

Remarks Announcing the Selection of Lieutenant Colonel Eileen M. Collins, USAF, as the First Woman Space Mission Commander
March 5, 1998

I'm getting my facts straight. [Laughter] First of all, let me say that Hillary and I are delighted to have all of you here. The story Hillary told about her fascination with space is not apocryphal; it is real. I heard it a long time before I ever thought she would be telling it before a microphone. And so this is a thrilling day for us.

I want to thank Dan Goldin and all the people at NASA for doing an absolutely superb job. Thank you, Colonel Collins, for your remarks and your example. To the Members of Congress who are here, Congressman Houghton and Representatives Jackson Lee, Eddie Bernice Johnson, and Zoe Lofgren, thank you for your support. I want to thank my Science Adviser, Jack Gibbons, as well as Sally Ride and Jean Phelan, a pioneer aviator, who are here.

Let me also say that Colonel Collins' husband is also a pilot, and when she introduced him to me, she said, "He's not only a pilot, he's a scratch golfer; he's better than you are." [Laughter] And after a brief conversation, we actually concluded it was more likely that I would go into space than that I would ever be as good as he is. [Laughter]

Forty years ago, Life magazine introduced America's first astronauts to the world, noting that the seven *Mercury* astronauts were picked from, quote, "the same general mold." They were all military pilots. They were all in their thirties. They all had crewcuts. [Laughter] They were all men. And they really were all true American heroes. But heroes come in every size and shape and gender. Today we celebrate the falling away of another barrier in America's quest to conquer the frontiers of space and also to advance the cause of equality.

I'm proud to be here to congratulate Colonel Eileen Collins on becoming the first woman to command a space shuttle mission. She may not fit the exact mold of 40 years ago, but she clearly embodies the essential qualities of all our astronauts, then and now, the bold, restless, pioneering spirit that had made our Nation great. And as we've already heard, the story of her life is a story of challenges set and chal-

lenges met. That is also the story of our space program.

When it comes to exploring space and the unknown, the word "impossible" is not in our vocabulary. We have always recognized the limitless possibilities of seemingly impossible challenges.

A generation ago, President Kennedy said within a decade we would send an American to the Moon and bring him safely back to Earth. By 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had left their footprints on the Moon. We said, in our time, that we would visit the planets of the solar system. And last Fourth of July all Americans, with the help of a robot called *Sojourner*, got a chance to rove the surface of Mars and meet red rocks named Scooby Doo and Barnacle Bill.

Thirty-six years after John Glenn made his history-making space flight in a capsule the size of a compact car, he's not only going back into space, but we are poised to build an international space station the size of a football field. America has indeed become, as President Kennedy hoped, the world's leading spacefaring nation, a distinction we must keep in the 21st century.

Colonel Collins will lead us in this effort, commanding a mission to launch a telescope that will allow us to peer into the deepest reaches of outer space. Our balanced budget for 1999 will support, in fact, 28 new space missions, missions that will help us decipher more of the mysteries of black holes, of ancient stars, and of our Earth itself. Indeed, later today NASA will be making some exciting new announcements on the results of the *Lunar Prospector* mission, currently orbiting the Moon.

The knowledge we gain from our space missions could help us treat diseases here on Earth, from osteoporosis to ovarian cancer. It could make our farms more productive. It could help us meet the challenge of global climate change. And perhaps help us to uncover the very origins of life itself.

All Americans, especially our young people, have important roles to play in making these plans a reality. They have to begin by taking

their studies, especially their studies in math and science, seriously.

Last week we learned that our leading spacefaring Nation is not faring very well when it comes to achievement of high school seniors in math and science. This is unacceptable. As we prepare for an information age that will require every student to master not just the basics of reading and math but algebra, geometry, physics, and computer science, I call on every parent, every school, every teacher to set higher expectations for our children. And I call upon all of our students—and I know that Hillary and Eileen will today—to take these challenging courses, so that we can all be prepared for the known and still unknown challenges of the future. And I call on all young girls across America and their parents to take inspiration from Colonel Collins' achievement.

Let me remind you of something she was too modest to say. She has a distinguished degree from Syracuse University. She came up through the ROTC program. She began her high school education in community college. I want every child in this country to know that we have opened the doors of college to all Americans, that community college is virtually free for all children now, that everybody can make this start and nobody needs to put blinders on their aspirations for the future. She is proof.

I want to say, especially to the little girls who will hear Eileen Collins and these who will see her and to their parents, let's remember that at a time when very few girls were taking the hardest math and science courses, Colonel Collins was taking them and mastering them. She did in part because of the unfailing support of her parents who set high expectations and told her she could do anything she set her mind to. She never gave up, and one by one her dreams came true.

I think our country owes a great debt of gratitude to her parents, and I hope that more will follow her direction. And perhaps with her well-justified new fame, notoriety, the greatest mark Colonel Collins will make will not just be written in the stars but here on Earth, in the mind of every young girl with a knack for numbers, the gift for science, and a fearless spirit. Let us work to make sure that for every girl and every boy, dreams and ambitions can be realized, and even the sky is no longer the limit.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:34 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Colonel Collins' husband, J. Patrick Youngs, and her parents, James and Rose Collins; former astronaut Sally K. Ride; and aviation pioneer Jean Ross Howard-Phelan.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare and an Exchange With Reporters

March 5, 1998

The President. Good day, everyone. I am glad to be joined here by members of the Medicare Commission. In a few moments we will talk for the very first time about what we have to do as Americans to preserve Medicare, a system that has served our country so well for 33 years now. It's more than a program; it is a way we honor our duty to our parents and build a future for our children. It has been one of the great achievements of American society in the 20th century.

We've already done a lot in the last few years to strengthen Medicare: The balanced budget will extend the Medicare Trust Fund for at least

a decade; \$20 billion has been saved by reducing fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in the system; we're giving people on Medicare a wider range of health plan choices and preventive services, including mammograms and diabetes management.

When Medicare was first passed into law, President Johnson said, and I quote, "It proved that the vitality of our democracy can shape the oldest of our values to the needs and obligations of changing times." I'm confident that the Medicare Commission will help us to build a new consensus to meet the challenges of a new era, strengthening Medicare for the 21st century