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Remarks to the Community in Beebe, Arkansas

January 24, 1999

Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Good afternoon. Thank you for making me feel welcome. Let me say, first of all, that I brought my ''Arkansas Cabinet''—Secretary Slater and Mr. Witt—down here today, along with a number of Arkansans from the White House staff, including Missy Kincaid, who is from this community. I have been here many times. I have a lot of friends here, and I was very sad when I flew over Beebe and McRae today and I saw how much damage had been done. And I saw a lot of pain in a lot of faces up on the road there, but I also saw a lot of determination.

I want to thank your mayor for being—even with his bad foot, walking around with me in some pretty lumpy places. He must think he has impeccable timing. He got himself installed just in time for the tornado. But he's a young man and a teacher, so he ought to be about rebuilding the schools—and that's a good thing.

And I thank your county judge. I thank your superintendent, Mr. Williams. I thank my good friend Senator Beebe and Mrs. Beebe and Representative Hinton. I'd also like to compliment your fire chief, Mr. Kennedy, and the National Guard people. I know they've worked very, very hard the last few days, and I know that we're all appreciative of them.

And you've had some young AmeriCorps volunteers who came down from St. Louis, and that's a program that was started after I became President—I'm proud of these young people; they volunteer a year or 2 years of their lives to work in communities just doing what needs to be done. And I'm very grateful for that.

Let me say on the points that I've heard people talk about, as all of you know, we've got a relationship here with the State emergency folks. We are going to set up programs to provide whatever help we can to this community. I think the most immediate public need, obviously, is for some place for the children to go to school. And we've talked about how quickly we could get some of the portable classrooms in here in large numbers and with the best possible quality. And I assure you that we will—I will personally be involved in that, and so will Mr. Witt and Secretary Slater. We'll get on it, and we'll get the job done as quickly as it can physically be done.

We also want to make sure that both the community and individual families are clear about what the Federal Government can and cannot do and what kind of support is there. We don't want anybody to leave something on the table that we could contribute to rebuilding the lives of the families and the community.

And, again, I just want to encourage you. You probably know, right before I came here I was walking through my old neighborhood in Little Rock, the Quapaw Quarter, where the Governor's Mansion is and where I lived for 12 years. I saw a lot of people whom Hillary and Chelsea and I spent a lot of time with, with their homes down around their ears today, too. They'll have to decide how to go forward, and many of you will. But I just want to encourage you. I want to tell you that as awful as it is, I just thank God there weren't more people killed. And I hope we can all keep the right attitude, and I hope all the neighbors will keep helping their neighbors and, in the end, I think it will come out all right.

And, again, let me thank you, Mayor; thank you, Judge; and I thank all the other local leaders, and thank you for giving a chance to be here—giving us a chance to be with you today.

God bless you. Thank you very much.

I also wanted to say just one other thing. Just because I—there's one part of Arkansas I am not visiting today. In addition to Congressman Snyder, who has Pulaski and White County, Independence and St. Francis County, and I think one other county have been declared disasters. And the east Arkansas counties are in Representative Marion Berry's district, and Congressman Berry is here with us today, too. And so our thoughts are with the people east of here who are suffering as well. And some of those folks lost everything they have, and I just wanted to mention them and say our thoughts and our prayers and our support are with them, too.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:47 p.m. in the Beebe School District Building. In his remarks, he referred to Katherine (Missy) Kincaid, Special Assistant to the First Lady; Mayor Donald Ward of Beebe; Judge Bob Parish of White County; Kieth Williams, Beebe superintendent of schools; State Senator Mark Beebe and State Representative Randy Minton of Arkansas; and Doug Kennedy, chief, Beebe Fire Department.

Remarks on the Welfare to Work Initiative

January 25, 1999

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is a good way to start the day, isn't it? [*Laughter*] We're all going to feel better when we leave here.

Let me thank the previous speakers. First, I want to thank Robert Higgins and his entire organization for setting an example for corporations throughout America. And I thank his employees for coming here today and for being a vivid human illustration of how welfare reform can work at its best.

I thank my good friend of many years Governor Mel Carnahan, and Mrs. Carnahan, who is here with him. We made two of our major welfare reform announcements over the last several years in Missouri because no State has worked harder to do this right, in a both humane and effective way.

I want to thank Carlos—I was looking at him—I don't know how many—how many public speeches do you think Carlos has made in his life? [*Laughter*] Man, he stood up here, he had his head up, his shoulders back—I was thinking as I was watching him that after he does all that computer stuff and makes money for a few years, that we're always looking for a few good candidates in this business, and he looked awfully good. [*Laughter*]

I would like to thank Secretary Shalala, Secretary Herman, and Secretary Slater for their work on welfare reform. And there are two Members of the House of Representatives here today who represent very different districts, but who have a passionate interest in this whole subject: Representative Ben Cardin from Maryland and Representative Rubén Hinojosa from south Texas. And I thank them for being here and for what they've done for this cause.

And my good friend Jane Campbell, county commissioner from Cuyahoga County, Cleveland, Ohio. And I'd like to say a special word, if I might, before I get into my remarks about Eli Segal who started our Welfare to Work Partnership.

You know, it takes a special, almost a genius, to start something that didn't exist before. And a couple of years ago, when I announced in the State of the Union we were going to have this Welfare to Work Partnership, we had five companies. A couple of years later, we have 10,000 companies.

Yesterday, you may have seen in the press, I went home to Arkansas to look at some terrible tornado damage. At each place where I went, both these places, there was a team of our young AmeriCorps volunteers from all over America—and most of them had never been to Arkansas before. And Governor, one of the teams was from St. Louis, working on the tornado damage. These young Americans give a year, sometimes 2 years of their lives; they earn credit for college. In 4 years there have been over 100,000 AmeriCorps volunteers. It took the Peace Corps 20 years to get to 100,000 volunteers. Eli Segal also started AmeriCorps. So for two great contributions to the United States, we thank him for this remarkable, remarkable thing.

One of the reasons that I ran for President in 1992 was to change the welfare system as we then knew it, to move from a system that promoted independence and had no incentives for parents who are not custodial parents to be responsible, and basically gave people a check that was almost always inadequate, in the name of being humane, which assumed, more often than not, that they had no capacity to work and support their children.

All these things were done with the best of intentions. We either assumed people couldn't do the right thing, or we assumed that they wouldn't do the right thing. And so, well, we made the best of an imperfect world by at least cutting a check once a