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Remarks on the Unveiling of a Portrait of Former Secretary of Agriculture Michael Espy

December 10, 1998

Oh, happy day. [*Laughter*] I'd like to begin by thanking Deputy Secretary Rominger, who has served so well both Secretary Espy and Secretary Glickman. I thank Dan Glickman and Rhoda for being a part of our administration's family.

Dan Glickman pointed out when I discussed this appointment with him that he would be in the proud tradition of my commitment to a Cabinet that looks like America and to diversity because there were even fewer Jewish farmers than black farmers. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank my friends Reverend Wintley Phipps, Reverend Walter Fauntroy, Reverend Beecher Hicks, and the Howard Gospel Choir here. They are wonderful. I thank the members of the Cabinet and former members of the Cabinet who are here, Secretary Herman, Secretary Richardson, Secretary O'Leary, EPA Administrator Browner, Ambassador Barshefsky. John Podesta and Bob Nash and a whole slew of people from the White House are here; Senator Leahy, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, Congressmen Clyburn, Jefferson, Eddie Bernice Johnson, Stenholm, Congressman Thompson. We're glad to see former Congressmen Montgomery and Coelho and many other former Members of Congress here. And Reverend Jackson, thank you for coming; and to the Espy family and all the members of Mike Espy's extended family here.

Six years ago, on Christmas Eve, I announced that I would nominate, and I quote, ''my neighbor, my friend, and my supporter, Mike Espy'' to be Secretary of Agriculture. He was a young Congressman from Mississippi when I served as Governor of Arkansas. We shared a passion for many issues, including rural development.

As a Congressman, Mike worked with my Senator, Dale Bumpers, to set up the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, a commission I had the honor to chair. It brought jobs and growth to one of America's poorest, least developed regions. I came to know and respect Mike Espy in that endeavor.

I knew we also shared a vision for America, a new approach to government rooted in our most enduring values, changed and shaped to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The need for change was nowhere more evident than at the Department of Agriculture, which has, as Dan Glickman said, since the time of President Lincoln, nurtured the seeds of renewal for America.

On Christmas Eve I said, ''The Department of Agriculture can't simply be a stolid representative of the interests of the past. It has to be a real force for family farmers in our country, for the agricultural issues of today and tomorrow.'' Mike understood that. As the first African-American to become the Secretary of Agriculture, he was the very embodiment of change. Not only here but in many other areas of administration policy—one of eight African-Americans who have now served in the President's Cabinet in the last 6 years. And I am very grateful for that.

And I'm grateful to Senator Leahy and Senator Carol Moseley-Braun for confirming them all.

In his 2 years at the helm Mike changed the Department of Agriculture as profoundly and beneficially as any Secretary in its history. It is fitting today we raise his portrait. He made history, and today we honor him for it.

I'd like to talk a little bit about his record as Secretary of Agriculture. His first great challenge came only a few days after he started on the job, when an outbreak of *e-coli* from tainted meat took the lives of three children in Washington State. Mike went to Washington, promised the victims' families strong action, and he delivered.

The new science-based inspection procedures developed during his tenure and put into place under Secretary Glickman have cut incidents of salmonella contamination in pork by a third, in poultry by nearly 50 percent, according to the preliminary data we have. The Department of Agriculture has no higher responsibility than ensuring the safety of America's food supply. Today it is fulfilling that responsibility, thanks in no small measure to Mike Espy's leadership.

Mike's second great challenge came in 1993 also. It was a challenging year, when floods of biblical proportion struck the Midwest. In the past, the Federal Government had earned a reputation for slow and inadequate responses to natural disasters. But Mike Espy, along with James Lee Witt at FEMA, helped set a new, higher standard of Government service, providing thousands of communities and millions of Americans with the aid they needed swiftly and efficiently.

His third great challenge at USDA was to help our economy and our farm sector by expanding markets for America's agricultural bounty. When we negotiated the GATT accords in later 1993, some of the greatest obstacles were agricultural issues. Nobody worked harder, with greater success, to work through those issues and pave the way for the passage of GATT than Secretary Espy.

His fourth great challenge was to make USDA smaller, stronger, more responsive to farmers and consumers. In just 2 short years, Mike put in motion a process, which Secretary Glickman has carried through, that has reduced the work force by 18,000, closed and consolidated over 1,000 field offices, saved the taxpayers of our country $4.8 billion, all the while, thanks to the employees here, improving services to farmers, many of whom can now visit one location instead of driving from one USDA field office to another. I thank him, and I thank all of you who work here, for doing that.

The list of the good things he did for America goes on and on. He set higher nutritional standards for school lunches. He helped end the gridlock over logging on Federal lands in the Northwest. He spearheaded the Water 2000 effort to make sure that, by the end of the century, no American is without fresh, clean drinking water. Starting in Congress, continuing as Agriculture Secretary, Mike worked to win more resources for minority farmers and to fight discrimination in USDA programs, a fight that Secretary Glickman has energetically continued. I thank both of them for that.

This year, finally, we fought for and won legislation to allow minority farmers discrimination claims from almost the last two decades finally to be heard.

Mike left the USDA in 1994 to face a different kind of challenge, one no person could have chosen, but one he faced with characteristic resolve, integrity, and strength. I'd like to say—I don't know if this is appropriate or not, but I think we ought to give Mr. Weingarten and Mr. Wells a hand and ask them to stand. They did a heck of a job. [*Applause*] Thank you.

Mike drew inspiration from his family, his friends, the Holy Scripture. With his head held high, he persevered, and he triumphed. Often, Mike talks fondly of his late father Henry, who was a USDA Agricultural Extension Agent in Arkansas in the early 1940's, back in the days when black extension agents only served black farmers. The pride Henry Espy would feel if he could see this portrait of his son hanging in this room is something we can only imagine. But the pride that we can feel, for Mike, for the USDA, and for the progress of our Nation, is every bit as real.

I think all of us have been deeply moved to see this good man grow in mind, body, and spirit through this difficult ordeal. He often said he read the 27th Psalm. When I saw him outside the courtroom, I thought of the wonderful passage from Isaiah: ''Be not afraid. I have redeemed you. I have called you by my name. You are mine.'' Well, Mike, the jury redeemed you, and you belong to the American people, and we are very proud of you.

Now I would like to ask Mike's children, Jamilla and Mike, to join me in unveiling this fine portrait by the Mississippi artist, Jason Bouldin, who is also here. I would like to ask Mr. Bouldin to come up and stand on the stage with us, so we can appreciate his handiwork.

[*At this point, the portrait was unveiled.*]

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I think it's high time we heard from the man we came to honor, Secretary Mike Espy.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:52 p.m. at the Department of Agriculture. In his remarks, he referred to Rhoda Glickman, wife of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman; civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson; and attorneys Reid H. Weingarten and Ted Wells, Jr.

Statement on the National Education Goals Report

December 10, 1998

Today's release of the annual National Education Goals Report shows that America has made some progress toward achieving the National Education Goals but still has a long way to go. If we are going to reach these goals, we must strengthen accountability and raise standards for students, teachers, and schools. I will continue to press Congress to help give our students smaller classes, well-prepared teachers, and modernized school buildings. I will continue my efforts to expand access to early childhood programs, increase public school choice, make our schools safe, disciplined, and drug free, open the doors of college education, and help Americans engage in lifelong learning.

I am pleased at the progress that the report shows in helping our young children arrive at school ready to learn, improving student achievement in math, and increasing the participation of women and minorities in math and science in higher education. Those responsible for such gains—parents and teachers, local and State education officials, colleges and universities, the business community, and students themselves—should be proud of what they have accomplished.

But we must do more. Education is a local function, a State responsibility, and a national priority. The National Education Goals define excellence in education, and Americans at all levels must redouble our efforts to meet them.

Remarks Following Discussions With Central American Leaders

December 11, 1998

President Clinton. Good morning. I have just concluded a very good meeting with the leaders of five Central American nations: President Rodriguez of Costa Rica, President Flores of Honduras, President Aleman of Nicaragua, President Calderon Sol of El Salvador, and Vice President Flores of Guatemala. We send our best wishes to President Arzu, who is in Guatemala recovering from a bout of pneumonia.

Over the past decade, Central Americans have transformed their countries. Nations where freedom once was denied, where there was once fear and violence, have now joined their neighbors as democracies in peace. Economic development has raised many from poverty. Now nature has put that progress at risk.

Central American nations face in varying degrees the formidable task of rebuilding from the region's deadliest storm in modern history: 9,000 confirmed dead, another 9,000 missing and feared dead, 3 million people homeless or displaced. The hurricane destroyed schools, hospitals, farms, utilities, roads, and bridges.

The governments and people of the region have made tremendous efforts to address this crisis, showing great courage and strength. But they are not, and they never will be, alone. I say to the leaders here and to the people of Central America, the United States will continue to do everything we can. *Ayudaremos a nuestros hermanos.* We will help our brothers and sisters. It is the right thing to do. And I say to my fellow Americans, it also serves our long-term interests in a stable, free, and prosperous hemisphere.

I'm very pleased that we have achieved an era of growing cooperation, respect, and friendship among the nations of the Americas. We stand together for democracy, opportunity, and peace. We stand together in good times and bad. The United States already has committed $283 million in assistance, and we will provide an additional $17 million through AID for food assistance.

Thousands of our troops and civilian officials are now in the region supporting relief efforts. With our help and with the help of others, the people of Central America have reopened roads, contained disease, restored drinking water in many areas. Both the First Lady and Tipper Gore have visited the region, and last month, they led a conference of charitable organizations to coordinate aid.

Now we are shifting our focus to reconstruction. And the United States will do our share there as well. Working with Congress on a bipartisan basis, our effort will include funds for rebuilding, debt relief and new financing, trade and investment initiatives, and immigration relief.