

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Remarks at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan September 21, 2000

Give her another hand. *[Applause]* Wasn't she great? Thank you, Karla.

Well, good afternoon, everyone. I am delighted to be here at Mott Community College. And I want to begin by thanking Karla Hudson again for her sterling example, but even more for her commitment to helping other people build a better future for themselves.

I also want to thank my longtime friend and now Cabinet member, Secretary Mineta, for his years and years of commitment to empowering people with disabilities. I thank my National Economic Adviser, Gene Sperling, who is a native of Michigan, for the work he did on the announcements I will make today. And Mayor Stanley, thank you, as always. Judy Brewer, thank you for your work.

I also want to acknowledge Pamela Loving from the Career Alliance and Michael Zellej from the Disability Network for what they're doing. I'd like to thank Dr. Shaink, the board, and the faculty members and the students of Mott Community College for making us welcome here today.

And I'd like to acknowledge a couple of other people who came with me today to be here—first, the remarkable president of Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, Dr. I. King Jordan, and a marathon runner—congratulations for being here—James Clark, vice president at NCR; Carl Augusto, the president of the American Foundation for the Blind; and from the administration, Judy Heumann, the Assistant Secretary for Special Education Rehab Services, and Jonathan Young from the White House. They're all around there. Thank you all very much for being here.

I would also like to thank the Vice President in his absence for the work that he has done with me for 8 years to empower all Americans.

Looking back, I think this is my fourth trip, Mayor, to Flint. I'm beginning to feel at home. I'm afraid if I come back, I'll get a tax bill, I've been here so often. *[Laughter]* When I first came here in 1992, Mayor Stanley wel-

comed me. Now I'm about to leave the Presidency, and when I'm gone, he'll still be mayor. *[Laughter]* I want to know what the secret is. *[Laughter]*

Let me say, as Secretary Mineta said, this is a very fortunate time for our country, and it happened because of a lot of people across America working together. Flint has worked hard, against tough odds, to bring this city back, to prepare for a new century. And you have made a great deal of progress. I am quite sure that the people whom I visited today who are involved with the Disability Network and the Career Alliance and the people at this community college have played a major role in the resurgence of this fine community.

But we all know that not everyone has shared in the American economic renaissance. We all know there are people and places who have been left behind, including millions of Americans with significant disabilities who want to go to work but whose path is blocked and who could work and could contribute, not only to their own lives but to the rest of us, as well.

The great labor priest George Higgins articulated a fundamental truth when he said, "Work is an important way in which we exercise our humanity. In return, society offers us not only our daily bread but a sense that we, ourselves, are honored for the contributions we make."

When I sought the Presidency in 1991 and 1992, my first objective was to give work back to the American people. One of the strongest supporters I had was your former Governor, who is here with me today, and my friend of many years, Jim Blanchard, and I thank him for coming. Not only here in communities in Michigan but in far away New Hampshire, Jim went with me in the snows to listen to people who had lost their livelihoods, who broke down over dinner, crying because they were afraid they'd never be able to send their kids to school.

And we have, in large measure, succeeded. But we have not given every American the

chance, first, to get an education, and second, to use their education to work and achieve the American dream. We have an obligation to do it, an obligation that requires us to keep expanding the circle of opportunity. And in this information age, when the pace of change increasingly accelerates at a breathtaking rate, we cannot achieve that goal if we leave any Americans stranded on the other side of the now famous digital divide.

Now, for nearly 8 years now, the Vice President and I have worked to break down barriers that hold people back. One of the most important things we did was to fight hard in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to insist that people with disabilities have full access to telephone equipment and service that most people take for granted. And one of our Federal Communications Commissioners, Susan Ness, is here with me today. I thank her, and I thank all of those who helped us to fight for the rights of disabled Americans in the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

In 1998 we pushed through the Work Force Investment Act, requiring that any information technology the Federal Government buys be accessible to people with disabilities. And in 1999 I was very proud to sign the Work Incentives Improvement Act, which will enable Americans with disabilities to retain their Medicare or Medicaid coverage when they go to work and provide more choices for job training. This will give tens of thousands of Americans the opportunity to be in the work force.

But breaking down barriers is not enough. People actually have to have the tools they need to take advantage of this remarkable moment of opportunity—especially the tools they need in cyberspace. There are truly amazing new possibilities, as I saw today on my tour.

Through information technologies, a person with a disability, such as the great physicist Stephen Hawking, can continue to be one of the world's top astrophysicist and—and this is a big “and,” because he suffers from Lou Gehrig's disease and is the longest living person, as far as we know, in history with that disease—and I'm convinced that one of the reasons he is alive today, with the fire in his eyes and the passion burning in his heart, is that he can not only continue to learn; he can continue to communicate what he knows and what he thinks to the rest of the world, thanks to technology.

Millions of other people with disabilities can also access and use the information superhighway if we build the necessary on ramps. For example, we're creating a national network of community technology centers so that all Americans, no matter where they live or what their incomes, have easy and affordable access to the Internet.

I visited America's newest community technology center this afternoon, right here in Flint, a partnership between the Department of Education, Mott Community College, and the non-profit Disability Network, focusing on empowering people with disabilities to access the Internet and learn computer skills. I was amazed by a lot of what I saw: technology that translates web pages aloud for people who are blind or visually impaired; provides captioning for deaf and hard-of-hearing people; enables people with significant physical disabilities to control a computer through eye movement and brain waves. This technology has unbelievable potential.

I have a friend in North Carolina, named Joe Martin, with Lou Gehrig's disease. Years ago, we worked together on education and the economy in the South. Joe Martin then was in great health. He was vigorous, energetic, charismatic, compelling, and effective. He's had Lou Gehrig's disease for some time now, and in spite of how great he was then, he is greater today in every way. Although he can't walk or talk or use his hands, his eyes provide a window on the world. With EyeGaze technology, he can look at a computer screen and type away just using his eyes. He E-mails people here in Flint. With another glance he can activate an electronic voice that reads his words aloud. This astounding technology has enabled him to keep his job as a banker, to talk with his wife and friends and, now, write an about-to-be-published compelling book about his life.

Some of you may have heard of a young swimmer from South Africa named Terence Parkin. Yesterday he won the silver medal in the mens' 200-meter breast stroke, one of the best athletes in the world. He also happens to be deaf, and he can't hear the starting buzzer that used to begin all swimming races. Instead, he can now watch for a personal, yellow starting light, which flashes at his starting block at the same time the buzzer goes off. By installing the simplest of technology, a little light bulb, officials gave this determined and gifted athlete

his shot at glory. He took it. Now he can celebrate the flash of sunlight off his silver medal, and aren't you glad he got the chance to race?

These kinds of innovations are going to make a tremendous difference in people's lives, especially as we incorporate them into mainstream technology, something Judy emphasized. Here in Genesee County, employers can't find enough people to fill all the technical jobs. Many pay \$20 an hour.

Now, if we want to keep the rest of the economy growing, we have to make information technology more accessible. It's responsible for about 30 percent of the economic growth we've enjoyed over the last 8 years. And we have to bring more people into the circle of opportunity to work in information fields. That means people with disabilities have to be able to enter the 21st century work force, not only for your own benefit but for the rest of America as well.

Today I am honored to announce several major public and private commitments that will move us in the right direction. First, 45 chief executive officers of American high-tech companies have pledged to make their products more accessible to people with disabilities, training their employers to develop new accessible software, hardware, and services.

Second, 25 of our Nation's leading research universities have committed to helping us provide equal access to information, including new course work for engineering majors and new tenure-track faculty positions to address these challenges. That's a big deal. Think about it. Major universities giving people tenure to teach how to provide equal access to all Americans without regard to disabilities, to have information-age technology—that's wonderful.

Third—I'm trying to keep up with all of this. Third, I am pleased to announce that Flint's very own CS Mott Foundation—and I believe the president of the foundation, Bill White, is here—will support these goals by funding a blue-ribbon task force, headed by the Disability Network, to figure out how to make this new technology more affordable. It's not enough to develop it if people can't afford it.

Fourth, I'm directing my Cabinet to explore ways of enhancing Medicare and Medicaid to help people with disabilities pay for technologies to enable them to live and work independently in their communities. The Department of Education will provide grants totaling \$4 million to the Web Accessibility Initiative and the National

Center for Accessible Media to help to ensure that people with disabilities can tap into the World Wide Web and make the most of on-line learning.

And finally, I am particularly proud to announce that AmeriCorps is awarding \$9 million in grants to put 1,200 volunteers into schools and communities to teach students with disabilities and children from difficult backgrounds the skills they need to take advantage of the Internet.

One project in North Carolina will provide computer training to 300 students who are blind or visually impaired, showing them a whole horizon of possibilities. And I know, of course, that AmeriCorps volunteers have been active in the disability community here in Flint, and I thank them for their work. And thanks for wearing your T-shirt today. You look good. Thank you.

I've got to get in a little plug for AmeriCorps now. Our legislation reauthorizing AmeriCorps is now pending in the Congress. I have now received a letter signed by 49 of the Nation's 50 Governors asking Congress to reauthorize AmeriCorps and other community programs administered by the Corporation for National Service, including the new E-Corps program to bridge the digital divide. I hope Congress will take a look at what you've done here and reauthorize AmeriCorps.

Let me just make two points in closing. Once more, bridging the digital divide is not just the morally right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. I remember a decade ago when people were debating the Americans with Disabilities Act, critics said it would be too expensive to make public facilities available to put in curb cuts, handrails, to put those signs in braille up. They were wrong. Since we've torn down those barriers, more than a million Americans with disabilities have entered the work force, and we have had the strongest economy America has ever known. It is good to help people live their dreams.

And if we build new onramps to the information superhighway, people with disabilities will help us build an even stronger America and, I might add, share in the promise of the declaration of true independence.

The second thing I'd like to say is, this is about way more than economics. It's important to be able to earn a living, and I want all of

you to contribute to America's economic welfare. But it's about more than economics. A century ago, visionaries here in Flint harnessed the potential of new technology to build the world's largest auto company. Their success gave Americans a mobility and freedom that reshaped the entire economic and physical landscape of our Nation.

Today, at the dawn of the information age, we have the potential to give millions of Americans even greater freedom in cyberspace. As I said, it's about more than economics. You know, when I was driving from my last stop here, there were police along the way at intersections, making sure that no children got in the way of the motorcade or no cars went through the stop sign. One of those police officers was in a wheelchair.

One of my speechwriters has one disabled arm and one prostheses. He writes a heck of a speech. It's nice that he's got a job, but it's more important that the feelings of his heart can be expressed. One of the things I've learned in nearly 30 years in public life and a few years before that, just sort of ambling around the world, is that everybody's got a story; everybody's got dreams; everybody's afraid sometimes and brave sometimes. And in the end, when you strip it all away, there's not a great deal of difference in the relative significance of our stories. If you put all the people in the world end to end, with the person with

the lowest IQ on one end and the highest IQ on the other, you couldn't stick a straw between any two people.

The whole premise of America is that we are inherently, in a fundamental way, equal, though unique. People carry different burdens in life, and everybody, even the most blessed, carry a few. God puts bigger burdens on some than others, but everybody should have the chance to have their story. In the end, in the not completely knowable terrain of the human heart is the real argument for all these efforts.

So I ask you, I'll do everything I can in the time remaining. For the rest of my life I'll be grateful that I happened to be President at this moment of true revolution in human ability. But we have to keep working and never forget the economics is important, but the dreams matter more.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:15 p.m. in the Ballinger Field House. In his remarks, he referred to Karla Hudson, rehabilitation counselor, Michigan Commission for the Blind, who introduced the President; Mayor Woodrow Stanley of Flint; Judy Brewer, director, Web Accessibility Initiative; Pamela Loving, president and chief executive officer, Career Alliance; Michael Zelle, executive director, Disability Network; and Richard Shank, president, Mott Community College.

Statement on the Federal Budget Surplus

September 21, 2000

Today the Department of the Treasury is announcing that for the first 11 months of this year the surplus stands at a record \$171 billion, more than twice the surplus at this time last year. In total, we are on track to pay off a record \$360 billion of publicly held debt over the last 3 years, including over \$220 billion in this year alone.

This dramatic fiscal progress did not happen by accident. A long-term commitment to tough choices and fiscal discipline, not to short-term political gestures, has helped put America on track to pay down the debt by 2012. The majority in Congress should not jeopardize the longest

economic expansion in history by failing to adopt our long-term strategy to make America debt-free for the first time since 1835.

Let's work together to invest in our future by strengthening Social Security and Medicare, including a voluntary, affordable Medicare prescription drug benefit, making investments in key priorities like education, and putting America on course to be debt-free for the first time since Andrew Jackson was President.