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Remarks at an Access Now for Gay and Lesbian Equality Dinner in Beverly Hills, California

October 2, 1999

Thank you. Let me say, first of all, I thank you for that. I'm profoundly moved. And I was thinking when I was watching David Mixner make those remarks that 30 years ago, when I let him sleep on my floor—[*laughter*]—when we were much younger men in England, and I didn't charge him a nickel for it—[*laughter*]—I never dreamed that either of us would be in this place tonight doing these things. [*Laughter*]

David's life has taken a lot of twists and turns since then. He's had his ups and his downs like all the rest of us. But I can tell you something, when I met him when he was young, I thought I had never met a person whose heart burned with the fire of social justice so strongly. He has never forgotten the roots of his childhood. He has never forgotten not only the pain that he and other gay and lesbian Americans have endured; he also cares for other people who are dispossessed and downtrodden and underrepresented and often forgotten.

And tonight I was watching him, and he introduced his wonderful sister—who has also been a friend of mine for nearly 30 years now—and I was thinking how fortunate we are in this country at this time, with all the things we've had to do, to have had his energy, his heart, his devotion, his passion. It was 8 years ago that he and Scott Hitt and a few other ANGLE members met with me this week 8 years ago, here. Then in May of '92 we had a big event out here, and some of you were there. And I told you that I had a vision of America, and you were part of it, that we were all part of the same community.

Well, tonight I thank you for helping to make that happen. I thank my good friend Governor Gray Davis for the leadership he has given in California. I thank our leader in the House of Representatives, who—when David made that crack about the "Canterbury Tales" and how we're known by our traveling companions—[*laughter*]—it kind of made me feel sorry for Dick Gephardt. [*Laughter*] You talk about a guy that gets up and goes to work every day under adverse conditions and continues to do the right thing, he does.

But I know that Representatives Baldwin and Becerra and Kennedy and Sherman and Waxman are here, and they're his good fellow travelers. We just may need five more in the company to make it a much better trip. [*Applause*] Thank you.

I want to thank Bill Melamed, Skip Paul, Gwen Baba, Roberta Bennett for putting this together. I want to thank the members of our administration who came: Sean Maloney, Karen Tramontano, Minyon Moore, Fred Hochberg, Richard Socarides, Marsha Scott. And I want to thank Scott Hitt, especially, who's been the Chair of the AIDS council. He's having his last meeting as Chair on Monday, and he's been magnificent, and we ought to give him a big hand. [*Applause*]

I'd also like to thank the Gay Men's Chorus. I was back there feverishly trying to write down all those lines. [*Laughter*] I want to call Hillary and give her those best lines tonight. You know, I'm trying to remember them all. It was unbelievable. If someone would furnish me with the lyrics of that song, I would be eternally grateful. [*Laughter*]

You know, I'd like to put what brought us all here tonight just for a minute—I know a lot of other people are going to speak and have a lot of great things to say, but I would like to put this in, just for a moment, in the context of history and the larger context of our future, and how the fight for equal rights and equal opportunity and full participation to build one America fits in with all the other things we should be doing as a country, and how what we are at home will determine what we can do around the world in the new millennium.

When I ran for President in 1992, most Americans felt things were pretty dismal in this country. The economy was in bad shape; the society was divided; all the social indicators—crime, welfare, and other things—were going in the wrong direction. Politics was, as we all remember from the convention they had back then on the other side, a matter of division, you know, just drive a wedge in society and make sure your wedge is bigger than their wedge; you get more votes, you

win; and if everybody is all torn up and upset, who cares, you're in power.

And over and over and over again, things in Washington were sort of repeating themselves like a broken record. And I felt that we could do better with a unifying vision. That's why I set out a vision of America, and you were part of it. But I also had a vision that we could build an economy that was good for working people and employers. I believed we could build a country where we could grow the economy and make the environment better, not worse.

I have always believed that the real purpose of life and growth is to try and figure out how to develop these unifying visions and to move closer to them and to break down all these funny walls we have to put up in our minds to organize life into little boxes so we can figure out how to get from here to there.

And, you know, in '92, the American people just sort of took a chance on me and Al Gore. I mean, it was an argument we made and there was no evidence for it because the other crowd had been in so long. We just made an argument. And it was not an easy race. A month after we had that meeting out here in May of '92, I won the California primary. And the headline the next day was that the exit poll showed that all the people that voted for me really wanted Ross Perot to be President. [*Laughter*] And I was in third place.

And then he and President Bush got in a fight about who messed up whose daughter's wedding or something. [*Laughter*] You remember that? I mean, it was an amazing—and I thought to myself, people don't have jobs; they're being foreclosed on; why are you guys fighting about this? The wedding went off without a hitch. What is this about? [*Laughter*] And somehow the American people decided to give me a chance, decided to give Al and Hillary and Tipper and all the people that came in the administration a chance.

I guess what I'd like to say tonight, first of all—not with arrogance, but with humility—is that we now know that there is evidence that we're right and that pulling things together and moving forward actually works. We have the lowest unemployment in 29 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the lowest crime rates in 26 years, the first back-to-back budget surpluses in 42 years, the highest homeownership in history, the longest peacetime expansion in history.

And you have to—15 million Americans took leave under the family leave law. And when it was vetoed in the previous administration, they said, "Oh, well, we've got to veto this bill because if we let people take time off from work when their babies are born or their parents are sick, why, it will ruin the small business economy." And every year, we've set a new record for new small businesses in America.

Ninety percent of our kids are immunized against serious diseases for the first time, our young children. We're giving 5 million more of them health insurance. A hundred thousand young people served in AmericCorps. I could just go on and on. And along the way, we gave America the most diverse, truly representative government by far in the history of America. That included you and everybody else.

What I want to say to you is, this is not an argument anymore. [*Laughter*] We have evidence. And so you should be of good cheer. And when you look ahead to these elections in 2000, you should be absolutely sure that anybody who is not with you knows they're doing it in the face of the evidence.

And because—what really bothers me about what's going on in Washington now, it's like there are all these people out there making decisions in the congressional majority as if the last 6½ years just didn't happen. And that bothers me. So I say to you, when they say, looking at the Vice President and our party, "Well, America needs a change," I agree with that. America always needs a change. We've got a lot more to do on your agenda. America needs a change? The question is not whether we'll change, but how are we going to change? How are we going to change?

You mark my words, the world is changing so fast in how we work and live and relate to each other and folks around the globe, that the world will change. The question is, how? And are we going to use this unprecedented moment, the chance of a lifetime to say, okay,

what are our big challenges out there, and seize them? Or are we going to do what got us into so much trouble in the first place? Are we going to pretend that the last 6½ years just didn't happen? That's very important.

And I want to try to put the things that you're thinking about now into that context. What are the really big challenges facing America that affect you, too? One, the aging of America—I hate it because I'm doing it. [*Laughter*] But I'm the oldest of the baby boomers. The number of people over 65 will double in the next 30 years; there will be two people working for every one person retired and drawing Social Security.

Now, we have never been in a position, until now, in my lifetime, to deal with that challenge. But we now have the ability to run the life of Social Security out 50 years, to add more than a decade to the life of Medicare, to cover prescription drugs for elderly people—three-quarters of them cannot afford quality prescription drugs today—and to do it in a way that all of you who are younger than that should rejoice about. Because I can tell you those of us in the baby boom generation are plagued by the notion that our retirement will be so expensive for our country that it will burden our children and our ability to give our grandchildren the childhoods they deserve. But we can fix it now. So I gave them a plan to do it. So far, they say no.

Another thing that really bothers me—we've got the largest and most diverse group of children in our school in history. We never had over 53 million children in schools, and they come from more different backgrounds than ever before. And that will be a godsend to 21st century America if, but only if, they all have a world-class education. And I think they're entitled to it.

So I gave Congress a plan to build and modernize 6,000 schools and hire 100,000 teachers for smaller classes; make sure all the kids had computers in their classrooms; make sure we stopped social promotion, but had after-school programs for the kids who needed it; and more of these charter schools that California has led the way in bringing to our children. So far, they said no.

Funny thing, maybe Mr. Gephardt will talk about this later, but one of the most interesting things is last year, right before the election in '98, they got religion on this education program. [*Laughter*] And they supported this big downpayment on our plan for 100,000 teachers, and we funded 30,000 of those teachers. And you had those real liberals, like Mr. Armey—[*laughter*]—going home—this is serious business, ask Dick. You had these real liberals going out and saying, "Man, this is a great thing we've done. We've made a big downpayment on 100,000 teachers; we're going to put 30,000 teachers out there, and this is a great Republican program because there is no bureaucracy in it. We just give it to the schools, and they hire the teachers." They thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread before the election.

They have just voted not only to refuse to fund any more of those but to no longer earmark the money for the 30,000. So there's a big difference here.

I'm worried about the families of our country. I'm worried about all these working people. How are they going to have the child care they need? How are they going to have the health care they need? Why don't we pass the Patients' Bill of Rights that protects working people? There's a difference between the two parties on that, and I think it's important.

We're finally going to get a chance—we've been working for 2 years—finally going to get a chance to vote on the Patients' Bill of Rights in the House next week. I'm very worried about this fabulous economy, because we've left some people behind. Yes, we've got the lowest poverty rate in 20 years, but there are still people in places that have not felt this recovery. If you come from—a lot of you come from other places, the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, the Indian reservations, many of the inner cities. So I want to do some things that I think will change all that. I want to, first of all, give Americans with money the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America we give them to invest in poor areas around the world. I think that's important.

I hope in the near future we'll be able to make access to the Internet as universal as

telephone access is. It will have a huge impact on the economy. Last night I was in northern California, and I was with some people who work with eBay. A lot of you probably buy things on eBay. [*Laughter*] It seems like everybody does now. And I learned that over and above the employees of that company, there are now over 20,000 people, including a lot of people that used to be on welfare, who actually make a living buying and selling things, trading on eBay, over 20,000 people.

Well, I'm telling you, that means nothing at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where the unemployment rate is 73 percent. Now, we can do better. And we ought not to quit until every American has the chance to participate in our prosperity if he or she is willing to work. And I won't rest until that happens.

I want you to keep a checklist in your mind, and when I get to the end, ask yourself what's all this about, what's it got to do with you as Americans. This is part of being part of America. I think we need to do more, not less, for the environment. The Vice President has this livability agenda to deal with, using all kinds of computer technology to alleviate traffic congestion, to buy more green space in urban areas. We're trying to lead the world toward recognizing that this global warming is real, but that you do not have to end your economic growth, because now there are technologies available to allow us to grow the economy as we reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. There are people in the other party who believe that this is some sort of subversive plot to wreck America's economic future.

Not very long ago, I came out here and went to San Bernardino, to the Inland Empire, and we announced a housing development for low income working people in which the developers pledged, by the use of energy conservation technologies, to cut the utility bills of these low income working people by 40 percent. And I just got a report that the average reduction is 60 percent. That's good for the economy. That's not bad for the economy, and it's good for the environment.

Let me just mention a couple of other things. I am very concerned that America, even though we've got the lowest crime rate in 26 years, is still a pretty dangerous country compared to other countries. We should be the safest big country in the world. This is a free and prosperous place. We welcome all kinds of people. It is not rational. Why aren't we the safest country in the world? Because we haven't taken reasonable steps, not enough of them, to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children. And because, frankly, even though we've put 100,000 more police on the street in community policing, we've still got neighborhoods that don't have enough coverage.

So I gave Congress a plan to deal with both those things: put 50,000 more police officers out there to prevent crime in the highest crime areas of the country and to deal with guns and so forth. They say no. Our crowd says yes; their crowd says no. Big difference.

What about our role in the world? I've tried, from Bosnia to Kosovo to the Middle East to Northern Ireland, to stand up for the idea that people ought not to be murdered or moved wholesale because of their race or their religion. We have worked to support other countries and to build the capacity in Africa to prevent future Rwandas, because people ought not to be murdered because of what tribe they're in. And you can define tribe however you want. [*Laughter*]

We're about to start a great debate on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, to end nuclear testing, something that Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy wanted us to do years ago. We're finally going to have a chance to do it. In so many of these areas, there are partisan differences which surprise me. And let me come back to you.

Why are we for the hate crimes legislation? Why are we for "ENDA"? Because if we can't build one America, it's going to be very hard to have a unifying force that will deal with every other one of these issues. And that's what I want you to think about. Don't you think that it's interesting that here we are on the verge of this new millennium with all these absolutely breathtaking technological breakthroughs that people who are technologically challenged, like me, can hardly keep up with? [*Laughter*]

I mean, isn't it amazing to you that we have—modernity is bursting out all over in

the form of high technology. And yet, the world's largest problem, and America's largest problem, that you can see when those kids got shot at that Jewish school and that Filipino postal worker was murdered here; that you could see when that guy who said he belonged to a church that didn't believe in God but did believe in white supremacy killed all those people of color and wounded others in Illinois and Indiana; that you could see when Matthew Shepard was murdered and James Byrd was torn apart; and that you can see in the tribal slaughters of Rwanda, and the persecution of the Kosovar Albanians or the Bosnian Muslims or the fights in Northern Ireland or the continued agonies of the Middle East—here we are on the verge of this great modern world, where we can make movies with virtual reality now, and virtual reality seems sometimes more real than what is real. And the biggest problem we've got is the primitive, age-old fear and hatred and dehumanization of the other people who aren't like us.

And so I say—I'm nearly done; I just want to say this—[*laughter*]—I'm going to do everything I can, every day that I have, to remind people of that, that we have to be one America. We can have honest differences over issues, but we can't have honest differences about whether we share a common humanity. And we cannot be under the illusion that either material prosperity or technological breakthroughs alone can purge the darkness in our hearts.

I believe that America's best days are still out there. I believe with all my heart that we can find a way to marry prosperity and peace and humanity. But we must have a unifying vision. I want to say, again, I am grateful to people who have worked in my administration who have made me more alive to the concerns of your community, not only those who themselves are gay and lesbian, but others, beginning with my Vice President, who has been terrific on all of that in ways you will never know.

But people are still scared of people who aren't like them. And other people are scared of themselves, and they're afraid they won't count unless they've got somebody to look down on. And if you have to find somebody to look down on, it must be somebody that is different from you. Because if you look down on somebody who is just like you, then you're looking down on yourself. [*Laughter*] And so we, in our little minds, come up with all these boxes. But all of life is a struggle to find a more and more and more and more unifying vision that, at least for me, makes us both more human and more in tune with our maker.

I wish I could have done better. But we've done pretty well. And we're a long way from where we were. But I want you to think about this a little bit every day between now and next year, 13 months until the millennial election to define what America will be like; whether we will continue to embrace these big challenges and change in a positive way, building on what we now have evidence of; whether we will continue to look for those unifying visions that allow us all to join hands and go forward together.

And I want you to remember the enthusiasm with which you greeted me tonight. And I want you to remember that it's easy to shout in the moment. But the world is turned by those who day in and day out, with courage and determination and heart and hope, stay the course. We need you. America needs you. I still believe in the future of America, and you are a part of it.

Thank you, and God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:10 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Beverly Hills Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to ANGLE member David Mixner, who introduced the President, and his sister, Patricia Mixner Annison; H. Scott Hitt, Chairman, President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS; Gov. Gray Davis of California; and ANGLE members and dinner cochairs Bill Melamed, Skip Paul, Gwen Baba, and Roberta Bennett. The President also referred to ENDA, the proposed "Employment Non-Discrimination Act."

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Reception and Dinner in Brentwood Park, California

October 2, 1999

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, I've already been to the ANGLE dinner tonight. We had a wonderful time. I've looked forward to coming to Rob and