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Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Reception in Austin, Texas

June 19, 2000

I'm glad to see this place in the daytime. [*Laughter*] Well, first, I want to thank Roy and Mary for letting me come back to their home. I love this place. And it's exhibit A for the proposition that if you want to live like a Republican, you should vote Democrat. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Benson, thanks for the music. And I want to thank Governor Richards for being here, because now I know I'll get at least one new joke before I get on the plane tonight to go home. [*Laughter*] And Governor Briscoe, thank you, sir, and thanks for being so nice to Hillary all these years. And my good friend Jake Pickle, I miss you, and I'm delighted to see you.

I want to say to all of you who had anything to do with this, I'm very grateful. I was looking tonight at Roy and Judy and Garry Mauro, and we all started out together 28 years ago. They don't have any gray hair; I'm practically broken down. [*Laughter*] I don't know how this happened. But Mauro and Spence and I, we were 30 percent of the white male vote McGovern got in Texas. [*Laughter*] We could dominate the whole—it was kind of a kick; it was the ultimate case of being a big fish in a small pond. That's not quite fair, there's several of you in here I met 28 years ago. And I've loved my relationships with this State and with these people a long time.

And I want to thank Senator Torricelli for all the hard work he's done for the Democrats in the Senate. And Senator Wyden, thank you for coming all the way from Oregon.

And my great long-time friend Chuck Robb, who in many ways would qualify for the title of the bravest person in the Senate. He's the guy that always stands up and votes exactly what he thinks is right and to heck with the consequences, and then goes out and really believes he can convince the people of Virginia he's right. He had to run for reelection against Ollie North in 1994, the worst year the Democrats have had in 40 years. And he survived. And now he's got to run against a man who's a very popular former Governor, and he's going to win again. And he's going to win again because he's brave and good, and you should be very proud of him and his Texas size. And I thank you very much.

Now, I also want to thank those of you who helped Hillary when she was down here. She was also here with us in Texas in 1972, and I just talked to her before I came here. And she spoke to the Merchant Marine Academy commencement on Long Island today. And she was regaling me with tales of the merchant marine—it made me want to join again. I wish I was 20 years old, and I could start—when you said, "I was your 28-year-old friend," I thought, you know, if somebody would let me be 28, I'd let them be President, and take my chances. [*Laughter*] I could do it again. I'd take my chances. I'd do it all over again. [*Laughter*]

Let me—I'll be brief. I always wonder whether I'm preaching to the saved at these meetings. But I want to say just a couple of words here. First of all, I'm grateful for the chance I've had to serve, and I've loved it. Secondly, I've had a good team. And I say this, and I want to say a little more about this in a minute, but there's never been, in the history of America—and I'm a pretty good student of American history—a Vice President who's had remotely the positive impact on this country as Vice President than Al Gore has had. I've had a great Cabinet; I've had a great staff. My wife has played a marvelous role in a lot of different ways in helping move the country forward. And we've had a good time. And lo and behold, it worked out pretty well.

And what I would like to say—I'd just like to make a couple of points, because somebody might ask you tomorrow why you came, and I don't want you to say you just wanted to see Roy's house one more time. [*Laughter*] A lot of the things that happened that were good, I think, happened because we had a set of ideas about how the country should be run and how we should work. That is much more like your work in your daily lives than the way Washington worked when I got there and the way, unfortunately, it still works too much today.

I basically believe that there was something wrong when you had a political system where everybody said, "It's just terrible; we're up to our ears in debt," and then kept voting to run the debt up every year. I thought there was something wrong with a system that said that if you were pro-labor, you couldn't be pro-business; if you wanted a clean environment, you couldn't be pro-growth; and that the Republicans and the Democrats just spend all their time trading insults instead of figuring out how to get work done. Because I can tell you—and I think we're going to get a lot of stuff done in the 7 months I've got left to be President. And if we do everything we could conceivably get done, as the Senators here will tell you, there will still be plenty that we disagree about in the election.

And so we began to work on getting the economy together and on trying to figure out how to pull people together to actually solve problems. And we had an economic strategy that said, get the debt down; invest more in education, even if you have to cut out a lot of other things the Government is doing, and in science and technology; figure out a way to deal with a lot of these big, long-term challenges; and try to pull the country together across all the lines that divide us, because we're growing ever more diverse.

Steve Ricchetti is here with me. He's my Deputy Chief of Staff. He grew up in Ohio. We went to Houston; we were at a lunch in Houston today. We had Muslims, Sikhs, east Asians, obviously, African-Americans, Hispanics, the old rednecks like me there. It was an amazing thing. Ricchetti looked around this crowd, he said, "This is not your typical Houston cowboy crowd, is it?" [*Laughter*] And I said, "No, but it's tomorrow's Texas." It is tomorrow's Texas, and it's tomorrow's America. So it's working.

Now, I think the way elections come out often depend on what people think the question is. So what do you think the issue is in this election, in the President's race, in the Congress races, in the Senate and the House? I think it is, what are we going to do with this moment of prosperity? Eight years ago the country took a chance on me, but we were in trouble. Everybody felt like we were in trouble. They thought we were drifting; they thought there was too much fighting going on; they thought we needed to take a new direction. And they decided to take a chance on us.

So now we've got the ship of state turned around. We've got the longest economic expansion in history, the lowest crime rate in a quarter century, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the relative absence of crisis at home and abroad. Our country has been a real force for peace and freedom throughout the world. So what are we going to do with it?

And if you think that's the question, then you have to answer it. My belief is, since I'm now old enough to remember the last time we had the longest economic expansion in history, is that we've got to work like crazy to deal with the big challenges and seize the big opportunities our country has, because nothing lasts forever. If you've been through any tough times in your life, you thank God it doesn't last forever. But nothing lasts forever. The world is not static; it's changing very rapidly. And we have this little moment in time, and we can make something really big and beautiful and wonderful out of it.

I've done everything I could to leave this country in good shape. And my only desire now is that when I'm not President anymore, that everybody is trying to make the most of it, instead of just squandering it.

So, for me, what does that mean? It means we ought to keep the economy going. We ought to extend its benefits to everybody that's willing to work for it. We ought to help families meet the challenge of the new world, like how to balance work and child rearing. And we ought to think about the major issues of the future: putting a human face on the global economy; expanding trade and lifting people's lives; dealing with this problem of climate change, which the young people here may find to be one of the three biggest problems they'll face in the next 20 to 30 years unless we face it now. How are we going to deal with all this diversity at home? Unless we can deal with it at home, we can't really, over the long run, deal with all the problems around the world. It's a big deal. How are we going to deal with the aging of America?

So, number one, I think this election is as important as the ones in '92 and '96. It's

just different. And I think it ought to be about, what are we going to do with our prosperity, first one. Number two, this does not have to be one of these elections—and we've had all too may over the last 20 years—where the candidates just try to bludgeon each other about, you know, this one's a crook, and this one's no good, and all this kind of stuff. We don't need any politics of personal destruction here. We just need an honest debate on the honest differences.

But pointing out the differences is not negative; it's healthy. You've got to understand, there are choices, and all your choices have consequences, whether it's in the Presidential race, the Senate races, or the House race. And so, point one, it's an important election; point two, there are big differences.

Point three—and this is very important; you watch this—the most interesting thing about this election is, only the Democrats want you to know what the differences are. [*Laughter*] It's very interesting this year. And I suppose I should take that as a compliment. [*Laughter*]

But, I can tell you, if you just go through—let me just—and this is why the Senate's so important. And you know, everybody that has studied civics 101 knows that the Congress is important. But I think no one—I think maybe a President understands more than anyone else how profoundly important it is, every single Senate seat. They vote on who goes on the Supreme Court—big deal, huge consequences in the next election.

There will be two to four new members of the Supreme Court in the next 4 years. They vote on treaties. They vote on other important appointments. And the way their system works, one Senator can virtually either shut the whole show down or change the whole future of the country, for good or ill. And unless you've actually been there and seen it, you can minimize it.

So I'll just give you a few examples. And again, I feel this way about the President's race. I think we ought to say, okay, we got two good people here; there's no point in running anybody down; they have real differences; here they are; here are the consequences of your decision. Just don't pretend that there aren't any consequences, and be willing to live with them, whichever you do. Because there's a lot of surveys which show that, notwithstanding people's tendency to believe that all of us politicians never keep our word, that most Presidents pretty much do what they say. And when they don't, we're glad they didn't. Like Abraham Lincoln promised not to free the slaves. Franklin Roosevelt said he'd balance the budget, and with 25 percent of the people out of work, it would have been the worst thing he could have possibly done.

But people normally do what they say they're going to do when they run for the Senate, when they run for the House, and when they run for President. Now in the Senate—I'll just give you a couple of examples. We're going to face a big question early next year. And I'm battling the preliminaries now. You'll see the skirmishes unfolding over the next 7 months.

What's the best way to keep the economy going? Our side says, the best way to keep the economy going—when there's so much growth and unemployment is so low, when everybody is looking at inflation, the Federal Reserve has already raised interest rates—the best thing we can do is keep paying this debt down to keep interest rates as low as possible.

We can afford a reasonable tax cut that helps people educate their kids, pay for child care expenses, gives people with money the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America we now give you to invest in poor areas in Latin America and Asia and Africa. But we've got to have a—there's got to be a limit to it, because we've got to keep paying the debt down and because we've got to save enough money to deal with Social Security and Medicare when the baby boomers retire.

The Republicans believe that because the estimates of the surplus are so large over the next 10 years, we should go ahead and plan to spend it all on a tax cut and the other commitments that have been made. Well, it would be self-serving for me to say that the surplus would materialize, because it happened on my watch. But I don't really believe you can bank on $2 trillion showing up over the next 10 years. There are lots of turns in the road between here and there. So I think we're right, and I don't think they are.

But you have to make a decision. And the Senate elections will have a lot to do with that. I'll give you another example.

We're going to be more and more involved with the rest of the world, whether we like it or not. I'm trying to pass this bill to normalize trade relations with China. I think it's very important. I think it may keep us out of another war in east Asia in the 21st century. It's important. It's more important than the money involved, to me, and it's a good economic deal for us—is that we fought three wars in Asia in the last 50 years, and I don't want my kids or my grandkids to be involved in one in the next 50 if there's anything I can do to help it.

It's not a guarantee, but we'll dramatically increase the chances of a peaceful future if we have a constructive relationship and try to bring Chinese society into a rule-based, law-abiding, get-along-with-your-neighbors, try-to-find-some-way-to-work-it-out system.

So what are the differences there? Well, I've worked real hard to work with other countries to reduce the threat of nuclear, chemical, and biological war. I was the first world leader to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The Republicans voted it down—the first time an arms treaty has been voted down, an international treaty like that, since the Republican Senate voted against the League of Nations in 1919. And Governor Bush said he agreed with that.

They just don't believe that. They think we don't have to be part of that; we should just take care of our own defense, and if we've got to keep testing—if 25 other countries start nuclear tests, that's okay. So we have big differences there. And you have to decide whether you think the Democratic Senators are right or the Republican Senators are right.

And it could have real consequences for how these children have to live. And you should hear their argument. I think they're wrong, but they can tell you why they think it's time for us to change 50 years of our efforts to work with others to reduce the arms issue.

On climate change, I think that it's finally possible in this high-tech age, that Austin is one of the centers of, to grow the economy and reduce damage to the environment. Basically, most of the folks in their party don't believe that. They still think if you want to get rich and stay rich, you've got to put more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. You need to decide whether you think they're right or we're right.

And I could just go through issue after issue after issue. On health care, we're for the Patients' Bill of Rights, they're not. We want a Medicare program that has prescription drugs that seniors can buy, because I think if we were creating Medicare again today, we'd never have a Medicare program without a drug component. Thirty-five years ago, it was about hospitals and doctors; now it's about keeping people out of the hospital. Anybody who lives to be 65 today has a life expectancy of 82. These children here have got a better than 50 percent chance of living to be 90, once the human genome is completely mapped. And you see all of these things are going to come forward.

You have to just decide. And they have their arguments. They say, "Well, it might cost too much." My argument is, it won't cost near as much as giving the surplus away on a tax cut. But you ought to listen to them. But I'm just telling you, I think that—the thing that bothers me is that things are going along so well in the country, people might be too casual about this election. And what you do with the good times is as stern a test of your judgment, your vision, and maybe even our national character, as what we do in adversity. And there are real differences with real consequences.

Obviously, I think a lot of these ideas have been tested, and we turned out to be right. We're in this huge fight over what I think is self-evident. I don't think I'm going to keep anybody out of the deer woods by passing legislation that says if a crook tries to buy a gun at a gun show, we ought to have time to do a background check and stop the crook from getting the gun. That's what we did with the Brady bill. Half a million criminals didn't get guns. We've got the lowest gun crime in a decade or 20 years; dropped 35 percent since I've been in office, hasn't been a single hunter missed a day in the woods.

And every time I say this, oh, they all squalled, and Charlton Heston—looks like I'm trying to end the American way of life.

[*Laughter*] And the Republicans agree with them, and the Democrats in the Senate basically agree with me. And I come from a—I had my first .22 when I was 12. But I think there's evidence here, in the lower crime rate and the less violence, and I don't think this country is safe enough. But I just want you to remember that.

It's a big election, just as important as '92 and '96. I think the question is, what are we going to do with our prosperity? There are real differences with real consequences. But only one party really wants you to know what the differences are. I think that's a pretty good argument for our side.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:53 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to reception hosts Roy M. Spence, Jr., and his wife, Mary; musician Ray Benson; former Governors Ann Richards and Dolph Briscoe, Jr., of Texas; former Representative J. J. (Jake) Pickle; former Texas Land Commissioner Garry Mauro and his wife, Judith; Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; U.S. Senatorial candidate George Allen; and Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association.

Statement on Congressional Action on the Tobacco Settlement Lawsuit

June 19, 2000

Last year the Department of Justice filed a civil lawsuit against the tobacco companies to recover the billions of dollars the Federal Government spends each year on tobacco-related health care costs. Tobacco-caused diseases kill more than 400,000 Americans each year and cost billions in health care costs, including more than $20 billion in Federal payments under Medicare and other programs. The Justice Department's suit would simply hold the tobacco industry financially responsible for reimbursement of these costs.

The suit is based on overwhelming evidence, much of it from the tobacco industry's own documents. This evidence shows that the tobacco companies have conspired over the past 50 years to defraud and mislead the American public and to conceal information about the effects of smoking.

The Congress, in its appropriations bills, is undermining this lawsuit by preventing the agencies that have been harmed and that could recover billions—the Defense Department, the Veterans Administration, and the Department of Health and Human Services—from providing any support. If Congress cuts off funding for this lawsuit or interferes with the Justice Department's pursuit of the lawsuit, Congress will be capitulating to the tobacco industry once again at the expense of taxpayers and their children.

It would be wrong for Congress to undermine the authority of the Department of Justice and block this lawsuit rather than allow it to be decided on its merits in court. I call on Congress to support rather than undermine these efforts and allow the Justice Department to keep working to give taxpayers their day in court.

Statement on Greece's Entry Into the Economic and Monetary Union

June 19, 2000

I congratulate Prime Minister Simitis and the Greek people on the decision today at the EU Summit in Portugal to bring Greece into the EU's Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), effective January 1, 2001. Reaching agreement to become a full member of the EMU a year before the euro currency is introduced demonstrates Greece's remarkable economic progress in recent years. This economic success complements Greece's increasingly active political role within the EU.

Through determination and hard work, Greece succeeded in meeting all the Maastricht Treaty economic criteria. Entry into the EMU is not the end of the race but the start of a challenging new phase of economic reform. We wish the Hellenic Republic every success as it moves ahead and hope this will usher in a new era of increased trade and investment between our two nations.