

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner November 18, 1997

Thank you. Thank you very much for being here tonight. I won't take a lot of time because I want to just sit and visit. But I would like to just begin with a story.

Yesterday I was in Wichita, Kansas, coming back from California, and I visited the Cessna airplane manufacturing facility—not the plane facility but their training facility for people they're trying to move from welfare to work. And we went there for a number of reasons. One was to announce that we now have 2,500 businesses who have committed to be part of our partnership to hire people from welfare and put them into the workplace. These 2,500 businesses are small, medium, and large. Seventy-five percent of them are small businesses, but combined they have over 5 million employees.

The other reason I went there is because the way this Cessna project works is the way I'd like to see America work, not only in this issue but a lot of others. They receive support for a number of the things they've done from the Labor Department and from the Housing and Urban Development Department, and of course they have the framework of the welfare reform bill. But here's what they do: They go out and take people—many of them the hardest to place people on welfare—and they put them through a 3-month training program. And then if they go through that, they put them through a 3-month sort of pre-job program. And if they get through both, they get an automatic guaranteed job at Cessna at high wages and good benefits.

And some of these people have very, very difficult home circumstances. They're not just—they're not taking the most well-educated people who just temporarily hit a bad patch and get on welfare. A lot of these folks are high school dropouts. Many of them are women who have been abused in a domestic setting. And they actually have a housing development across the street from the training center to give temporary housing to anybody who either doesn't have a car or has been kicked out of their house because of a violent situation.

And I'm telling you, it was the most exhilarating thing. I was introduced by two women who graduated from this program, and then I

met their children. And when it was all over, I looked at the man who was with me and I said, "This is why I got into public life: to be a part of things like this, to change lives in this way, to do something that works."

And of course, having a good economy has helped. They have 1,000 more employees than they had 4 or 5 years ago. But the main thing is, it's fresh evidence that we can make the country work if we do something that makes sense and we do it together and it's consistent with our values.

So for all of you who have made any contribution to the fact that we have the lowest unemployment rate and the lowest crime rate in 24 years and the biggest drop in welfare in history, and we've grown the economy while making the air and water cleaner and the food supply safer and having fewer toxic waste dumps, that we've built more jobs but tried to help families with the family and medical leave law and tax cuts to raise their kids or adopt children or send their kids to college—I hope you'll take a lot of pride in that.

We've got a lot of challenges up the road, but at least no one in America could doubt today that we can make this country work and that when we make it work for everybody, you see the kind of profoundly humbling and awesome stories I saw in Wichita yesterday.

I'd also like to remind you that elections are contests of ideas and perceptions. And I think in a rational world, where everybody had equal access to the voters, our party would be in better shape than it is today, because in '93 we had a big fight over the economic direction of the country, and I think the evidence says we were right and they were wrong. But they profited from it.

In '94 we had a big fight over our crime policy, and we stood up to the people who said I was going to take their guns away if we passed the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban. And I think the evidence is, we were right and they were wrong.

I think the evidence is our environmental policy, our education policy, our family leave policy—all these things, I think, our party has been on the right side of history and on the right

side of the basic values of America. And I think the more people like you help us to get our message out and make our points, the more you'll change America and the more, parenthetically, people will know who did what, when, and why.

So there is a direct connection between what I saw in Wichita yesterday and your presence

here tonight. And we have to make a lot more of those stories in the future. And I'm very grateful to you for your role in doing that.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:44 p.m. in the Chesapeake Room at the City Club of Washington.

Statement on Signing the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998

November 18, 1997

I have signed into law H.R. 1119, the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998." This Act authorizes fiscal year 1998 appropriations for military activities of the Department of Defense, military construction, and defense activities of the Department of Energy. Although I have reservations about some provisions in this Act, it supports a large number of my Administration's defense program and policy priorities. Moreover, the conferees' revision of the bill satisfactorily addresses several onerous provisions that were included in previous versions that my Administration opposed.

This Act provides for a strong national defense, maintains high military readiness, supports our commitments to a better quality of life for our Armed Forces and their families, and authorizes investment programs necessary to modernize the equipment that our forces use. By providing the necessary support for our forces, it ensures continuing American global leadership.

The Act demonstrates that we can maintain a robust defense while achieving a balanced Federal budget. It supports a wide range of quality of life initiatives, including a 2.8 percent military pay raise, an increase in aviation officer career incentive pay, a doubling of the aviation officer career retention bonus, and increases in hazardous duty pay and the family separation allowance. I am also pleased that this Act provides resources to support most of the recommendations of the Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review. In particular, it supports major procurement programs, such as the F-22 and V-22 aircraft, central to modernizing our forces for the 21st century.

The Act also provides strong support for the Chemical Demilitarization Program, crucial for implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention for which the Senate provided advice and consent to ratification earlier this year. It also provides the President new authority to call up 30,000 volunteers from the Individual Ready Reserve for active duty. This gives the Secretary of Defense greater flexibility in tailoring reserve call-ups and enables him to make greater use of the unique skills found in the Individual Ready Reserve.

I am very disappointed, however, that H.R. 1119 imposes restrictions on the Department of Defense's ability to contract with the private sector for the maintenance of weapon systems and components. Both the Quadrennial Defense Review and the Defense Reform Task Force recommended relief from current laws that constrain the Department's efforts to competitively outsource depot maintenance workload. By further restricting, rather than facilitating, such competitive outsourcing, the Act will limit the Department's flexibility to increase efficiency, preserve readiness, and save taxpayer dollars. The Act also changes the terms under which public-private competitions for work at closing maintenance depots can be conducted. Some of these changes should prove helpful, but other changes will likely make the Department's job more difficult. Nevertheless, the Secretary of Defense has indicated that the Department has flexibility to proceed with the remaining public-private competitions in a way that is fair to both sides. The Secretary has pledged to implement the Act so as to encourage all bidders, public and private, and to do everything possible