

Remarks at a Democratic Leadership Council Dinner December 2, 1998

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, I have to ask a couple of questions. The first question I want to ask is whether you can actually hear us. Can you hear? Some say yes; some say no. So-so. How's that? One of these mikes is working, but is that better? Okay. Still so-so. I'll do the best I can.

You know, this magnificent gallery may not be the best place for a speech, but most of you have heard my speech anyway. But it is a wonderful place, full of the rich history of Washington, full of the great culture of our country. It has special memories for me, because I once stood on a platform in this very same spot, a little over 3 years ago, with King Hussein, Shimon Peres, Yasser Arafat, and the late Prime Minister Rabin—the last time I ever saw him. So I have always very strong feelings, when I come to this place, about the importance of the public mission of citizens.

I was thinking on the way over here of the day, 7 years ago, when I spoke to the DLC in Cleveland, when our party was suffering, our Nation was struggling. The DLC was a very small group with very large ideas. And I said that we had to offer the American people a new choice rooted in old values, that offers opportunity, demands responsibility, gives citizens more say, provides them with responsive government, because we recognize that in fact we are a community. We are all in this together. We will go up or down together.

These words—opportunity, responsibility, community—came to identify and embody a new approach to government and politics, tying our oldest, most enduring values to the information age. We said we wouldn't seek to stop the currents of economic change, but we would not, as Americans and as Democrats, tell our people they had to sink or swim on their own. We said that the way to advance the spirit of FDR was not to preserve his programs in amber but to remember that he said, "New conditions impose new requirements." We said we were New Democrats, and we called our approach the Third Way.

I think it's fair to say that our ideas were not universally welcomed or even wholly understood by some of our own fellow partisans, by

the Republicans, or by the press. But we believed America could work again and America could lead again, and we won the Presidency in 1992.

Then we made some tough and sometimes controversial decisions on the economy, on foreign policy, on crime, the environment, welfare, health care, but we got America moving again. And with our commitment to build a bridge to the 21st century, the American people gave our party the White House again in 1996, for the first time since 1936.

And in 1997 and 1998 we continued to push these new ideas, and I believe we have regained the trust of the American people in their Government. Last month, standing strong and united on a platform of fiscal responsibility, strengthening Social Security, renewing our public schools, protecting people in the new health care marketplace, dealing with the challenges of the global financial crisis, our party won an historic election victory.

I'm sure all of you know that it was the first time the President's party has gained seats in the House in the sixth year of the Presidency since 1822. Now, since I'm not a candidate anymore, I can say that the last time that happened, in 1822, the other party disappeared. *[Laughter]*

I don't believe that will happen this time, partly because those in the other party who had the greatest success in this election year were those who campaigned with language and often even policies strikingly similar to our own. When Republican Governors stand in front of banners that say "opportunity" and "responsibility," when they talk of community, it may not be the sincerest form of flattery, but it's flattery nonetheless. And even more, it's a sign that America is moving in the right direction, that the common sense and the uncommon dreams of the American people are being heard.

All of you know, I'm sure, that these same ideas are reviving center-left political parties throughout the industrialized world as people everywhere struggle to put a human face on the global economy, from Great Britain and Germany to Greece and The Netherlands.

Far from Europe, in Brazil, bold actions by like-minded President Cardoso have tamed that

country's notorious inflation, pointed the way for a new model for emerging democracies. And it all started with the DLC, a political movement begun by people, many of whom were in rooms like this when we all began. Today, less than 15 years after we started, the ideas pushed by the DLC are literally sweeping the world, and you should be very, very proud.

I also think it is very important to point out that we have done more than fashion a politically appealing agenda that is well marketed. We have actually worked hard to find the right way to have a leading industrial nation thrive in the 21st century. We have worked hard to marry politics and policy, to build a new American consensus.

Now, having said that, here's the main point I want to make tonight: This is not a time for self-congratulation. I applaud the work being done by the DLC, bringing in people today to talk about tomorrow's ideas, working on finding and training people to run for public office who share those ideas. We have got America working again, but many of the difficult tasks of transforming our country for a new century and a new millennium still lie ahead. And we have to understand that there will be obstacles in the path. There are genuine problems out there in the global economy. We are beginning to feel them here, in energy, in aerospace, in steel, in agriculture. We have to face these challenges.

There are also many Americans who have not yet felt the benefit of the ideas we are pushing. There are many neighborhoods which still haven't seen the revitalization of enterprise that we're so proud of. There are many schools that still aren't working for their children. There are many challenges we have not met. Therefore, we have to move forward with a little humility, as well as with a great deal of determination.

I'd like to talk about how we got here and ask you to remember three things as you go forward. First, our ideas have met the most important test: They actually work in the real world. If we want our ideas for tomorrow and the next day to work, they have to meet that test as well.

There was a bestseller when I ran for President called "America: What Went Wrong?" In my first Inaugural Address, I said there is nothing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what is right with America. Today, the question is: America, what went right? What went right

was new ideas: welfare reform; community policing; doubling the earned-income tax credit; creating AmeriCorps, which now has its 100,000th member, and—they're doing a wonderful job around the country—and an economic plan that focused on reducing the deficit, expanding investment, and expanding trade.

By almost every measure, American families are better off. We have also met our responsibilities to promote peace, prosperity, and security around the world. And perhaps best of all, our country is regaining its legendary faith in itself. We actually believe that we can make tomorrow better than today for all Americans willing to work hard and be good citizens.

The second thing I think we ought to remember is that our ideas work because they're true to our values and our common sense. For too long, politics treated issues like education or crime or health care or welfare—you name it, any issue—as a battle over ideology, not a problem to be solved but a political matter to be exploited. The idea was to divide and conquer the electorate, to split blacks from whites, to split Hispanics and other immigrants from Americans who were born here, even though their parents or their grandparents or their great-grandparents weren't, to split the North from the South, the middle class from the working class.

If the American people said anything at all in the last election with a loud, resounding roar, it was, "No, thank you; we do not want to be split anymore. We choose progress over partisanship." The American people, out of the wreckage of Oklahoma City, out of the horror of the African-American citizen being brutally murdered in east Texas, out of the awful death of young Matthew Sheppard, out of the shooting of the doctor in New York, out of the arguments around the kitchen table, somehow they always get it right if they've got enough time. And they said, "In the world we're living in, our diversity is a blessing. It is a richness. It is our key to the future. We will not be divided. We are going forward together. There cannot be opportunity and responsibility unless there is community."

And we must never forget that lesson. It is our key, our heart and soul as a party.

And as we look ahead, we have to confront these difficult issues. I want to remind you that we did not say ever that all the choices would be easy but that, if we had to make hard

choices, they ought to be the real choices. It is a false choice to say that we have to choose between work and help for the needy. It is a false choice to say people ought to have to choose between doing right by their children and being effective at their jobs. It is a false choice to say we have to choose between punishing people who commit violent crimes and trying to prevent kids from committing those crimes in the first place. It is a false choice to say you have to choose between cleaning up the environment and growing the economy. And it is a false choice to say you have to choose between being proud of your race, your religion, or any other special characteristic you have, and being most proud of being an American and a child of God. Those are false choices. We have enough hard, real choices to make, and we should make them.

The third thing I want to remind you of is that we made a decision that was profoundly important, that the way Government works matters, that we could not maintain the confidence of the American people and we could not have ideas that delivered unless the Government was functioning in a sensible, modern, and prudent way. Things that used to be boring, things you could never get people to stand still at a standup reception like that and listen to, became the Vice President's reinventing Government program. And we have worked at it very, very hard.

We didn't take a chainsaw to the Government, but we did slim it down, and we did change the programs. And we now have the smallest Federal Government since the first time John Glenn went into space. And it works better. The last time John Glenn went into space, a couple of weeks ago, just for example, in the last 6 years, NASA, with a smaller staff and a smaller budget, had gone from two space launches a year to six space launches a year. That matters to people.

It matters whether this thing works or not. And I know it will never get the headlines, and I know that it will not be in the reports of my speech tomorrow in the press, but it matters.

If you like the fact that the crime rate went down, remember there had to be a system for getting the 100,000 police out there. If you believe it's a good thing to have welfare reform, but people who are moved from welfare to work should have child care and health care for their children, there had to be a system to do that.

If you like the fact that we could cut the size of the deficit and increase our investment in education and transportation and many other areas, remember we had to reduce the size of Government by over 300,000 people to do that.

So I ask you, don't forget about the nuts and bolts. They matter. It really does matter whether people get up every day and go to work and worry more about what they're doing than what is said about what they're doing in the daily columns. It is very, very important that we remain serious about this.

The fourth thing that I want to say is that we have succeeded, in no small measure, because we understood that America's interests at home could no longer be divided from America's interests around the world; that America's values at home could no longer be protected unless we stood up for those values around the world. This is a very small globe.

It is a good thing that we work for peace in the Middle East, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Northern Ireland. It is a good thing that we worry about nuclear weapons on the Indian subcontinent. It is a good thing that we worry about whether people half a world away will have their children's legs blown off by landmines, or may be subject to chemical or biological weapons. It is a good thing that we worry about whether pollution is destroying the environment of people in Latin America, in Asia, in some other place, because it will all come home here.

We live in a world where our responsibilities to others are important and integral to our ability to do right by ourselves and our future. Those things we must remember.

And as we look ahead, let me say that I am very, very excited about the next 2 years. I'm looking forward to this State of the Union; I'm looking forward to working with this Congress. As we always do, we will do our best to work with members of both parties. We hope that the people in the other party will come forward and work with us, because we have a big agenda.

In the 20th century, we built a safety net to give dignity to our parents. In the 21st century, we have to prove that we can strengthen the Social Security system so we can take care of the baby boomers without bankrupting their children. We can do that.

In the 20th century, we built the first-ever mass middle class in the world, in no small measure through strong public schools. In the

21st century, with a much more diverse population, we have got to prove we can revolutionize those schools so they can prepare our children for the information age.

In the 20th century, we found a way to tackle the cycles of boom and bust, to prevent another Great Depression from occurring. In the 21st century, we have to prove we can do that with the global financial crisis so that we can be secure at home. I will say again what I said before: What you see here, when farm prices go down in the high plains because of the Asian financial crisis, when Boeing has to lay people off because people can't buy the airplanes they've ordered, when the steel industry is overwhelmed by imports from countries who can sell for nothing because their currencies have depleted—when you see these crises, they are simply symptoms of the larger reality that will govern our children and our grandchildren's lives.

We must be prepared to undertake the duty of leading the world toward a new resolution so that we can continue to grow the global economy without having another global collapse because we did not do our duty in our time, as our forebears did 50 years ago.

Now, there are a lot of other things to do, but you get the point. I am so grateful that I was given the chance to serve as President; that I was given a chance to implement so many of the ideas that many of us began, in the mid-eighties, to articulate. But it is just a beginning. It took a good while just to get America up and working again.

But when you reel off all the statistics—the lowest unemployment in 28 years, the smallest percentage of people on welfare in 29 years, the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, the fastest-rising wages in over two decades, the lowest crime rate in 25 years, the highest homeownership in history—I say to you, all that means is that America is working again, and that's a great tribute to the American people as well as to the ideas that we have helped to make real. But we have not completed the process of transforming this country for the 21st century, for the information age, and all of you know it.

So I say again, I ask you to leave here with renewed determination, with renewed energy, and with no little humility for the task ahead. When we met in Cleveland in 1991, no one there dreamed that we could have accomplished, either politically or substantively, for our country what has happened in the intervening years. No one but Al From; he knew it all along. [*Laughter*] No one else.

And you can be proud of that. This is the work worthy of a lifetime. I'm proud that I was fortunate enough to meet Al and Will Marshall and all the DLC people; I'm proud that I was able to work with people like Joe Lieberman and John Breaux. And I have to mention one other of our early DLC members who had a very good day today, former Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy. I know we all wish him well, and we're happy for him.

But I leave you with this thought. The real test of our ideas is whether they outlive this Presidency; whether they are bigger than any candidate, any speech, any campaign, any debate. The real test is whether we can find a way to carry them on and on and on, and whether we can find a way to avoid self-satisfaction and self-congratulations, and always be searching for the new answers to the new challenges.

If we remember the basic things that got us here, if we remember how we were when we started, if we keep the fire for the future of not only our party but our children, our country, and our world, then 8 years from now, 80 years from now, the DLC will be here, doing its job in America's greatest days.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:30 p.m. at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. In his remarks, he referred to King Hussein I of Jordan; former Prime Ministers Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; President Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil; Al From, president, Democratic Leadership Council; and William Marshall, president, Progressive Policy Institute.