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Remarks on the Digital Divide and an Exchange With Reporters December 9, 1999

The President. Good morning. I just thought we ought to come out here in the brisk morning sunshine and wake up together. [Laughter] I want to thank the representatives here from all parts of the communications industry, from the foundation world, from various civil rights and other civic groups for being here, and coming in and giving me a chance to make this statement, because I had intended to go to Secretary Daley's conference today on bridging the digital divide, and because I'm going to Worcester, I couldn't do that. So they came in this morning, and we had a visit. I want to thank them for being here and for their commitment and for all those who aren't here but who are at the conference.

This conference is about closing the digital divide. And we have worked hard on that for the last several years in very specific contexts. Under the Vice President's leadership, we have worked to make sure that eventually a digital divide will not deprive business of the technology-savvy workers they need and will not hurt our educational systems today.

We started with the first NetDay in California, back in 1994, when only 3 percent of our classrooms were wired and only 14 percent of our schools were. And we've been working ever since. Now we know that, through the public-private partnerships that have been established all over America, through the Telecommunications Act and the E-rate, which the FCC set to make sure our poorest schools could afford to be connected, we're now up over 50 percent of the schools, from 3 percent, and over 80 percent of the classrooms, from 14 percent, since 1994. And I think that's pretty good.

I'm very pleased by that, and we're on our way to meeting our goal sometime next year of having all of our schools wired and, soon after that, all of our classrooms wired. I want to thank the Vice President and all the people in various industries who have supported us and helped us in this regard.

But as Secretary Daley's most recent "Falling Through the Net" report shows, there is still a lot more to do. We must connect all of our citizens to the Internet not just in schools and libraries but in homes, small businesses, and community centers. And we must help all Americans gain the skills they need to make the most of the connection. So this morning, as they go back to their meeting, I want to announce a series of new plans and partnerships that will expand on both these efforts to use the combined forces of public, private, and nonprofit sectors, finally to slam shut the digital divide.

First, I have decided to lead a prominent delegation, including top CEO's, on a new markets tour this spring to focus specifically on the digital divide out in America. As we've done on our previous tours, we will visit communities that have not fully participated in our Nation's economic growth. And yet, in the communities we'll also see how partnerships between the public and private sectors can unleash the power of the Internet to link children and adults to a lifetime of learning, to provide access to distant medical care, to empower parents, to assist job seekers, to enhance safety, and foster economic development.

Second, I am signing an executive memorandum to ensure that closing the digital divide will be a vital goal not just for Secretary Daley and for us here in the White House but throughout the Federal Government. For example, I'm directing Secretary Daley to work with the private sector to develop a national strategy for connecting all Americans to the Internet and directing Secretaries Daley, Riley, Herman, Cuomo, and Shalala to expand our growing network of community technology centers.

I just ask you all to think about this one thing. What do you believe the economic impact would be if Internet access and usage were as dense in America as telephone access and usage? I think it's clear that we need to keep working until we achieve this goal.

Third, with the help of many other groups, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights is launching an initiative to empower the entire civil rights community through an expanding civilrights.org website, through leadership forums and even modern-day freedom riders who will bring high-tech training to the doorsteps of nonprofit organizations.

As the Congress of National Black Churches has said, the digital divide is a key civil rights issue of the 21st century. That's why our civil rights organizations must be ready, wired, and able to lead the change.

Fourth, the Benton Foundation is bringing together companies from across the computing, telecommunications, software, and Internet industries, as well as the Urban League and several other large private foundations, to create the Digital Divide Network, an enormous clearinghouse of information for information on public and private efforts to bring technology to underserved communities. For the first time, we'll have one-stop shop for tracking our progress in every community and for learning exactly what's worked and what hasn't.

Now, these are the steps we'll take immediately. I want to thank all the leaders who are here today who are making these initiatives possible and all of those who are going to announce specific things that they and their companies and organizations are doing at the conference. I thank them for the other major commitments they will make, because there is no single, big silver bullet here, but we know we have to have a national commitment to closing the digital divide.

I also want to send out an invitation to all of your counterparts around the country who are not able to be with us today but who should join with us in this great national endeavor. Together we have the power to determine exactly what we want the Internet to become. And what we want it to do is to be an instrument of

empowerment, education, enlightenment, and economic advance and community building all across America, regardless of the race, the income, the geography of our citizens. And thanks to these people, we're going to be closer to achieving that goal.

Thank you very much.

Russia and the Situation in Chechnya

Q. Mr. President, there seems to be a divide with President Yeltsin this morning. He has given you something of a long-distance tongue lashing, saying that you've forgotten that Russia is a great power and has a nuclear arsenal. And he accuses you of taking an anti-Russian position.

The President. Well, I'll say again what I said yesterday. I don't think what they're doing will help them to achieve their goal. Their goal, their legitimate goal, is to defeat the Chechen rebels and to stop their terrorism within Russia, to stop their invasion of neighboring provinces like Dagestan. And I don't think displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians will achieve that goal. I don't know what else to say.

I haven't forgotten that. You know, I didn't think he'd forgotten that America was a great power when he disagreed with what I did in Kosovo. I mean, we can't get too serious about all the—let's not talk about what the leaders are saying and all these words of criticism. Let's focus on what the country is doing. Is it right or wrong? Will it work or not? What are the consequences?

I think—I don't agree with what's going on there. And I think I have an obligation to say so.

Thank you. I've got to go.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:12 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House prior to departure for Worcester, MA. In his remarks, he referred to President Boris Yeltsin of Russia.