

## Remarks at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, Maryland March 7, 1996

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mark, for your fine introduction and for your fine example and for reminding us about why this is an important day for the United States. Thank you, Dr. Boarman, for recalling my previous trip to Eleanor Roosevelt. That was a great day. I must say, when I was there then talking about the national education goals, I didn't have any idea I'd be back here a few years later in this role to discuss this issue.

I'd like to thank the Members of Congress who are here and my good friend Secretary Cisneros; Governor Glendening and Lieutenant Governor Townsend; your county executive, Wayne Curry, who was with me just yesterday in the White House telling me about how this is the best county in America. I thank Reverend Jackson and all the people from the entertainment community and the other leaders who are here from across America today at this national conference.

I also want you to know that there are two graduates of this high school who work in the White House: one of my associate counsels, Cheryl Mills, and Andy Blocker, who works in Legislative Affairs. So I am a direct beneficiary of Eleanor Roosevelt High School, and I thank you for that.

When I leave you here we're going over to the conference with the delegates, but I wanted to come here with the Vice President and with General McCaffrey because, really, this conference is about you. And frankly, this is a day when I wish that as President, it weren't my job to give a speech, that I could just spend the next hour or two sitting around visiting with a number of you and listening to you and talking with you about your future, because we're here to try to do what we can to make your lives safer and your future stronger.

You probably don't think about this very much, but already in your lives you have acquired different roles and different responsibilities, and they give you different perspectives: You are students, and you're still children; you're sons or daughters; you may be brothers or sisters; if you have an association with organizations, you're in the ROTC or in an athletic club or in the band; you have obligations, doubt-

less, to your friends that have become more and more important to you as you get older.

That's the position that I find myself in today. I want to speak with you about this whole issue of crime and violence and drugs from the perspective of a President, the head of our Nation's Government; a citizen who understands that much of this work needs to be done in grass-roots, citizens' community-based organizations; and the father of a high school-aged daughter. I see this whole issue in terms of what's good for families and what's good for the country.

You're old enough now that you're being confronted on a regular basis with tough decisions, where you have to choose right from wrong, dangerous from safe. What you may not know is that the decisions that you make also may be good or bad not only for this community but for your entire country.

That's what I want to talk to you about today, the decisions that I have to make as President to try to create more opportunity for you and a more secure environment, the decisions that we all have to make as citizens to try to improve your future and your present, and most important, the decisions that I hope you will make to choose life over death, to choose what is right for you over plainly what is wrong.

You are coming of age at the moment of greatest possibility in all of American history, where young people who are prepared for it will be able to have more options to live out the future of their dreams than any previous generation. And the technological revolution, which is still a mystery to me, is something that many of you just take for granted. It can be the most democratic instrument in our history. It can offer enormous opportunities to children who not so many years ago could never have had them just because they came up in poor households.

The other day the Vice President and I were in a school district in New Jersey that is in a poor neighborhood where most of the children come from immigrant families, the per capita income is way below the State average—and New Jersey is one of the two or three richest States in America. The school district was performing so poorly a few years ago that the State

almost had to come in and close it and take it over. But they got new leadership. Major companies came in with a commitment to help. They put computers in all the classrooms for the kids, and then they even had computer hookups in the homes of these poor parents, many of whom had only been in our country for a few years. Within a matter of weeks, immigrant parents were E-mailing the principal to see how their kids were doing and whether they were doing their homework. Within 2 or 3 years, this district that was on the verge of failure and all these poor children on the verge of being denied the American dream had attendance rates and graduation rates and, most important of all, test scores above the State average in one of the wealthiest States in this country.

That can happen to America. That is the technological age we are living in. But the interesting thing about it, and the perplexing thing about it, is that technology is like every other tool of human beings: That's all it is. And in order for technology to work, it still has to be used by people who have good values, a strong background, and who choose life, who choose their future, who choose what is right for themselves and their country.

Our Nation has a lot of challenges that we have to meet together if we're going to make sure the American dream is available for all young people without regard to their background, if we're going to see that our country remains the strongest country in the world, if we're going to see this country come together instead of being divided by race, by region, by income.

We've got a lot of challenges to meet. Some of them are obvious. We have to do a better job of strengthening all families and giving all children a chance at a good childhood through things like better nutrition programs and immunization programs and Head Start for kids who need it. We have to provide excellence in educational opportunities for a lifetime now, not even just for children kindergarten through 12th grade, through things like a better student loan program and more college scholarships and the national service program and the program that first brought me here, the national education goals, giving schools the grassroots tools they need to meet high national standards of educational attainment for all of our young people; through economic strategies to create more high-wage jobs in the places that don't have

them. We've got a lot of work to do. But in the end, if you think about it, we cannot succeed in any of these challenges unless first we deal with the problems of crime and violence and gangs and drugs, for in the absence of safety, people are not free.

I don't know how many of you saw—I'm sure many of you did—the gripping, painful pictures coming across our airwaves from the Middle East in the last few days, where innocent children were killed by suicide bombers bent on destroying the peace process in the Middle East. But I couldn't help—I was so moved by the interviews with children, with young people. And it struck me just so clearly there that Israel is a very great democracy, but if every child goes to bed at night afraid, it is not a free country.

And the same thing is true here. If you are imprisoned from within by drugs, or from without by a fear that you can't even walk down the street without looking over your shoulder, this is not a free country and you are not a free person. And you can never be everything that you ought to be unless you are free. Part of it involves your choice to choose life and a future. Part of it involves what we can all do together to make sure that nothing takes that future, nothing takes that life away from you.

And that is in many ways our most fundamental mission, because from it all else flows: your mission to decide what kind of person you're going to be; our mission to decide what we're going to do to make sure you get the chance to become that person. And in our country it still means—even though the crime rate is down, even though drug use is way down from where it was at its peak, we still have a lot of work to do. We have to get rid of the guns that turn arguments into terrible tragedies, like the one that took the life of C.J. Brown. We have to take back our streets so that mothers and fathers don't have to be afraid when a son or daughter is waiting for a ride after work, like Julie Ferguson was on the night she was killed.

So that's why I want to talk to you about this. And I have a real perspective, I think, about the whole drug and crime and violence problem. I grew up in the sixties when most people your age—when I was your age, they just sort of got into this business. They didn't really believe drugs were dangerous until it

nearly destroyed our generation. I heard General McCaffrey, who served with great distinction and valor in Vietnam, talking about, yesterday, how in our generation when we were younger, the United States military was nearly destroyed by it. I had a brother who nearly lost his life because of a drug problem. I know a lot about this.

And we have seen this incredible progress in the drug issue in the last several years where drug usage has gone way down, still going down among people 18 to 34, but now casual drug use going up again among people under 18. We have to stop that. We see the crime rate going down in America, the murder rate going down, the violence rate going down, but casual violence among people under 18 going up again. There are people in this conference with me today who've become friends of mine who once were members of gangs and have devoted the rest of their lives to stopping young people from making that mistake, trying to get them to choose life. And we have to do that.

I tell you today, the most perplexing challenge facing us is how to make sure that drug use goes down among people who are under 18, that violence continues to go down among people who are under 18. We do not want to lose any more children. We don't want to rob any more people of their future. We have to fight these things whenever and wherever we see them.

Let me begin by saying that one of the most disturbing findings in a lot of the national surveys is that more and more young people in your age group, and maybe you're among them, seem to believe that drugs are not dangerous anymore. That is factually wrong. It's not only wrong about cocaine, it's not only wrong about methamphetamine; it's wrong about marijuana. It is just wrong. We know that the toxic content of marijuana alone, for example, is roughly 3 times greater than it was 30 years ago. It is not true that they are not dangerous. They are illegal and therefore wrong, but they are also dangerous.

And I'll say again, I nearly lost my only brother. I'm not just telling you as a President. This is not a political speech. This is a personal statement. And there is no reason for the people of this country who happen to be under 18 to start seeing drug use go up again and violence go up again when the future for you is the brightest future any group of Americans have

ever known, if you can make the transition into this new high-tech age.

So no matter what we do with the laws and all the things that we should be doing, you have to make the right decision first. And I want to say, one of the reasons that we wanted to come here to have this conference at Roosevelt instead of some hotel or Government building is because of what you have done at this school, because the students, the teachers, and the parents of this school are doing such a remarkable job of fighting drugs and violence. They're not a perfect stranger here, drugs and violence, but this community has come together to send them packing. And I thank you for that. The way you're doing it is a lesson for all of America.

I've spent a lot of time saying what the Government can do and what the Government cannot do. We cannot solve the drug problem from Washington. We can't stamp out youth violence just by passing laws. We can't even do it by giving resources to local communities unless they are properly used. Each of us has our own role to play. Our Government has a responsibility which we have tried to fulfill.

The crime bill we fought for in 1994 is helping to put 100,000 more police officers on the street. That helps to deter crime, and it is working everywhere it's being used aggressively.

We banned 19 kinds of assault weapons, and you've already heard that we passed the Brady bill to require a 5-day waiting period before people can buy handguns. And tens of thousands of people who have criminal records now have failed to get guns. This is a safer country because of that.

We passed the "three strikes and you're out" law to put the most dangerous criminals behind bars for life. We are fighting against domestic violence as never before because of that crime bill. And we're trying to help thousands of schools to fight drugs and violence with drug education and gang prevention and increased security. We're supporting programs like the D.A.R.E. program, which I think is doing a wonderful amount of good in elementary schools throughout our country. I know that that can work.

We also made it a national Federal crime for any person under the age of 18 to carry a handgun except when supervised by an adult. Last year I fought for a law requiring every State to expel any student who brings a gun to a school for a year, no excuses. You have

a zero tolerance policy for guns here at Roosevelt. We ought to have a zero tolerance for guns in every school in America. You should never worry about your safety when you're in school.

We've launched an aggressive campaign to crack down on advertising to convince young people to begin smoking. Cigarette smoking is now rapidly becoming the greatest cause of future health dangers to young people in America. Three thousand children start smoking every day, even though it's illegal in every State; 1,000 will have their lives shortened as a result. Don't let that happen to you. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you started, stop. It could be the best thing you ever do for your health.

You heard General McCaffrey a few moments ago. The National Government has a responsibility that is embodied by General McCaffrey to do everything we can to try to stop the flow of drugs into our country, and to try to deal with it after it comes in our country, to try to help people who have already fallen victims to drug abuse. We're doing everything we can in that regard.

We also, in the crime bill, gave communities some funds that I'm struggling with the Congress to preserve now, not only to tell our young people they should say no to drugs but to give young people in difficult circumstances more things to say yes to, more opportunities to be involved in positive activities and engaged in things that will help to build their lives. That is all our responsibility.

But General McCaffrey cannot do this alone. The President cannot do this alone. The Government cannot do this alone. That's why I say the things you've done here may count for more than anything else.

I was given some notes before I came over here about your grad night program, which I think is a remarkable thing. Every school in the country ought to do that. Your parents know that peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol is always strong, especially on graduation night. But they want you to celebrate your achievement, not end your life. And I think it's a very impressive thing that businesses have supported this, parents have supported it; every year they throw you an all-night party. I don't think it's advisable every week, but I think once a year it's a pretty good idea. For the benefit of the press and the others who are here, the seniors come to school at 11, give their keys and bags

to their parents, load up the buses; they don't come back until 6 in the morning. They can spend the night swimming, playing basketball, dancing, eating all kinds of food. They even have a chance to win a car. I wonder if that gets the participation rate up. *[Laughter]*

Last year—listen to this—622 seniors here; 597 showed up to celebrate. That's an amazing thing. That's an amazing thing. That's the kind of community spirit and commitment we need all across this country. And today I want you to know that we're getting that kind of community spirit in other ways as well.

Working with the drug czar's office, the leaders of a major American industry have come together to try to do their part. We know the fight against youth drug abuse has to begin at home. We also know that a lot of parents don't always recognize the warning signs of drug abuse and they're unsure about how they should approach their children when they do. Well, what can we do about this? We know that America can do a lot. When people need health advice, they normally turn to their family doctor. We know that the pharmaceutical industry sends sales representatives to see every doctor in his or her office in the entire country. Today I am proud to announce that the 15 major pharmaceutical companies in America are launching a \$33 million campaign to put the kind of drug education material that parents need in the hands of 400,000 doctors, so that they can give it to parents and we can work to stop this problem earlier.

We have some pharmaceutical executives who are here with us today. I'd like to ask them to stand up and be recognized. Where are they? Here they are. Let's give them a hand. Thank you very much, gentlemen. Thank you. *[Applause]*

All of us who are parents have a big role to play. We are the beginning of how children learn right from wrong. We are the beginning of what children believe about drugs and whether they're safe or unsafe, how wrong it is to break the law. But in the end, it still comes down to all of you and your counterparts all across America.

I will say again, you have a lot of responsibilities. You have responsibilities as students. You have responsibilities as children, responsibilities as members of various organizations. Your most important responsibility now is still to you. Your most important responsibility is to choose life.

Your most important responsibility is to make the most of your own life. As my wife always says when we have a big argument around our house, life is not a dress rehearsal. That is your most important responsibility.

I know a lot of you have been pressured to do drugs before, and you will be again. And when I tell you you shouldn't do it, you look at me and say, "Look at that—he may be President, but he's still 50 years old and has gray hair. It's easy for him to say." [Laughter] I know that's what you must be thinking. And you're right. It is easy for me to say. But believe it or not, all of us who—adults who are here today were once young, and we're not entirely without our memories. We understand what you're going through. And if we're lucky enough to be parents, we see it firsthand, up close.

There are things we can do: things I can do as President, things these pharmaceutical executives can do, things General McCaffrey and the Vice President can do, things the schools can do. But in the end, when you look at this from my perspective, when what I really want to do with the Presidency is to make sure every American has a chance to live out their dreams, I realize that if large numbers of our young people give up on their dreams, nothing I do will permit me to succeed. And I know there are other people that have a lot more influence than I do. A lot of these entertainers that you cheered for, you may listen to them more. My friend Charles Rayoff from Los Angeles, he used to be in a gang, now spends his life telling kids they shouldn't do that anymore. Maybe he's got more influence over the people on his street than I do. I know this: In the end, you're going to make the decisions about what happens to you; I'm not, and neither is anybody between me and you in the chain of command in our society.

So I say to you in closing, I believe that your future can be the brightest future any generation of Americans have ever enjoyed. I believe that the kinds of things you're going to be able to do because of the explosion of information and technology, because the world is drawing closer together, because America is—look around this room here. This is the most successful, multiracial, multiethnic democracy in all of human history. This is a great thing.

The rest of us, we'll keep doing our part. I want to say a word about Reverend Jackson—you clapped when he was introduced. A long time before either one of us knew we'd be sitting here, 20 years ago—20 years ago next year was the first time I went with Jesse Jackson into a school to hear him give a speech to young people about staying off drugs. Twenty years ago, long before it was the fashionable thing to do, he was out there doing it. I thank you for that. Twenty years ago this year. [Applause] Thank you.

General McCaffrey will keep doing his part. He'll be a great role model and a great leader. But in the end, you have to do it. And let me say, I know most of you are doing the right thing. I get tired of hearing only the bad things about America's younger generation. Most of the younger generation is pretty great, and that's why we're doing as well as we are. I understand that. But if you're in doubt, don't do it. If you're in trouble, get help. If you're doing the right thing, don't be afraid to be a role model, don't be afraid to be a friend.

This country will be the greatest country in human history 50 years from now if we whip the problems that are afflicting childhood; if we give our children back their childhood; if when you turn on the television at night and you see some act of violence on the news, you are surprised instead of just deadened, "Well, that's what I always see."

We've got to make violence the exception, not the rule. We've got to make drug abuse the exception, not the rule. We've got to make the rule what I see out here when I look in your faces: young people who are committed to themselves, committed to their families, committed to their communities, committed to their own future. Choose life and we'll be all right.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:23 a.m. in the gymnasium. In his remarks, he referred to Mark Anderes, student, and Gerald Boarman, principal, Eleanor Roosevelt High School; Gov. Parris Glendening and Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend of Maryland; Prince Georges County Executive Wayne Curry; and civil rights leader Jesse Jackson.