

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Labor Luncheon August 14, 1998

Thank you, John, for the wonderful introduction and, even more, for your friendship and your leadership. I thank all the officers of the AFL-CIO and our friends from the National Education Association who are here.

I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to my good friend Gerry McEntee, the chair of your political committee; and I'd like to congratulate Morty Bahr on settling the CWA/Bell Atlantic strike. I gave him his reward today; I have ordered him to be on a plane for the Middle East by 9 o'clock tonight. *[Laughter]*

I want to thank Governor Romer and Steve Grossman and Len Barrack and all the DNC staff and the White House staff and all who have done so much work with you in substance and on politics over the last few years. We've been a good team; we've gotten a lot done; America's a better place. But we've got a lot still to do.

Before I begin, I'd like to make a brief announcement about help to our hardest pressed communities during what is now officially the hottest summer ever recorded. For 17 years now, the LIHEAP program—that's the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program—has helped the neediest Americans to protect their families in times of extreme weather conditions, helping pay for air-conditioners and electric bills and fans during the hot summer months, for heating in times of extreme cold. It has literally been a lifesaver for many, many Americans in my personal experience in times of very difficult weather.

As you know, we are experiencing the hottest summer on record. In many States in the mid-South, including my home State of Arkansas, we had for the first time ever 3 weeks or more of straight 100 degree-plus days. Earlier this week the Vice President announced that last month was the hottest record ever recorded on the planet Earth, beating out July 1997 by half a degree. July was the seventh month in a row where 1998 was hotter than 1997, and 1997 was the hottest year ever recorded.

This heat wave has destroyed crops, caused power outages, led to the deaths of more than 100 Americans. It threatens mostly our most vulnerable people, young children, the disabled,

the elderly. And for those who don't have air-conditioning, the high temperatures for those in physically difficult positions will continue to be life threatening.

We've been able to make this heat wave safer because of the LIHEAP program. It's a good program. Last month I directed the Department of Health and Human Services to release \$100 million in emergency funds for the 11 hottest Southern States. Today, because the heat wave has continued and families continue to struggle, I have ordered the release of another \$50 million to these States.

One of the difficult issues we are fighting out in the Congress this year is that the House committee with jurisdiction over these matters has recommended the elimination of this program. I think, based on the experience of ordinary people this summer, that would be a mistake. I can understand that it might be beyond the experience of some people, because they live in moderate climates or they've never dealt with this. But I'll never forget one summer when I was in Arkansas, and it was so hot the elderly people—and there were thousands and thousands of them that lived in homes without air-conditioning—we had to bring them into the senior citizen centers and put up cots. We had to buy thousands and thousands of fans for people who were in their homes.

You know, most of us, we're pretty comfortable. We're sitting here in this beautiful hotel; we've got this nice air-conditioning going. We take some things for granted. There are a lot of our fellow Americans out there that are literally in danger this summer.

So we'll do what we can, but I hate to put anything else on your legislative plate, but I need you to help me get this LIHEAP program continued. It looks like extreme weather will intensify, not abate, and America needs to be there to help our most vulnerable citizens.

I want to talk to you today about the important choice facing the American people, including the members of your organizations, all of them, in this election season. I have said before and I will say again that we have to decide to move forward with the same approach that has brought our Nation to its present strength

and prosperity, an approach that puts progress over partisanship and people over politics and unity over division. That is the choice.

Five and a half years ago, when you helped Al Gore and me to get elected, we said we would bring the country a new direction with new leadership and new ideas based on old values. You've fought alongside us to help us to bring these changes to not just your members but all the American people. And now the results can be seen.

Thanks to the hard work, the ingenuity, the good citizenship of our fellow Americans, but supported by the policies of this administration, we now have the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years and 16 million new jobs; the lowest crime rate in 25 years; the smallest percentage of the people on welfare in 29 years. We're about to have the first balanced budget and surplus since Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon 29 years ago; inflation, the lowest in 35 years; homeownership, the highest in history. Last year wages went up at twice the rate of inflation after having been stagnant for so very long.

Millions of Americans have taken advantage of the family and medical leave law. Because of the Brady law, 118 felons an hour have been unable to get a handgun. We will never know how many lives that has saved. Millions more children are getting health care; the doors to college are open wider than ever before; the environment is cleaner even as the economy has grown. And you can take a lot of responsibility for that.

I would like to say a special word of appreciation to the Federal employees, the members of our Federal work force, for they have produced more while reducing the size of Government by approximately 350,000 people to its smallest point since John Kennedy was President 35 years ago. None of this would have been possible had it not been for their ingenuity and continued dramatic increases in productivity. And I am profoundly grateful for that.

Now, this is a golden moment for our country, and the big question is what to do with it. I'm proud of the things that have been accomplished so far, but every election is about the future.

Some of you have heard me tell this story, but when I had been Governor 10 years and was trying to decide whether to run for another 4-year term, I went out to the State fair. And

a guy came up to me in overalls and said, "Bill, are you going to run again?" And I said, "Well, if I do, will you vote for me?" He said, "Sure, I always have." And I said, "Well, aren't you sick of me after all these years?" He said, "No, but about everybody else I know is." [Laughter] And I said, "Well, don't they think I've done a good job?" He said, "Sure, but that's what we paid you for. You drew a check every 2 weeks, didn't you?" [Laughter] It was a very interesting, insightful conversation with him. Elections are and properly should be about the future.

Now, the conventional wisdom is, whenever unemployment is low and inflation is low and job growth is high and things are good, that countries will be like people and families and businesses. You just want to say, "Gosh, man, we had years when things were a real hassle, and I just want to take a break. I want to be left alone."

I think, under these circumstances, it would be a serious mistake to take that approach. Why? Because, as every one of you knows—and you heard John Sweeney talk about the speech I gave to the World Trade Organization—we were over there talking about the impact of the Asian financial crisis on the American economy. Every one of you knows the world is changing very rapidly in ways that affect how we work, how we live, how we relate to each other, how we relate to our friends beyond our Nation's borders.

If we sit still and say, "Gosh, isn't this great," we won't be able to maintain these great conditions. The only way to do it is to stay ahead of the changes, to keep our energy level up, to keep our focus up, to keep looking at the long-term challenges facing America. So I would like to respectfully suggest that this election ought to be what's right for the country and that good policy would be good politics.

What are the long-term challenges of America? First and foremost, we've got to stick with the economic strategy that got us here and refine it and improve it: fiscal discipline, expanding our exports, investing in the skills and education of our people. We can't depart from this path. I would like to see an expansion of our efforts to bring the benefits of the economic recovery to urban neighborhoods, small rural towns, and Indian reservations which haven't felt the benefit of it yet. And it is an inflation-free way to grow the economy. I keep arguing

to my friends in the business community that the biggest untapped market for American goods and services is here in America. It's in the neighborhoods, the small towns, the Native American communities which have not yet felt the lift of this recovery.

Second, related to our economy, we have to honor our parents and future generations, and we, those of us in the baby boom generation, have to do our duty by our children and grandchildren by saving Social Security for the 21st century. And we shouldn't spend a penny of this surplus until we know we have provided for a Social Security system that is decent, comprehensive, and adequate, but we've done it in a way that will not lower the standard of living of the children of the baby boomers.

Now, we were very fortunate to have an economic estimate come out a few weeks ago, estimating that the projected surplus over the next 10 years was going to be about double what we had previously thought. And that's good; I'm glad to have an estimate like that. But we'll get another estimate next year and another estimate the year after and another estimate the year after that.

In an election year, it is tempting to offer and provide a great big tax cut or a great big new program, but you know and I know, if you pass a tax cut, you're never going to repeal it, whether or not that projected surplus materializes.

Now, I'm not against tax cuts; I've got a targeted tax cut before the Congress right now to help working families with child care, to help meet some of the energy challenges we face, to help deal with some of the other personal family challenges that people face. I'm not against that. What I am against is promising something to the American people and giving it to them that sounds good today but that will give us a royal headache in the future.

The biggest challenge we've got out there is when I retire—I'm the oldest of the baby boomers—and then all the ones that are down to 18 years younger than me get in, at present birth rates, work force participation rates, immigration rates, and retirement rates—when all that happens, there will only be two people working for every person drawing Social Security. Therefore, the system, as presently constituted, is unsustainable. And if we do not act now to reform it, including having available whatever money the American people have pro-

duced through this surplus, we will regret it for a long time. Because I don't think—I can tell you that every person I know in my generation, including middle-class, middle-income people living on very modest incomes, nobody wants us to retire in ways that say to our kids, "Okay, let's raise your payroll tax 2½ percent. I want to lower your standard of living to take care of mine. I want to undermine your ability to raise and educate my grandchildren so I can live just like my parents did in retirement." We don't want that.

Now, since that's a few years off, small changes today can make a big impact tomorrow. I know you have supported us on this, but this is profoundly important. It's also very important to our economic stability. Suppose we were to do this with this surplus, and then it didn't materialize. Then where would we be? Do you want to go back to the economic policies of the eighties where we quadrupled the debt in 12 years? I don't think so. So it's very important.

The third thing I want to say is, we have to protect our families in the health care area with a strong Patients' Bill of Rights. We've got 160 million people in managed care plans. They do a lot of good, managed care plans, in some areas. They can make health care more affordable and more available. But medical decisions ought to be made by doctors and patients, not accountants. That means, among other things, access to specialists; access to the emergency room; continuity of care, even if your employer changes health care providers while you're pregnant, while you're in the middle of chemotherapy, while you're in the middle of something else. Every American deserves quality care. Every American deserves privacy of medical records as well. And I want to thank you for the very effective grassroots campaign you're waging for the Patients' Bill of Rights.

The differences between the bipartisan bill that the Democrats support and that of the Republican leadership in Congress are breathtaking. You may have seen this little chart I showed in Louisville, Kentucky, a couple of days ago. I wish you could mail it to every member of every organization here present. Protecting medical privacy—big deal to most families: Our proposal does; theirs doesn't. Guaranteeing direct access to specialists: Our proposal does; theirs doesn't. Assuring that accountants don't make arbitrary medical decisions: Our proposal does; theirs doesn't. Providing real emergency

room protection: Ours, yes; theirs, no. Holding health plans accountable if they harm patients: Ours, yes; theirs, no. Protecting patients from secret financial incentives to doctors to deny care: Ours, yes; theirs, no. Keeping your same doctor through critical treatment periods: Ours, yes; theirs, no. Maybe most important of all, covering all health plans: Ours, yes; theirs leaves 100 million Americans out.

So when Congress comes back, everybody is going to be for a Patients' Bill of Rights. It's going to be like motherhood and apple pie and the Fourth of July. So you've got to look beyond the label, and the American people are very sophisticated about this because they have to navigate through their health care plans. You need to help them and help us get this information out.

The fourth thing we have to do is to make sure our kids have the best education in the world. We've done a great deal to open the doors of college to all Americans. We've made community college virtually free to most American families. And everybody believes we've got the best system of higher education in the world. But nobody believes every child in this country—every child—has a chance to get an elementary and secondary education that's the best in the world.

Now, I have given Congress a plan to support reform effort to the grassroots level: high but voluntary national standards; hiring more highly trained teachers; having smaller classes in the early grades; building new schools and modernizing old ones; hooking up classrooms to the Internet; creating charter schools; and providing more opportunities for more kids to go to summer school and after-school programs so they learn more and get in less trouble. That's our agenda.

We have the money to do it, and we should debate that in this election because the Congress disagrees with me on it, at least the Republican majority does. On September 8th all across America, our teachers will shine a spotlight on one of these issues, the need to modernize our school buildings. I thank them for doing that; you can't build the children up in school buildings that are falling down.

Fifth, we have to pass on to future generations the Earth God gave us. We have to prove that we can grow the economy and improve the environment. For all the advances in clean water, 40 percent of our lakes and streams and

rivers are still too polluted for fishing and swimming. And a lot of your members, the only vacation they ever get is when they go to a State park or a national park or to some fishing resort or someplace to a lake where they can take their kids skiing. So our clean water initiative is just one example of what we can do and must do to grow the economy and to preserve the environment.

The last thing I want to say is this, because the AFL-CIO has a very important responsibility, in my view, that you have always fulfilled, to try to educate your own members and the country generally about the importance of America's leadership in the world for peace and freedom and prosperity. And as these awful events in Africa have reminded us, as the Asian financial turmoil has reminded us—where 40 percent of our farm exports go, and they're down 30 percent this year, just for one example—our fate is increasingly bound up with the rest of the world, and we cannot retreat from America's responsibility to stand up for peace and freedom and prosperity. Our own peace, freedom, and prosperity depends upon our willingness to stand for it around the world.

In the last few days, I've spent more time on these two challenges, by far, than anything else, and we have more to do. I had a good talk with President Yeltsin today. A few days ago, I talked with the new Japanese Prime Minister. I'm soon going to Russia and then over to Ireland to keep doing what we can to support the peace process there. We're pushing ahead to try to bring peace to the Middle East and to stop the very difficult situation in Kosovo. Most Americans don't think about a lot of this a lot of the time. A lot of Americans might not know what the International Monetary Fund is, but having the right kind of international posture is critical to our own prosperity and critical to our own security. And I have always respected the support the AFL-CIO has given to Republican and Democratic Presidents alike for the proposition that we have to stand strong for freedom in the world.

America has got a good agenda in the coming months. We can be for saving Social Security first, better schools, a cleaner environment, and a Patients' Bill of Rights, and we can sell that in every place in America. They are real choices real Americans face in this election. We don't have to be excessively partisan. We can say we're for the progress of this country. We want

to build on what brung us, if you'll forgive me an Arkansas phrase. And we're going to do it.

And you'll be critical to that. Without your help, we never would have had the minimum wage; we wouldn't have protected Medicare and Medicaid; we wouldn't have had family and medical leave; we wouldn't have had the economic plan of 1993, which reduced the deficit by 92 percent before we ever passed the balanced budget plan. Without your help, none of that could have happened.

When I visited California and campaigned against Proposition 226 out there, all the smart prognosticators said there was no way you could win that fight. But when I saw your dedication and skill, the level and intensity of your commitment, I thought, I'm not so sure. Besides, you were right on the issue, and your message prevailed.

So I will say again: This election is about the future, and it should be. It is about ideas, and it should be. We have good candidates; I've seen a lot of them out there. We've got a good Democratic National Committee that's worked its heart out to restore its health and direction and energy. And if you will help us, we can go out there and tell everybody in America, "Let's stay with what brought us to this point, but be active. Let's save Social Security first before we spend that surplus. Let's give our kids the best elementary and secondary schools in the world. Let's have a Patients' Bill of Rights. Let's prove we can continue to grow

the economy and improve the environment. Let's keep standing up for peace and freedom and prosperity. We're going to be just fine."

You know, the First Lady, in this Millennial Project of ours, has a theme: "Honor the past; imagine the future." That pretty well captures where organized labor is today. You've got an enormous sense of your own roots, your own accomplishments, the deeply held values that have never changed. But there is more imagination, more willingness to think new thoughts, come up with new ideas, work out creative relationships with management so that everybody can win than I have ever seen in my lifetime. If America will honor the past and imagine the future and vote on that basis, we're going to have a good November.

Thank you, and God bless you. *[Applause]*
Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:30 p.m. in the John Hay Room at the Hay Adams Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to John J. Sweeney, president, AFL-CIO; Gerald W. McEntee, president, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; Morton Bahr, president, Communications Workers of America (CWA); Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, general chair, Steve Grossman, national chair, and Leonard Barrack, national finance chair, Democratic National Committee; President Boris Yeltsin of Russia; and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan.

Statement on Announcing Assistance to Heat-Stricken Areas in the South and Southwest

August 14, 1998

Today I am pleased to announce that additional relief is on the way to thousands directly impacted by the heat wave in the South and Southwest.

On July 23, I announced the release of \$100 million in emergency Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) funds to the 11 Southern and Southwestern States that were hit hardest by the heat wave. Since this time, the heat wave has continued, so today I am directing the Department of Health and Human

Services to release an additional \$50 million in LIHEAP assistance to those 11 States.

Funds will be released to 11 Southern and Southwestern States: Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Mississippi.

This scorching heat wave has destroyed crops, caused widespread power outages, and worst of all, led to the deaths of more than 100 Americans. The heat poses the greatest threat to our most vulnerable citizens—children, the disabled,