

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Reception in East Hampton August 1, 1998

Thank you. This is one clever man. I want you to watch this. You see this? He took the watch again. [Laughter] Thank you, Jonathan. Thank you, Christopher. I want to thank Andy and Jeff and Elizabeth and all the others who were cochairs tonight. I want to thank Sandy Thurman and Richard Socarides and Marsha Scott, who've done a lot of great work for me and on my behalf with so many of you.

And I want to thank Brian Rich for serving as a White House volunteer. The whole place runs on volunteers, believe it or not, to an astonishing extent. I want to thank Steve and Len and all fine people here from the DNC, and all of you for being here.

Last night we were with some people, and a person who's lived here for many years said, "You know, the last sitting President to visit Long Island was William McKinley—the eastern end of Long Island—William McKinley." And everybody laughed. They didn't exactly see me as a natural successor to William McKinley. We don't think of him in the same terms that I'm frequently painted these days.

But I'll tell you an interesting thing about William McKinley. He was the last of a line of either four or five generals, Union generals from Ohio, to be elected President between 1868 and 1896, that included Ulysses Grant; his successor, Rutherford Hayes; James Garfield, who, unfortunately, was assassinated and lived only a few months; Mr. McKinley—Mr. Harrison might have been from Ohio; I'm not sure. But the point is, if you were a Union general from Ohio, you had about a 50 percent chance of being elected President between the end of the Civil War and 1900.

Now, what has that got to do with all this today? There's a reason they won. They won because Ohio was the heartland of America at the time and because they embodied the idea of the Nation for which Abraham Lincoln gave his life, that slavery was wrong, that discrimination based on race was wrong, and that we needed a strong, united country for America and for all Americans to fulfill their God-given capacity.

Throughout American history, one of our two parties has always been essentially the party of

the Nation. And even though the Democrats, I regret to say, after the Civil War, were just kind of coming to that—they were the party of immigrants, and that was good, and they stood against discrimination against immigrants—but for all kinds of reasons, we didn't become the party of the Nation until the election of Woodrow Wilson. And then, our fate was sealed when Franklin Roosevelt was elected and Harry Truman succeeded him.

We haven't always been right on every issue in the 20th century, but I think it's clear that we have been on the right side of history. And I think that's why you're here today. And a lot of you said a lot of very kind things to me as I worked my way through the crowd, and I appreciate them more than you know. When I ran for President in 1992, I did it because I thought our country was divided, that we hadn't taken care of the business before us, and we certainly weren't planning for the future very well. It seemed to me that we needed to be trying to create an America in which there was genuine opportunity for every responsible citizen, in which we were continuing to lead the world toward peace and freedom and prosperity, and in which we were coming closer together as one community.

Or, if you put it in another way—if you go back and read the Declaration of Independence, it basically lays out the things that our country has been for all along. We just never perfectly lived up to them. We've always been for deepening the meaning of freedom. Keep in mind, when all those people said all people are created equal, if you weren't a white male property owner, you couldn't even vote. But Jefferson said, "When I think of slavery, I tremble to think that God is just."

So we set out an ideal, and then we knew we'd have to be working toward it for a long time, constantly redefining it, deepening the meaning of freedom. We've always tried to widen the circle of opportunity, and we have been on a permanent mission, in the Founders' words, to "form a more perfect Union."

Now, on all fronts, I believe our party is on the right side of history on the edge of this new millennium. Hillary is running this great

Millennial Project called imagining the past and envisioning the future—imagine the future—excuse me, “Honor the past; imagine the future.” It’s been a long day. [Laughter] Anyway, the thing I like about it is, I don’t think you can imagine the future unless you do it in terms of the values and the history of the past, and I don’t think you can just live in the past. So everything I’ve done the last 6 years, I’ve tried to make America, first of all, work again. I’ve tried to develop a working definition of what the role of the Federal Government in our national life should be. And I’ve tried to get out of the old debate about Government is the problem, Government is the solution, toward seeing Government as an empowering agent to enable the rest of us to live our lives and to create the conditions and give people the tools to do what needs to be done.

And I think that the ideas we brought to the economic and social debate, to the foreign policy debate have contributed measurably to the remarkable conditions in our country today. Most of you know that we have the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years and the lowest crime rate in 25 years and the lowest percentage of people on welfare in 29 years. We’re about to have the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, the highest homeownership in history, with the smallest Government in 35 years.

But we also have advanced the cause of peace and freedom around the world, advanced the cause of interdependence around the world through economic cooperation, and advanced the cause of unity at home with things like citizen service and the opportunities I’ve had to work with many of you to remind the American people that we’re all one country and that everybody is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect and equality.

And I would just like to say, if you look ahead at the big challenges facing the country—how are we going to prepare for the retirement of the baby boom generation? We have to reform Social Security and Medicare so that it will do what it needs to do to hold our society together and provide for dignity in old age, without bankrupting our children and grandchildren, those of us who are baby boomers.

We have to provide, for the first time in history, a genuine world-class elementary and secondary education for all of our kids, not just those who are middle class or better. We have to prove that we can grow the economy and

improve the environment—not just preserve it, but improve it—because I believe that the global warming phenomenon is real. I know the oceans are being slowly undermined. And we had a fabulous conference on that recently in California.

We have to prove that America can still be a force for peace and freedom and security around the world, standing up against all this racial and ethnic and religious hatred around the world and the spread of dangerous weapons and taking advantage of the opportunities that are there.

And finally, I don’t think we can do good around the world unless we are good at home. And that’s why I have always said I belong to a party that puts progress over partisanship, that puts people over politics, that puts unity over division.

And you know, sometimes when you try to affect that kind of transformation, you know you’re going to provoke a reaction. I didn’t dream it would be quite as profound as it has been, this reaction. But I must say, if I had it to do over again, I would gladly assume the challenge because it’s been a wonderful thing. And if it weren’t for the 22d amendment, I’d give the people one more chance to elect or defeat me—[laughter]—because I believe in what we’re doing. And I’ve been blessed to have not only a wife but also a wonderful Vice President who believes in what we’re doing.

And I just want to say to all of you, what Hillary said is right. We can do very well in this election. If you go all the way back to the Civil War, the party of the President, when the President’s in his second term, always has lost seats at midterm. It may not happen this time, which is one reason the heat, the incoming fire is so intense now, because they know it may not happen this time. Why? Because we have an agenda out there: We have a Patients’ Bill of Rights. We’ve got an education agenda. We’ve got an environmental agenda. We’ve got a foreign policy agenda. We’ve got an economic agenda for the inner cities. The debate, the substantive debate is out there.

And I still believe that the biggest problem with the American people not feeling the sense of unity and mutual harmony and respect that affects among other things—among others, people in the gay community all the time, is a lack of genuine, open, unthreatening contact, debate, discussion.

And so, I just want to say to you, I thank you for your contributions; I thank you for being here. We'll try to make good use of the investments you've given us. But I hope between now and November, you will go out and tell people that it's not an accident that America is better off today than it was 6 years ago, that there are ideas behind the changes that took place in this country, and they're good ideas. And the ideas we have for the future are good ideas. And the American people ought to go out there in this election and be heard on those ideas. And if they are, I think that our Democrats will do very well indeed, because we know that given a reasoned chance to make a judgment, we win two-to-one on almost every critical issue facing the country.

But given organized and well-financed disinformation campaigns, we sometimes have trouble, as we did recently when, much to Andy's grief, we lost the fight with the big tobacco interests in Congress. I'm not done with that, and we're going to come back to it.

But you can help us prevail. And the last thing I'd like to say is—the other thing Hillary said is right—a part of this strategy that we're up against is designed to depress the vote. In 1994 we had a very depressed vote. Now, I personally don't think it's going to work this time, because the country is in better shape

and the consequences of the policies of the administration are more evident, and the strategy against us is a little more bald, I'd say. I think that's a delicate way of saying it. And so I don't think it will work.

But you've got to think about that. Go out there and tell people that you're doing this because, throughout history, America was always at its best by trying to perfect what we started with in the Declaration of Independence, to widen the circle of opportunity, deepen the meaning of freedom, strengthen the bonds of our Union, and because we're on the edge of a whole new millennium, a whole new way of thinking and living and working and relating to each other and the rest of the world; and the party of the future is the party that's on the right side of history and that you're proud to be a part of it.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:30 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to reception hosts Jonathan Sheffer and Christopher Barley; event cochairs Andy Tobias and Jeff Soref; Elizabeth Birch, executive director, Human Rights Campaign; and Steve Grossman, national chair, and Leonard Barrack, national finance chair, Democratic National Committee.

Remarks at a Saxophone Club Reception in East Hampton August 1, 1998

Thank you very much. Wow! [*Laughter*] First, I want to thank you for being so laid back and quiet and restrained. Aren't you proud you're here and proud of what we're trying to do for our country? [*Applause*]

Let me begin by thanking Alec and Kim for opening their home tonight to this intimate little gathering, giving up their privacy for this high public purpose, and making us all feel like we're very welcome at their beautiful home. Thank you very much.

I want to thank Judith Hope and Tom Twomey, Alan and Susan Patricof, Liz Robbins, all the cochairs of the event tonight. Thank you, Chairman Grossman, and all the people from the DNC. And thank you, Hootie and the

Blowfish. Thank you. I told some people coming in even an old guy like me likes them. I love them. I thank Congressman Meeks, Congresswoman McCarthy, Lieutenant Governor Ross, Mark Green, all the other office holders who are here.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am so thrilled to see you. I'm thrilled that you're here for this purpose, and I want you to take this enthusiasm out from under this tent back to your daily lives. And I want you to infect every person you meet with it between now and November.

You know, in—a young girl came through the line earlier tonight, shook my hand, and had her picture taken with me, a little girl. And she said, "Why did you want to be President?"