thank you, Antonio, for that wonderful introduction. Thank you, Senator Lieberman, Governor Romer, Al From, and Will, and all the other folks here from the DLC. I thank Governor Carper and Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, all the other elected officials who are here. I thank Jill Docking for her work on this important project.

And let me say, I'm very glad to be here, and I wish that I could sit here for a couple of hours and listen to you, instead of the other way around. I find I nearly always fail to learn things when I am doing the talking. But I am honored to be here. And I just took a little picture in the next room with the elected officials who are here, and I was thinking that we have come a long way since 1984, a long way since the New Orleans Declaration, a long way since Cleveland, and that all of you should be very proud to be a part of a growing national movement that at the same time is bearing faithfully our most treasured American traditions and ideas.

I think it's worth remembering that in the early 19th century when the Democratic Party—when the term began to be used, very often the term was shortened from “Democratic Party” to just “Democracy”; people used to refer to our predecessors as the Democracy, because we believed we were representing all Americans. And I think that that may be a better name for us now, even than it was then. Our party is again a party of hope, a party of the future, a party that empowers individuals and gives them a chance to be part of a larger national progress and unity.

The credo of Andrew Jackson's day that I've heard Al From say a thousand times, “opportunity for all, special privileges for none,” is still a big part of what we believe. Thomas Jefferson believed that we needed more freedom and more responsibility, and that's still what we believe. Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman believed that America had to lead in this increasingly interdependent world if we wanted to advance the cause of freedom and peace and prosperity and security. That's still what we believe.

And we have fundamentally, especially here at the DLC, been a group of Democrats committed to ideas. And in that sense, we have embraced one of the central gems of wisdom of the greatest Republican President, Abraham Lincoln, who, in a very eloquent series of statements that I'm sure many of you remember by heart, reminded us that we could never build our country up by tearing others down. I am proud to be a New Democrat with all of you.

We have called our approach “the third way,” with a Government that is more active, more effective, less expensive; one that can bring us together and move us forward, not drive us apart and set us back.

I am profoundly grateful to the American people that in two Presidential elections we have been entrusted with the leadership of the country into the 21st century. I believe it is not an accident that this has happened. I do not believe it is a figment of the fertile imagination of me or any political expert that worked for us. I think this happened because we had good ideas that were rooted in old values; that we were able to tell the American people in a convincing way that we could transform our Nation, and in the process transform our party, in a way that would enable us to do the eternal business of America; that in the face of new challenges and new opportunities we would find a way to change while still anchored in our basic values; and that we could bring good results to the American people.

That is what I think brought about those two election victories. And I believe that history, when people look back on it, will show that. And in that sense, every one of you who have been a part of all we have done here for more than 10 years, and especially since the issuance of the New Orleans manifesto, can really take a lot of pride in the good things that have happened to America. We are, in effect, building an American example for the new millennium right now.

Now, just think how far we've come. Think about how America was in 1990, in 1991. We not only had problems, we were not only drifting apart and stagnating economically and our social problems were deepening, but there was

a real belief on the part of many people that nobody was really concerned enough to do anything about it. And more and more we had folks in the other party saying, "Well, there's a reason we're not concerned. We can't do anything about it, because Government is the problem, and we just have to let this stuff happen, and if we don't, it will just get worse. If we try to make it better, it will just get worse."

And you remember all their speeches, "The Democrats would mess up a two-car parade," and all that sort of thing. That was the basic prevailing conventional wisdom that they tried to hammer home: "So, yes, we have these problems, but we really can't deal with them because Government is inherently the problem. Now, if you trust the Democrats, they'll just make it worse by trying to help."

And then, to make the climate worse, there were politicians who really tried to make these social differences in our country bigger, when I'm trying so hard to make them smaller. Every time they saw a point of tension in our society, they saw that as an opportunity for what the professionals call "wedge issues." And there were even people who believed, looking at all this, that our country was in some sort of long-term decline. And all the experts believed—the political experts believed that it would be a very, very long time before any Democrat could be elected, because the other party said, "Government is inherently bad, and besides that, the Democrats can't run the economy, manage foreign policy. They're weak on crime, weak on welfare, and they'll run the deficit up. It will be a disaster." You remember all that.

Where is all that? It's all gone. What drove it away? Reality. [Laughter] You should be proud of that. You should be proud that you have been a part of that. We tried in this administration to be faithful to what we said in Cleveland in 1991, to stay with the themes of opportunity and responsibility and community. We've tried to make sure that our ideas were driven by our values, and our politics were driven by our policies, not the other way around. This really has been an administration of ideas.

Yesterday I had the pleasure to go celebrate one of those ideas. I went to Cleveland to the national convention of City Year, one of our AmeriCorps affiliates. I saw 1,000 young people that are changing the futures for tens of thousands of other people all across America. It's been a stunning success. Nearly 90,000 young

people have now come into national service in the last 4 years. And over half of them have earned the credits to go to college; that was a very essential part of the DLC idea of national service and earning money for education. And it is making America a better place. If you didn't read about it, it's only because no one had a fight or called anyone a name. But it actually happened yesterday, and it was quite wonderful. And it was very, very moving to see that an idea that all of us nourished for such a long time was actually out there alive.

One of the young men who spoke said, "The first time my mother ever said she was proud of me was when I became an AmeriCorps volunteer and I started working with children." A young man that I met 7 years ago in Boston when I was running for President came up and reminded the audience that he'd given me the T-shirt off his back—the sweatshirt off his back so I'd never forget the service project he was involved in. And I kept it and ran in it and still have it to this day. And he kept the service to this day; he now does it full-time.

There are young people like this all over America. How did this happen? It happened because the DLC developed this concept of national service. We had an election; it was part of the election debate; and the Congress ratified the judgment of the people in the election of 1992. And it changed America. There are lots of other ideas like this.

The DLC talked a lot about reinventing Government and how we had to change the way Government worked and brought in a lot of people to actually go through the details of it. And a lot of that is kind of boring, you know, and it doesn't make great high-flown lines in speeches. But a huge percentage of the savings that we will enjoy over the next 5 years that are helping us to balance the budget came because of the reinventing Government efforts that the Vice President led. And we now have over 300,000 fewer people, and 16,000 pages of unnecessary regulations gone, and more than 250 programs gone, and 640,000 pages of internal rules gone. We saved a lot of trees—[laughter]—with this RIGO movement. It's worked. The efforts have saved \$137 billion. Years ago, reinventing Government was a New Democrat idea. Today, it's an American success story. You ought to be proud of that.

If you think about community policing, we just celebrated the fact that we're ahead of

schedule. We've now funded 75,000 of our 100,000 community police that we promised in the campaign of 1992, a DLC idea. We're ahead of schedule and under budget. What was a New Democratic idea is now an American success story. The crime bill with the community policing, the Brady bill, the assault weapons ban, the prevention efforts to do smart things in local communities with community leaders—all these things were part of the original, tough, smart crime package of the DLC. They were New Democratic ideas; now they're American success stories.

We promised to ease the burden of taxes for working people, to reward work, to lift millions of working families out of poverty. When we doubled the earned-income tax credit, we made the American dream real for people who work full-time. We said, "No matter how little you make, you shouldn't live in poverty if you're working full-time and you've got kids in the house." That earned-income tax credit today is worth about \$1,000 a year to a family of four. It was a New Democrat idea; now it's part of America's success stories.

There are over 2 million children who have been lifted out of poverty because of an idea that started in a meeting like this held by the DLC and then appeared on a piece of paper and is now a part of the life of the United States. What you do here matters. Ideas matter. Work like this matters.

Now, I could give you lots of other examples. When I became President, I think there was one charter school in America. Today, there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds. The State of California just voted to take the cap off of the number of charter schools that they could have. It's sweeping America. For most people, it started as an idea being promoted by the DLC.

You can see it in the balance of tough child support enforcement with more support for children in welfare families. You can see it in the family and medical leave law. You can see it in our trade policy, in the empowerment zones and all the other initiatives to bring the spark of enterprise to the inner city. You can see it in the HOPE scholarships, and, yes, you can see it in the balanced budget. They were New Democrat ideas; now they are American success stories.

And what are the results? Just think about it. If I had told you on Inauguration Day in

1993 that in 5½ years, I'd be able to come back here and assert to you that we have the lowest crime rate in 25 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 27 years, the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years, the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, the lowest inflation rate in 32 years, the smallest Government in 35 years, and the highest homeownership in American history, and, oh, by the way, along the way we opened the doors of college to every American willing to work for it and made dramatic advances for peace and freedom and security in the world, you would have said, "I don't believe it, but if it happens, I'll be proud." You should be proud because you're a part of it.

Now, that brings me to why you're here: because we're not nearly through. We still have to work to expand our own ranks within our party and to win elections with our adversaries in the election process. The American people need to understand even more clearly than they do now what the connection is between these ideas and the early actions that were taken and the consequences that have happened. But the most important thing to remember is this: Elections are always about the future. If all you have done is a good job, you're entitled to a gold watch. Elections are always about the future.

I remember one time in 1990, I was thinking about running for Governor again, and I was out at Governor's Day at the State fair, and I said—this old guy came up to me in overalls. He said, "Are you going to run for Governor again?" And I said, "Well, if I do, will you vote for me?" He said, "Yeah, I always have." I said, "Well, I've been Governor 10 years. Aren't you sick of me after all these years?" He said, "No, but nearly everybody else I know is." [Laughter] And I said, "Well, don't they think I've done a good job?" He said, "Oh, they think you've done a wonderful job, but that's what we paid you for all those years." [Laughter]

Very important to remember: Elections are always about tomorrow. And that's the importance of this process in which you are engaged now. And what I'd like to say to you is, if you think about all these things I just said, what we'd really like is if that were more the normal condition of America. I mean, we'd really like it if we could sort of keep this thing going.

But what I want to say to you is that this is a moment where maybe the most important

thing is Americans are upbeat again. They're optimistic. They have a sense of possibility, a sense of confidence. Even trust in Government, notwithstanding everything else they've been told, has begun to edge up. Why? Because reality is out there. And no matter how much people may try to fill the atmosphere with other things, there is a reality out there.

The point I'm trying to make is, this reality has given us a sense of collective self-confidence and security to be honest about what still needs to be done in America and to think about what the long-term challenges are to build the country we want for the 21st century. Now, let me just mention a few of them because I think there are clearly New Democrat approaches there.

The first thing I want to say is that we need to candidly tell the American people, "Yes, things are going well now, but if we are complacent, short-sighted, selfish, we will fritter away an opportunity to make sure that this country fulfills its potential in the 21st century, because we still have some very big challenges."

What are they? The first thing we've got to do is figure out how to deal with the coming retirement of the baby boomers and the increasing life expectancy of people, which is looking better to me all along. [Laughter] I think that's a high-class problem. [Laughter] But we have to figure out a way to deal with this without bankrupting our children and undermining our children's ability to raise our grandchildren, while still honoring the need of the senior population for a certain level of predictability and security and a decent life.

So the first thing I would say is, we have to maintain fiscal discipline. We shouldn't spend the surplus before it materializes, and we shouldn't spend a penny of it until we have secured Social Security for the 21st century, and we ought to craft the reform in early 1999.

Secondly, we also have a Medicare Commission chaired by another DLC leader, Senator Breaux, and we have to recognize that we have to deal with that. And we ought to deal with that also in 1999. And the Democrats should not run away from making the necessary reforms in Social Security and Medicare. They are our programs. We brought them to America. They are the great gift of our party in the 20th century. Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson and their friends in the Congress gave this gift to America.

Who can say anything other than "hallelujah" that less than 11 percent of our seniors live in poverty? But when we get to the point when there are two people working for every person drawing Social Security at present rates of retirement, life expectancy, childbirth, and immigration, even if we succeed in providing quality health care more or less in line with the rate of inflation, you don't have to be a mathematical genius to know that we don't want to be responsible for destroying that which we have created. And therefore, if we don't want to destroy that which we have created, we should take the lead and tell the American people they should trust us to take the lead to reform it in a way that will be consistent with our values and that will preserve the gains of the last 50 years but drive them into the next 50 years with a 21st century system that meets the challenges of this day. And the Democrats ought to take the lead on that.

Furthermore, on health care, I think we have to continue to support both the Patients' Bill of Rights and increased access to health insurance, especially for selected groups where they're really often left out. And we have both addressed in different ways the need to deal with people who are not old enough to be on Medicare but are, through no fault of their own, left without health insurance. It's a terrible problem. Everywhere I travel in the country, somebody else comes up to me and talks about it.

This Patients' Bill of Rights is a big issue because it's a way of saying we support managed care in its benefits, but any system which is rooted in process only, that gets disconnected from the values, the purpose of the endeavor, in this case providing a healthier population, will get into trouble.

There was a woman with me from Minnesota the other day who, 5 weeks ago, was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer. Two years ago she had a lump in her breast. She went to her HMO. They said "Well, we took a picture of it, and it looks all right to us." But it never went away. Finally, she paid for her own biopsy. So this was about 6 weeks ago—she was here last week—they said, "You've got stage two breast cancer." So then she goes to her HMO, and they said, "Well, you can't have a breast cancer surgeon, but we'll give you a general surgeon to do this surgery." She said, "I don't think so." She made 123 phone calls trying to

get them to give her a qualified doctor to do the surgery. So she said, "Well, I can't afford it, but I'll pay for it myself." When she was under the knife, the HMO called her home and said they would cover it, but then they wouldn't cover her chemotherapy afterward.

Now, this may be an extreme case, but I promise you, something like that is happening somewhere today. Now, part of it is the extreme financial pressure these folks are under. But if you put health care decisions in the hands of people who don't understand health care, then you have taken efficiency a step too far. And I believe it's a mistake.

I also believe, however—it's just like Social Security reform. I think we had to have some managed health care. We couldn't continue to have health care costs go up to 3 times the rate of inflation. Eventually it would have consumed the whole economy. But if you don't remedy the abuses and set aside a system, then you may wind up destroying the whole concept that you can manage the health care system in an efficient way.

So we ought to be out there out front on these issues. We ought to be continuing to support education reform until the charter school movement and public school choice is the rule in America, not the exception. We ought to support my initiatives for smaller classes and better teachers and higher standards and access to technology for all students. We ought to continue to support initiatives in juvenile crime and to rescue our inner-city neighborhoods generally, further economic issues, further public safety issues, further supporting community efforts that have been proven to be successful in rescuing kids and keeping them out of trouble before they go to jail in the first place.

In the end, that's what we've got to do. We can't jail our way out of the juvenile crisis in America. We can punish people who ought to be punished, but in the end, we have to be smart enough to figure out how to save more of these kids. We need them for our future, and we can't let them go. And we ought to be on the forefront of doing that.

And let me just make one other—there are lots of other issues I could mention, but I'd like to mention one. I think that we need—and the DLC and the New Democratic forces need to do a lot more to define what our stakes are in the world of the 21st century. I'll just give you a few.

I went to Geneva the other day for the 50th anniversary of the World Trade Organization and urged them to do 7 things to modernize the trading system for the 21st century. As a Democrat, I believe that we ought to have more trade. America's got 20 percent of the world's wealth and 4 percent of the world's population, and you do not have to be a mathematical genius to figure out that we have to sell something to the other 96 percent if we want to maintain our standard of living. But as a Democrat, I also want our trading relations with other countries to lead to improvements in the conditions of life for ordinary people in those countries, because that's the only way that freedom and free markets will be widely supported and that will sustain themselves throughout the new century.

So I do think we have to find ways to push that. But the answer is not to run away from expanding trade. The answer is to broaden our agenda in aggressive and creative way that other countries will have an interest in supporting. I think we ought to be out there doing that.

I think we ought to recognize that there are new security threats in the 21st century that include, but are not limited to, biological and chemical weapons, the spread of disease because people are so much more interconnected with each other, and the sweeping implications of cross-border environmental problems, the most significant of which is climate change. We have got to find a way to convince our neighbors around the world that you can grow the economy and improve the environment.

I just got back from Texas, where they are acutely aware of the interconnection of nations with the environment, because all those wildfires that are raging in Mexico are now coming across the Texas border with the smoke, undermining the quality of the air. We're working very hard on that. Whether we like it or not, this wildfire problem is not a Mexican problem. We had the same thing this year in South America; we had the same thing several months ago in Southeast Asia—we had two boats—ships on the ocean crash into each other because they were blinded by smoke from wildfires from the rain forest in Southeast Asia—all a function of the changing climate of the world.

These are security issues. We should see them as such, and we should be totally unwilling to say that we all have to go back to the stone age economics to preserve the environment

when that is clearly not true. But we do have to be aware of it.

Well, there are lots of other things I could say. I would like to say one thing just very briefly, and I don't want to—the Secretary of State is working on this, as you know, at this moment. But I'd like to say one thing about the problems on the Indian subcontinent because I think they're important for you to think about in a 21st century context.

First of all, they show you that there's still a combustible mix if you have old ethnic, religious, and national tensions combined with access to modern technology. Secondly, it shows you—and this may be the more important point—that as much as we're trying, there are still a lot of people who believe that being a great nation in the 21st century should be defined by the same terms that defined it in the 20th century.

An enormous part of my time as your President has been spent trying to develop policies and then make arguments to people like the President of Russia and the President of China that the definition of greatness should be different tomorrow than it was yesterday, that we should want to be measured by our ideas and our achievements and our ability to raise our children and our ability to relate to each other, and that national strength and greatness should be measured in different terms.

The present tensions between India and Pakistan and the tests are a sober reminder in a larger scale, because of the nuclear tests, of the challenges we still face in the Middle East, the challenges we still face in the Balkans with our unfinished business in Bosnia, in Kosovo, the challenges we still face in Africa in trying to get over what happened in Rwanda, throughout the world.

One of the important things about what you're doing is that other people in other parts of the world are now interested in taking this kind of approach. And they're trying to figure out whether they can find a politics that is both humane and sensible, that works. And so I would urge you to devote even more of your thoughts in the months and years ahead in this forum to how we can convince the American people, first of all, that we need to lead the world and we need to invest the money it takes to lead the world and we get a lot out of it, not just on trade but in other areas; and sec-

ondly, how we can best make alliances with people in other nations.

There must be people who think like you in India and people who think like you in Pakistan, just like there were in the new Labour Party in Great Britain or in the Government in the Netherlands or the Government in Italy or the Government in Brazil. And we need to engage people in trying to define national greatness in a way that is inclusive and constructive, not divisive and destructive. It is very important.

The last point I want to make: We are celebrating this week—celebrating is the wrong word. We are observing this week the 30th anniversary of the death of Robert Kennedy. I remember it like it was yesterday because it happened just a couple of days before I graduated from college. And I remember staying up with one of my roommates who worked in Senator Kennedy's office in Washington to watch the results of the California primary, and I turned the television off 5 minutes before Robert Kennedy was shot.

In so many ways, what he was trying to do then for the Democratic Party and for our country has great parallels to what we have been about in the last few years, trying to get people to give up the old dogmas, trying to bring people together, trying to go beyond the sort of stale liberal-conservative name calling and figure out a policy that was both humane and effective. A lot of what he said and did prefigured what we have tried to do in our time.

But in that springtime in 1968, when both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed and when our country was so profoundly troubled and divided over issues at home and abroad, it was after those events not possible for a very long time to try to put the pieces of an American progressive movement back together because America's mind and heart was too easily divided and distracted and was too uncertain.

And I'd like you to think about it as you read things about Senator Kennedy; over the next couple of days there will be a lot in the press. He never had a time like this in which to serve. And a lot of what Martin Luther King wanted to do in civil rights was complicated because of all the other problems that came into American society over the Vietnam war, and we became divided in other ways.

This is a time—I read all those statistics off to you—28, 29, 30 years, and you were all clapping. It's really exhilarating, isn't it? But what you have to think about is, this doesn't happen all that often. And we have space now and confidence and a sense of possibility, and we cannot squander it.

Robert Kennedy used to quote Tennyson, saying it is not too late to seek a newer world. Well, it isn't too late. But I don't care how good things are—believe me, I've now lived long enough to see things change—it's not too late, but we don't have a moment to waste. And we've only just begun.

So I want you to celebrate what you've done. I want to thank you for what you've done, but I want you to think about the next 50 years and realize what a precious gift as citizens we

have been given to mobilize together, to think about the large matters of our children and grandchildren's future, and to actually to do something about them. And keep in mind, we're where we are because we had ideas and we had action.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:30 p.m. at the Omni Shoreham Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Antonio Riley, Wisconsin State Representative; Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, general chair, Democratic National Committee; Al From, president, Democratic Leadership Council; William Marshall, president, Progressive Policy Institute; Gov. Tom Carper of Delaware; Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend of Maryland; and Jill Docketing, cochair, Kansas Justice Commission.

Remarks at a Reception for the SAVER Summit

June 4, 1998

Thank you very much, and welcome to the White House. I want to say again a special word of thanks to Senator Breaux and the other Members of Congress who have pushed this summit. I believe that Congressmen Neal, Payne and Clay are here, and there were others, of course, with us earlier in the day. I thank Secretary Herman for her outstanding leadership.

I think it is truly remarkable that Louisiana State has gone so far in the baseball finals. [Laughter] And I say that as a neighbor. I've actually known about John Breaux—John Breaux and I first ran for office in 1974, and we had the same ad person, so I knew about John Breaux sort of from a distance. And my guy, who was his guy, kept saying, "You're so earnest. You just don't have the kind of moves that Breaux does." [Laughter]

And Louisiana—I grew up in Arkansas, so he's my neighbor, and it's just different down there. [Laughter] Really. Baseball—it's the only State in the country where, in all probability, everybody on the baseball team has to slow down to play that sport, instead of speed up. [Laughter] It's just an amazing place.

I quoted Benjamin Franklin today and told you all the story about his leaving the £2,000 to Boston and Philadelphia. Franklin also once

said, it's better to go to bed without supper than to wake up in debt. And we're almost out of debt, so we're giving you drinks and not supper here tonight. [Laughter] But at least we're making progress. And if we're quick enough, at least you'll be able to have supper. [Laughter]

There was a good feeling in that room today when all of us were there. I think you all felt good about it; I felt good about it. The reason we felt good about it is because you like to see your leaders working together and listening to you. And that's the way it ought to work around here all the time.

I keep telling people I have to travel out in the country and see people and just sit and listen on a regular basis to remind myself that I'm supposed to be working for you instead of against them, and vice versa—that that's really what we're all here for. And I think the fact that we have this level of common commitment is some evidence that we understand this is a big deal, and you don't have the luxury of engaging in petty politics.

Here you are in this remarkable East Room, with this wonderful picture of Theodore Roosevelt, the only American President ever to win the Nobel Prize for Peace, for helping to settle