

June 4 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

we had in 1998, because we not only had good candidates and we not only were running on saving Social Security and the Patients' Bill of Rights and building modern schools and keeping our economy going, we had to have some way of getting that message out. It's unprecedented for Members on our side to do that, and he did it. And I will never forget that as long as I live.

So for all those reasons, I'm honored to be here with him and with the next Governor of West Virginia.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:15 a.m. at the National Democratic Club. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas P. O'Neill III, son of former House Speaker Tip O'Neill; President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); and Representative Robert E. Wise, Jr., candidate for Governor of West Virginia.

Remarks on Presenting the President's Award for Furthering Employment of People With Disabilities

June 4, 1999

Situation in the Balkans

The President. Thank you very much, Jill. Secretary Herman; Chairman Coelho; Mr. Dart; to Janice Lachance, head of our Office of Personnel Management. Ladies and gentlemen, I have looked forward to this day, and I am delighted to see you all here. I'll have more to say about the others who are up here with me in a moment.

This is my only opportunity to appear before the press today, so I hope you will also indulge me if I say a few words about the recent developments in Kosovo. For 72 days now, we have been engaged with our Allies in a difficult but just and necessary military campaign, with three simple goals: the return of over 800,000 innocent Kosovar refugees to their homes, with safety and self-government; the withdrawal of Serb forces; and the deployment of an international security force, with NATO at its core, to protect all the people of that shattered land.

Yesterday the Serbian authorities indicated they would accept those conditions. Russian Special Envoy Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Ahtisaari played instrumental and courageous roles in making this possible. I am grateful to them, and so should all Americans be.

Tomorrow military officials from NATO and Serbia will meet to work out the details of the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo. This is the next necessary step for implementation of our conditions. I'm pleased that it will take

place, and I hope the talks will proceed professionally and expeditiously.

As I said yesterday, our diplomatic and military efforts will continue until we see Serb forces begin to withdraw in a full-scale manner. Our experience in the Balkans teaches us that true peace can only come when progress in discussions is followed by progress on the ground.

At the same time, there is an enormous opportunity to be seized here, a chance to shift our focus from defeating something evil to building something good; a chance to work with our Allies to bring a stable and prosperous and democratic southeastern Europe, in which people are never again singled out for destruction simply because of their religious faith or their ethnic origin. This is a goal that has been worth fighting for over the last weeks, a goal which must be uppermost in our minds as we make sure our conditions are met, a goal we must work for with steadfast determination in the months and in the years to come.

And I believe that the overwhelming majority of Americans share this goal. We do not want our children to grow up in a world which is dominated by people who believe they can kill innocent civilians because of the way they worship God or the way they were born.

Disability Employment Awards

Fifty years ago Harry Truman, the very first President to present the awards that we present today, set a goal for our Nation. I'd like to

repeat it: to give every American with a disability the chance to play their full part in strengthening our Nation and sharing the greatest satisfaction of American life, to be independent and self-supporting.

Today we gather to honor three Americans whose efforts to bring more and more people with disabilities into the world of work have moved us closer to that great and just goal. Since the founding of our Nation, work has been at the heart of the American dream. Because millions of Americans have had the opportunity to work and to build better lives for themselves and their families, our Nation is enjoying historic strength and prosperity. Through work, we reinforce the values that hold us together as a society, the values of responsibility, perseverance, striving for the future.

And in so many ways, we define ourselves as Americans not only by our families and our hometowns but by our work. Often, the first question Americans ask each other is not who are your parents or where do you live but what do you do. Today, still, there are too many Americans with disabilities who've never had the chance to answer that question. Even as we celebrate more than 18 million new jobs and a nationwide unemployment rate of 4.2 percent, the lowest in a generation, as the Secretary has said, 75 percent of Americans with disabilities remain unemployed. And of that number, 72 percent, almost three-quarters, say they want to go to work.

This is not just a missed opportunity for Americans with disabilities. It's a missed opportunity for America. This is an era now of labor shortages, where companies go begging for employees they need to stay competitive in the global economy. And we simply cannot afford to ignore the potential of millions of potential workers simply because they have a disability.

One of the things I have spent a great deal of time on in the last year, particularly, is trying to work with my economic advisers on issues that only peripherally involve the disability community but that you are a central part of resolving. And it is this: How can we continue to grow this economy and lift the standards of living of our people until we embrace everybody who has not participated in the recovery; keep the recovery going, which is already the longest peacetime recovery in history, and not have an explosion of inflation?

There are—if you think about it, there are only, I would argue to you, three possible answers to that. You either have to get more workers who are unemployed, generally, in the society, into the work force so that they not only are helping themselves but helping the rest of us by becoming consumers and taxpayers and growing the economy; you have to go to those discrete areas where whole areas have been left out of our economic growth; or you have to find more customers for America's goods and services around the world.

Therefore, I have continued to push the idea of the expansion of trade on fair and just terms. I have promoted the empowerment zones that the Vice President has so ably led our efforts in for the last 6½ years, and this new markets initiative, to reach into the rural areas, the urban communities, the Native American reservations where there has been almost no economic growth. We have cut the welfare rolls almost in half, trying to move able-bodied people from welfare to work.

The last big chunk of people in this country who could keep the economy going for all of us, with low inflation, are the Americans with disabilities who want to work, who can work, and who are not in the work force. Every American citizen should have a selfish interest in the pursuit of this goal in the most aggressive possible way.

As everybody here knows—and Secretary Herman already mentioned it—one of the very largest obstacles to employment for Americans with disabilities is the fear that they'll lose their health insurance once they take a job—that which is provided by the Federal Government. Not so very long ago, I went in February to New Hampshire and had a roundtable about this, where people were explicitly discussing this in graphic terms, giving through the press to the American people dollars-and-cents reports on what the consequences of this would be.

Under current law, many people with disabilities simply can't work and keep Medicare or Medicaid. For many Americans, medical bills literally cost thousands of dollars beyond what is typically covered by an employer's private insurance. For many Americans, their medical bills would be greater than their entire salary.

Therefore, we keep a lot of people out of the work force. But we don't save the Federal Government any money, because they're spending the money anyway, on the health care. So

we deny opportunities to millions; we prevent the American economy from reaching its full potential; we don't save the Federal Treasury one red cent, because the health care money is being spent anyway.

Today, as a country, it is time to say that no American should have to choose between going to work and paying the medical bills. Last summer, and in the State of the Union, I asked Congress to free our fellow Americans from this unfair burden. The "Work Incentive Improvement Act," sponsored by Senators Jeffords and Kennedy, Senators Roth and Moynihan, and a wide group of sponsors in both Houses, from both parties, will do just that. There are, at last count, over 70 Members of the Senate who have signed on to the bill.

There has been a lot of commentary lately about how hard it is to get legislation through the Congress, with the partisan divide. Well, there are a lot of issues on which Republicans and Democrats have honest disagreements. Thank goodness, this is not one of them. Because it is not one of them, because we already have over 70 people who say they will vote for this if they can just get a chance to vote for it on the floor of the Senate, I am confident that we can work together to pass the work incentives bill by July the 26th of this year, the ninth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

We can celebrate that great, historic, bipartisan landmark by opening the doors of opportunity for millions of people even wider, enabling more Americans with disabilities to join the proud ranks of working citizens.

There is more, I would argue, that we should do. In my balanced budget presented to the Congress, I proposed a \$1,000 tax credit to help people with disabilities afford special transportation technology, which you've already heard about, or personal assistance needed to make the transition to work. And we must double our efforts to make assistive technology, such as voice recognition software, mobile telephones, braille translators, more widely available. So I ask Congress to move forward with both of these proposals in my budget.

And today I am taking immediate action to give more Americans with disabilities the opportunity to become part of the largest work force in America. On Monday the First Lady, the Vice President, and Mrs. Gore and I will be hosting a White House Conference on Mental

Health, an area that has been a special concern, as I'm sure many of you know, to Mrs. Gore for many years. One of our goals is to help more Americans understand that mental illness is not a character flaw. It is a disability. That is why today I am using my executive authority as President to strip away outdated barriers that keep people with psychiatric disabilities from serving America in our Federal Government, directing all Federal agencies to provide applicants with mental illnesses the same opportunities as other applicants with disabilities to work for the United States of America.

As you know, and as we see here today, not only the Government but individual citizens can take action and make an enormous difference. The three citizens we honor today are proof of the difference one person can make, and I am proud to present these awards to each of them.

First, to Joyce Bender. Fifteen years ago, as Joyce lay in a hospital trauma unit recovering from a near-fatal cerebral hemorrhage, she made a vow to give something back to the patients who were not so lucky. Through Bender Consulting Services, she's used her own expertise as a professional headhunter to place people with disabilities in high-wage, high-tech jobs.

She knows the demand for high-skill workers will only continue to grow, and she is determined to make sure people with disabilities will be ready to meet it. She's founded a new program to train even more people with disabilities in the high-tech skills that are the ticket to the world of the 21st century.

It's an honor to present this award to Joyce Bender. Joyce.

[The President presented the award and congratulated Ms. Bender, the recipient for 1999.]

The President. Next, to James Click, Jr. Over more than 30 years as a car dealer in California and Arizona, Jim Click has become an undisputed leader in his field. But he's also unrivaled in his commitment to extending opportunity to people with disabilities.

A few years ago, he discovered he could encourage more businesses to follow his lead by making it easier for them to find workers with the right skills. So he founded LINKAGES, which brings Tucson businesses and rehabilitation programs together to match qualified workers with disabilities to jobs in the private sector.

In a little over a year, more than 170 people have found work through LINKAGES. It's an honor to present this award to Jim Click and hope others will follow his lead in every community in the country.

[*The President presented the award and congratulated Mr. Click, co-recipient for 1998.*]

The President. Finally, to Laura Hershey. Laura has said, and I quote, "Disability is not a tragedy. It is powerful."

By speaking her mind and using her gifts as a writer to point out the shortcomings and the possibilities of our society, Laura has found the power to make the world a better place for people with disabilities. As head of a variety of disability organizations and as a private citizen, she has fought to reform our Social Security, housing, and transportation systems to better serve Americans living with disabilities.

Economic freedom and self-sufficiency for Americans with disabilities is her goal. I am confident she will not rest until she achieves it. And I am proud to present this third and final award to Laura Hershey.

[*The President presented the award and congratulated Ms. Hershey, co-recipient for 1998.*]

The President. So there you have them: a high-tech headhunter from Pittsburgh, a car dealer from Tucson, an activist from Denver. Now, if you didn't see them you might think,

just by those descriptions, that these people have little in common. But they are bound together by their remarkable passion for empowering Americans with disabilities and helping all Americans to live closer to the ideal of equal opportunity for all. Each is, therefore, a true patriot.

President Truman once said, "We love our country because it offers us the chance to lead useful lives and to do what we can for those around us."

I thank each of you for reminding us that, really, those two things are two sides of the same coin. We cannot truly lead useful lives unless we also do what we can for those around us. This is a good day for America.

Thank you. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:05 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jill Rickgauer, participant in the LINKAGES program, which links employers with disabled job seekers; Tony Coelho, Chairman, President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities; Justin Dart, Jr., chairman and founder, Justice For All; President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland; and Special Envoy and former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin of Russia. The Executive order on Federal employees with psychiatric disabilities is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Statement on South Africa's National Elections

June 4, 1999

It is my great pleasure to congratulate President Nelson Mandela and the people of South Africa for Wednesday's successful national elections.

It has been my honor and privilege to work with my great and courageous friend President Mandela during the past 5 years as he and his fellow citizens have worked to heal the wounds of the past and build a new, inclusive, democratic, and free South Africa. The elections Wednesday represent an important step on that continuing journey. Their peaceful and fair conduct and the tremendous voter turnout are a testament to South Africa's extraordinary trans-

formation. I congratulate all the parties and candidates who participated.

And on behalf of all Americans, I congratulate the people of South Africa for their determination and hard work to build a better future. By doing so, South Africa has reminded us of the preciousness of democracy and the resilience of the human spirit. South Africa's example shows the way forward for other troubled areas of the world, from Kosovo to the Middle East to Kashmir—inclusive, democratic government that represents the will of the people can be a bulwark against conflict and a foundation for reconciliation, cooperation, and lasting peace.