

the people who founded this Nation. But I believe it would make them very, very proud.

Thank you for what you do and for what, together, we will do to make our country stronger in this new era. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. in the ballroom at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Sandy Robertson, chairman, Robertson Stevens.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Disaster Assistance in Oakland, California

February 26, 1998

The President. First, let me thank all of you for meeting with me today. I'm very interested in this project. One of the things that I promised myself when I ran for President was that if I got elected, I would give this country a first-rate disaster response operation through FEMA. When I was the Governor of my home State, Mayor Harris' other home State—[laughter]—and Mr. Witt was my State emergency services director, we had the highest frequency of tornadoes in the country. And we had some very serious flooding and a lot of other natural disaster problems. And it seemed to me that the United States Government owed it to the American people, basically in a completely non-political way, to have the highest level of confidence, as well as common sense and humanity, in response to emergencies. And we have worked very hard to give that to the American people, and unfortunately, we've had more opportunities to practice in California than any other place in the country because of all the difficulties that the people here have faced. But it's terribly important.

Yesterday I was in Florida dealing with the worst tornado there in 50 years and had, as you know, almost 40 people killed there. And we are very well aware of all the difficulties of El Nino here. But I just wanted to begin by saying I think this is an important part of our national obligation to one another, to deal with these things in the proper way.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about the project here, but first let me say that the people of California and now the people of Florida are giving the people of the United States some very painful examples of the excesses of this El Nino, which is apparently the strongest one in this century. We are doing what we can to help. Mr. Witt and I have been talking about

this now ever since we were in Florida yesterday and flying up here.

Based on his recommendations, we're adding four more California counties to the disaster list: Los Angeles, Orange, Stanislaus, and Trinity. We're announcing that all 35 counties are available for public assistance, and they will be eligible also, the ones on the disaster list, for individual assistance and for help with debris removal and other emergency proceedings.

The Federal Highway Administrator is here. We are releasing another \$20 million, in addition to the \$20 million announced last week by the Vice President, to help rebuild the road system. FEMA has already sent about \$5 million for disaster housing assistance. And SBA, HUD, and Labor are also providing support. But we are going to provide another million and a half dollars for emergency watershed funding from DOA to repair flood damage in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. So we're going to do the very best we can to help deal with these problems now.

The thing that I think is important as I have seen Californians deal with flooding, earthquakes, fires, hurricanes, you name it—I told somebody after the Northridge earthquake that California had been through so much I kept waiting for the pestilence to appear. [Laughter] But one of the things that I've been most impressed by is how quickly some visionaries in California have moved from dealing with the disasters to trying to prevent them and trying to accept the fact that there is a high probability of natural hazards in this area but that with enough work they might be prevented, or at least some significant number of them might be prevented from becoming devastating disasters.

For every dollar we spend on prevention, we save two or more in future disaster cost. We know that. Therefore, the balanced budget plan that I presented contains \$50 million to launch this Project Impact to build disaster-resistant communities through partnerships with the private sector, volunteer groups, community organizations. FEMA has already launched seven of these pilot projects, and we will have a Project Impact community in every State by this fall. So I think that's very good news.

I'm glad that Harris Wofford is here. Our AmeriCorps volunteers are going to be joining our efforts by the spring break initiative, coordinating disaster reduction efforts in communities of Project Impact. And in Oakland, the Collaborative Agencies for Responding to Disasters is joining the Corporation for National Service and FEMA to mobilize hundreds of high school students to carry out preventive measures in over 500 low-income and elderly housing complexes. That's very, very good news.

It seems to me that Project Impact can become a real model for every community in the country. And it's an example of my idea of the proper role of Government as partner, as catalyst, as giving people the tools to deal with their own challenges and make the most of their own lives.

In Seattle, the business community has matched a million dollars that we put into Project Impact with \$6 million in private money. And they're undertaking a really very impressive comprehensive effort. We'll have 50 Project Impact communities, and we need 500 business partners by the end of this year. I hope we will get them. I think we will.

Let me say I look forward to the discussion today. I want to hear from you. I want to get the best ideas I can about what else we can do. We want common sense, innovative opportunities to help people deal with profoundly human challenges.

Mr. Witt, you might want to give us a little update on where we are in southern California, and then we'll just go around the table. I'd like to hear from everybody here.

[At this point, the roundtable discussion began.]

The President. One of the things that I hope will happen is that Project Impact and all the communities where it operates will be able to get a higher percentage of people who are willing to basically continue to be prepared, con-

tinue to train, and then continue to do things like you just talked about on the gardening on a systematic basis.

Interestingly enough, this is a problem that is common to all human affairs. If you think about the last time something bad happened to you in some way, the longer ago it was the less likely you are to worry about it anymore. It's just human nature in all human affairs. And one of the big challenges we have in maintaining the readiness of our military forces is the fact that, since the cold war, the general perception is that, well, there are all these things we don't have to worry about.

And then you say, "Well, why don't you have to worry about it?" Well, because you have this military force. But if all of a sudden you forget it and you act like you don't have to worry about it, then one day you don't have it anymore.

So this is a common problem in all human affairs. And one of the things that I was so excited about this thing was that maybe we could actually get a high density of people, real citizens in every community in all these various walks of life we've been hearing about here, who will at least maximize the chance that people will be ready the next time something bad happens, and that they will have done as many things as you can possibly do to minimize the damage of whatever it is that occurs.

That's all you can do in human life. The rest of it's up to the good Lord. That's something we just—there aren't any guarantees. But I think it's very important what you're saying, and I just hope that this project will get more people either like you or to listen to you.

[At this point, the roundtable discussion continued.]

The President. One of the things I was going to suggest—and it may be a hair-brained idea; wouldn't be the first one I had—but the position you're in with this mudslide business, it's not as if you deliberately ignored a clear and present danger. For example, the last time we had a big flood at home in the 1990's, we had all these little towns just flooded out along the Arkansas River. Now, there were some people who had built in the 100-year flood plain and some people who built below that, that basically, reasonably should have known that every 25 years that was going to wipe out. I don't think we had three 100-year floods in about 10 years,

so I guess we can wait 300 years before we have another one. *[Laughter]*

But anyway, it's not that sort of situation. It's just a question of what happens if you have a vulnerable ecostructure, as you do in California, and you have a lot of people that have to live somewhere; there always may be kind of unforeseen circumstances. And one of the things that I was kind of interested in was whether you might be able to devise some partnerships with insurance companies where you get all the people involved in litigation, all the people involved in all this and then you say, okay, give me the laundry list of things everybody in this neighborhood has to do, but if they do it, then you can get kind of a blanket insurance policy. Even if it's got a fairly sizable deductible, it would protect you against what you're worried about now.

And I think that in a place like California where—see, all these things relate to one another. For example, if you have an earthquake that doesn't damage your home profoundly, but loosens the foundation a little bit, then you're more vulnerable to a mud-slide that may come along 6 years later. I mean, all these things reinforce one another. And so if there could be some way that, growing out of this Project Impact, there could be some more comprehensive look at insurance plus prevention plus mitigation plus all these things going together, I think it might bring a lot of peace of mind to all those people on your block now, for example, that are worried to death they're going to have a study and the study's going to say, come up with 3 times your annual income if you want to save your house. That's like saying if I were 25, I could jump higher. *[Laughter]* It's nice to know, but you've got a pretty good idea before you do the study.

Let's talk a little more about mitigation, though. I know a lot of you have been involved in this.

[At this point, the roundtable discussion continued.]

The President. Well, let me say this. One of the things—I would like to ask you all to think about this, and I want to call on our host mayor here in a minute to close, but I—one of the things that I would like to see come out of this—keep in mind, I have asked for a substantial amount of money but spread across the Nation the \$50 million is not a great deal of

money—what we want to do is help get as many of these projects put together as possible. And if they work, then you can, coming up out of this project here and in other places like it, kind of give us a sense and provide evidence that if we shifted some of our spending programs priorities—whether it's in housing or highways or whatever—to do more prevention, this is something that would not only meet with widespread public support but actually that the money would be well spent because you've actually gone through a grassroots planning process, and you know kind of what needs to be done; you've identified the things and you can guarantee that we will get that 2 to 1 return we were talking about.

So I hope you'll all be thinking about this. As you go along, you do all this work you're going to do anyway just think about—just for example on this whole business of vegetation. You know, in addition to planting gardens, there are plenty of places that, if they were more properly vined, you'd have all kinds of other stuff going: You would reduce soil erosion; you would reduce the impact of a flood. Now, if the flood is big enough, it will wash anything away, but we're talking about within range.

All these things there are possibilities for, should this be part of the conservation reserve program, for example, the agriculture program, all these kind of things. There's a gazillion options we could have here that will present themselves to us as you work through this.

[At this point, the roundtable discussion continued.]

The President. This has been very interesting to me, and it's a wonderful reaffirmation of the citizenship of all of you, not only our AmeriCorps people, but all this is really ultimately about citizen service. I thank you very much. And we'll try to do our part, get this going, and get it going across the country.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:24 p.m. in the auditorium at the Scottish Rite Community Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Elihu Mason Harris of Oakland.