

Remarks at the Harry Tracy Water Filtration Plant in San Bruno, California

August 11, 1998

Thank you very much. Good morning. I asked Lorraine if any of her children were here, and she said they were all here. I would like to ask the members of your family to stand. Everybody in Lorraine's family, stand. [Applause] Good for you. There are your children, your husband. Thank you all. I'd say they were worth fighting for.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for braving this beautiful but rather warm California sunshine to participate in this event. Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Thank you, Ann Caen, for your service and the reference to Herb. Thank you, Lieutenant Governor Gray Davis, for your support for the environment. Thank you to Superintendent Paul Mazza and the members of the facility here, all of the people who work here. I'd like to thank them for what they do to help improve the lives of the people in this area. Thank you very much. I know we have members of the San Mateo board of supervisors and other—perhaps other officials here.

And I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to Congressman Tom Lantos and especially for the reference he made to the terrible events a few days ago in Kenya and Tanzania. We now have—as the Congressman mentioned, the American citizens who were killed there are coming home, and Hillary and I will go to Andrews Air Force Base to meet that sad homecoming plane on Thursday. In addition to that, you should know now, over 200—well over 200 African citizens have been killed and almost 5,000 injured. There are over 500 people still in the hospital in Nairobi in Kenya.

I think it's important for me to tell you that we have worked very closely with the Governments of Kenya and Tanzania in, first of all, determining and finding those who were killed and those who were injured and now in their treatment. And also they are working very closely with us in our attempts to find those who are responsible.

And I know this is terribly frightening to people when something like this happens, but in an ever more open world where people are traveling more and where more information and technology and, unfortunately, weaponry are

available across national lines, and more and more information through the Internet, I think it is important that we all, as Americans, send a clear signal to the world that we are not going to back away from our involvement with other people, and we are not going to back away from our opposition to terrorism. It makes us more vulnerable as targets because we have taken the toughest stand around the world against terrorism. Now is the time to bear down, not back up, on that. And that is my determination. And I believe that's what the American people support, and I hope all of you will.

Let me say that today is a happy day because it marks another step forward in our attempt to bring the American people the kind of life I believe that all hard-working citizens deserve. It is tempting because our own country has enjoyed so much prosperity and a declining crime rate, declining welfare rolls, and declining other social problems, rising wages. Particularly in a place like California, where you had such a tough time for so many years, it's tempting at a good time like this for everybody to say, "Okay, we went through all those tough times. Now we've got good times. Mr. President, leave us alone. We want to relax. We want to enjoy this. We want to chill out." I think that's what some people say.

I think that would be a mistake. Why? Because all you have to do is pick up the newspaper any day or watch the news any night, and we see how fast the world continues to change—always changing—the way we work, the way we live, the challenges we face, the way we relate to each other and the rest of the world. At a time like this we should take our prosperity and the self-confidence it has given us as a country and say, "What are the challenges of the future? And how can we use this moment of opportunity, because we're doing well, to take care of the long-term challenges to our children's future and to make America what it ought to be?"

We have to, for example, save Social Security for the 21st century, before all the baby boomers retire and impose unbearable strains on the system as it's now constituted. We have

to make our elementary and secondary schools the best in the world, just as our higher education system is now. We have to prove that we can provide affordable and quality health care to all people, which is why I've fought so hard for this Patients' Bill of Rights.

We have to expand opportunity into inner-city areas and rural areas and Native American reservations where there has been no recovery yet. We have to prove we can live together as one America as we get more diverse. We have to, as Tom Lantos said, fulfill our responsibilities in the world, because we cannot grow and prosper at home unless we are also strong abroad in pursuit of peace and freedom and prosperity.

But one thing we clearly have to do is to prove that we can grow our economy while we improve the environment and public health. The two things must never be seen in conflict. When they are, we pay a price that is terrible, first in the environment, second in public health, and eventually in the health of our economy.

And one example of that is what we're here to talk about today, the importance of our drinking water. It may have been gold that brought people to California 150 years ago, but water has enabled them to stay here and enabled this State to grow and expand to the point where now California comprises 13 percent of our entire Nation's population. It may be that the clear water that flows down the Sierra slopes and was miraculously, a long time ago, through pipes and channels, taken into a reservoir here to provide water for this area was an even greater discovery than the gold. I think clearly it was.

Few States are blessed with such a supply of fresh water, and none have done more to put it to productive use than California. Still, although there are problems, and I understand there are still disputes over water, I have seen in my own administration how, by working patiently together with different groups, cooperation can win out to protect this vital resource so there's enough for the farms, for the wildlife, and for the people.

Now, we also have to work to assure the quality as well as the supply. That's what we're here to talk about today. Mrs. Ross told you about what happened to her family and others in the Silicon Valley. Five years ago, the citizens of Milwaukee found themselves with 400,000 people sick, dozens of people dead because a

microbe called cryptosporidium had contaminated their water supply.

The Vice President and I have worked hard to deal with this issue, to strengthen the Safe Drinking Water Act, to help communities upgrade treatment plants, and to zero in on contaminants posing the greatest threat. We required more industries to publicly disclose the chemicals they release into the air and water. The results of that have been quite remarkable. The factories required to provide this information—listen to this, just the community right-to-know—the factories required to provide the information about the chemicals they release into the air and water have reduced their toxic releases by almost half. That's what right-to-know can do.

Now, today we take another important step to empower communities with information. Beginning next year, under a new EPA community right-to-know rule I'm announcing today, water systems across our country must give their customers regular reports on the water flowing from their taps, to tell consumers where the water comes from, whether it meets Federal standards, as well as the likely source of any contaminants and their potential health effects.

Thanks to these reports, contamination in the water will no longer be invisible to the eye. Families will see at a glance whether their drinking water is safe. When it is not, utilities will have a crystal-clear incentive to clean it up, and citizens like Lorraine Ross will not have to fly blind. They will be able to come up all over America, and they will know what they have to work with and what they must work toward.

Safe water for our children is something all Americans agree on. This should not be a partisan issue. We've improved the quality of drinking water so much over the years, in fact, because of a bipartisan effort. And yet, there is in Congress today a disturbing trend to break up what has historically, at least for the last 30 years, been a bipartisan consensus on the environment. If there is ever an area where we need progress, not partisanship, it is to ensure the purity and safety of our environment. But there is a question about that. So far, Congress has refused to fund my clean water action plan that would help to restore the—listen to this—the 40 percent of our waters that are still too polluted for fishing and swimming.

In February, I proposed to add 100 national and historic sites across our country to our endowment of protected areas. One of the things I'm proudest of that our administration has done is that we have protected more land in perpetuity than any administration in history except those of the two Roosevelts. And now we have 100 more sites, places like Bair Island, a haven for endangered wildlife in San Francisco Bay, and the gravesite of John Muir, perhaps the greatest preservationist of all time. Believe it or not, the money has been appropriated for all these sites, but under the law, once they're selected, the congressional leaders must approve its release. So far, that approval has not been forthcoming for months and months. Today, for the sites in California and throughout the country, again I ask Congress to release the funds already approved so we can preserve these precious places.

We need progress and not partisanship in our efforts to avoid the degradation of our ocean waters. We had a big ocean conference out here on the Monterey Peninsula not very long ago. And we need it in our efforts to combat climate change and to do America's part.

Just yesterday the Vice President announced new data showing that the month of July was the hottest month ever recorded since climate records have been kept on Earth. This is not some fly-by-night phenomenon. The 9 hottest years ever recorded have occurred in the last 11 years; '97 was the hottest year ever measured; every month in '98 has been hotter than the preceding month in '97. And we need to work together.

Yet many in Congress want to cut the common-sense technology, market-oriented initiatives I have proposed to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and to do America's part. We can grow this economy, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve the environment. If we do not do so at some point in the not-too-distant future, our children will be living in an economy that is much reduced, because we didn't do right by the environment. And we should never forget that.

Let me finally say that one of the things that I have found most frustrating in trying to create a bipartisan consensus on the environment is that I keep finding in all these bills that are sent to me legislative gimmicks called riders, which have nothing to do with the bills that pass, where the little rider is designed to weaken some environmental protection the United States has. Lawmakers have attached language to unrelated bills to cripple wildlife protection and cut through an Alaskan wildlife refuge with a \$30-million road. These back-door assaults must also stop. We shouldn't squander our bounty for short-term gain.

Now, the people of California know this. From Monterey Bay to Lake Tahoe, people who haven't always seen eye to eye on any political issue are working together to preserve their water and land. We are rebuilding at the grass-roots level a consensus for preserving our environment, advancing the public health as we grow our economy.

That message needs to get back to Washington, because every American has to come to grips with this fundamental challenge. We can never create the 21st century America we want for our children until we do not think of economic growth as divorced from the preservation of the environment and the public health. They must be seen as absolutely part of one indivisible effort to create the good life for the American people. If we do that and if we fulfill our responsibilities, then I'm convinced that for the children here in this audience, America's best days are still ahead.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:22 a.m. outside the plant. In his remarks, he referred to community activist Lorraine Ross; Mayor Edward Simon of San Bruno; Ann Moller Caen, president, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, and her late husband, Herb Caen; gubernatorial candidate Lt. Gov. Gray Davis; and Paul Mazza, superintendent, East Bay Water Treatment Facilities.