

Remarks at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Martinsburg,
West Virginia
November 11, 1993

Thank you very much. I want to say a special word of thanks to Tom Weaver and to all the people on the staff here at this wonderful, wonderful health facility for making me feel so welcome today and for taking me around at least one of the floors and giving me a feel for the kind of care that's provided. I really thank them.

I'd also like to thank Senator Rockefeller for flying down here with me today on the helicopter—I hope the helicopter didn't bother you too much when it landed—and my good friend Congressman Wise and Governor Caperton. All three of them in different ways have worked hard to try to provide quality health care for the veterans of our country and for all Americans. And as I'm sure all of you know, that's a big struggle that we're involved in now in Washington, and it's nice to have three allies from West Virginia.

I told Jay Rockefeller today that we wouldn't be up there fighting for national health care if it hadn't been for him fighting for it a long time before someone could run and win a Presidential race on that issue, and I thank Jay for that. I also want to encourage you, Governor Caperton; this health care is a complicated issue. You just have to keep fighting. It's like pushing a rock up a hill, but eventually we get to the top, don't we?

I want to also say to all of you here in West Virginia, I'm especially glad to be here on Veterans Day. This whole area of the country has the look and feel of my home State of Arkansas. And one of the men I met today when touring the hospital, a man named Overman, was actually born in Arkansas. So I sat on his bed and looked out the window and thought I was home. He didn't have an accent. [*Laughter*]

We're here today to honor all the Americans who have worn our Nation's uniform, those who have contributed in war and those who have stood in peace, people who have protected our security and people for whom we now have a moral obligation to protect their security. I wanted to come here to this hospital today to drive that point home. I know we can never fully repay the debt that we owe as a country to our veterans. But we can honor that debt

and partially repay it by making sure that we have quality, secure, and comprehensive health care for all the veterans of the United States.

This morning I had the honor of hosting a breakfast at the White House for the leaders of our veterans groups and for several of the brave young soldiers who have been serving our country in Somalia and who were involved in the ferocious firefight on October the 3d. And this morning I was also pleased to sign into law a bill, which Senator Rockefeller was the leading sponsor, which increases the cost of living allowance to our disabled veterans, which goes into effect on December 1st. Even though this is late in the year, thanks to the leadership of Senator Rockefeller who's the chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs committee and his counterpart in the House, my neighbor, Sonny Montgomery from Mississippi, this will be paid on time beginning in January of 1994.

Again, let me say how much I appreciate the leadership that Senator Rockefeller has exhibited, not only on the issue of health care for all Americans but on the special needs of our Nation's veterans. We stand together, along with Congressman Wise, in our determination to make sure that we do something about the health care issue to provide real and genuine and comprehensive security to all the people of this country before the Congress goes home next year. We have to do that.

The Veterans Administration today operates the Nation's largest health care system. And as I said today, I saw a health care facility here that any American, any American, would be proud to be a part of, to work in or to be a patient in. Under the leadership of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown and the Deputy Secretary, Hershel Gober, who's here with me today somewhere—Hershel where are you? He's not up here on this stage because he's heard this speech before, he said. We're going to continue to work for that.

When I was out in the crowd outside shaking hands, I was pleased to see that one lady had already purchased a paperback copy of the administration's proposed health plan that was put together by the group that the First Lady head-

ed. One of the things that I want to encourage all of you to do is to get a copy of that plan and read it. I'm very proud of the fact that the health care reform plan proposed by our administration is the only one that embraces the VA as a real resource for high-quality, affordable health care for our people. Under our plan, all veterans would be eligible to receive their comprehensive national health care benefit package through the VA system. Veterans with service-connected disabilities and low-income veterans who choose VA would receive this care with no copayments or deductibles. And no veteran in need of health care would ever be turned away from a VA hospital if our plan became law.

This Veterans Day is a special one. It marks the 75th anniversary of the armistice which ended World War I. And as all of you know, that was the occasion for commemorating Veterans Day. We are fortunate today that there are about 31,000 living veterans from World War I, and four of them are with us. I want to acknowledge them today and to tell you that today we'll be giving them this medal commemorating their service in World War I and a certificate. The medal says: 75th Anniversary, World War I. And then on the back, it has two great slogans: A grateful Nation remembers, and They came on wings of eagles.

Now, let me introduce them to you: Mr. Benjamin Valentine. Where are you? There's Mr. Valentine. He's right there. I want to tell you a little bit about him. He served in the Army from May 1918 through May 1919. He was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps and embarkation depot at Charleston, South Carolina. In his civilian life he worked in a brickyard, and his favorite leisure activities were hunting and fishing.

The next honoree is Mr. Ernest Deetjen. Where is he? Mr. Deetjen. Let me tell you a little about him. He served in the Army as a cook with the 331st Supply Company. He enlisted in June 1918 and served in France from October of 1918 until October of 1919. In his civilian life, he opened the first A&P in Hagerstown, Maryland—good for him—and later opened his own store. And since we're here in this outstanding health facility, I should also mention that his uncle helped discover the X-ray process and brought the procedure to the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. I also learned today that this fine gentleman actually

once met President Woodrow Wilson. I think in France, I believe, in Versailles in France, he met President Wilson. Now, let me tell you why that's important. Not only was President Wilson a member of the same political party as I am, but every year there's a new President, a famous American shoe company, Johnson and Murphy from Nashville, Tennessee, writes the President a letter and offers the President a pair of shoes and tells you what every other President's ordered since 1856. So when I got my shoes, they said, "Dear Mr. President, you have the biggest feet in the White House since Woodrow Wilson." [Laughter] So, Mr. Deetjen, we're glad to see you.

Mr. Robert Hannah. Where is he? Let's recognize him. Here he is. Mr. Hannah served as a courier in the 317th Infantry from September of 1917 through June of 1919. He worked as a logger. He helped to build the Cass Railroad in West Virginia. He worked in an aircraft plant. His last job was with Bethlehem Steel in Sparrows Point, Maryland. He's certainly earned his way through life. Let's give him a hand. [Applause]

And our last honoree is Mr. Milton Garland from Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. Stand up, Mr. Garland. This man has an amazing story. He served in the first division of the Navy from July of 1918 through September of 1921. At the age of 98, he is still known as "Mr. Refrigeration" because, at his age, he still teaches refrigeration classes in Waynesboro for the Frick Refrigeration Company. He has designed ice rinks, food refrigeration units, and petrochemical controls, and he's still working at his chosen profession. Let's give him a hand. [Applause]

I close by asking you to remember that the service that these fine people rendered is being replicated today all around the world by the men and women who wear our uniforms. Today they are the best-trained, best-equipped, ablest people who have ever worn the uniform of the United States of America. They would not be able to do that today, had it not been for the contributions of people like these four men we honor. So I ask you to remember what this says: A grateful Nation remembers. Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:04 p.m. in the Domiciliary. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas Weaver, director of the Veterans Medical Center.