

June 19 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

million Hispanics out of poverty in the years that I've been in office. That's why I think we ought to raise the minimum wage again. That's why I think we ought to adopt this new markets initiative. It's the only really good bipartisan thing we've got going up in Washington now. We are working really well in the House in a bipartisan way. It's really quite touching, and I thank the Speaker of the House for doing it. And I hope we can do it in the Senate. It's why I think we ought to implement a lot of the recommendations of the Southwest Border Initiative Task Force that I got. A lot of you have been involved in that in one way or the other.

What are we going to do about health care? Are we going to have a Patients' Bill of Rights or not? Are we going to let all the seniors on Medicare have access to affordable prescription drugs or not? Are we going to do more to let working families have access to affordable health insurance or not? I've got a big proposal on that. I think Houston has one of the highest percentages of working people without access to health insurance in the entire United States, a lot of them Latino. This is a big issue.

So that's the last thing I leave you with. The country is moving in the right direction. Things are better than they were 8 years ago. But how a nation deals with its prosperity is as stern a test of its character and judgment as how it deals with adversity. And those of us that are old enough to remember different times know that nothing lasts forever. And when you're in the bad times, you can thank God

for that. But when you're in great times, you should be humble and grateful and make up your mind to make the most of them.

We've got the best chance in my lifetime to deal with the big challenges still out there, to seize the big opportunities out there. And that's why it's important that you empower people. They can't take good times for granted. And if they're still in trouble, they shouldn't take that for granted, either. The vote is the voice, just like your sign says.

And it's been a great honor for me to serve. It's been a great honor for me to work with you. I've had the time of my life. This is the first election in 25 years I'm not part of; most days I'm okay about it. [Laughter] But as a noncandidate, the only thing I ask everybody to do is to vote and to be intelligent about it, to make up your mind what you think we ought to do with this moment of prosperity, and then to clearly understand the choices before you and go out and make yours. If we do that, America will be in good hands.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:35 a.m. in the Austin Room at the Four Seasons Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Texas State Representatives Rick Noriega and Al Edwards; Bill White, former chair, and Billie Carr, executive council member, Texas State Democratic Party; Texas State Senator Carlos F. Truan; and Antonio Gonzalez, president, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project.

Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Luncheon in Houston

June 19, 2000

Thank you very much. Senator Torricelli, Senator Wyden, Mayor Lanier and Elise, and Secretary Bentsen and B.A.; Mr. White, we miss you in the administration. I told Lloyd Bentsen when he and B.A. came through the line, I said, "Well, your economy is still humming along pretty good, Lloyd." And I want all of you to know that if he hadn't been my first Treasury Secretary, might not any of us be sitting here

today celebrating the strongest economy in American history, and I thank you very much.

I am here today primarily on behalf of our Democratic candidates for the Senate and those who are presently serving. I suppose that every American who is a reasonably good citizen understands, in general, what the Senate does, and thinks on balance it would be a good thing if good people were there who more or less agree with you.

But because of the unique vantage point that I have occupied in the last 7½ years, I probably feel that more passionately than any other person. I know what a difference it makes in the confirmation process of judges, in the weighing of the decisions about confirming people for other important positions, and how legislation is shaped and how the whole direction of foreign policy is controlled. And these things are very important. And I think what I would like to do today, recognizing that, as all of you know, I have a special interest in one particular Senate race—which, thank goodness, does not disqualify me from speaking here today. [Laughter]

I want to leave you with three thoughts. Somebody's liable to ask you why you showed up here today, and you need to be able to give an answer. And the three points I want to make is, number one, this is a big election. And it's just as important as the elections of 1992 and 1996, which enabled us to turn this country around and move it in the right direction and get a lot going.

The second thing I want to say is, there are real differences between the candidates of the two parties. And I hope this will be an immensely positive election. It is no longer necessary for us to engage in the politics of personal destruction. I hope we've beat that back for a long time to come. But that means you can have an honest debate on the real differences. And from the White House to the Senate to the House, there are real differences. And we ought to have a good time debating them—in a good humor, be happy our country's in good shape, and just have an old-fashioned citizenship lesson in what the differences are. So it's a big election; there are real differences.

The third point, however, I want you to know is that for the only time, I think, in my adult lifetime, one party—the Republican Party—doesn't really want you to understand what the differences are. Which is a dead giveaway that, at least, they think if the American people knew what the differences were, they'd vote with us. And from my perspective, I'm—first, let me say I'm grateful that I had the chance to serve as President and determined to get everything done I can do in the next 6 months, 7 months I have to serve. I had a very distinguished man call me a couple of days ago, and he said, "You know, Mr. President, for a lame duck, you're still quacking rather loudly." [Laughter] So I

do think there's a lot that we're going to get done in the next 6 months.

But what I want to say to you is I've done what I could to turn the country around, to build that bridge to the 21st century, to bring people involved—all different kinds of people in the political process. My Deputy Chief of Staff, Steve Ricchetti, is here. "Look around this room," he said—and Steve grew up in Ohio—and he looked at me, and he said, "This is not your typical Texas cowboy crowd, is it?" And I said, "You know, Texas has changed. Houston has changed. America has changed. This is a different world out there. And we want everybody involved."

And so what I hope for my country now is that we will say to ourselves, this is a very important election; here's what we want to accomplish; here's where the candidates stand, from the White House to the Senate to the House; here's what we're going to do. I mean, I hope that democracy, in short, will work the way it's supposed to work. And then none of us can have any complaints.

But a lot of people seem to think it really doesn't make much difference because the economy is so prosperous; we've got the longest economic expansion in history and the 22 million new jobs and the lowest African-American, Hispanic unemployment rate we ever had, the lowest crime rate in a quarter century, and the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years—they're half what they were when I took office. And there is no apparent threat to our security, and our country is able to be a force for peace and freedom around the world. So they say, "Could there be any differences?" And the answer is yes. Are there consequences? Yes.

Anybody who has lived more than 25 or 30 years, anyway, knows that nothing lasts forever. Now, if you're in the middle of a terrible time, that's immensely reassuring. [Laughter] But if you're in the middle of good times, it ought to be humbling and sobering. You get a time like this maybe once in a lifetime as a nation, where you really have it within your power to shape the future of your dreams for your children.

And to do that you have to ask, what are the great challenges; what are the great opportunities here before us? And then, how should we go about meeting them? And I think you can really argue that how we handle prosperity is as stern a test of our judgment, our vision,

our character, as how we handle adversity. There is not anybody in here over a certain age who can't remember at least one time in your life when you made a mistake not because things were going so badly but because things were going so well. You thought there were no consequences to the failure to concentrate. It's just part of human nature.

So that's the first thing. This is a big, big election. The second thing is, what are the questions? Bob Torricelli said I always try to ask the right question. I think that the outcome of these elections will be determined, in no small measure, by what people think the question is. So I can only tell you what I think the big questions are.

Number one, how do we keep the economy going? It's projected that we're going to have a very large surplus over the next 12 years—10 years. We can actually get this country out of debt in the next 12 years. Should we do it, or not? I think we should. And we can do that, still have a decent-size tax cut, invest in the education of our children, invest in science and technology, and health care and preserving the environment and keep paying the debt down.

And in the process, we will then prepare for what I think the next big challenge is, the aging of America. How are we going to handle it when there are only two people working for every one person drawing Social Security and Medicare? We should be saving today against that eventuality and preparing for it.

How are we going to extend this economic prosperity to people in places who have been left behind? Now this is something Vice President Gore and I have worked on very hard for the last 8 years. We have this empowerment zone program that he's done a brilliant job of running. We've got one quite successful one down in south Texas, which is now the third fastest growing area of America—interestingly enough, Secretary Bentsen's backyard down there.

But I think we ought to give Americans the same incentives to invest in poor areas here we give them to invest in poor areas around the world, in Latin America or Africa or Asia. And I'm working with the Speaker of the House. I'm trying to make this a totally bipartisan issue. But this is a big deal, because there are still a lot of people in places who aren't part of this prosperity.

The next big question—I think a big ethical question for our society—how are we going to permit people to do a better job of balancing their responsibilities as parents and their responsibilities at work? A higher and higher percentage of people with young children are in the work force. If they have to choose between succeeding at raising their children and succeeding in the work force, society has lost from the beginning, because the most important work of all is raising children. And so, obviously, if you make people choose, we're going to lose. There's a lot more we can do there.

We have an enormous percentage of families who are racked with worry because they don't have access to health insurance. Houston, the greater Houston area, one of the highest percentages in the country of working families who don't have access to health insurance—what do we propose to do with that?

How are we going to grow the economy and continue to improve the environment and deal with the challenge of global warming, which now virtually everybody acknowledges is real? Can it be done? The answer to that is, yes, it can be. How are we going to give all of our kids a world-class education and open the doors of college and university to everybody? How are we going to stay on the cutting edge of science and technology? How are we going to continue to be a force for peace?

Now, what are the specifics here? Are there differences? Yeah. The Democrats, for example, believe that America should ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty—we're trying to get India and Pakistan to do it—the Republicans don't. They believe we should walk away from a generation of leading the world toward less dangers from nuclear weapons. This is a huge issue, and it falls right on the Senate.

So if you agree with them, that you think it would be a good idea if America withdrew from all these global arms control regimes and stop trying to reduce the danger of nuclear weapons and say, "We'll just have bigger weapons; we don't care what anybody else does"—then you should support the Republicans for the Senate. But if you are proud of the fact that America has tried to lead the world away from the nuclear brink and reduce the nuclear threat, and that we—you should be, I hope, proud of the fact that I was the first world leader to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban

Treaty, and you would like to see it ratified—then you should support the Democrats.

I'll give you just another. If you believe that we should pay down the debt and have a modest tax cut we can afford, and that we can't possibly assume we're going to have all this money that people now say we'll have over the next decade, so we should take a more prudent course, then you have to vote for our side. If you think that it's an absolute lock-cinch that nothing bad will happen in the next decade and you want to get all the money out there right now in a tax cut and just hope to goodness it will all work out all right, you should vote for them, because that's what they want to do and they really believe it.

They don't believe there's any way anything bad can go wrong, and so they want to spend the surplus right now, all of it, before it materializes. And they think it will make the economy stronger. I think it will cause interest rates to go up. I think it will bring back the deficits, and I think it will make it weaker. But you have to decide. It's not like you don't have a choice here. And I could go through issue after issue after issue.

Now obviously, you've made your choice, or you wouldn't be here. But the point I'm making is, you need to go out across the State, across the community, across the country, to your friends, and say, whether you agree with me or not, this is an important election. The country is being tested. This is the election where we will say, "This is what we propose to do with our prosperity." That's what this election is about.

Nineteen ninety-two was about, "We're in a mess here; how are we going to get out of it?" Nineteen ninety-six was about, "Can we really build a bridge to the new century by keeping this going?" Two thousand is about, "What do we propose to do with our prosperity?" And then I want you to say, "There are differences between the candidates at all levels, and it is not necessary, as we too often have done in the last 20 years, to criticize them personally. It is better to say, here are their honest differences." And then, of course, I hope you'll—[*applause*]. Thank you. And then, of

course, I hope you'll say why you agree with our side. But even if someone disagrees with you, that's what an election is about. That's what democracy is supposed to be.

And this is the last point I want to make. The most important thing of all, which is why I like looking around this crowd today, is that we find a way to live together with all of our differences, that we find a way not just to tolerate them but to celebrate them, to say we are glad these Muslims from South Asia are part of 21st century America. We think they look very nice in their garb, and they're probably more comfortable than we are in the summertime. And we might have something to learn from them about the way life is organized and lived and thought about. And who knows, maybe they've got something to learn from us.

And this makes us stronger, that we have Sikhs and maybe Hindus and we've got Jews and we've got Christians and we've got Baha'is and we've got people from every different racial and ethnic group. And there has to be a way for us to celebrate this and yet reaffirm the primary importance of our common, shared humanity. Everything I have done as President for 7½ years, when you strip away all the details of the policy, has been designed to achieve that.

If I could have one wish for America, I would wish for us to be one America in that sense, because we're very smart. We're very industrious. We're very clever, and we'd figure out how to solve all our other problems. If we can keep the human heart in proper balance as we relate to others, we're going to be okay. And one of the things I'm proudest about my party and my Senate candidates is that that's the America we believe in.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:17 p.m. in Salon A at the Four Seasons Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Robert G. Torricelli, chair, Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee; former Mayor Bob Lanier of Houston and his wife, Elise; former Secretary of the Treasury Lloyd Bentsen and his wife, Beryl Ann (B.A.); and Bill White, former Deputy Secretary of Energy and former chair, Texas State Democratic Party.