

Statement on House of Representatives Action on Voluntary National Testing for Basic Education Skills September 16, 1997

I am disappointed that the House of Representatives voted tonight to block my proposal for voluntary national tests in the basic skills. These tests will help raise expectations for our students, provide clear standards of achievement in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math, and give parents the tools they need to measure the progress their children are making. They will help our students learn and our schools continue to improve.

Yet the House of Representatives tonight cast a vote for the status quo and against better schools. The same old forces that have resisted education reform over the past decade came together to defeat high national standards in the

basics. They have voted against a plan to improve our schools by raising standards, empowering parents, and increasing accountability.

The House vote is unacceptable, and it will not stand. Last week, by a bipartisan vote of 87–13, the Senate endorsed my plan for voluntary national tests to help students master the basics and embraced my proposal to place them under the control of the independent, bipartisan National Assessment Governing Board. My administration will work hard to make sure that the final legislation reflects the bipartisan support of the Senate and the broad support of the American people.

Remarks to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus September 16, 1997

Thank you very much. Thank you for the wonderful welcome you have given to the Vice President and me. Thank you, Xavier. Thank you, Carmen, Carolina. To the Members of Congress who are here, members of the Hispanic Caucus Institute, members of our administration—all those who were introduced by the Vice President. I'd also like to acknowledge the presence here of the general chairman of our political party, the Democratic Party, Governor Roy Romer of Colorado. Welcome, Governor Romer.

Xavier pointed out that I have been here all 5 years I have been President. I come because I have a good time. *[Laughter]* I like it. I know that here I will see the future of America, the vitality, the energy, the commitment, the passion necessary to make this country what it ought to be. But I have been here five times. *[Laughter]* I mean, those of us who are linguistically challenged—*[laughter]*—always learn a few phrases—you know, *su voto es su voz; mi casa es su casa*. *[Laughter]* Now I can say, *su caucus es mi caucus*. I come here because when I leave here, I feel more alive, I feel more committed, I feel new energy, and I like what I see.

I thank the Members of Congress for their service. I thank the Hispanics who have served in our administration, more than in any other in the past; the members of the Cabinet who are here—Secretary Peña, Ambassador Richardson, Aida Alvarez. To all those in the White House—Maria Echaveste, Mickey Ibarra, Janet Murguia, and others. To my speechwriter, Carolyn Curiel, who I will soon nominate to be Ambassador to Belize; Gloria Tristani, whom I have just selected to serve as the newest member of the Federal Communications Commission.

There is also another person here I want to acknowledge who will have a lot to do with seeing that the face of the Federal Government and the policies of the Federal Government reflect the face and the heart of America. And here with me tonight is my nominee for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Bill Lee. And I'd like to ask him to be recognized.

He grew up a Chinese-American in New York, has spent a lot of his life working for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. He has worked to defend and protect the civil rights of the most vulnerable among us. And I thank

you for your continued support for his nomination.

I'd also like to mention two people who aren't here tonight. We all miss Frank Tejeda whose career ended far too soon, as did his remarkable life. But I want to say again how much I enjoyed working with him and how much I miss him. And I'd also like to say a very special word of appreciation and good wishes to the first Hispanic-American elected to the United States Congress, Henry B. Gonzalez. He has been an irrepressible force for progress. He is an irreplaceable legislator. It has been my great honor to know him for 25 years, long before I ever dreamed I'd be here, and I'm quite sure long before he ever dreamed I would be here. *[Laughter]* But we wish him well, and we'll miss him.

Together, we have begun to prepare our beloved country for the 21st century. Tonight I want to take just a few moments of your time to talk about the work ahead and the responsibility we have to support each other in that work.

It's been nearly 6 years now since I announced my candidacy for President. Many of you started with me, almost all of you finished with me, and we have begun a journey to restore the American dream to everyone willing to work for it, to make America the world's greatest force for peace and freedom well into the next century, and to go forward into that new century in spite of all of our diversity as one America.

We began with a bold new economic course which reduced our deficit 80 percent before the recent budget passed. For all of you who voted for that, I hope that you're out there clapping to yourselves, because you deserve it. We expanded our exports with over 200 trade agreements. We invested in our people and their future. We took on the tough social problems at home and the tough foreign policy problems around the world.

Today, the American people are reaping the results of these last years of effort: unemployment below 5 percent, Hispanic unemployment dropping from over 11 percent to about 7 percent, a drop of over 35 percent; record rates of small business growth with Hispanic-American businesses growing at 3 times the rate of overall business growth; and hundreds of thousands of new Latino homes in this country. Violent crime has dropped 5 years in a row. We've had the largest drop in welfare rolls in history.

All this signals progress. We should be optimistic, we should be hopeful, we should be confident. But we all know we have more to do before every one of our people, every one of your people, and every one of the American people will be prepared to do well in the 21st century.

The first thing we have to do is to continue to expand and improve educational opportunity. I am proud that the budget I just signed represents the largest single increased investment in education since 1965. I fought hard to ensure that it included a 36 percent increase in funding for bilingual and immigrant education, to see that it expands Head Start. It funds our America Reads program to mobilize up to one million volunteer tutors to make sure our children can read well at an early age. It will help us to develop voluntary tests in reading and math to help children learn the basic skills they need to succeed, not to put them down but to lift them up.

It also opens the doors of college to all Americans for the first time in history with the biggest increase in support for people going to college since the GI bill passed 50 years ago. There's the largest increase in Pell grants in more than two decades, a \$1,500 HOPE scholarship tax credit to open the doors of the first 2 years of college to all Americans, and further tax credits for all higher education for people of all ages, because we know we have to have a system of lifetime learning in America, and we should support that for people of all ages.

Despite a strong work ethic and falling unemployment, however, despite exploding numbers of new Hispanic-owned businesses, Hispanic family income is not yet rising. And one of the biggest reasons for this disparity in income is that too many young Latinos continue to drop out of school. The dropout rate for Hispanic-Americans remains far above the rates for whites or African-Americans. Many of these young people leave school for responsible reasons, to begin to help their families by working. But increasingly in a global economy, we must teach our children that responsibility means staying in school and going the whole route.

We have organized an intense effort in the White House to address the dropout problem of Hispanic-American students. I instructed

Gene Sperling, the head of the National Economic Council, Maria Echaveste, who heads our Office of Public Liaison, Mickey Ibarra, who heads our Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, and our Education Secretary, Dick Riley, to evaluate all of our current programs and identify what more we can do right now to help young Latinos reach their potential.

I am pleased that Senator Bingaman and Representative Hinojosa will soon introduce the "National Dropout Prevention Act of 1997" to establish a coordinated national strategy for lower dropout rates for Hispanics and others who should have their dropout rates lower. I want to ask you to help us with this. We need your support.

Let me also say, in the context of education, that balanced budget agreement just set a framework for the next 2 years. Every single year we have to make sure that the congressional appropriations are faithful to the agreement. And I ask your support in helping us and helping the Members of Congress make sure that those investments are there.

And in that connection, let me tell you, I, at least, and I think most of you, are quite concerned by the recent, very narrow decision in the Senate to support the Gorton amendment that would block-grant virtually all Federal education funds to the States. That's a step in the wrong direction, because whatever its intent, the effect of the amendment is to shift funds away from the schools that serve our neediest children. And unless we can persuade them to change it, I will not hesitate to use my veto power to prevent that hasty decision from becoming the law of the land.

Let me also say that that budget did one more thing that I want to emphasize—it did a lot of good things, including providing health insurance for up to 5 million American children, many of whom will be Hispanic children and the children of hard-working people who work all day, every day, but can't get health insurance at work. It also kept a promise I made last year to restore benefits to legal immigrants who come to this country legally, work hard, and contribute to our society. And I thank the Members of Congress who are here who made that possible.

The second thing we have to do is to sell more of our goods and services around the world. We have 4 percent of the world's population, 20 percent of the world's income, 96

percent of the world's consumers live somewhere else. The growing developing economies are growing at three times the rate of our European and other traditional trading partners. We have no choice but to compete for those new markets.

Indeed, 70 percent of our export growth this year comes from our neighbors—Canada to the north, and all the other neighbors are to our south, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, South America—70 percent of our growth is there. Now, the legislation I sent to Congress today to renew the President's traditional authority to negotiate trade agreements, to open markets to our products, and create good jobs, contains important provisions that will enable me to negotiate to protect both worker rights and the environment. And it will involve Congress every step of the way.

But I say again, it is in our interest to open these markets. Week after week, I read of these European leaders going to South America, saying, "America doesn't care about Latin America. Europe cares about Latin America. America is sitting up there sitting on its gain. We want you to be allied with Europe."

I say, they are our friends. I have worked hard to establish a good relationship, and I think we should go forward with fair, balanced trading agreements that will help our economy and help our relations.

I want to say a special word of thanks to Congressman Becerra and his allies in the Hispanic Caucus for the contributions that they made when I last went to Latin America several months ago, when I went to Mexico and Central America and to the Caribbean. Congressman Becerra and Congressman Reyes went with me; Congressman Romero-Barceló joined us in the Caribbean.

In a few weeks, I'll be going for a week's visit in Brazil and Argentina and Venezuela, and I'm looking forward to working with you, Congressman Becerra, and with the Caucus to make this productive for America as well. Thank you very much.

Let me make one other comment now about the last thing that I think we have to do. Our journey into tomorrow is about more than economics. It's about the kind of people we are and how we relate to each other. It's about whether we can really learn to not only tolerate each other, not even just to respect each other, but to celebrate the fact that people who are

so different share this land together and want to share its future together and deserve to share its future together because we are bound together by common values, by faith and family and work and community and service to country.

Now, in order to do that, we have to face some facts. The first fact is that we still have some unfinished business in this country, some discrimination that we have not resolved. It still exists. The second fact is that all those people that want to get rid of affirmative action carry a heavier burden than they have yet borne to show about what they were going to do to replace it, to guarantee everybody has an equal opportunity.

The third thing we have to do is to treat each other respectfully and honestly in all of our dealings, particularly in putting together our political system. So in that connection, let me just make one comment more about the census coming up in 2000 and the whole issue of sampling. My sole goal is to have the most accurate count of Americans. I have no other political agenda. I have never been involved in this in any way, shape, or form. Every expert who has reviewed the census process, including a recent report from the National Science Foundation, says that the sampling method the Census Bureau proposes to use in the year 2000 is designed to count hard-to-find Americans, including the homeless and some minorities, not to leave them out. We are not interested in counting people who do not live here and do not exist, but we want to make sure, finally, that everybody who is here is counted in the census of the American people in the year 2000.

If we're going to be one America, we have to make sure our immigration laws are fair and humane to all. To that effort, we have undertaken two initiatives I want to mention briefly. First, we're seeking to extend the legal authority that permits people to obtain permanent immigration status without having to leave our country, often leaving their families and their jobs behind. And second, we're working to enable some Central Americans and others who have already made lives for themselves here in the United States to be considered for permanent status under less stringent rules in place prior to the passage of the recent immigration bill.

But the most important thing we can do is to really make up our minds that we're going to share the future together. The reason that I organized this national conversation on race

for the next year and had an advisory board constituted, including Linda Chavez-Thompson, who is well-known to many of you, is that it bothers me that so few Americans have really thought about what this country is going to be like in 20 or 30 or 40 years.

Within 5 years, our largest State, California, will have no majority race. Hawaii already has no majority race. Hispanic-Americans are the fastest growing American minority, but within a matter of decades, we'll all be members of some racial or ethnic minority.

Now, people have said for years—maybe for over 200 years, maybe going all the way back to the beginning—that America is not a place, a nation, that is about a particular religious creed or a particular race or even a particular place; America is just a set of ideas. We are about to find out. We are about to find out.

And so I say to all of you, when I come here and I feel your energy, your spirit, your patriotism, your dreams, your affection for each other and for your country, that is what I want every American to feel. And that's what I want you to be able to feel about every other American. And we have a heavy responsibility here. No other great democracy like ours has ever been so diverse, and yet people living together so closely. No one has ever tried to do this. We are trying to do this against the backdrop of reading in the last several years about all of the problems, from the Middle East to Bosnia, to Northern Ireland, to Africa, to you name it.

We say to the bottom of our soul, we don't believe in any of that. We don't seek, any of us, to lift ourselves up by putting someone else down. We are simply trying to create a country where everybody's responsible, has opportunity, where we're drawing together more closely every day, and where we're still trying to promote what we believe in around the world.

You, as the fastest growing group of Americans, have a special responsibility to make sure that message pierces the mind and heart of every one of your fellow citizens, because if it does, we'll take care of the economics, we'll take care of the other work we have to do. If we can get our hearts right and our heads straight about how we're going to do this together, we will get to the next century with this country still the greatest nation in human history.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:15 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Representative Xavier Becerra, chair, and Carmen Votano,

vice chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute; and Carolina Reyes, wife of Representative Becerra.

Remarks on Proposed Tobacco Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

September 17, 1997

The President. Thank you very much. Mr. Vice President, Secretary Shalala, Secretary Glickman, thank you for your work. Thank you, Bruce Reed. I'd like to say a special word of thanks to David Kessler for the work he did—historic work he did at the FDA when he was here. Thank you, Dr. Koop, and members of the public community who are here. To Members of Congress, the attorneys general, the representatives of plaintiffs in the private litigation—and we have one of the injured parties here representing all of them—we thank all of them for coming today.

This is a time of prosperity and hope and optimism for America, with our economy improving, making progress on our social problems, our efforts to lead the world to a more prosperous and peaceful future making headway. But I think we all know that this country still has some significant challenges, especially in the health field. And if we think about what we want America to be like in the 21st century, the health of our people and especially the health of our children must be paramount in our thinking, in our vision, and in our efforts. That's why a year ago I worked with the FDA and we launched this nationwide effort to protect our children from the dangers of tobacco by reducing youth access to tobacco products, by preventing companies from advertising to our children.

The purpose of the FDA rule was to reduce youth smoking by 50 percent within 7 years. Earlier this year, a Federal judge in North Carolina said that the FDA has the authority to regulate tobacco products to protect the health of our children. There have also been other examples of litigation progress, as you know, brought by private plaintiffs and by the attorneys general. Now, these victories for public health drove the tobacco companies to the bargaining table. They

extracted concessions that would have been literally unthinkable just a short time ago.

I want to say a special word of thanks to the attorneys general and the other parties who worked hard to negotiate this settlement. Everyone knows we would not be here had it not been for their foresight, their determination, and their relentless efforts.

Now we have this unprecedented opportunity to enact comprehensive tobacco legislation, working with all the parties involved, the Members of Congress, the attorneys general, the representatives of injured parties, the public health community, the tobacco farmers, and others. We have moved from confrontation and denial and inertia to the brink of action on behalf of our children, and that is all to the good.

Today I want to challenge Congress to build on this historic opportunity by passing sweeping tobacco legislation that has one goal in mind: the dramatic reduction of teen smoking. In the coming weeks I will invite congressional leaders from both parties to the White House to launch a bipartisan effort to enact such legislation.

There are five key elements that must be at the heart of any national tobacco legislation. Reducing teen smoking has always been America's bottom line. It must be the industry's bottom line. That is why I believe the first thing any tobacco legislation must include is a comprehensive plan to reduce teen smoking, including tough penalties. These penalties should be non-tax-deductible, uncapped, and escalating to give the tobacco industry the strongest possible incentive to stop targeting children as new customers.

One of the surest ways of reducing youth smoking is to increase the price of cigarettes. Today I call for a combination of industry payments and penalties to increase the price of cigarettes by up to a dollar and a half a pack