

why we ever had a serious debate about it. If we don't do it, 20 years from now we'll still be kicking ourselves for being so dumb. That's what I really believe. And there is no point in my being delicate about this; I think this is a big deal. And our country and my successors in office, and their ability to do the right thing by you and by our values, will turn in no small measure on how we vote on this.

So I realize that in this crowd I'm preaching to the saved—[laughter]—but if you want America's economy to continue to grow and if you want your country to continue to be a force for peace and freedom and prosperity and to have an influence on people, to get them to give up their irrational attachment to the animosities of yesterday, we have to be willing to shoulder our burden for the future. This is part of it. And ironically, we will be one of the greatest beneficiaries by doing what is right for China and for the rest of the world.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:25 a.m. at the Tech Museum of Innovation, to the conference entitled "New Democrats: Meeting the Challenges of the New Economy." In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Ron Gonzales of San Jose; Al From, president, Democratic Leadership Council; Santa Clara County Assessor Larry Stone; former Mayor Toni Casey of Los Altos, CA; Steve Wesley, vice president of marketing and business, and Meg Whitman, chief executive officer, eBay; Irwin M. Jacobs, chairman and chief executive officer, Qualcomm, Inc.; Eric Benhamou, chairman of the board and chief executive officer, 3Com Corp.; former National Economic Adviser Laura D'Andrea Tyson; Gov. Gray Davis of California; Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association; Gov. Gary Locke of Washington State; and Gov. Edward T. Schafer of North Dakota.

Remarks to the AFL–CIO Building and Construction Trades Department Conference

April 4, 2000

Thank you. Well, the first thing I would like to say is John Podesta told me that he exceeded this retirement dinner for Bob Sunday night. And then Hillary came over here for breakfast, and I just kind of got lonesome. Nobody had me come over, so I just thought I would intrude myself on your meeting. And I'm glad to be here.

I want to say I came for two reasons. First of all, I came to thank you for all the support you've given me and for all the work you've done for America and for all the people you represent. I have tried, too, to be a builder, and the builders of this country, to me, embody the best of America. So I want to thank you, because without your help and your support, none of the good things that have happened that our administration, that the Vice President and I have been part of would have been possible.

And the second thing I wanted to do was to say a special word of thanks to Bob Georgine as he retires after 29 years. Thank you for your leadership on raising the minimum wage, on

school construction, on bringing investment to the new markets of America that have been left out of our prosperity, on the Patients' Bill of Rights, and on all the issues that specifically affect your members and working people.

And I wanted to also thank you for last Labor Day, where you taught me to use an electric screwdriver. [Laughter] Now that I'm moving into my own home and it's 111 years old, I might need that skill again, before you know it. [Laughter]

Bob and I are both retiring. And at least he's doing it voluntarily. I'm term-limited. But I tell you, as we look back on the last 7 years, it has been a wonderful experience. And again I say, we could not have done it without you. What I'd like for you to do now is just take a few minutes with me and think about why we are where we are and where we need to go.

I have my politics, I suppose, partly from the way I was raised by my grandparents and my family, partly from what I've learned as a Governor in my home State of Arkansas and

as President, partly from what I've observed about human affairs and human nature. But I have come to believe that there are basically two big approaches here to American politics: One is, obviously, from the bottom up; the other is from the top down. We're on the bottom-up side. The other is unite and lift, against divide and conquer. I think that most of us believe the way we do because we think everyone counts, everyone ought to have a chance, everyone has a role to play in our society, and we all do better when we help each other. That's why we think everyone should have opportunity, and we should have a community of all Americans.

Now, if you think about where we are today, it seems to me that even though I love to hear you cheer for me and for where we are and what we've done, the real issue is, what are we going to do with this moment of prosperity? You know, people can be tested in adversity, but they are also tested when times are good. When you build up a great legacy, what do you do with it? And I've worked as hard as I could for the last 7 years to try to first turn this country around. Just remember what it was like when we all—when Al Gore and I showed up here. We had high deficits. We had high interest rates. We had no job growth. We had social divisions. We had political gridlock. I've worked hard to try to turn it around. The country is moving in the right direction. What are we going to do with it? And that is the real issue.

And I would argue that you have a solemn responsibility in this election season not only to mobilize your members and their families but to reach out to the larger American community to say, "This is not a time for self-indulgence. This is a time to concentrate on our unique ability to meet the big, long-term challenges of America, for the most vulnerable among us, for the children like those children that are in this audience today." And I'd just like to begin with one; Bob alluded to it.

In the next 30 years, all the baby boomers are going to retire, and we'll only have about two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. Not two people total, but—[laughter]—two people. Even I couldn't get that done. [Laughter] Two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. And so there will be a great question here. How are

we going to change that? How are we going to accommodate the aging of America?

Well, I'm about to sign a bill which removes the Social Security earnings limit, so people who want to work in their later years can do so and still draw their Social Security. I think that's a good thing to do. But we also have to recognize that we're going to have to make some changes in order for Social Security to mean in the 21st century what it has meant to the 20th century.

We're also going to have to make some changes in the Medicare program, which was established when President Johnson was here, to make it work in the 21st century. And I've asked the Congress, for example, to dedicate the interest savings from paying down the debt to the Social Security Trust Fund. Why? Because right now, we're paying more in Social Security taxes than we're paying out in Social Security. So as we pay the debt down, I want to take the interest savings from paying the debt down, put it in the Trust Fund. It would now allow us to add about 54 years to the life of the Social Security Trust Fund and take it out beyond the life of the baby boom generation.

And I hope you'll talk to the Members of Congress. I know a lot of Republicans have supported many of your issues, and you have relationships with both Republicans and Democrats. This is not a complicated deal. The only reason for the Republicans not to support this is if they want to privatize Social Security, if they can get the Congress and the White House. Now, you need to put the heat on folks to say, "We've got the money now. Let's dedicate it now to saving Social Security and taking it out beyond the life of the baby boom generation."

The other thing we have to do is to modernize Medicare and add a prescription drug benefit for our seniors on Medicare. Now, we just learned last week that Medicare, which was scheduled to go broke in 1999, last year—when I took office, they said the Trust Fund would run out of money in 1999. We have now taken it out to 2023, and I'm very proud of that. But you know, if we were designing a Medicare program today, no one would even think about designing Medicare without prescription drug coverage, first of all, because there's been so many dramatic advances in medication; and secondly, because, again I will say, the nature of people over 65 has changed.

When Medicare was originally designed, people didn't live much longer than 65 years, typically, and this was designed for emergency care or for critical care, for hospitals and doctors. Now, any American lives to be 65 has got a life expectancy of 83. And more and more, we need preventive care and chronic care. And more and more, that is prescription medication. No one—if we were starting all over again today, we'd never even think about having a Medicare program that didn't provide a prescription drug component.

Now, I've just come from a meeting with the Senate Democrats. And the Senate is taking up the budget today, and the Democrats are going to try to, first of all, say we should not spend the surplus on risky tax cuts; we should first take care of our basic business. Senator Robb is going to offer an amendment today, supported by Senator Daschle, that makes this simple statement: After we modernize Medicare with an affordable, broadbased, voluntary prescription drug benefit, then we can move forward with sensible tax cuts that aren't so big they undermine our ability to save Social Security, pay down the debt, and invest in the education of our children. But first things first.

So the Senate is going to get a resolution by Senator Robb today that says, say yes to Medicare and prescription drugs and no to having a big tax cut first. So I hope you will support that.

Now, interestingly enough, a number of people in the Republican majority are saying, "Okay, well, I'll go along with the drug program as long as everybody doesn't get it. We ought to stop at the poverty level or 150 percent of the poverty level or maybe at the outer reaches, some of them 200 percent of the poverty level." Let me tell you something. They want to say that nobody with an annual income of over \$16,700 should get help with this prescription drug benefit. I just think that's wrong.

If you think about it, a lot of you have parents, uncles, aunts, maybe your older brothers and sisters that are on Medicare. If they have a \$300 or \$400 a month drug bill, which is not all that rare, then \$16,000 is not all that much money. And since this benefit is voluntary—again I will say, I don't think a widow earning \$16,000 or even \$20,000 a year is less deserving of drug coverage than someone who is below the poverty line.

So I hope you will stick up for the proposition that all of our seniors should have the option of buying into this insurance program. That's what made Medicare work in the first place. That's what made Social Security work in the first place. It was a universal program that helped middle class people as well as low income people. And this is an opportunity to improve the process of aging in America in a way that is humane and decent and completely affordable. So we need your help to get prescription drug coverage in the Medicare program this year, in the right way, for all Americans.

I also want to thank you for your devotion to the welfare of people on the other end of life's age line, for your support for education and, in particular, for the work you have done to build bipartisan support for school construction and renovation.

This year I have sent a budget to the Congress which will enable us to build or modernize 6,000 schools and to repair 5,000 schools a year over the next 5 years. This is terrifically important. We've got the largest school population we've ever had. We want to have high standards and high accountability. We want to hook all these schools up to the Internet. But there are schools in New York City that are still being heated with coal—with coal. The average age of a school building in Philadelphia is 65 years. I was in a small town in Florida, visiting an elementary school where there were 12—12—house trailers behind the school to take the overflow of the students.

One-third of our schools are in serious disrepair, a lot of them literally too old to be wired for the Internet; other kids in trailers that need to be in modern classrooms. This is a big issue. We've been working on it for 3 years now. This week the Department of Education released a State-by-State report, telling us that the need has grown and grown. Enrollment is growing; facilities are crumbling. Every year we fail to act, the problem gets worse.

I am very frustrated by those who say, in the majority in Congress, that this is not a national responsibility. That is not true. I'm not trying to tell people how to build the buildings. I'm not trying to prescribe the—we're not trying to micromanage this program. But the school districts of this country do not have the money or the means right now to do what our children need. We have finally more people in the

schools than we had during the baby boom generation after World War II. And we cannot expect them to learn in facilities that are unbearable and, in many cases, unwireable.

So I asked you to work with me. With your help, we actually have now a strong bipartisan school construction bill in the House. And thanks to you, largely, we have both Republicans as well as Democrats supporting this legislation in the Senate and the House. The House bill would allocate \$24.8 billion to help communities build or renovate these 6,000 schools.

So now that you've gotten us some good Republican support, we have to get this to a vote. Once it became obvious on the House floor that we actually had Republicans supporting this bill and that we could pass it, then efforts were made to keep it from coming to a vote. So I say to you, there are a lot of people who believe that this year, because it's election year, should be a year where nothing gets done. And I have challenged every Member of Congress who believes that to relinquish his or her salary for a year, because we didn't get to where we are today by taking a year off. You don't get to take a year off. Nobody else gets to take a year off, and everybody's drawing a paycheck every 2 weeks. There is no reason not to continue to move forward.

Believe me, no matter how much progress we make this year, there will still be significant areas of disagreement between our Presidential candidates and between the two parties in all the congressional races. So let's show up for the American people and do what we can. There is no reason—no reason—not to pass the prescription drug benefit on Medicare and not to pass the school construction bill this year. And you can help us do it. I hope you will.

Now, I would like to close with the point with which I began, first, with a simple thank-you and, second, with a reminder that this year, this election year, imposes on all of us an historic responsibility. We did not get to where we are today, with 21 million new jobs and the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest female unemployment rate in 40 years, the lowest minority unemployment rate ever measured, highest homeownership in history, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, lowest poverty rates in 20 years, lowest crime rates in 25 years—this didn't happen by accident. It happened because we worked together, and we had the right ideas, and we were moving in the

right direction. It happened because we believed in uniting our people and lifting them up and not in divide and conquer. It happened because we believed you could be pro-business and pro-labor, pro-work and pro-family, you could grow the economy and improve the environment, you could balance the budget and run a surplus and still invest more in education and give tax relief to middle income families.

A study last week said that the percentage of Federal income tax coming out of average families' incomes was the lowest in 40 years. That's why we had a unite-and-lift, not a divide-and-conquer theory, and because we kept working. And the only concern I have about this election year is that people will say, "Well, we've got the first surpluses we've had in 40 years, back to back. Things are going well. Why don't we vote for something that makes us feel good in the moment?"

And I just want you all to listen to this, particularly those of you that are about my age. In February we celebrated the fact that we had the longest economic expansion in American history. And so I had all my economic advisers in, and we were sitting around talking about it. And I said, "Well, when was the last longest economic expansion in history, before this one?" You know when it was? Nineteen sixty-one to 1969.

Now, let me tell you what happened then. In 1964 I graduated from high school, at the peak of this economic expansion. We had low unemployment, low inflation, high growth. Everybody thought the growth would go on forever. We had a civil rights challenge at home, but Lyndon Johnson was President. He'd united the country after President Kennedy's assassination, and people believed that the civil rights challenge would be met in the Congress and the courts, not in the streets. We were sort of involved in Vietnam, but people thought that was a long way away, and nobody dreamed it would divide the country. And people thought that we would win the cold war because our values and our system were superior, and things would just rock right along. That's what we thought in 1964.

Four years later, in this city, I graduated from college on June the 8th. It was 2 days after Robert Kennedy had been killed, 2 months and 4 days after Martin Luther King was killed. Today is the 32d anniversary of his death. It was 9 weeks after Lyndon Johnson said he

couldn't run for President anymore, because the country was divided right down the middle over Vietnam and there were demonstrations everywhere.

It was a few weeks before Richard Nixon was elected President on one of those divide-and-conquer platforms. And I know a lot of you probably voted for him if you were of voting age—that age. But let me just remind you of what the message was. The message was, “I represent the Silent Majority,” which meant that those of us that weren't for him, we were in the loud minority. So there was “us” and there was “them.” And then we had all these “us” and “them” elections. Al Gore and I came along and said, “We want to put people first. We want to unite, not divide.” But just a few weeks after that election in 1968, boom, the longest economic expansion in American history was over.

What's the point of all that? I'm not trying to get you down. I want you to be up. There's nobody more optimistic than me in this room today. But we need to have a little humility and gratitude for this moment we're in. And we need to understand that these things can get away from us. And we need to be resolved

to make the most of this. This is a moment for making tomorrows, not a moment for being distracted or indulging ourselves but for making tomorrows.

We have a chance to build the future of our dreams for our children. And the reason I told you that story about the 1960's was not only to remind you that nothing lasts forever, and you have to make the most of these things, but to tell you that, not as your President but as a citizen, I have been waiting for 35 years for my country to have this chance. And you can make the most of it.

So in everything you do this year, you remember this little story I told you. And you remember that we have the chance of a lifetime that we should be grateful for. And everyone you talk to and everyone you touch and everything you say, remind people: This is our moment for making tomorrows.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:25 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton and Towers. In his remarks, he referred to Robert A. Georgine, president, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO.

Remarks on Efforts To Bridge the Digital Divide

April 4, 2000

Thank you very much. First of all, Julian, I thank you for your introduction, for your remarks, and, mostly, for the power of your example. I find very often when we do these events in the White House, by the time I get up to talk, everything that needs to be said has already been said. And I certainly thank you.

I want to thank you, Senator Barbara Mikulski, for being the first Member of Congress to talk to me about the digital divide. And once I realized you were interested in it, I stopped worrying about whether we would address it—[laughter]—because no one will ever say no to the Senate's sparkplug of energy. I want to thank Secretary Herman for her support. And Secretary Glickman, thank you for being here. Harris Wofford, the leader of our national service movement; and Gene Sperling, my National

Economic Adviser, who has pushed this whole digital divide issue so passionately.

I want to thank the Members of Congress who are here. Over to my left, Senator John Breaux, my neighbor from the Mississippi Delta, where we are very interested in the potential of the computer and the Internet. And we just had a large delegation of House Members that have come in. They've been voting, and I'm glad they're here. I hope I have all their names, but I'd like to introduce them: Representative Maxine Waters, Representative Bart Stupak, Representative Ellen Tauscher, Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard, Representative Silvestre Reyes, Representative John Larson, Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson, Representative Zoe Lofgren, Representative Rubén Hinojosa. Thank you all for being here. Did I get everybody?