

Week Ending Friday, December 17, 1999

**Remarks to the Community in West  
Memphis, Arkansas**

*December 10, 1999*

Thank you. Was she great or what? Let's give her another hand. [Applause] She was unbelievable. That's great.

Well, to Dr. Glen Fenter and your board chairman, my longtime friend Alex Coulter; and to Sandy and all the students from the college and all the faculty members, thank you. Thank you for being exhibit A for the new economy in eastern Arkansas.

Mayor Johnson, Judge Williams, Representative Jones, Representative Steele, I think I speak for all of us when I say we are delighted to be here. I want to thank Lieutenant Governor Rockefeller and the other people from State government who came over to be with us. I thank Secretary Riley for coming down with us; and my longtime friend Carl Whillock, who I'll say a little more about in a minute; and Rodney Slater, who I'll say a little more about in a minute.

I also would like to thank this White House staff who have heard me say now 5,000 times, we have to do more for the Delta. My Deputy Chief of Staff, Maria Echaveste; Lynn Cutler; Lisa Kountoupes—it is their job to monitor everything the Federal Government does that might, in their wildest imagination, have a positive effect on Arkansas and the other States in the Delta. And I thank them.

But I want to say a special word of thanks to Senator Blanche Lambert Lincoln and to Marion Berry, who, long before he was a Congressman, was the farmers' advocate in our administration in Washington, and long before he did that, he used to host all of us at the Gillette coon suppers. [Laughter] That's my ultimate trump card with every Congressman or Senator from every other State in America who tells me they know more about rural America than I do. I say, "Well, how many coon suppers have you

been to?" [Laughter] I haven't lost an argument in 7 years up there. [Laughter]

You have absolutely no idea the amount of time and effort and the passion that these two people have put in to trying to help eastern Arkansas and the Delta. You cannot imagine. They have been magnificent. I deal with Members of Congress from all across America. I deal with people who are really good at what they do. There is nobody—nobody—who has done a better job standing up for the people they represent than Blanche Lambert Lincoln and Marion Berry.

I may have a little trouble getting through this speech today. First, I'm a little tired. I talked to Hillary last—about 1 o'clock last night, and we talked three times between 11 and 1. And she was kind of jealous that I was coming down here. And I want you to know she's doing great, and I'm proud of her for what she's doing, and my daughter is doing great.

I woke up early this morning and started thinking about what I wanted to say. It's a little harder now. I look out in this crowd, and I know half of you by your first names. There's old Bobby Glover sitting there, gave me the first contribution I got when I ran for attorney general in 1976. You could have stopped this whole thing if you hadn't done that. [Laughter] Mary Louise Poindexter had me to the first revival of the Elaine Christmas parade. I've been colder in Elaine than any public official in the history of America. [Laughter] We know east Arkansas—that's not the royal "we," that's all of our crowd here. And we owe eastern Arkansas. Rodney's roots are here. He did such a good job for you as a highway commissioner and at ASU, and he's been a superb Secretary of Transportation. Carl Whillock was the president of ASU, head of the co-ops. When Marion went home, he came to Washington; he thought somebody ought to stick up for the ordinary farmers in the Department of Agriculture. I see Kevin Smith out there. I've

had so many people here. You can't imagine how many people from Arkansas we've got working in Washington. It's sort of a subterranean plot. That's how we stayed in all these years; we had people that showed up and remembered who they were working for.

I was thinking about the first time I came to Crittenden County to John Gammon's wild game dinner when they were still meeting in that—that's before the dinner moved uptown—when they were still meeting in a place that had a tin roof. And the first night, a woman got up, a young woman got up to sing "If I Can Help Somebody," and the darndest rain came up you ever saw. And it was raining on that tin roof and it sounded like a musical background, and she was just beautiful, singing.

Ness Sechrest reminded me that the first time I saw him, I had to traipse all the way out to Horseshoe Lake and fish with him and do other sundry things that he thought were necessary to decide whether he should support me or not. [*Laughter*] He's been making the same mistake for 24 years now.

And I came here today to make another installment on the work we've been doing together for two decades. I'm very proud that I signed the bill when I was in my very first term as Governor to create the vo-tech school here. And then in 1991 I signed the bill that enabled you to convert it to a community college. And since I have been President, the enrollment at this college—the stories like Sandy's—the enrollment has increased by tenfold of accredited students—tenfold. And that's something you can be really proud of, and it will make a difference.

I was thinking when I was coming over here today, all the time I spent in the eighties when the whole State, the whole country, this part of the country was in trouble economically, trying to get plants to come in here and save the ones that are here. When I got reelected Governor in '82, I remember going up to—I think it was Poinsett County, and they closed the Singer plant for the last time. I stood there and shook hands with 600 people when they walked off the job for the last time. That was right before I got inaugurated Governor the second time. I had this emblazoned memory of all these people leaving their jobs for the last time.

I remember going all the way to Japan to try to get the Sanyo people not to close the plant in Forest City, and then working with all the folks in Brinkley and other places to help start this Wal-Mart "buy American" campaign, to get them to buy the TV's from Sanyo and shirts from Brinkley and first one thing, then another.

I have a vivid memory of what you have been through and the struggles you had and the struggles you continue to have. And we're here to try to fulfill our duty, not only to you but to people like you throughout the country. I'm very grateful that I've had the chance to serve these last 7 years. I'm grateful that we're ending the 20th century on a high note.

In February we will have the longest economic expansion in the history of the country—already the longest peacetime expansion. In February it will be longer than the one we had in World War II, when we had to fully mobilize.

Since 1993, we've got over 20 million new jobs. We've got the lowest unemployment rate and welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the lowest African-American unemployment and poverty rates ever recorded since we kept separate figures for about three decades now. We have the lowest unemployment rate for women in 40 years and the lowest poverty rate for single-parent households in 46 years in America. And I'm proud of that. But you couldn't prove it by some places in this country, because there are still people in places that have been totally left out of this remarkable upswing, and that's what we're here to say. All of you know that. Maybe they're too rural. Maybe they're too undereducated. Maybe they're too this, that, or the other thing. Maybe their power is too expensive or the transportation is too distant.

I've been across America now, doing what I used to come over here and do, county by county. I've been in the hills and hollows of Appalachia. I've been in upstate New York which, interestingly enough, would be 49th in job growth in this country of all the 50 States if it were a separate State. I've been in rural Maine, where it's a long way from everything. The State's 90 percent

timberland. I've been on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the home of the Lakota Sioux, the tribe of Crazy Horse, where the unemployment rate is 73 percent. So you can go to bed tonight thanking God for small favors. I have seen these inner-city neighborhoods where every other store is still boarded up.

And what I want to say to you is, if we, with this economy, in the absence of foreign threat or domestic crisis, can't bring free enterprise and opportunity to the people and places who have been left behind now, when will we ever get around to doing it?

We are determined to try to convince everybody in America that places like the Delta are the new markets for the 21st century. We sit around in Washington all the time, and Mr. Greenspan sits over at the Federal Reserve all the time, and we have the same debate now. We say, we've already got the—in February we're going to have the longest economic expansion in history, and we didn't even have a war. How did it happen? Can we keep it going? How can we keep it going? How can we keep it going without inflation, because if we have inflation, then, to protect everybody else, they'll have to raise interest rates a lot, and that will kill the recovery.

And I'll tell you one way to keep it going is to get money invested and jobs created and consumers created in the places that have been left behind. That's an inflation-free way to continue to grow the economy. So it is in the interest of every single American—in places like Nebraska where the unemployment rate is 2.4 percent statewide—it's in their interest for us to do what is necessary to bring opportunity to the people in places who have been left behind. And if we don't do it now, we'll never get around to doing it.

So I want to look at this. Now, let's look at Crittenden County. In Crittenden County, unemployment has dropped from over 7 percent in '93 to 5 percent today, but it's much higher in the rest of eastern Arkansas than the Nation as a whole. Wages are up in the Delta, but wages are still way below the national average. Infant mortality rates are better than they were, but they're still much, much higher than the national average.

Now, I want to thank all of you for stepping up to the challenge of trying to change all that. Before I came over here, I was over at the community college meeting with Dr. Fenter and a group of CEO's from some of America's largest transportation companies. They're working together to design a curriculum and to build a facility to train young people for good jobs in the transportation industry.

Now, these jobs pay good money, and there is a shortage today, I learned at our meeting, of 80,000 jobs for entry-level truck drivers and other transportation jobs that would pay an average of \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year—entry-level jobs.

So what we want to do is train everybody in the Delta who wants one of these jobs here so that they can continue to live in the Delta. You have to travel 3 or 4 or 5 days a week, but you don't have to move away from here to get a job. I mean, you all know you can move away from here and get a job, but you don't want to leave.

So this is the kind of thing that we should be doing. This is one of the most important transportation hubs in the country, and education and training is the key to providing these opportunities.

In August I was here in Helena, and we had kind of a listening session, and in September Secretary Slater had another meeting like that here in West Memphis. In October we invited a delegation from here to meet with senior officials in the White House, and today we want to respond to that.

First of all, to try to address the unacceptably high rates of poverty that still plague the region, I intend to propose in next year's budget more than \$110 million to create and fund a new Delta regional authority, as recommended by Senator Lincoln and Representative Berry. This will fund their legislation. It will provide funds for economic development and assistance from Federal agencies to help improve the quality of life. It already has a number of bipartisan cosponsors from throughout the Delta, and I want to work with the Congress, and particularly with all the Members from this region, to ensure that we get quick enactment of this legislation. This should not be a partisan issue. This is about economics.

Second, we're going to help rural communities again access the myriad of Federal programs that already exist. Today I am signing a memorandum directing 14 Federal agencies to provide comprehensive technical assistance to the region in a pilot program we're calling the circuit rider project. You know, preachers and judges used to ride circuits and go from town to town. That's what the Agricultural Extension Service did for decades, seeing people one-on-one.

It is almost impossible for a little town to be able to afford—to find out what kinds of grants they could be eligible for in every conceivable Federal agency, much less how to apply for them and get them. So we want to organize that effort and bring them to you.

I'd like to thank Wilbur Peer and the others at the Agriculture Department who have been involved in our rural economic development issues. I want to thank all the departments for agreeing to do this. We're going to get out there, be aggressive, and try to bring the benefits of the Federal Government that's already being paid for to the people who are paying but not getting, and the circuit rider project will work, I think.

Third, we're announcing the creation of a \$16 million fund to provide resources to develop and improve rural health infrastructure in the seven counties served by the Arkansas Health Education Center, including Crittenden County—funds used to make loans to hospitals, clinics, and health providers to help close the health care gaps that are also a problem here and a problem in attracting new investment.

Fourth, we're announcing an award of \$1.2 million from the Economic Development Administration to the Blytheville-Gosnell Regional Airport Authority to create a 35,000 square foot mail sort facility out of one of the former hangars at Eaker Air Force Base. This will help create more than 350 new jobs. It will create more than 350 new jobs and protect some that are already there.

Finally, we're expanding trade opportunities in the region by opening a Commerce Department rural export office at Mid-South Community College to help east Arkansas businesses take advantage of export opportunities through E-commerce. This is no idle thing. I was out in Los Angeles the other

day, and I went to a training facility where a young man was in a program buying and selling things in South America, in Russia, and you wouldn't believe where else. In this poor inner-city neighborhood, he was making a living. He established a business identifying people in other countries that needed to buy things and identifying people in third countries who had them, and putting them together.

We can sell a lot of the things produced in east Arkansas all over the world if we have the right kind of networks. And one of the things that—we just had last week a conference at the White House, bringing in big executives in the communications business all over America to try to figure out how to close the so-called digital divide, because if you look at the places where not only computer usage but Internet access is roughly as dense as telephone access, they're growing faster.

And one of the things that I am determined to do is to finish the job of getting all of our schools and libraries and hospitals connected to the Internet so that all of our kids will have access to that educational information. But we need to make that available for adults, too, in commercial centers so that no part of the country is denied these opportunities.

I'll bet you there are people here—and I'll just give you one example—I'll bet there are people in this audience who have bought something off the web from eBay. Have you ever used eBay? I see some of you nodding. I'll tell you an interesting thing. I was out with the eBay people in California a couple of weeks ago, and they told me there are now 20,000 Americans, including many former welfare recipients, who are making a living on eBay. They don't work for eBay; they make a living buying and selling on eBay because it's basically America's trading mart now on the Internet.

It is very, very important that we bring the benefits of E-commerce to the poorest parts of America and to teach people how to use it. It's simple. It's getting increasingly user friendly. It's about gotten to where even I can figure it out. *[Laughter]* And I think it is profoundly important.

Finally, I want to ask you one thing that I want you to do for us, for me and for Senator Lincoln and for Congressman Berry. I'm trying to pass a couple of simple bills in Washington. I got two of them actually passed to provide some funds for my so-called new market initiative. But what I'm trying to do is to get money, tax credits, and tax incentives basically so that I can say to anybody in America, we think you should have the same financial incentives to invest in the poor areas of America that you now have to invest in the poor areas of Latin America or Africa or Asia or any other part of the world.

Now, I hope and pray I'll be able to pass that this year. We have more bipartisan support for this endeavor than we've ever had before.

I went to Chicago the other night with the Speaker of the House. And we met with the two local Members of Congress who were there. We had a great joint meeting. And there is a chance we can just totally put this beyond politics. But if you think about it, sure there are some extra risks in going to an extremely rural area where the average education level may not be as high as it is in some other places, but it's not as great as the risk of going thousands of miles from home.

I'm not against asking Americans to help the people of Africa and Latin America and Asia. I'm all for that. We just passed through the Congress a bill forgiving the debt of some of the poorest countries in the world that can't pay it back anyway, and all we're doing is keeping them mired in poverty. We can't educate their kids or make them vaccinate them or do anything else, because they spend all their money paying interest on the debt, and they never make any headway. I'm all for that.

But I think we have areas in the country, as prosperous as we are now, and we still have areas as poor as some of our areas are. It is wrong not to give the same incentives to invest there, whether it is the Delta or Appalachia or the Indian reservations. So I want you to help me do that.

I want you to help make sure every Member of this congressional delegation votes for that legislation. I want you to help make sure

anybody you can reach in Tennessee or Mississippi votes for that legislation, and I want you to tell people that the dignity of the job and of a thriving community has nothing to do with party politics, and every American ought to be entitled to it. And if we can't do it now, we will never get around to it, because we are more prosperous now than we have ever been.

We'll keep working at it every day to the last hour of the last day of our term. When I come home and set up my library and public policy center, I'll keep working at it some more. I'll always be doing this. I'll always be indebted to the Delta.

When I was a young college student and I used to drive back home from Washington, I used to take off a day every Christmas vacation and just drive to the Delta and ride around. I never knew I would be Governor, much less President, and I was just fascinated with it. But I always promised myself, if I could do anything about it, I would.

I never will forget the first time I ran for Governor, and I discovered how many communities over here had no water and sewer. And we tried to do something about it. I don't even know if I can tell this story. The most emotional moment I ever had in all the years I was in government in Arkansas occurred when I was running for reelection as Governor in 1982. And there was a big meeting in a barbecue joint in Forest City of all the black leaders in the Delta. And they were trying to decide whether they were going to be for me or not. I had just gotten beat 2 years before, when I had the distinction of becoming the youngest former Governor in American history, with very limited career prospects. *[Laughter]* And no one in Arkansas had ever been Governor and then defeated and then reelected again. It had never happened before.

So they were having this meeting, and an articulate young lawyer, whom I still know well, got up and said—I was there, and one of my opponents had been there, and he had left—so this young lawyer got up and said, “You know, Governor Clinton was a good Governor, but we can't be for him; he's a loser. And we've got to win; we can't afford to lose.” And he had a point. *[Laughter]* I

mean, I had lost, and no one had ever been elected, defeated, and reelected again.

I wouldn't be here today if this meeting turned out that way, in the Delta. I'm telling you, my whole life since then was riding on the outcome of what these 85 people in this barbecue joint were going to do.

Wilbur is smiling. He knows all this. I don't know if I can tell this story. And you could feel the tone of the meeting go cold. And all of a sudden, this guy stands up in the back, named John Lee Wilson, who was the mayor of a little town called Haines, Arkansas—150 people. He's not alive anymore. I'd give the world and all if he were here today. John Lee was in jeans and a white T-shirt. He wasn't a lawyer. He weighed about 300 pounds, on his light days. [Laughter] He had arms bigger around than my neck. And he said, the young lawyer might have had a point, but all he knew about this whole deal was that before I became Governor the first time, sewage was running open in the streets of Haines and the children were sick. And after I had served, they weren't sick anymore.

And he said, "If we don't stick with people who stick with us, what kind of people will we be?" He said, "Governor Clinton may be going down, but I'd rather go down with him than run off from him." And they all—and the room changed again. And the Delta stayed with me, and the rest is history.

I owe you, and I owe the memory of John Lee Wilson, whom I revered and loved and remember to this day. And I'll do my best to be faithful.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3 p.m. in the Civic Auditorium at Mid-South Community College. In his remarks, he referred to student Sandra Eason O'Sullivan, who introduced the President, Glen Fenter, president, and Alex Coulter, board of trustees chair, Mid-South Community College; Mayor William H. Johnson of West Memphis; Crittenden County Judge Brian Williams; State Representatives Steve Jones, Marvin Steele, and Bobby L. Glover; State Senator Kevin Smith; Lt. Gov. Winthrop P. Rockefeller of Arkansas; Carl Whillock, former president, Arkansas State University; Wilbur Peer, Associate Administrator, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, Department of Agriculture; and John Gammon and N.S. (Ness) Sechrest, long-time friends of the President. This

item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

## **Memorandum on the Arkansas Delta Circuit Rider Pilot Project**

*December 10, 1999*

*Memorandum for the Secretary of Agriculture, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Administrator of the Small Business Administration*

*Subject: Arkansas Delta Circuit Rider Pilot Project*

The Delta region of the United States is rich in historical, archeological, geological, natural, and cultural assets. The Delta region also has tremendous human capital in the people who live there and hold strong hopes for the future. The Delta's human, natural, and cultural resources have the potential to contribute significantly to the region's future.

Despite great progress in a wide range of economic and social areas, the Delta region, particularly the Delta communities of Arkansas, still often lag behind the rest of the country. Substandard housing, inadequate transportation systems, limited access to capital, low educational levels, and lack of adequate health care have hindered progress and caused hardship. While nationwide unemployment levels have fallen during my Administration, the Arkansas Delta communities still suffer from disproportionately high unemployment. Furthermore, in the Delta counties of Arkansas, only 55 percent of the adult population has a high school diploma.

While Governor of Arkansas, I chaired the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission. In 1990, the Commission submitted an action plan to address the economic development needs of the region. This action plan