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Remarks to the College Democrats of America

July 14, 1999

Thank you. I ought to quit while I'm ahead. [Laughter] Harold, you ought to be giving that speech for yourself some day. That was pretty great. I was definitely impressed. Thank you.

Thank you for your wonderful welcome. I want to thank all the College Democrat officers: your national chair, Reta Lewis, who used to be in the White House with me; Vice President Brendan Tully; Executive Director Jeff Schulman; National Field Director Lisa Kohnke; and all the people who helped to organize this, your largest meeting ever.

Let me say a special word of welcome or greetings on behalf of the Vice President. Eleven years ago he almost single-handedly brought the College Democrats of America back. And I'm glad you came back. We have needed you.

My administration has been, in large measure, about giving the young people of America a better America in the 21st century, an America where there is opportunity for every responsible citizen and where we are coming together as a community across all the lines that divide us.

When I ran for President in 1992, I was infuriated that I had seen election after election after election, and then Washington in between, use rhetoric to divide us and to create a majority based on not being "them." I didn't think it was good for America then; I don't think it's good for America today. I have done everything I could do to get all of us to see that what we have in common is much more important than what divides us.

I must say that the young people of America, who increasingly live more and more together with those who are at least superficially different from themselves, are going to have to lead America to that future. The work that you have done, the registration ef-

forts that you have done—in 1996, under the leadership of your former executive director, Susan Blad Seldin, CDA helped to register over a million young people—that is very, very important.

I want to say something serious tonight. This is—we've got a very festive atmosphere, and I know the fire marshal is concerned about how many people we've crammed in this room—[laughter]—but I want to say something really serious to you. I'm not running for anything anymore. I'm not on the ballot in 2000. I'm telling you this because I'm still concerned about tomorrow. Ideas make a difference in politics.

I was, earlier today, at the Democratic Leadership Council's meeting. Many of the ideas that we've been working on there for 14 years are now the focus of debate not only in the United States but in other countries around the world, where new parties—sort of like where the Democrats have been in the last 6½ years—have won elections in England, in France, in Germany, and Brazil and The Netherlands and many other countries, with the kind of debates that we have tried to provoke about how do you create opportunity for everyone; how do you really promote greater responsibility among citizens; how do you build a community in an increasingly diverse society; what are our responsibilities to the rest of the world? Those kinds of debates are going on all over the world today, based on ideas. Ideas have consequences.

I know that images have a lot to do, rhetoric has a lot to do with elections. But what I want you to understand is that we must stay the course that is the course of new ideas rooted in these basic values that have produced such good results for America. It is not an accident—I used to say, coin that old—quote that old country saying in the '96 election, when you find a turtle on a fencepost, the chances are it didn't get there by accident. [Laughter] Ideas have consequences.

All these things that your president just recited about the strength of the economy—and I might say, we now have almost 19 million new jobs—almost 19 million. And we have the lowest minority unemployment rates ever recorded since we started taking

statistics. And we have, as has been pointed out, cleaner air, cleaner water, safer food. We've also set aside more land—from the redwoods in California and the Mojave Desert there to the Florida Everglades—we've set aside or protected more land than any previous administration except those of the two Roosevelts. This administration has thought about tomorrow. Ninety percent of our 2-year-olds are immunized against serious childhood illnesses for the first time in history, because we're thinking about tomorrow.

Ideas matter. And in the last year and a half of this administration, in the last 6 months and the first year of the new millennium, we will have a debate about ideas which will not only shape the 2000 election, but decisions will be made or not made which will profoundly affect your future and the future of every young person in this country.

This week and in the weeks to come, we're going to have a huge debate centered around what we should do about the surplus. Now, most of you are so young that you can't realize that if anyone had had this discussion 10 years ago, that would have been an absurd discussion. [Laughter] In the 12 years before I became President, the national debt was quadrupled. The year I took office, the deficit was \$290 billion, projected to go to about \$400 billion this year. This is a high-class debate in that sense—what to do about the surplus. Don't stop thinking about tomorrow—that's what to do about the surplus. I believe we should use this moment to meet the great challenges of your generation, the great challenges of the 21st century.

What are they? Number one, the aging of America. That affects not just the baby boom generation—that's most of your parents—but you. If we reform and strengthen and secure Social Security and Medicare, it means not only that your parents will have a secure retirement; it means they won't have to depend upon you and the income you will need to raise your children when they're your age. This is a compact for all Americans. So yes, I believe we should use the bulk of the surplus to save Social Security and to save Medicare and to reform it.

I believe we should continue to invest in education, in the environment, in research and development, and to keep our military the world's strongest so that we can do what we did in Kosovo, to save lives against ethnic slaughter. I think that is important.

I believe we can do these things and still have a tax cut, a tax cut that will help people to save for their own retirement, to pay for child care, to pay for long-term care for their parents, that will help us to build modern schools, and that will help us to do something else—that will help to give Americans the same incentives to invest in the poorest parts of America they now have to invest in the poorest parts of the world. That's what I tried to do last week in traveling around the country.

And the nice thing about it is that if we do with the surplus what I propose, we can spend more money on education and the military and other things; we can have a tax cut that is substantial; but if we will save the bulk of it to extend the life and the security and the quality of Social Security and Medicare, we will also have this country out of debt for the first time since 1835, in 15 years.

Why should you care about that? Because in a global economy, where the financial markets move money across national borders at the speed of light, where interest rates are set by what's going on everywhere, if America, the world's wealthiest country is out of debt, it means lower interest rates; higher business investment; more jobs; higher incomes; lower costs for home mortgages, student loans, car payments, credit card payments; more money at lower cost for other countries that need the money badly to develop, to become our partners for trade and prosperity and for democracy and freedom. It is a better thing for the world. So I say to you, it matters.

Now, I had a good meeting Monday with the leaders of Congress in both parties, and we may have some agreement on at least saving the Social Security taxes for Social Security. But they may not do it in a way that actually lengthens the life of the Social Security Trust Fund. Nonetheless, it's a good start.

But unfortunately, the Republicans have now unveiled their tax plan. What they want

to do is to use almost all the non-Social Security surplus on a tax cut and to go to the people and say, "Our tax cut is bigger than theirs." And that sounds good. But what they don't say is if theirs passes, it means you can't really strengthen Social Security; it means no new money for Medicare, which will imperil it; it means big cuts in education, the environment, research and development and, yes, their defense budget cannot be funded. That's what it means. And it means, in the second decade of the tax cut, we'll actually start having deficits again, at the very time when the baby boomers retire and we ought to be paying down the debt until we don't have one any more.

Now, these are big ideas. And young people in college should care about them because it will affect your life much more than mine. This is about tomorrow. So if somebody asks you tomorrow, "Why did you go to the College Democrats convention?" don't say it was because the President gave a good speech. [Laughter] Say, "It's because I believe that our ideas are good for America, good for all Americans; and I have evidence." We have 6½ years of evidence—not just a strong economy but the lowest crime rate in 26 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, declining social problems.

I believe it matters. And I believe we ought to use this moment of promise with this surplus to save Social Security, save and modernize Medicare, give the seniors the prescription drugs benefits and more preventive screenings so they stay healthy in the first place, invest in education, invest in the environment, bring opportunities to the poorest parts of America, and still pay for a tax cut we can afford while meeting our responsibilities to tomorrow.

If they ask you why you're a Democrat, say because you think we ought not to let criminals buy guns just because they go to gun shows. If they ask you why you're a Democrat, if they ask you why you belong to this party and this organization, tell them it's because you're for a Patients' Bill of Rights that lets doctors, not accountants, decide the medical needs of people.

If they ask you why you came to this convention, tell them you're for hate crimes legislation that protects people without regard

to whether they're gay or straight, black or white or Hispanic or Asian. And you tell them, tell them it's because you kind of like the idea of giving Federal money to help our schools in a way that hires 100,000 teachers, modernizes schools, ends social promotion, but gives kids a chance to go to summer school and after-school programs to guarantee all of our children learn.

And you have to keep looking for new ideas. On Monday the Vice President talked about his crime plans, and he said that he thought we ought to have, yes, stiffer punishment where it was merited, but more prevention where it would work, and that he thought we ought not to quit now in trying to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. He said we license people to drive cars, and they have photo licenses. If you don't want to close the gun show loophole because you think it's too burdensome, we could do it if everybody had a photo ID to go with their handgun license and they had to show that they knew how to use a gun.

If they ask you why you're a Democrat, tell them because you like the fact that we have cleaner air, cleaner water, safer food; you don't like all these proposed legislative riders from the other party to weaken the quality of the environment, and you like the Vice President's livability agenda. Why shouldn't we set aside more green space in all of our cities? Why shouldn't city kids be able to enjoy nature, just like people like me that grew up in rural areas?

Now, I'll tell you why it's important. Because for every one of you here cheering, there are 10,000 others that aren't here—maybe more. In 1998 only one out of five young people between the ages of 18 and 24 voted. I realize sometimes it's a hassle. You register where you're in school or where you live. And you have to study for an exam or you're just preoccupied with something that seems much more important in the immediate future. But I'm telling you, ideas matter.

Young people understood when they stood with me and Al Gore in 1992 that we had to turn this country around, and their future was at stake. It is no less at stake now just because things are going well. And the longer you live, the more you come to appreciate—

or endure when they're not so good—the rhythms of life, the ups and downs, the twists and turns in the road, the unpredictability; and the more you come to understand how precious moments like this are, when things seem to be going well, and how profoundly important it is not to just reach out and grab the biggest apple on the tree that looks so good but to keep thinking about tomorrow.

So what we do with the surplus will affect how you raise your children, as well as how your parents fare in retirement. It will affect the quality of the air your children breathe. It will affect the texture of the society in which you live and whether we are really coming together in a way that celebrates our diversity and makes life more interesting, but still binds us tighter and tighter together as a national family. It will affect all of that.

So when you leave here, make yourself a promise. This summer when you go home to your friends, next year when you go back to school, talk to people about the ideas. Oh yes, the people are important, and I'm glad I had the chance to serve at this time, but the ideas and the values behind them are far more important. And you, you can carry them into the 21st century and guarantee that America's best days are in your future.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:38 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Washington Court Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Harold D. Powell, national president, College Democrats of America.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Members of S.A.F.E. Colorado and an Exchange With Reporters

July 15, 1999

The President. Good afternoon. I want to welcome the groups of young people from Colorado S.A.F.E. here to the White House, as well as those who brought them here from Colorado, the co-leaders, David Winkler and Ben Gelt. David will speak in a moment. And I want to say again how grateful I am that these young people have come. Secretary Summers and Attorney General Reno and I have just had a remarkable session.

It has now been 3 months since the horrible day in Littleton, since the crack of gunfire and the cries and the funerals. And now

as the shock and grief subside, as the cameras and satellite trucks move on to different events, it might be easy to forget and to have the Nation weaken its resolve to keep our children safe from gun violence. But America must not forget that event or those which occurred in schools last year or the fact that 13 of our children die every single day from gun violence.

These young people represent millions of Americans who have come together at the grassroots to take action. They have come to Washington to hold our feet to the fire and to make their voices heard. And I thank them for coming.

I have just had, as I said, a fascinating question-and-answer session with these young people. They have asked good questions, and they have given good suggestions. And they are plainly impatient with the lack of action on the important legislation before Congress.

This afternoon they will carry that same message to Capitol Hill. I hope the Congress will listen very, very carefully to them. For the past 3 months, the gun lobby has been calling the shots on Capitol Hill; now it's time for Congress to listen to the lobbyists who truly matter—our children, the people who will be most affected by what is or is not done by the Congress.

This is not a partisan issue out there in America, indeed, not a partisan issue anywhere but Washington. Americans of all ages, all backgrounds, all political philosophies support strong legislation to close dangerous loopholes in our gun laws. The vast majority of Americans believe passionately that no criminal who has failed a Brady background check and been refused a gun by an honest dealer should be able to turn around and buy a gun at a gun show. Florida, hardly one of our most liberal States, voted 72 percent in a referendum last November to do just that.

We believe that every handgun should be made childproof with a safety lock. We know that high-capacity ammunition gun clips are designed for war, not hunting, and they have no place in the American market. We believe any juvenile convicted of a violent crime should be banned, as an adult would, from owning a handgun.