

Remarks to Volunteers at Cardozo High School *January 19, 1998*

The President. Thank you. Are you having a good day?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Me, too. I want to thank Mr. Ballard, the principal, and I want to say a special word of appreciation to the officials who are here with me today: first, the head of the Corporation for National Service, Harris Wofford; DC City Council Chairperson Charlene Drew Jarvis; General Becton; School Board President Harvey; Terri Green, the PTA president; the other school board members; and representatives of council members. And especially I want to thank all the volunteers in the AmeriCorps NCC program. And thanks for this; I like my little jacket here.

Thirty-one years ago Martin Luther King came to this very neighborhood and urged the people here to engage in citizen service to rebuild their lives and their community and their future. That's what you're doing here today. You are honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King and answering the highest calling of citizenship in this country.

My staff did a little research to illustrate what we could all do if we just gave back a little to our community. And they swear that if just everybody with the last name of Clinton and Gore in America—just the people whose last name is Clinton and Gore in America—would put in 2 hours a week, they could paint every classroom and every public high school in America by Martin Luther King's next birthday.

Now, that gives you an idea of what we can do if we serve and work together. That's why I have invested so much in AmeriCorps, our national service program that I'm so proud of. And all of you who are involved in the program, let me thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope that you're getting a lot out of it. I know the AmeriCorps volunteers I painted with today made me feel proud that we started this.

That's why I have strongly supported, along with all the former Presidents, General Colin Powell and the Presidents' Summit on Service and the work that he is doing and that tens of thousands of people across America are doing to give all of our children a good chance in life.

But finally let me say that this country will never be all that it can be and your future will never be all that it can be unless we decide we're going to build that future together. We will never be able to bridge the racial and other divides in this country unless we decide we're not only going to work together and learn together but we're going to serve together.

We actually have to believe that we're all better off when our neighbors are better off. We actually have to believe that we'll do better if we go forward together. We actually have to believe that this diversity we have is a blessing; and that the fact that some of us start out life poorer than others is a condition that can be overcome if we work hard to give people who deserve it a hand up; and that as we do that, we are all happier, more fulfilled, and living in a stronger America. That's what this is about.

This is not just about painting the walls of a school, although I passionately believe it's important. I, personally, as a student, preferred old buildings to new ones, but every student deserves to go into a clean building with bright walls and clear windows, sending a signal that the student and his or her future is important.

But you're not just painting a school today, you're painting a very different picture for America's future. And it's a beautiful one because of you.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:49 p.m. in the cafeteria. In his remarks, he referred to Reginald C. Ballard, principal, and Terri Green, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) president, Cardozo High School; Wilma Harvey, president, District of Columbia school board; former Presidents Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George Bush; and Gen. Colin Powell, USA (Ret.), chairman, America's Promise—The Alliance For Youth. The President also referred to the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) program of the Corporation for National and Community Service.