

Remarks to the 75th Annual Convention of the American Federation of Teachers in New Orleans, Louisiana
July 20, 1998

The President. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen of the AFT, Senator Landrieu, Congressman Jefferson, Secretary Slater. Mayor Morial, thank you for hosting this fine group of America's teachers in this wonderful city.

To President Sandy Feldman and Ed McElroy and your newly elected executive VP, Nat LaCour, and all the officers and people who are here. Let me say, when Sandy was up here giving her introduction, my mind was racing back over lots of events going back to early 1992 when we first went to a school in New York together.

Audience member. Cardozo.

The President. Cardozo, that's right; you were there, weren't you? [Applause] Now, anytime I'm talking, if I mention something that gives you an opportunity to flack for your school, you stand up and do it. [Laughter] I won't be offended. I think you ought to be proud of what you do and where you work and the children that you're trying to help to prepare for tomorrow.

And when you think about where we were then as a nation and where we are now, I was so concerned because not only was the economy in the doldrums, but our society was becoming more divided; the crime rates were going up; the welfare rolls were exploding; there were tensions among our people; people were looking for racial or ethnic or religious or political reasons to blame other people for the general problems and challenges we shared as Americans.

One of the things that I always admired most about the AFT was that I felt that you have always found the right balance between being passionately devoted to public education and to the welfare and working conditions of teachers and uncompromising—uncompromising—in your advocacy of high standards and accountability and educational excellence for every single American child.

Shortly before I came out here, your officers told me that Eadie Shanker had decided to give the Medal of Freedom that I awarded to Al to the AFT for safekeeping. I love that. For it was your legacy, your values that he worked

so hard to serve. You take good care of it. He earned it, and so did you.

This is a remarkable time in our country's history, a time of prosperity and confidence and breathtaking change if you think about where we are now compared to where we were on the day that I was fortunate enough to be inaugurated President. I don't say that our administration is 100 percent responsible for all the good things that have happened. That would be foolish. In a free society, the people deserve the lion's share of any change that occurs.

But I will say this, we had new ideas and new policies. We said we would take this country in a new direction. And there were consequences to those decisions, just as there will be consequences to the decisions of those who disagree with us if they hold sway.

And I think every single one of you should feel a personal measure of pride if you helped Al Gore and me win those elections in '92 and '96 because of what has happened—every single one of you.

Because when you hear these statistics—I mean, think about this. Compared to 1992, we have 16 million new jobs and the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years, the lowest crime rate in 25 years, the lowest percentage of our people on welfare in 29 years, the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, the lowest inflation in 32 years, the highest homeownership in the history of the country, and the smallest National Government in 35 years, and the biggest investment in education in our Nation's history. I am proud of that, and you should be too.

Now, today I want to ask you to look ahead at where we are and what our challenges are. And I want to ask you to help me with a lesson plan for America's future. I know you're mildly acquainted with such things. [Laughter] I also know that this union represents people who help you in schools who are not teachers, and I thank all of them, all the support people here who are here. Thank you for your service.

We have to decide what to do with this moment. And I want to talk about education and the role of some other issues. But let me just back up and say, there are three things I want

you to think about. First of all, all these numbers and statistics that I mentioned are very rewarding because they represent real positive changes in real peoples' lives: incomes for ordinary people are up; poverty is down, as Sandy said; 90 percent of our kids are immunized; we've virtually opened the doors of college to everyone who will work for it. I'm proud of all that.

But you know and I know that we face some big long-term challenges. And I'd just like to mention a couple of them, because I want you to talk to your students and to the parents and to the people that you work with about them, because people need to understand that just because times are good, it doesn't mean we should all be relaxing—except if you want to go out in the sun in New Orleans and relax, I'm for it. *[Laughter]* But I don't want it to be a permanent condition for the American people.

Because we have big challenges facing us if we're going to go into the 21st century with the American dream alive for everyone, with America coming together as a community across all of our differences, and with our country leading the world for peace and freedom and prosperity. What are they? Well, let me just mention a few of them.

Number one, we have to save Social Security and Medicare for the baby boom generation. And we have to do it in a way that recognizes that they lift millions and millions and millions of seniors out of poverty but that, as presently constructed, it is not sustainable because when—and I'm the oldest baby boomer, so I can say this—when we retire, at present birth rates and present immigration rates and present retirement rates, there will only be about two people working for every person drawing Social Security. So we have to make some changes. If we make modest changes now, we can avoid drastic changes later. We must do that, and every American must support it. And we must find an American, unified way to do it.

The second thing we have to do is to recognize, as you can see from this sweltering heat, that the Vice President is right: The climate of our country and our globe is changing. The globe is warming. And our principal contribution to it, human beings everywhere, is that we're putting too many greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, primarily because we insist on maintaining Industrial Age patterns of energy use

when all the technology available indicates that you don't have to do that to grow an economy.

So we have got to take advantage of the fact that our children are natural environmentalists, to use them, to empower them, to help us all to find a way to save our planet, to improve our environment, even as we grow the economy. I promise you it can be done, but we've got to get people to think differently. This is a huge education issue.

The third thing we have to do is to prove that we can bring the benefits of this great economic recovery to all Americans—not just to those who have it now—in our inner cities, in our rural areas, our farming areas, on our Native American reservations.

The fourth thing we have to do is to persuade the American people that if we're going to lead the world for peace and freedom and prosperity, we have to be farsighted. We have to pay our way in an interdependent world. That means we can't walk away from our investment in the United Nations. We can't walk away from our investment in the International Monetary Fund.

I was just home for the weekend, and I know what a lot of folks at home think. They think, "Why does Bill Clinton want to spend money on the International Monetary Fund? We've got needs here at home." I'll tell you why. Because unless we help to reform and restore growth in the Asian countries, for example, they won't be able to buy our products and 30 percent of our growth—if you like these 16 million new jobs, if you like this low unemployment, if you like the taxes that are flowing into local government for education because of the economy—somebody has got to buy our stuff around the world, and if they don't have any money, they can't buy it. And if they don't have any money, the value of their currency goes down, so their products they sell here are cheaper. So our trade deficit goes up.

If you want us to grow in America, we have to grow together with our friends and neighbors around the world. We have to be responsible partners, and we've got to teach people that.

Just two other quick points. We've got to be able to live together as one America across all the lines that divide us. Many of you teach in school districts where there are children from 20, 40, 60, 80, maybe even 100 different racial and ethnic groups, speaking dozens of different languages as their native tongues. This is a good

thing for America in the 21st century, in a global economy, an information age.

If we can overcome the demons of racial and ethnic and religious hatred which are bedeviling the world in our time, from Bosnia and Kosovo to Rwanda, to Northern Ireland, to the Middle East, to the conflict between Greece and Turkey, to the difficulties between India and Pakistan, and if you want your country to lead the world away from all that, I can just say this: In order for America to do good throughout the world, we have to be good at home. We have to be one America.

Finally, the last big challenge that I think we face—big challenge for the 21st century—is providing every single child with world-class excellence in education—every child, every child. No one anywhere in the world questions that we offer more rich, quality opportunities for people to go on to college than any other country in the world. We've worked very hard to open the doors of college to everybody who will work for it. But no one who is honest would say we don't have serious challenges in our elementary and secondary education. There are all kinds of different arguments about, well, what caused it or what the problems are or what the solutions are.

You and I, by and large, agree on the solutions. But the main thing we've got to agree on is that this is one of the five or six challenges that will shape the America our children and grandchildren will live in, in the 21st century. If you do not want our country to continue to be divided along the lines of income, to continue to grow more unequal, if you don't want the 21st century to see an America where there are fabulously wealthy, successful people living alongside breathtakingly poor people, isolated in areas where opportunity never reaches, we have to realize that if this is an information age and if the economy is growing by ideas, then it is more important than ever before that educational excellence be universal. And we have to provide that.

Now, I also want to say a few words today about an issue that may seem somewhat mundane to people who've never been in the classroom and faced it, but America has been thinking about it because of all the tragedies in all the schools in the last year or so, and that is the whole issue of school safety and the critical role of a safe classroom and a safe school and

a safe schoolyard play in the work that teachers do.

Every day, you work hard to broaden young minds, to unlock their potential, to sharpen skills. You have faith in the possibilities of our children. If you didn't, you wouldn't be doing this, because just about every one of you could be making more money doing something else. If you weren't devoted to our children, you wouldn't be doing this. It keeps you in front of a chalkboard or a keyboard; it keeps you up late at night grading papers and making lesson plans.

We have tried to be a good partner with you, as Sandy said. I have loved working with you to raise standards, to increase accountability, to improve teaching, to give schools the tools and the flexibility they need to reach the national education goals, to try to help make sure all of our children can read and can log on to the Internet and can go on to college.

We now have, I think, a great challenge before us, because in spite of the fact that this agenda is clearly an integral part of America's economic success over the next few years, believe it or not, there are people who don't want to continue it in Washington and some who downright are committed to undoing it. But I have put before the Congress an agenda to modernize our schools, to reduce class size, to connect every classroom to the Internet, to end social promotion but provide more funding for after-school and summer school programs that work to give our children a chance, to give more schools who are in disadvantaged areas the funds and the support they need to adopt the kind of comprehensive approach that Chicago is pursuing with such success, to give more students in disadvantaged areas mentors and the certainty in junior high school or middle school that they can go on to college if they learn and become good citizens and succeed in school, to provide more funds to put teachers into underserved areas, to do everything I can to help to provide 100,000 more master teachers so that we can do what needs to be done in every school building in the country, and to support your efforts to improve teaching.

I salute Sandy Feldman's plan to improve teacher quality, and I want to support your efforts. I have always been impressed, I will say again, that the AFT was never afraid to say that before a teacher is certified, it is reasonable to have the demonstrated competence of the

teacher. I have always respected that, and I thank you for that.

But I will also say that while I have strongly supported the testing of teachers before they're certified, I also have strongly supported paying them once they are certified and strongly supported having master teachers in every school building in America and doing the things that Sandy outlined in her proposal.

So, as teachers, you're stepping up to your responsibility. I have tried to preserve the gains of the last 5½ years and put forward an ambitious program for the future. And we've had a lot of success working with Congress in a bipartisan way for education. In the balanced budget bill, as Sandy said, we got this huge increase in funding for education, and we got the HOPE scholarship; we got more work-study positions; we got big increases in Pell grants.

We have, earlier than that, got a big improvement in the student loan program to open the doors of college. We've got 1,000 colleges now participating with their kids in the America Reads program, going into your schools. We've got AmeriCorps people; almost 100,000 young people have been in AmeriCorps. When I drove by a grade school this morning on the way here, there were the AmeriCorps volunteers out there with their kids, holding up signs, welcoming me to New Orleans. We have been able to do those things by working together.

Now is the time for Congress to turn away from some of these recent committee votes where they say no to smaller classes, no to modernized schools, no to AmeriCorps. They haven't yet said yes to America Reads. I am pleased that we seem to be making some bipartisan progress with the proposals to prepare teachers for the classroom.

But I ask Congress to support all these proposals. They are not my ideas. They are the ideas of educators. They are the ideas that we know work. All of them came from grassroots America. I was in Philadelphia the other day where the average age of a school building is 65 years. A lot of those buildings are beautiful, but they need rehabilitating.

I was in Florida in a little town where there were 17—count them, 17—trailers outside the major school building because the school population had grown so much. If you want smaller classes, they have to be held somewhere, and there have to be teachers to walk in the classroom. We have got to do this. This is important.

So I ask you to redouble your efforts, to reach out to all Members of Congress without regard to their party and say, "Look, if there's one thing in America, even in Washington, DC, we ought to be able to put beyond partisan politics, it should be education of our children." Now, if you want to fight about whether you believe in vouchers or not, fine, let's have an argument about it. I don't mind that. But while we're arguing about it, don't forget this: Over 90 percent of the people are out there in those public schools. And these ideas are good on their own merit, and they deserve to be implemented and passed without regard to party in Washington, DC. We have the money to do it, it is allocated, and we should do it.

Now, let me also say that you know, better than anybody, learning cannot occur unless our schools are safe and orderly places where teachers can teach and children can learn. Wherever there is chaos where there should be calm, wherever there is disorder where there should be discipline, make no mistake about it, it's not just a threat to our classrooms and to your mission; it is a threat to the strength and vitality of America.

In a recent study, 81 percent of teachers said the worst behaved students absorb the most attention in school, not the struggling students, not the striving students, the worst behaved. Seventy-one percent of all high school students said there were too many disruptive students in their own classes. And only 13 percent of public school students said their classmates were, quote, very respectful of teachers.

Now, teachers can't teach if they have to fight for respect or fear for their safety. Students can't study if there is disorder in a classroom. And the disruption won't change unless there are clear, strict standards for behavior. You know better than anyone that we either have discipline in a classroom or we have disorder and, too often, danger. Hard experience has taught us this lesson all too well. As a nation, therefore, we must recognize that giving you the tools to have a safe, orderly classroom is central to the mission of renewing America.

There is another lesson to be learned from all this. In this case, it is from the overall decline in crime. And let me back up and say one of the cruel ironies of these horrible killings in all these States over the last year or so has been that they have occurred against the backdrop of a dramatic drop in crime and the first

drop in juvenile crime in years and years and years. Crime is dropping around the country because we're getting serious about community policing, effective punishment, and effective prevention. Crime is dropping because whole communities, like Boston, are taking responsibility for their streets and their neighborhoods and because government is giving them the support they need.

I mention Boston because they went 2 years and a few weeks without a single, solitary child under the age of 18 being killed with a gun. That's an amazing statistic.

Now, these things do not happen by accident. They happen by design at the grassroots level, but people must have the tools to do the job. That's the idea behind our efforts to put 100,000 police on the street. When I became President, violent crime had tripled in the last 30 years, and the number of police officers had only increased by 10 percent. You didn't have to be Einstein to figure out that was a mathematical equation for disaster. And the police officers told us we can prevent crime if you give us enough police to walk the streets, to be on the blocks, to know the kids, to know the parents, to know the store owners, to figure out what's going on. So that's what we did.

But if you look at what happened in community after community where the crime rate dropped, they first of all put in place a system that said, "We are going to have respect for the law, and here's the system we're going to have to maximize respect, hold people accountable who don't respect the law." And guess what? More and more people started to follow the law in the first place, to behave as responsible citizens, to walk away from the prospect of criminal conduct.

That's what we've tried to do with school safety. We've worked hard to tighten security, to give you the tools to do that, to strengthen prevention, to toughen penalties. We initiated this nationwide policy of zero tolerance for guns in schools. In the '96-'97 school year, this policy led to the expulsion of about 6,100 law-breaking students. It obviously prevented countless acts of violence. Yet, as we have seen from the recent acts of violence, we have to do more.

When I was in Springfield, Oregon, I was so moved by what the parents of injured children said, the parents in some cases of children who were killed. The teachers who were there talked about the necessity of doing more and

developing the right kinds of intervention strategies. This is terribly important.

And one of the things I came here today to do is to say that in the fall, I will host the first-ever White House conference on school safety, and I want you to be a part of that. We want to bring together educators and law enforcement officers and families whose lives have been touched by these terrible tragedies to find new solutions to this profound challenge.

Again, I ask Congress also to be our partner. And again I say, this should not be a partisan issue. I have proposed a juvenile crime bill to ban violent juveniles from buying guns for life and to take other important steps to give communities much needed support. I've asked that in our balanced budget, \$95 million be allocated to the prevention of juvenile crime. I urge Congress to invest in prevention.

You know, when we talk, those of us who have run for office, we all like to talk about punishment because everybody has known someone who's been hurt, who's been a victim of crime, and because we are outraged when we see children have their lives cut short. And I would point out that in our '94 crime bill we did more to stiffen punishment for crimes under Federal law than had ever been done. But you know and I know that we cannot jail our way out of this problem; we've got to prevent more of these kids from getting in trouble in the first place.

Again I say, this is not a Democratic or a Republican issue. We should simply invest in prevention because the police officers tell us it works, because the teachers tell us it works, because the social workers tell us it works, because the religious leaders tell us it works, because the children themselves tell us it works. We should be investing in a summer jobs program, in the summer school program, in the after-school program because it works.

We also know, by way of lessons, that the small stuff matters, the basics matter. In most schools it's not the sensational acts of violence but smaller acts of aggression, threats, scuffles, constant backtalk that take a terrible toll on the atmosphere of learning, on the morale of teachers, on the attitudes of other students. And that's why setting strict standards and enforcing them can make a powerful difference all across America, as they are doing in many places.

And let me just give three or four examples. Our first effort has to be to get kids inside

the schoolhouse doors and keep them there during school hours. Truancy is more than a warning sign; it is trouble, a gateway to drugs, alcohol, gangs, and violence. Our children will either sit in class or stand on the streets. They'll either learn from teachers or learn from the gang leaders on the streets. It used to be the rule that truancy laws were enforced, that local police knew kids and brought them back to school. But in too many places, that has long since ceased to be the case.

Thankfully, communities again are turning their attention to the old-fashioned remedy of enforcing the truancy laws. In Milwaukee, officers can now stop students on the street during school hours. In Boston, where more than a quarter of the public school students were absent 3 weeks or more this past school year, they now have a strict new promotion policy. If you don't attend, you don't advance.

Other cities are forming truancy task forces, a united front of schools, social services, community police to keep our children in school and out of trouble. This is important. A teacher's day must sometimes seem very long. But we know the school day lasts precious few hours, and there's no time to waste.

The other thing I—next thing I'd like to say is, when the kids are there, they need to feel free, and they need to feel free of danger going to and from school. That's one of the ideas behind this incredible wave of enthusiasm across the country for school uniforms. When I spoke about school uniforms in my 1996 State of the Union Address—besides making half the kids in America mad at me—[laughter]—it struck a lot of people as an idea long out of date. And it was just gathering steam in places like Long Beach, California.

But in the years since, I have been heartened by the flood of interest, from New York to Houston. From Dade County to Chicago, school districts are adopting school uniform policies, and they're finding ways to do it in ways that give the children and the parents and the teachers all a say in how they do it and that don't put poor kids at a disadvantage when they can't afford the uniforms.

But students have told me—I've talked to a lot of students about this in schools that have uniform policies—when one student is no longer obsessed by another student's sneakers or designer jackets and where students are focused not on appearances but on learning, crime and

violence go down; attendance and learning go up. And I am proud of the support we have given to those of you who have done this.

The next thing I'd like to say—and I know you believe this, because you applauded earlier when I mentioned it—is that the responsibility that we adults have for our kids doesn't end when the last school bell rings. After school, an awful lot of children's parents are still working, and there's nobody home to either supervise them there or know where they are or where they're going when they leave school. Well, a lot of kids get in trouble after school, and youth crime is at its peak during the unsupervised hours of 3 to 6. That's why I have said that our schools should remain open, to become community learning centers where children are safe and can learn and grow.

In this budget for 1999, for next year, I have proposed a significant expansion in our investments for before- and after-school programs. And for the later hours when streets become darker and more dangerous, I have often urged communities to install curfews, to follow the example of New Orleans, where Mayor Morial, who is here with us today, put in place community-based curfews with very impressive results, in no small measure because the children are also taken, if they violate curfew, to somebody who can help them if they've got a problem and support them and get them back on the right path. But these are the things that we have to do if we expect you to have a safe learning environment.

I should also say that I think that the character education programs that our Education Secretary, Dick Riley, has done so much to help implement across the country are a positive force for a more disciplined school environment where the little nagging, terrible problems don't occur.

So we're going to have this conference in the fall on school violence. I want the AFT involved. I want the teachers who know what the problems are to participate. But I want to encourage every place to adopt antitrucancy efforts, to consider school uniforms, to look at the curfew issue, to look at character education programs, to look at a new approach to restoring discipline in our schools and order in our children's lives. We can do this. The three R's of the AFT: responsibility, respect, results—that's what school discipline is all about.

In closing, let me say I am always struck by how every challenge in American education has been solved by somebody somewhere. Therefore, I am always frustrated that we have not yet found a way to make sure when somebody somewhere solves a problem, we cannot model that and make sure it's solved by everybody everywhere. That is one of the things that the AFT has been devoted to: finding what works, developing a systematic approach, trying to get it done everywhere. And it's one thing America needs desperately in this area of school discipline, school order, and school safety.

Again, I say I am very proud to be your partner in building a 21st century America that is leading the world to peace and freedom and prosperity, an America in which every child is

a responsible citizen with unparalleled opportunity, in a community that reveals in its diversity but is bound together in our wonderful ongoing effort to form a more perfect Union.

You, the educators of our Nation, are the architects of that 21st century America. Build well.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Marc H. Morial of New Orleans; Edward J. McElroy, secretary-treasurer, American Federation of Teachers; and Edith Shanker, former AFT President Albert Shanker's widow.

Remarks at a Luncheon for Representative William J. Jefferson in New Orleans

July 20, 1998

Thank you so much, Congressman, Senator Landrieu, Mr. Mayor, Lieutenant Governor Blanco, members of the city council, the Jefferson Parish Council, and let me thank all of you for coming. If Al Gore were giving this speech, he would say thank you for the standing ovation. [*Laughter*] I think it's a pretty good joke, too, but I can never bear to give it without giving him some credit for it. [*Laughter*]

I want to say also to Andrea and to the Jefferson daughters and to their vast families over there, they could even elect Bill to Congress, they have so many in their families. [*Laughter*]

Let me thank all of you for coming. Let me once again not miss an opportunity to thank the people of Louisiana for supporting Hillary and me and the Vice President and our team twice, for dramatically increasing our margin in 1996, and for electing Mary Landrieu to the Senate. I thank you for all that.

I have so many rich and wonderful memories of this city. I first came here when I was about 4 years old, and I still remember at least one thing that happened then, when my mother was in nurse's training here—I maybe even was younger. I must have been younger; I must have been about 2½. But I still remember leaving on the train, and I still remember being on

the top floor of the Jung Hotel. And I don't remember much else, but whatever happened, I was bit, and I've been coming back ever since.

I want to tell you that I am honored to be here for your Congressman. I remember when Bill and Andrea had me in their home early in 1992. I remember well the meeting that John Lewis and Mike Espy and he had with me and their early commitment, which meant a great deal. I remember in the Democratic primary in Louisiana, 69 percent of the voters voted for me against a rather wide array of choices that they had. You don't forget things like that, and I'll always be grateful.

But I also want you to know that Mr. Jefferson here, while we rag each other a lot and make a lot of fun of each other and have had an enormously good time knowing each other, is a truly gifted and extraordinary public servant. He has the necessary blend of education and intelligence and practical sense. He is a visionary who wants to get things done. He knows what to be serious about and not to take himself too seriously. And I can tell you that once he makes up his mind to do something, he is absolutely dogged.

I don't know how many people there are in this audience that he has personally talked to