

*May 11 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1993*

of schools; and Kevin O'Keefe, Special Assistant to the President. A portion of the question-and-

answer session could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

## Remarks to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights *May 11, 1993*

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President, for that wonderful introduction and for being such a great partner in the campaign of 1992 and in this administration. I think it is fair to say that Vice President Gore has already exercised a larger role in this administration than perhaps any Vice President in the history of this country. And I hope he will continue to do so.

I'm honored to be here with Ralph Neas and with my longtime friend Benjamin Hooks. Don't you just love to hear Ben talk? I mean, really, I could hear him intone those poems from now until tomorrow morning, reminding me of the rhythms of my childhood and the faith of our parents.

I'm proud to be here with all of you tonight not only because of what you have done for the last four decades and more but because of what together we must do now. I'm proud of your commitment to civil rights. I'm proud to be here with our Attorney General, Janet Reno, who is the embodiment of that.

I thank you for the vote of the national board of the leadership conference today to support the nomination of Lani Guinier to be Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. I want to say a special word of support for Lani Guinier. I went to law school with her, and I announced at the Justice Department the other day when we announced all of our Assistant Attorneys General that she had actually sued me once. *[Laughter]* Not only that, she didn't lose. And I nominated her anyway. So the Senate ought to be able to put up with a little controversy in the cause of civil rights and go on and confirm her so we can get about the business of America.

I want to say, too, how honored I am to be here with your honorees. My friend Dorothy Height: From the freedom schools in Mississippi to the Black Family Reunion, what a guiding spirit she has been to all of us.

I want to take my hat off to Raul Yzaguirre for his leading voice. Over 20 years ago, I first

came in contact with La Raza as a movement and a commitment. And I have watched them over these years help people all across the country with the practical problems of life which give real meaning to the idea of civil rights, when you can actually live in a decent house and have a decent job and know your kids are going to get a decent education and know that you're going to be treated fairly no matter what your race is.

I want to say, too, how very much I admire Justin Dart for all the work that he's done as Chair of the President's Commission on Employment of People with Disabilities and leader in making the Americans with Disabilities Act come to life. You know, Justin, every time we went anywhere in the campaign and had a rally, we always had a section for people with disabilities. Today I went to a suburb north of Chicago, in a heavily Republican community, as it turned out, to meet with a bunch of students from the high school that I was visiting and other high schools and people in the community. And we had a big section there for the students with disabilities. And I was thinking as I was coming over here tonight, a lot of those kids are where they are today because of what you did—and you ought to be proud of that—sitting in the front of the row so they can ask the President their questions and shake hands with the President; instead of being overlooked, being uplifted.

I say that to you to make one introductory point. I've been here for 100 days and a sum, fighting to break the gridlock in Washington. And sometimes I think the biggest gridlock of all is the gridlock in our minds, the hold that foolish notions have on our imaginations. I have been roundly attacked by people on the extreme right trying to make me look like some radical leftwinger because I had this crazy notion that I ought to have an administration that would have some diversity and give women as well

as men and people of color as well as people who look like me the chance to serve if they could meet high standards of excellence. And there are people who say, well—and I see these relentless articles in the paper—oh, that’s why no appointments are being made. Well, so in 100 days I show up at the Justice Department, and I ask for the totals: Pass me the envelope, please. [Laughter] And it turns out that in spite of my commitment to diversity and excellence, after 100 days my predecessor had made 99 appointments, his predecessor, President Reagan, had made 152 appointments, and I’d made 173. Where are they? And I expected to see the shameless right in sackcloth and ashes, saying that we had falsely accused this poor President in promoting gridlock. But they have no shame. [Laughter]

Let me tell you something: Today when I was in Illinois, a young, handsome, fine-looking Hispanic man stood up and said, “I have joined the United States Army. And I’m proud that I’m going to serve my country. And I know we’ve got to cut the military budget, but I want to know if you’re going to cut it so much that I can’t give my whole career to my country if I want to.” And I thought to myself, why doesn’t somebody point out to all these people who have attacked us for trying to open the doors of opportunities that the number one, most successful institution in the United States of America for giving opportunities to women and people of color are the United States military branches. They have done it with a commitment to excellence and opportunity. And what we’ve got to do is to prove that the rest of us can do so as well. And we ought not to make this a partisan issue, and the guardians of gridlock should stop trying to use it to move arguments around that indicate that there’s somehow something wrong with the President who believes that everybody who can serve ought to have the chance to do so.

This administration is committed to the enforcement of the civil rights laws. This administration is also committed to programs like national service that give everybody the possibility of being part of a new era of civic responsibility. This administration is committed to guaranteeing that every American is entitled to a fair chance at the brass ring but even more important, to empowering people to seize those opportunities, to moving beyond the incredible gridlock in the mind of this town that you either

have to give somebody something for nothing or take it all off the table.

Why don’t we behave in Washington the way people behave in their normal lives? We need opportunity and responsibility. Why don’t we stop making these nutty arguments that imply that everything in life is an either-or proposition: We’re either going to write somebody a check and bust the Government budget, or we’re just going to stick it to them and walk away. That’s not the way life works.

You know, civil rights should embody a country that works. We don’t want to guarantee everybody equal employment opportunities when there are no jobs. Does that mean that we have to sacrifice one and not the other? No, it means you should have a President who will pursue both, walking and chewing gum at the same time. That’s what this is about. Is that right?

We want to guarantee everybody an equal opportunity to get an education, but wouldn’t it be nice if the education you’re getting is also better? It’s not either-or. We want to guarantee everybody the right to health care and family security through health care, but wouldn’t it be nice if you live in a rural area or in the heart of a big city if there happens to be a clinic to visit?

I just am amazed after 100 days to find that a lot of the gridlock that has gripped this city for so long is in the imposition of what one writer had called false choices on all of us who are supposed to make policy. It never occurred to me that I should appoint somebody who wasn’t qualified to a job. You know, I don’t wake up in the morning thinking, you know, I need to find some female Latino who is totally unqualified to put in a job. [Laughter] Or neither did it ever occur to me that every white man I appoint is going to hit a home run every day. But that is the kind of rhetoric you see running beneath so much of the characterization when we try to change 12 years of attitudes.

The same people that were criticizing the previous administrations for being insensitive to civil rights immediately turned around and say, “Oh, there’s too much, too much attention being given to ethnicity and gender, and that’s why no appointments are being made.” So the record comes in, and I’m still waiting for the acknowledgement.

I tell you, folks, I refuse to believe that we cannot go forward together, that we cannot set an example, that we cannot make progress. I

*May 11 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1993*

refuse to believe that you can't be committed to civil rights and to civic responsibility. I refuse to believe that we can't create economic opportunity by empowering people to seize control of their destiny and changing the Government's policies.

I think that if this leadership council should have any mission today, it should be to break through those barriers that push us all into one extreme camp or the other and make us mute in the face of reality and common sense. Surely we can bring the experience of our own lives and the lives of our fellow Americans beyond the borders of this city to the policymaking process that will dominate Washington for the next year. That is what we ought to do if we want civil rights to come alive in this country.

You know, when I ran for this job I spent a lot of time in African-American churches because I always had, and because I felt at home. When I got this job and I sought to protect the religious and civil liberties of every American, it was because I wanted mine protected and because I have a sharp memory of what it was like to live in a society where half the people I knew, because of their color, were treated as second-class citizens.

I also have a sharp memory of those who had the courage to try to change that position. And now that I am President, I want you to know that I'll make my mistakes from time to time, but I'm going to keep trying to move the ball forward. I believe we can make advances. I don't believe that our fights are over.

I know that there are still civil rights battles to be fought, but I know that they need to be fought today in the context of making a real difference in real people's lives. And we should not be intimidated, those of us who believe in the cause of civil rights for all Americans, into thinking that somehow that can be separated from the fight for economic justice and economic progress and making our free enterprise system work better.

We should not let people who basically don't care whether we make progress in civil rights think that you can separate civil rights from the fight for substantive improvements in education and for meaningful advances in health care or any other area of our national life. Let us resolve tonight that we're going to spend the next 4 years breaking down the gridlock by tearing down the artificial barriers in people's minds to bringing us together, saying we don't have a person to waste and lifting up everybody's God-given potential and doing what we can to see that they achieve it.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Ralph Neas, executive director, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; Benjamin L. Hooks, former executive director, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Dorothy I. Height, president and CEO, National Council of Negro Women; and Raul Yzaguirre, president and CEO, National Council of La Raza.

## Appointment for Members of the Commission on Presidential Scholars

*May 11, 1993*

The President today appointed 32 members of the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars. Among them is New Jersey Governor Jim Florio, who will serve as Chair of the Commission.

The Commission on Presidential Scholars is responsible for selecting 141 graduating high school seniors from around the country to become Presidential Scholars, the Nation's highest honor for high school students. The scholars are chosen on the basis of their accomplishments in many areas, such as academic and artistic

success, leadership, and involvement in their schools and communities.

"The Presidential Scholars Program is an important vehicle for recognizing the efforts and accomplishments of our country's young people," said the President. "I am glad that Governor Florio and the rest of this distinguished group of Americans have agreed to serve on this Commission, and I look forward to welcoming the students they choose to the White House."

In addition to Governor Florio, the members