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Remarks to African-American Leaders

March 29, 2001

Thank you all. The legislative branch is always trying to take something from the executive branch. [*Laughter*] Thank you, J.C., for helping set up this meeting. And thank you all for coming. It's my honor that you're here, and I want to welcome you to the people's home.

Before I begin, I do want to make mention of the fact and ask you to join me in a moment of silence—a Member of the United States Congress passed away today, Norm Sisisky from the State of Virginia. I know you'll join me in asking God's blessing on Norm, as well as on Rhoda and his four sons and seven grandchildren.

[*At this point, a moment of silence was observed.*]

Amen. Thank you very much.

Secretary Paige, thank you very much for being here. I've known Rod a long time. You may remember, at one time I was the Governor of the great State of Texas. [*Laughter*] And we had a superintendent of schools in our largest school district who insisted that every child could learn. And he caught my attention by saying that—and then not only did he insist that, he worked hard to make sure that that was the case. And it's such an honor to have Rod make the sacrifice of moving from Texas up here and becoming the Secretary of Education. People are going to be proud of the job he does. It doesn't matter what your political party is; you'll be proud of the job this man does. Thank you, sir.

I know the Lieutenant Governor of the great State of Colorado is here, Joe Rogers. And I don't know if Kenny Blackwell is here from Ohio. We've got elected officials, I know, from Oregon and Nevada and all around the country. Thanks for coming.

I love the old words of Jackie Robinson—he one time said when President Kennedy did something he disagreed with, he said: "The President is a fine man, but he reserved the right to change his opinion." [*Laughter*] Every President, whatever his party, is judged not only by the words he speaks but, more importantly, by the work he leaves behind. And that's what I hope my administration is judged on—by the work we leave behind.

I will constantly speak for the values that unite our country: personal responsibility, equal justice, equal opportunity for everybody. These are important common values. And I've set this administration to the work of putting those values into practice and into law.

The work begins where opportunity usually begins, and that's in the schoolhouses. I have made public education the number one priority of this administration for a reason, because when we get it right, when every child learns, America will be a much more hopeful place.

Today, all the children—there was a day when all the children couldn't enter schools. Some of you may remember that. I'm not trying to age you. [*Laughter*] As a result of a lot of hard work, that has changed. All children can enter schools, but the fundamental question now is, once in school, will all children learn? And that's the question all of us must ask, and if not, we must insist on change—we must insist on change. I've asked Congress to spend more money on education. But I've also asked that we expect more in return.

A good education system is one that's based on some fundamental principles. One is, high expectations for every child. You all know, those of you involved with education know, if you lower the bar, if you have low expectations, you get those kind of results. If you assume certain children can't learn, certain children won't learn. So, inherent in any good reform system is one that sets high standards.

Secondly, it's so important to trust the local folks, is to set power out of Washington so as not to provide convenient excuses for failure. We must align authority and responsibility at the local level. There's nothing worse than having a school system where centralized authority says you must do it this way, and when there's failure, somebody says, "Oh, we would have succeeded except somebody told me to do it the way we didn't want to do it." Authority and responsibility must go hand in hand.

And finally, at the center of reform, something Rod and I worked hard on in Texas, is to measure, is to insist upon accountability. There's a lot of fear about accountability in the education system. People view it as a way to punish. That's not our vision. We view it as a way to correct.

How do you know if a child isn't learning unless you measure? So it's so important that Congress gets the message that in return for Federal help, States and local jurisdictions must develop accountability systems that measure third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. It's important that we disaggregate those results, so that we treat each child as an individual. It is important that we post the results so people know and, as importantly, when we find success, thank the teachers and principals that are working hard. But when we find failure, instead of accepting the status quo, do something about it. That's why it's important to start measuring early.

I've got a reading initiative in front of the Congress that starts with those in kindergarten. It basically says, in order to access the money, you must develop diagnostic tools so that we can determine early whether a child needs extra help, extra time on task. It says, we'll use curriculum that works, not fancy, feel-good theories, but curriculum that actually can take a child from illiteracy to literacy. It says, if need be, teach reading all day long until you get it right, because literacy, as our friend, Phyllis Hunter, said in Houston, Texas, "Is the new civil right."

And so this is an education program that's based upon principles. I firmly believe that when implemented, that when it's in place, that we'll begin to achieve the goal and dream that we all want, and that's an educated tomorrow.

I also know that—the importance of our Historically Black Colleges. I know it well, because in our State of Texas, many of our finest citizens have been educated at those places of higher learning. And therefore, in the budget I've submitted to the Congress, I'm asking for an increase of 1.4 billion over a 5-year period of time. I hope Congress doesn't blink. I hope they join us in this important mission.

And people say, "Well, is there money? Do you have enough money in Washington to be able to make those kinds of commitments?" Let me talk about my budget, because there's a lot of discussion about budgets. And I want to thank the House for passing what I call a commonsense budget. It's a realistic budget. It's a budget that has set priorities. One of the priorities is education. In the budget is the amount of money I've just spoken to. It's a budget that sets aside all the payroll taxes for Social Security and only Social Security.

That old style, that old tired debate hopefully will be put to rest now forever, so they don't try to scare folks away from good public policy. The budget doubles the Medicare budget. That's over a 10-year period of time we double the Medicare budget. It's a budget that increases the—doubles the number of folks who will be served in the community health centers over the next 5 years. I don't know if you know what the community health centers are. They're places where folks living on the edge of poverty, maybe the newly arrived, can get good primary care in the health care system.

It's a budget that talks about how do we enable the working uninsured to purchase health insurance. It's a budget that grows by 4 percent in the discretionary side of things.

Now, 4 percent is greater than the rate of inflation; 4 percent is greater than most people's paychecks have increased. But for some, 4 percent isn't enough. I happen to think it's just right, because by focusing and by having a budget that's realistic, it leaves more money left over. And with this economy beginning to sputter, we need to send some money back to the people who pay the bills. We need to have meaningful, real tax relief.

And we can afford tax relief. We certainly can afford tax relief. And that's the debate. Can you afford tax relief, or do you want bigger Government? And after setting priorities—and, by the way, paying down $2 trillion of debt over a 10-year period and setting aside money for contingencies—I firmly stand on the side of letting people keep their own money. It's not only good for the economy, it's good for people, more importantly.

The crux of the issue is, who do you trust with the money? And I trust the people. It's their money to begin with. This surplus is not the Government's money; it is the people's money. And so we've submitted a plan that I think makes the code more fair, eminently more fair.

If you're a single mother in America, let's say, trying to raise two children—if she's at the income level of $22,000 and makes an additional dollar, she will pay a higher marginal rate on that dollar than someone who makes $225,000 a year. The way our Tax Code is structured is that for every additional dollar above the level of 22,000, in this case, for this particular woman, she starts losing her earned-income tax credit. She pays the 15 percent bracket for the first time, and she pays payroll taxes.

Our code is structured so that somebody struggling to get ahead, somebody working the hardest job in America, pays a higher marginal rate than successful folks—Wall Street bankers. And that's not right, and that's not fair. So one of the things we have done is, we work with Congress to drop the bottom rate from 15 percent to 10 percent and doubled the child credit from $500 to $1,000, making the middle class easier to access than the current code. The code is more fair.

I also drop the top rate from 39.6 to 33 percent. My attitude is that everybody who pays taxes ought to get tax relief. I get nervous when I hear we're going to have targeted tax cuts. I guess that's okay, just so long as you're not targeted out—[*laughter*]—just so long as the target is fixed in the right way. I don't believe in trying to pick or choose winners and losers in good public policy. I think everybody who pays taxes ought to get relief.

But I have been reminding people around here about the benefits of dropping the top rate, and it's important for you all to hear this. By far, the vast majority of small businesses are unincorporated businesses, sole proprietorships, maybe Subchapter S corporations, all of which pay taxes at the highest marginal rate.

There's a lot of discussion, and rightly so, about how do we encourage ownership in all communities in America. Well, one way to do so is to have an environment for the growth of small businesses in America. It turns out there are many hundreds of African-Americans who are starting their own business. And public policy people got to think about how to create an environment so that those businesses can flourish. And one way to do so is to let people keep more of their own cash flow so they can reinvest it. Seventy-five percent of the new jobs in America are created by small businesses. And 100 percent—100 percent—of the great hope of America comes when somebody owns a company. And that's what it's all about.

So I urge Congress not to get trapped in the—the kind of the rhetoric of class warfare, and think about the positive benefits that come by encouraging the growth of the small-business sector of America.

I see many of my friends here who are involved in the faith community, and I want to thank you all for coming. As you know, there's been a lot of discussion about a faith-based initiative. My attitude is that Government can pass laws, and we can work on matters of justice—and by the way, we will. Racial profiling is wrong. I've instructed the Attorney General to come up with a plan to end it, and he's following through.

But what Government cannot do is cause people to love one another. I wish we could. We would sign the bill. J.C. will sponsor it—[*laughter*]—I think. Won't you? And I will sign it. [*Laughter*] But love comes as a result of a higher calling, in many cases. Love comes from hearts. And our job in America is to gather the great compassion of America.

You know, we were talking about, earlier—I remember my friend, Tony Evans, gave a speech outside of Dallas, in Greenville, Texas. And he talked about the greatest welfare programs are on every street corner in America, because there are houses of worship where people have heard the universal call to love a neighbor like they'd like to be loved, themselves, people who spend their days trying to help a neighbor in need.

Government can't make people do that. We've got to recognize the limitations. But what Government can do is encourage faith-based programs and their mission. What Government can do is fund an individual who

we'd like to help and let that individual make a choice as to whether or not they want to find help in a secular program or in a faith-based program. Government can do that.

And we can do that without offending the process-oriented people who worry about church and state. We shouldn't breach the line of church and state, but we should welcome faith-based initiatives and faith-based programs that use a powerful, powerful way of changing people's lives. That's called the power of faith. You change somebody's heart, you change their lives. And Government shouldn't fear faith-based initiatives. As a matter of fact, we ought to welcome them.

And I want to thank those in the room who have been on the forefront of change, of helping us change Government attitude toward a policy that I'm absolutely convinced is going to positively affect the lives of thousands of people. One such initiative that we've asked for Congress to fund is a mentoring program for boys and girls whose mom or dad may be in prison.

And so these are some of the goals that we're working on here in Washington. I cannot do it alone. One, I've assembled a great team of people, of good people, like Rod and others. I was, today, with the Chancellor of Germany, and I was at the Oval Office, there in the little dining room. And sitting next to me were Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, as we were effecting foreign policy that affects the world. And I've got a great team of people around me.

As you can tell, I welcome good, strong folks—I think that's the sign of a chief executive officer who knows what he's doing—and I empower them, and I work with them. But we can also do some other things. We can help work to change the culture of Washington and to kind of tone down, dial down the rhetoric and dial up success. I'm doing my very best to stop the name calling and the finger pointing, to say that good people can disagree in an agreeable way. It's so important that we have mutual respect in the Nation's Capital. The issues that I've talked about, I don't particularly—I don't think are necessarily Republican issues. I think they're good policy issues. I think these are issues that are best for everybody in the country. Otherwise, I wouldn't be promoting them. And I know we can do a better job. And I hope the country's beginning to get a sense that there is now a culture of respect in Washington, DC, and as importantly, a culture of accomplishment, that we're getting some things done.

And not everybody's going to agree with every detail, but we're getting things done. And that's important, because, after all, those of us who have assumed the high offices we hold must understand we have a responsibility to those offices. We have a responsibility to conduct ourselves in ways in which somebody will say, "I'd like to serve." Public service is a noble calling. Public service is important to this Nation.

But you don't have to be a President or a Congressman or a Secretary of a Cabinet to affect people's lives in a positive way. And that's a message I'm also trying to spread, that the true strength of this country really isn't in the halls of Government or in the White House; it's in the hearts and souls of people who live all across America, without Government, without a President saying to go do this—just walk across the street and say to somebody in need, "What can I do to help?"

And that's why I'm so optimistic about America and so optimistic about our future and so thankful that you are here to give me a chance to talk about our vision.

Thanks for coming, and God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Representative J.C. Watts, Jr.; Representative Sisisky's widow, Rhoda, and sons Mark, Terry, Richard, and Stuart; Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell; Phyllis Hunter, consultant, Texas Reading Initiative; Anthony T. Evans, senior pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, and president, The Urban Alternative; and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany.

Statement on the Situation in the Middle East

March 29, 2001

I am deeply concerned about the escalating violence in the Middle East. It is claiming the lives of innocent civilians on both