

ethanol production tonight; we're about to get the science worked out, we get the technology worked out to reduce the number of gallons of gasoline it takes to make more gallons of ethanol; you're going to see an explosion there that will change the whole economic and environmental future of the United States—that we continue to press for peace and reconciliation and the reduction of the threats of weapons of mass destruction around the world.

Many people here tonight are Pakistani-Americans. I told somebody about 4 months ago that we were making progress on peace in Ireland, progress on peace in the Middle East, progress on peace in the Balkans. But the two places that I have been stymied, since I became President, were in relationships between Greece and Turkey and relationships between India and Pakistan. And just a couple of weeks ago the Greeks and the Turks announced they were going to have talks on Cyprus, and in a few days they're going to meet and discuss whether they will accept Turkey as a candidate for the European Union. So that leaves Kashmir. [Laughter]

And let me say to all of you, and to my good friend Senator Moynihan, who, in one of his many former lives, was our Ambassador to India—I have told many people this—of all the hundreds—we literally have in America now representatives of well over 150 different ethnic groups, I think something like 185. In education

and income, Pakistanis and Indians rank in the top five. They often meet together, work together, do things together in the United States. The Indian subcontinent would have a limitless potential for the 21st century if the differences between the two nations could be reconciled. There would be less need to spend vast amounts of money on military expenditures and more funds available for education, for social development, for all kinds of challenges that are out there facing people. So I look forward to making a real stab at that next year, and I see some hopeful signs there. But many of you can help, and we need your help.

The last thing I want to say is that in this coming election season, which is already well underway, I think it's very important that we not forget that we all still have to do the people's business. We all get paid; we're expected to show up for work every day. And I expect to accomplish a great deal next year, with the help of Senator Johnson and Senator Moynihan. And I am comforted by the thought that when term limits take me away, he'll still be here, thanks to you.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:55 p.m. at the Westin Fairfax Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Johnson's wife, Barbara, and former Representatives Vic Fazio and Jim Slattery.

Remarks at a "Keep Hope Alive" Reception

December 7, 1999

The President. Thank you so much. Mark, thank you for this evening. Reverend Meeks, Dennis, all the distinguished business and labor leaders in the audience, and my many friends: Berry, Willie, so many others.

Thank you, Smokey, for being here and for singing for Stevie at the Kennedy Center Honors the other night. You were magnificent. Thank you so much.

Reverend, thanks for bringing your whole family here, except for those who had to have babies and read books tonight. [Laughter] Santita thanks for the music; it was magnificent,

as always. And Jackie, thank you for being my friend and my inspiration.

And I want to thank your mother for all the things that Jesse said. But I want you to know, I've been in public life now—well, I started running for—I ran for my first office almost 26 years ago. I have talked to tens of thousands of people. I've shaken hundreds of thousands, maybe over a million hands now. And Grandma, you're the only person, ever, who came up and complimented me on quoting Machiavelli in a speech, in my whole life, ever. [Laughter] She said, "Every smart politician reads that fellow." [Laughter]

And that brings me to Jesse, because the quote from Machiavelli that she likes so well—now a quote that’s well over 500 years old—said, “There is nothing so difficult in all of human affairs than to change the established order of things. For those who will benefit are uncertain of their gain, but those who will lose are absolutely certain of their loss.” [Laughter]

Now, I’m honored to be here with Minyon Moore, my political director. Gene Sperling, my National Economic Adviser, just walked in; he works with Reverend Jackson because Jesse Jackson has been my friend for many years, long before either one of us could have known we’d be standing on this stage together and because he has done that most difficult thing in all of human affairs: He has changed the established order of things. And America is a better place.

I think about what he did to help save the Community Reinvestment Act and what he’s done to help me enforce it. We now have over 95 percent of all the money ever loaned under that law has been loaned since I’ve been President, thanks in no small measure to him and to you. I think about all the wonderful things he’s done as my Special Envoy to Africa, most recently in Sierra Leone, but in so many other places. I think about all those years with the civil rights movement, with Rainbow/PUSH, all the voter education drives, all the long campaigns, always sticking up for issues bigger than himself and for people in difficult situations.

I was thinking tonight when Jesse was talking about a night many, many years ago when he gave a speech in Little Rock, and I brought him back home to the Governor’s Mansion, and we got Hillary to come down to the kitchen, and we sat in the kitchen, and we cleaned out the refrigerator. [Laughter] We just kept on talking and kept on eating, and we kept on talking and kept on eating, until finally Hillary reminded me that I had to go to work in the morning and kicked him out of the house. [Laughter]

I was thinking something else, too. In the gripping story of Jesse’s past—you’ve got to make allowances for us, you know; I think people from the South generally tend to be more obsessed with the past than other people, in ways that are beautiful and burdensome and maybe boring to other people. But we are. But tonight I want to ask you to just take onboard

everything Jesse said. And I want to ask you this question: So, what now?

If you think about it, almost every major, big thing we have ever done in this country, we have done in the throes of difficulty or threat. This great country of ours was born out of the pangs of war, by people who were smart enough to say all of us are created equal, and then to say, but, oh, these slaves count as 60 percent of a person, for purposes of the census. And then to say we’re all created equal, but you can’t vote unless you’re A, white, B, male, and C, you have to own property, which means that if I’d been around back then, I probably couldn’t have voted either—[laughter]—because I’d have been one of the hired hands.

So, then, we were born in the pangs of a great war. And Mr. Lincoln comes along, and we finally got rid of slavery after the bloodiest war in all of our history. When we were a much, much smaller country we lost more people in the Civil War than any other one, just over the proposition that we were going to hang together and free people. It happened out of war.

And then in the industrial revolution we had some real social progress in the absence of war, but people were really suffering. I mean, little children, 10 years old, were working in factories 70 hours a week. Women with little children were working on Saturdays and way up into the night. And there was abject human suffering. And then the Depression came, and we had our first real comprehensive wave of social legislation. And we overcame the war, as Jesse said, and got out of the Depression.

And then we had the great civil rights movement of the sixties because of Martin Luther King and all the others, because the Supreme Court was visionary and brave, and—let’s be honest—because the Congress and the country were conscience-stricken after President Kennedy was murdered.

Now, in my lifetime and maybe in the lifetime of this country, we have never had so much economic prosperity so broadly shared with the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years and the lowest poverty rate in 20 years and the lowest African-American and Hispanic unemployment rates ever recorded and the highest rate of business and homeownership among minorities, as well as the majority population, ever recorded; the lowest female unemployment in 40 years, so broadly shared, with the absence of either an internal threat or an external threat to our

security. Crime rate is the lowest in 30 years; teen pregnancy rate is the lowest in 30 years; welfare rolls are the lowest in 30 years.

So what I want to ask you is, what now? And I want to ask you, even if you're not from the South, not to lose your memory. [Laughter]

Because—I came here tonight not only because I owe Jesse and because I love him and because Mark told me I had to—[laughter]—and because I want Dennis and Bill to help Hillary. [Laughter] I also came here because—I'm not running for anything—[laughter]—I want to spend the rest of my life as a good citizen.

But I'm telling you, in my lifetime—in my lifetime—this country has never had—not one time—the same level of economic prosperity, social progress, and national self-confidence, in the absence of domestic crisis or international threat, never, not once. And my lifetime, unfortunately, is getting longer. I was talking to a 6-year-old girl over Thanksgiving. She looked up at me, and she said, "How old are you?" And I said, "I'm 53." She said, "Oh, that's a lot." [Laughter]

So, what are we going to do about it? So, what? That's what I want you to think about, because we've done real well when we were under the gun in this country, you know? We had Abraham Lincoln, and people fought and bled and died; finally we got rid of slavery. We had Franklin Roosevelt, unemployment was 25 percent, got ourselves in a war; we whipped the Depression and won the war. We had Martin Luther King and people in the streets, and it took a few riots. And like I said, President Kennedy got killed; but we had President Johnson's great record in civil rights, which many of you contributed to.

What are we going to do with this? Because what I want to say to you is—the great English writer Samuel Johnson said that the prospect of a person's own destruction wonderfully concentrates the mind. The flip side is true: When you think things are peachy-keen and can't get bad, it distracts the mind. It makes people shortsighted. It makes people selfish. It makes people distracted.

And what I want to say is, we've still got some huge challenges out there. And we have the opportunity that no generation of Americans has ever had: to take our kids out of poverty; to give them all health care; to bring genuine economic opportunity to the people and places

that have been left behind; to bring genuine educational opportunities to all of our kids; and to build one America, without regard to race or region or income or sexual orientation. We've got this chance, and we'd better not blow it.

If we don't shoulder our responsibility to deal with this, our children and our grandchildren will never forgive us, because the country has never had this chance before, and believe me, nothing lasts forever. That kind of keeps you going in the tough times, but it's well to remember in the good times.

So I say to you, that's the main reason I'm here. Yes, Jesse started this Wall Street Project because he wanted to create more empowerment for individuals who were talented and just left behind. But we also know that there are whole peoples and places—the Indian reservations, Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, big neighborhoods in our cities—who haven't felt this economic prosperity. If we can't get it to them now, we will never get around to it. If we can't bring the benefits of free enterprise to the people and places that don't have it now, with the lowest unemployment in 30 years and the highest growth rate, we will never get around to it. If we can't save Social Security and take it way out beyond the baby boom generation and do something about elderly women who are too poor compared to the other retirees, elderly women living alone, if we don't do that now, when are we going to get around to it? If we don't extend the life of Medicare and provide some prescription drug coverage to the three-quarters of our seniors that can't afford what they need, when will we ever get around to it? If we're not going to give all of our kids—since we now know how to turn around failing schools; we don't have any excuse anymore; it's not a matter of some sort of scientific project—if we're not going to bridge the digital divide and make sure all of our kids have access to the Internet world of tomorrow, if we're not going to do it now, when will we get around to it? If we're not going to shoulder our responsibilities to our friends and neighbors, from the Caribbean to Africa to the world's most indebted countries, so that they, too, can be our partners and be a part of tomorrow, when are we ever going to get around to it?

Now, you can have your own list. But I'm telling you, one of the things I think we've proved is that you can take good social policy and good economic policy and prove they go

hand-in-hand. The progressives—we lost a lot of elections because people said, “Well, those people have a good heart but a soft head. And if you put them in they’ll spend us in the ditch, and tax us until we bleed. And they won’t be able to run the economy.”

They can’t say that anymore. We have the first back-to-back budget surpluses in 42 years. And we cut taxes on millions of working people with the earned-income tax credit. We raised the minimum wage, and we ought to raise it again. And we passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, and we ought to make it broader. We ought to do things to prove that good social policy and good economic policy go hand-in-hand, good environmental policy and good social policy and good economic policy go hand-in-hand.

You know, if you go into city after city after city, you will see, as my good friend Congressman John Lewis says, that environmental justice can be a civil rights issue. How many people do you know in urban areas living by toxic waste dumps that we could turn into economic goldmines if we cleaned them up? That’s what we’re trying to do.

But you make your own list when you go home tonight. Just write down the five things that you think are the biggest challenges facing America. And then you ask yourself, if we can’t do it now, when will we ever get around to doing it?

When I think of Rainbow/PUSH, I think of two things: Rainbow means we’re all in it together, and we all have a place at the table; PUSH is what Jesse does to me when he thinks I’m not doing right. [Laughter] And both those things are good. And you know, 14 or 15 months from now, when I become a citizen again, then I can be a PUSHer. We’ll all do that.

But this is a great country. You remember the history of it. Remember the stories Jesse told. Think about his mother-in-law—I got my pin—[laughter]—think about his mother-in-law. You think about this whole deal, and I’m telling you—I defy you to cite a time in your lifetime which has been like this. And I say it not to be self-serving. Look, I’m grateful I got to serve. I’m grateful that I got to serve at a time when the challenges of the country fit my experience, and what I knew, and what I felt in my heart.

But it’s like turning a big old oceanliner around in the middle of the Pacific. You can’t do it overnight. So we’ve turned this country

around. We’re going full steam ahead in the right direction.

But I am telling you, it’s no different from a person, a family, or a business. A nation, when things are going well, has to make a decision. And we have a responsibility to reach out for all those who have been left behind, to create one America, and to build the future of our dreams for our children. If not now, we will never get around to it.

So you go home tonight, and make your list, and keep supporting Rainbow/PUSH, and demand that your leaders take this historic opportunity to be worthy of the sacrifices that Jesse talked about tonight.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Wait, wait now. Before you all leave, we’re going to do one more thing. Jesse and I, we’ve got a little friend here that I want to sing for us. We’re going to have one more song.

Come on, Joshua. Come up here. Come on, Josh.

[At this point, child singer Joshua Watts sang a song, and musician Smokey Robinson urged the audience to support keeping arts programs in schools.]

The President. I know we’ve all got to go. I just want to say amen to this. [Laughter] We had a VH1 concert at the White House the other night because John Sykes, the head of VH1, is collecting instruments—he’s collected, I think, almost one million now, around America—to give to schools so they could have music programs. But all over the country, these music programs, these art programs, have been canceled out.

And we know that there are poor children out there who will learn better and find ways to express themselves better, stay out of trouble, and stay in love with education if they have access to these things. This is a huge deal, and I want to thank you for saying that. It’s a big deal.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:30 p.m. in the Washington Room at the Hotel Washington. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. Jesse Jackson, president and founder, Mark Allen, deputy field director and assistant to Reverend Jackson, Dennis Rivera, cochair, and Rev. James Meeks, board member, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition; Berry Gordy, Jr., founder, Motown Records; musician Stevie

Wonder; Willie Gray, attorney, Gary, Williams, Parenti, Finney, Lewis, McManus, Watson, and Sperando law firm; former Deputy Mayor Bill

Lynch of New York; and Reverend Jackson's wife Jacqueline, daughter Santita, and mother-in-law Gertrude Brown.

The President's News Conference

December 8, 1999

The President. Good afternoon. Before I take your questions, I have a statement to make. We are at a pivotal moment in the Middle East peace process, one that can shape the face of the region for generations to come. As I have said on numerous occasions, history will not forgive a failure to seize this opportunity to achieve a comprehensive peace.

We've made good progress on the Palestinian track, and I'm determined to help Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat move forward in accordance with their very ambitious timetable.

We've also been working intensely, for months, for a resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria. Today I am pleased to announce that Prime Minister Barak and President Asad have agreed that the Israel-Syrian peace negotiations will be resumed from the point where they left off. The talks will be launched here in Washington next week with Prime Minister Barak and Foreign Minister Shara.

After an initial round for 1 or 2 days, they will return to the region, and intensive negotiations will resume at a site to be determined soon thereafter. These negotiations will be high level, comprehensive, and conducted with the aim of reaching an agreement as soon as possible.

Israelis and Syrians still need to make courageous decisions in order to reach a just and lasting peace. But today's step is a significant breakthrough, for it will allow them to deal with each other face to face, and that is the only way to get there.

I want to thank Prime Minister Barak and President Asad for their willingness to take this important step. And I want to thank Secretary Albright who has worked very hard on this and, as you know, has been in the region and meeting with the leaders as we have come to this conclusion.

Before us is a task as clear as it is challenging. As I told Prime Minister Barak and President Asad in phone conversations with them earlier today, they now bear a heavy responsibility of bringing peace to the Israeli and Syrian people.

On the Palestinian track, Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat are committed to a rapid timetable: a framework agreement by mid-February, a permanent status agreement by mid-September. I'm convinced it is possible to achieve that goal, to put an end to generations of conflict, to realize the aspirations of both the Israeli and the Palestinian people. And I will do everything I can to help them in that historic endeavor.

It is my hope that with the resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks, negotiations between Israel and Lebanon also will soon begin.

There can be no illusion here. On all tracks, the road ahead will be arduous; the task of negotiating agreements will be difficult. Success is not inevitable. Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese will have to confront fateful questions. They face hard choices. They will have to stand firmly against all those who seek to derail the peace, and sadly, there are still too many of them.

But let there also be no misunderstanding. We have a truly historic opportunity now. With a comprehensive peace, Israel will live in a safe, secure, and recognized border for the first time in its history. The Palestinian people will be able to forge their own destiny on their own land. Syrians and Lebanese will fulfill their aspirations and enjoy the full fruits of peace. And throughout the region, people will be able to build more peaceful and, clearly, more prosperous lives.

As I have said, and I say one more time, I will spare neither time nor effort in pursuit of that goal. Today the parties have given us clear indication that they, too, are willing to take that path. Peace has long been within our