

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner in Aspen, Colorado July 25, 1998

Thank you very much. Thank you, Beth. Thank you, Steve. Like others, I want to thank Christy and Sheldon for having us in this magnificent home tonight with the wonderful natural surroundings. I haven't been to Aspen for a long time, and for the last 3 or 4 hours I've been kicking myself for how many years it's been since I was here last. But in the eighties, Hillary and I had some wonderful trips up here, and just looking around has been very—it's a wonderful opportunity. And again I say that this has been a particularly unique opportunity for me to see many of you and to see you in these magnificent settings. So, thank you, Sheldon; thank you, Christy. We're very grateful.

I'd like to thank many people here. I thank Secretary Riley and Secretary Slater for coming out here and being a part of this. Once I had a meeting of Presidential scholars at a time when things were not so rosy for our administration as they are now—after the '94 elections, I don't know, it was early '95, and my obituary once again had been written several times by several people. [Laughter] And this fellow who is a professor at Harvard in Presidential studies, he said, "I think you're probably going to be reelected." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, for one thing, you have the most loyal Cabinet since Thomas Jefferson's second administration," which was very touching to me because they're also very good.

Rodney Slater has worked with me for more than 15 years now, and I'm very proud of the work he has done. And Secretary Riley and I have been friends for more than 20 years now, and colleagues. We are so creaky; we were actually Governors in the 1970's. [Laughter] So I thank them for being here and for their ardent support of our political objectives.

I thank Senator Feinstein and Congresswoman DeGette. I'd also like to thank my wonderful friend Governor Roy Romer. He and Bea are here tonight, and he has done a great job being a spokesperson from our party, going around the country trying to do his job as Governor of Colorado and give us as much time as he can. I thank Steve Grossman and Barbara, and Lynn and Len Barrack, who are here, and all the weekend hosts.

I thought I would tell you, I was asking myself—although some of you are actually new to this, most people have heard me give too many speeches, and I was feeling very badly for all of you tonight. [Laughter] So I was thinking what I could tell you, and I thought maybe I ought to start with where I started this day.

Hillary and Chelsea and I had a wonderful weekend. Last night—or yesterday afternoon we all went out to Camp David, and we managed to fool my brother into believing that we had to have this high-powered family conference. And I think he honestly thought I was going to tell him that I had a life-threatening illness or something. [Laughter] And we had gathered his 20 best friends from all around America, and we threw a surprise birthday party for him last night, and he never did figure out what it was about until we hit him with it. So I didn't think I was capable of such sleight of hand, and I felt very good about myself afterwards. [Laughter]

And then, this morning I got up and I flew to Newport News, Virginia, to commission our newest aircraft carrier, the United States Ship *Harry Truman*. Margaret Truman, Harry Truman's daughter, is a good friend of Hillary's and mine, and she was, unfortunately, unable to be there. But all President Truman's grandchildren and great-grandchildren were there, and it was quite an extraordinary day.

I say that because if you think about what Harry Truman did 50 years ago, entering as he was, and as America was, into a new and very different time after World War II, it gives you some guidance in terms of what we ought to be doing today. And let me just mention three things.

Number one, at the end of World War II, he understood that America could not be isolated from the rest of the world, as we had been after World War I and historically, throughout our country's history before. So he was the first world leader to recognize the state of Israel, 50 years ago this year, against the advice of most of his advisers.

Number two, he understood that America was fundamentally at that time still quite a hypocritical society in that there was such a huge

gap between what was written on paper in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and how we were living. Fifty years ago tomorrow, Harry Truman issued the Executive order to integrate the Armed Forces. Fifty years later, we have the most diverse and the most successful military anywhere in the world.

Number three, Harry Truman understood that you could not go into a new and different time with just the right ideas; there also had to be some institutional mechanisms through which people could work to achieve their common objectives, just as—the same way that if you have an idea to make money in the free enterprise system, you still have to organize a business to do it. And that's what the United Nations was all about; that's what the International Monetary Fund was all about; that's what NATO was all about.

So Harry Truman committed us to the world, committed us to being one America, and committed America to building and supporting the institutions necessary to make it possible for the American people to make the most of their own lives and to advance the cause of peace and freedom and prosperity around the world.

Now, if you fast-forward to the present moment, on the edge of a new century and a new millennium, we have some of the same challenges and some very different ones. But the thing I want to say to you is, the world is moving quickly and changing profoundly, and we need that level of vision as a people to decide where we want to go. And I believe that our party best embodies that in America today.

And I'd like to just give you just a few examples. First of all, when I came to office in 1993 I was determined to reflect at least as best I could what I thought the real experience of Americans was out in the country and not just to get into this Washington sort of hyperpolitical rhetoric and shouting that is the staple of everyday life in Washington, DC.

I had the privilege to serve as a Governor with two of the Coloradans here present, Roy Romer and Dick Lamm. And when we argued about things, we almost always were arguing about what would work or not, based on what kind of country we wanted to build, what kind of future we wanted to have for our children, what kind of legacy we wanted to leave them.

So we started with a different economic policy, a different welfare policy, a different education policy, a different crime policy, and very often what I tried to do was misunderstood at least by the political writers who were quite angry that they could no longer put it into a little neat box of whether it was old-fashioned liberal or old-fashioned conservative. I concede that I caused them the discomfort of having to think about it, but I thought that's what we should be doing. We had gone on too long on automatic in American politics, and the time had come to lower the rhetoric and open our ears and our eyes and think about it.

I often used to quote Benjamin Franklin's famous saying that our critics are our friends, for they show us our faults. And then I found so many friends in Washington, I stopped saying it. [Laughter] But nonetheless, there's some truth to it.

So if you look at where are we today, today we have the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years, the lowest crime rate in 25 years, the lowest percentage of people on welfare in 29 years, the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, with the lowest inflation in 32 years, the highest homeownership in history, the smallest Federal Government in 35 years; with scholarships and loans that have opened the doors of college to all Americans; with cleaner air, cleaner water, safer food, fewer toxic waste dumps, more land set aside in national trust than any administration except the two Roosevelts; 5 million children with health insurance; and a real ethic of national service among citizens out there, with things like AmeriCorps, which is now at 100,000 young people serving in communities across America, and 1,000 different colleges which have had their students working in our grade schools, teaching our kids to read.

So this is a better country, stronger, more well prepared for the future. But I would say to you we still have a lot of huge, big institutional challenges. I believe that where we are now, compared to where we were 6 years ago, is that America is working again. And we should come to the point where we expect that—not that there won't always be ups and downs in the economy, but we should expect ourselves to have a functioning society.

And we should take this moment of prosperity and instead of doing what our friends in the Republican Party hope will happen—which is

that the status quo will prevail and they will hold on to power by doing the things they've done to kill campaign finance reform and to kill the tobacco reform legislation and so far to kill the Patients' Bill of Rights and a lot of other things that I think should be passed—we ought to be saying, no, no, no, no. When things are changing and the challenges are big, we should use the prosperity and the confidence it gives us to ask ourselves, what are the big long-term challenges this country faces, and how are we going to meet them? And that's what I want the Democrats to do.

Because as long as our party is seen as the party of constructive change and inclusive change, where we're embracing new ideas but we're rooted in traditional values, we're going to do better and better and better, because we have broken out of the paralysis of the past. And I think it's obvious to anyone just following the news that the members of the other party can't really say that today.

So let me just give you a few examples of what I think we ought to be doing. First of all, if we're looking to the future, we have to look at how we can build one America generationally, which means that we cannot permit the baby boom generation to retire with the present systems of Social Security and Medicare unaltered, because when you have two people working for every one person retired—which is what's going to happen when all the baby boomers retire, at present rates of birth, retirement, and immigration—the present systems, as they're constructed, are unsustainable.

Now, Monday I'm going down to New Mexico to hold the second of our national forums on Social Security. But there's got to be—Social Security has done a lot of good; 48 percent of the seniors in this country who are above the poverty line would be below it if there were no Social Security. It's done a lot of good. But the people that I know in my generation are obsessed with the thought—and I'm not just talking about well-off people; I mean the middle-class working people I grew up with in Arkansas—are obsessed with the thought that when we retire we will impose unfair burdens on our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren. We are determined not to see it happen. Therefore, our party, which created Social Security and created Medicare, has the responsibility to take the lead in a constructive reform of them if we want to honor the compact

in America between the generations. That's a first big issue. I hope it will be done in early 1999.

Second, we have an obligation to prove that we can grow the economy and finally make it reach people in places that it hasn't reached: in inner-city neighborhoods; in rural areas—you know, if you've been following the farm crisis, you know there's been a 90 percent drop in farm income in North Dakota in one year; in Native American communities, where the ones that don't have casino gambling have hardly had any advance in their economic well-being at all in the last 6 years. If we can't improve the economic circumstances, not by giving money but by creating enterprise, in these communities when we're doing well, we'll never be able to do it.

The third thing we have to do—and I cannot say how important I think is—a lot of you were kind enough to mention the China trip. And let me just make a little timeout here. Jiang Zemin once asked me if I was trying to contain China, if I were scared of China and I thought America had to keep it in. And I said, "No, I'm not worried about that. Historically, your country has not been particularly aggressive towards its neighbors, and you suffered from more invasion than you've done invading." I said, "But you do present a threat to our security." And he looked at me and he said, "What is it?" I said, "I'm afraid you're going to insist on getting rich the same way we did." [Laughter] "And I want you to get rich, but if you get rich the same way we did, nobody on the planet will be able to breathe."

And we have to prove that we do not have to maintain industrial age energy use patterns to have a successful, sustainable economy in which our children have unparalleled opportunities. And if you look at the technology now available, I predict to you that in the 21st century, energy will go the way of electronics in the last 50 years, you know, everything getting smaller and smaller and smaller. The only reason we got this year 2000 computer problem is that those of us like Americans who computerized early did it when the chips wouldn't hold much memory. And so all the dates were just put in with two numbers instead of four because memory was a precious commodity. That will never be a problem again because smaller chips hold unbelievable memory. The average home computer now has more power than the average

supercomputer did when my daughter was born, for example.

So we have to do this. This is a huge deal. Nine of the hottest years in history, since temperatures have been measured, have been in the last 11 years. Florida had the wettest winter, the driest spring in history, and June was the hottest month in the history of Florida, hotter than any July or August in Florida history. Ninety-seven was the hottest year in the history of the world; '98, every single month has set a new record. So unless something happens, in spite of the wonderful cool evening we're enjoying in Aspen, this will be the hottest year on record.

Now, I am not advocating a policy of no growth or low growth. I am advocating a policy of putting our brains and our market enterprise to the task of growing the economy while reducing the per unit energy use required to do it and changing the nature of energy.

The Sterns from Chicago are here; their son, Todd, runs this program for me, my climate change program. And he's a brilliant young man, and he's doing a wonderful job. But we have got to somehow convince the American people and the Chinese people that we can grow the economy and improve the environment. And if we don't—unfortunately, while I was joking with Jiang Zemin, I told him the truth. If you go to China today, what's the number one health problem they've got? Bronchial problems, breathing problems, children with asthma—terrible problems. And we can do better. But it's our solemn obligation to do it.

Let me just mention one or two other things. First of all, I want to talk about education just briefly. This is area where there's the biggest difference between the Republicans and the Democrats in Congress in this session. Everybody knows America has the best system of higher education in the world. That's why people from all over the world come here to go to college and to graduate school. And we welcome them. I love it. It's like our major exchange program. It saves the Government a lot of money that people want to come here anyway to go to college and graduate school. And it helps us to become even more tied into the rest of the world.

No serious person who knows a lot about education believes that we have the best system of elementary and secondary education in the world. And yet, in a world where the economy

is based on ideas, where even those of you in agriculture who are here are benefiting from and have to embrace newer and newer technologies every year, we need more universal education than ever before. So I have put before the American people and before the Congress an agenda that would support higher standards and greater accountability and better teaching and smaller classes in the early grades and hooking all the classes up to the Internet and more choice within the public schools.

And the main thing I want to say to you is that this is not a time for what I take to be the Republican response, which is, make possible for more people to go to private school and everything will be fine. When 90 percent of our kids are in public school, that's just not accurate. What we need is universal excellence of opportunity. And so that's something the Democrats have to be on the forefront of.

The last thing I'd like to say is that we've got to be interested in creating one America in a time that's far more complicated than Harry Truman's time, and in having that America lead the world in a time when the issues are more complicated than they were in his time. The cold war may be over, but believe you me, in the lifetime of people in this room, we will be confronting serious challenges—of terrorists, drug runners, organized criminals, having access to chemical and biological weapons, other high-tech weapons—I hope not—but they would try to get small-scale nuclear weapons.

In the lifetime of the people in this room, in this modern age, the ancient racial and religious and ethnic hatreds, which have killed hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda, bedeviled Northern Ireland, continue to paralyze the Middle East, caused the Bosnian war, now have all the problems in Kosovo—the possibility that those things might be mixed with weapons of mass destruction is enormous.

And all of you that are involved in finance know what this problem in Asia—these Asian financial problems and the challenges of Russia have done to the international markets there and the prospect of supporting peace and prosperity and freedom in those countries in that region. Our own economy has slowed considerably because of the Asian financial crisis. So that the last thing I want to tell you.

We have got to reaffirm—we've got to tell people, who cares that the cold war is over?

It's more important than ever before that America be in there leading the way to create an international economy that works, that works for people abroad, and works for the American people as well.

Now, I think if the Democratic Party stands for that kind of constructive future for America and comes forward with those kinds of ideas and is uncompromising, and if we get enough help to get our message out—and Steve Grossman didn't say this, but we picked up some seats in 1996. In the last 10 days, our candidates in the 20 closest House races were outspent 4½ to one. We're not talking about peanuts here. We're talking about—and the stakes could hardly be larger.

Now, you pick up the paper every day; you watch the news every day. Do you hear debates at the level that I've just been talking to you about on these issues? Is this what you think

they're talking about in Washington? You put us in, and that's what we'll be talking about, and your children will enjoy the fruits of it. That's why you're here, and we're very grateful.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:30 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to Beth Dozoretz, senior vice president, FHC Health Systems, who introduced the President; dinner hosts Christy and Sheldon Gordon; former Gov. Richard Lamm of Colorado; President Jiang Zemin of China; and the following Democratic National Committee personnel: Steve Grossman, national chair, and his wife, Barbara; Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, general chair, and his wife, Bea; and Leonard Barrack, national finance chair, and his wife, Lynn. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Democratic National Committee Reception in Aspen

July 25, 1998

The President. Thank you. That was better than I can do, Michael. Thank you very much. Thank you and thank you, Ana, for welcoming all of us into your home. And I want to thank my long, longtime friend Roy Romer for being willing to keep his day job and take on another job as well for our party.

Since you mentioned the Brady bill, I think what I'd like to do is maybe just talk just for a few minutes and then, probably to the chagrin of all the people who came here with me, take a few minutes, if any of you have any questions or comments or you want to give a speech to me, I'll listen to that. But if—you think about it, if you've got any questions you want to ask.

But you heard the example Michael gave you of the Brady bill, and if you ask me about what I have tried to do through and with our Democratic Party and as President that makes it worthy of the support of thoughtful Americans, many of whom might have even been Republicans before, I would say two things.

First of all, I've tried to move our party and to move our country and, hardest of all, to move Washington, DC, away from sort of yesterday's

categorical, partisan name calling toward a genuine debate over new ideas, because we are living in a new and different time that, coincidentally, is at the turn of the century and the turn of the millennium, but is indisputably different. It is different because the way we work and live and relate to each other and the rest of the world is different. It is different because the nature of the challenges we face, among other things, in relating to the natural environment are profoundly different than any previous generation. So that's the first thing; it is different.

The second thing I would say is that I have tried to redefine what it means for Americans to be engaged in what our Founding Fathers said would be our permanent mission, forming a more perfect Union. And the Brady bill is about as good an example as any I can think of for what the difference is today, in Washington at least—not so much out in the country maybe but certainly in Washington—between the two parties.

If you go back to the beginning of the Republic, the people who got us started were very