

Remarks at a Democratic Business Council Reception September 10, 1998

Thank you. It's rare for me to feel that I am at a loss for words. I can only hope you know what I'm feeling, for you and for my wife and for my country. I think you do, and I thank you more than you can possibly know.

Hillary has mentioned all the people who are responsible for this evening. I would just echo my strong note of gratitude to all of you. Congressman Markey was here—there he is. Thank you very much for being here and for your support.

There are many distinguished citizens here, but I would like to acknowledge one because he embodies to me everything that is best about America. I think he is one of the bravest human beings I've ever known, and without him, Americans with disabilities would not be where they are today: a man I had the great honor to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Mr. Justin Dart. Thank you for being here, and God bless you, sir.

In addition to Roy and Len and Carol and all the DNC officers who are here, and Tom and Mike and John and Chris, who did this weekend—you know, Steve Grossman is not here tonight, but I just want to acknowledge how hard he has worked for all of us, to make our party strong.

There is one other person I want to mention. I'm glad Steve Grossman is not here tonight, because he went home to Massachusetts to Kirk O'Donnell's funeral. And a lot of you in this room knew Kirk O'Donnell. He was a magnificent human being, a great Democrat, a proud Irish-American, a passionate citizen and patriot. And this town is much the poorer for his passing.

When I called his wife the other night, I said, "You know, I'm not really a Washington insider. I think we've established that beyond any doubt." [Laughter] I said, "But Washington has a lot of great qualities, and maybe some that aren't so great. More than anybody I ever knew around here, I think Kirk O'Donnell had all the good and none of the bad." I'm proud he was a member of my party, and I just want to say to his wife and his two wonderful children, on behalf of a grateful nation, I thank them for his life, and I thank God for his life,

and I thank Steve Grossman for representing all of us at his funeral today in Massachusetts. Thank you.

Yesterday I was in Florida, and I went to this school in Orlando. And I wish all of you had been with me. It was an elementary school that was basically a multilingual international school, where all the kids that were there had to take at least two languages, English and something else. And there were a lot of Hispanic kids there; there were a lot of Asian kids there; there were kids from South Asia; there were African-American kids there; there was every conceivable ethnic group in this little grade school in Florida. And there was a wonderful Hispanic principal—American—whose mother, the principal's mother, spoke to me in Spanish and had to have it translated because I'm not as fluent as I should be—and hardly in English. [Laughter]

But anyway, these kids, they had a school uniform policy, which I love. They had a PTA president who was more charismatic than 90 percent of the politicians I've met in my life. They had a sense of community that required them to go out to every mother of a newborn in the jurisdiction of the elementary school and give the mothers classical music and other support for the newborns as a part of the elementary school's mission. And they had the genuine commitment that everybody that was within their embrace mattered, that every child could learn, that every child mattered, and that they were creating not just a school but a community in which they were prepared to accept responsibility for all these children's well-being.

And I'm telling you, it was an overwhelming experience being there. I say that because that school is a metaphor for what I have tried to do with America. And tonight all of you in this Business Council, you're pretty sophisticated about what's going on in this economy, and you understand that for all of our great good fortune today, this is an uncertain world, a lot of changes in it. The stock market goes up and down in no small measure because of perceived risk in America as a result of events far from our shores in economies much smaller than ours, reminding us that if we want the benefits

of this global society, we must be able and willing to assume its responsibilities of leadership.

And so I want to just say two things that aren't particularly sophisticated. First of all, I am profoundly grateful for every single day, even the worst day, I have had to serve as your President because of where we are today. Secondly, when I was a young man—I don't believe I've ever said this in public except at my daughter's high school graduation—but when I was a young man I was complaining about something once, some perceived unfairness. And a much older man who sort of mentored me looked at me, and he said, "Let me tell you something, Bill." He said, "What you're saying is probably right, but just remember this: Most of us get out of this world ahead of where we would be if we only got what we deserved." [Laughter] He said, "No matter what happens, most of us get out of this world ahead." And we need to develop what Hillary later taught me is the discipline of gratitude. So that's the first thing I want you to know. I am grateful that we have had this chance to do these things.

The second thing I want to say is, usually when I come to a group like this, I say, isn't it wonderful that we have the lowest unemployment in 27 years, the lowest crime rate in 25 years, and the first balanced budget in 29 years, and the lowest percentage of people on welfare in 29 years, and you know the whole rest of it. And it is great.

But you understand a simple truth: This is a dynamic world. What really matters is not so much what we've had but what we intend to do with what we have. And a lot of times when things are going well, people think that they can indulge themselves in either idleness or things that are irrelevant to the mission at hand. I believe that in a dynamic world, our blessings confer special responsibilities to deal with the long-term challenges of the country.

We've got to really think about what we have learned about this global economy in the last 2 years. We learned a lot, you know. We learned a lot with NAFTA, with GATT, with our trade rules, with all the things we benefited—30 percent of our growth coming from trade. We learned a lot. What have we learned from the problems of the countries of Asia? What have we learned from the difficulties of the Russians? What have we learned from the difficulties of a great, vast, powerful country like Japan going

5 years without any real economic growth? And what should we as Americans do to inject stability and growth into this system? Because if we don't—as Chairman Greenspan said last week—we can't be an island of prosperity in a sea of distress. Big issue. We've got to start by paying our way to the International Monetary Fund.

But there is more, and it's big. We know that we have to prepare for the retirement of the baby boomers. Therefore, I say, let's don't spend this surplus until we save Social Security. Let's don't do that.

Maybe the Democrats feel more strongly about it because there were only Democrats voting for that economic plan in '93; we lost seats in the Congress on account of it. People bled over that plan. But when we passed the Balanced Budget Act, 92 percent of the deficit was already gone because of what our party did.

Now, we've been waiting 29 years—29 years. You know, I like tax cuts and spending programs as well as the next person. We've got both in our balanced budget, both targeted tax cuts for child care and education and the environment, and new investments in education and health care and other things. But I would like to see that ink change from red to black and just sort of savor it for a minute or two before we throw it all away again. [Laughter] And I think you would, too.

Now, everybody in this room who is between the ages of 34 and 52 in the baby boom generation, you've got to face the fact that if we do not meet our responsibilities to reform Social Security in a way that preserves its essential characteristics to give stability in old age to people who need it without imposing undue financial burdens—if we don't do it and do it now when it's least painful, then one of two things is going to happen: Either we'll all get to retirement, and we'll have to take a much lower standard of living; or we'll try to maintain the same system, which will cost our kids and grandkids so much money that they will have a lower standard of living. And that is a very foolish thing to do. We don't need to do it. So let's fix Social Security and then see how much money is left, and we can decide what to do with it then. That's what I think we ought to do.

We have just a few weeks left in this legislative session. I think it's important to make the right decisions. Look at the education bills we've

got up there: 100,000 teachers in the early grades to lower average class size to 18; a program that will enable us to build or rehabilitate 5,000 schools to deal with school overcrowding and substandard condition; programs for safe schools; programs to hook all our classrooms and libraries up to the Internet by the year 2000; programs to create education opportunity zones, summer school, and after-school programs and mentoring programs and guaranteed scholarship programs for schools that aren't doing well that will agree to end social promotion but only if they help the kid, not stigmatize him. All of that's there.

The America Reads program: We had 1,000 colleges last year sending young people into schools to make sure that every 8-year old could read by the end of the third grade. It's all out there riding on what Congress does. You won't read anything about it, but it may be the most important set of decisions still to be made in this Congress. Will they embrace an education agenda that we never asked to be a partisan agenda? We never asked for it to be a partisan agenda. It is an agenda for America's children.

Or the health care bill of rights: 43 HMO's have now endorsed our health care bill of rights that says, in an accident you ought not have to drive across town to get to an emergency room, you ought to go to the nearest one; if you need a specialist, you ought to be able to get one; if you're getting care and your employer changes HMO's during the time of your pregnancy or your chemotherapy, they ought not to be able to change your doctor in the middle of the stream; and if you have privacy concerns, you ought to know your records will be kept private. Those are just some of the things in our bill. I think that's a big deal.

There are 160 million Americans in managed care, and I have never been an opponent of it, because I don't think we could be where we are today with the economy where it is unless we had broken the inflation in health care costs. But quality comes first. Now 43 HMO's have supported our bill. Why? Because they're doing the right thing anyway, and they're at an unconscionable disadvantage by treating their people right unless everybody else follows the same rules. This is a big deal for America. It's going to be decided between now and the next 3 weeks.

The same thing is true on the environment: 40 percent of our lakes and streams still not

fit to swim in; even though the air and the water are cleaner and the food is safer, and we've cleaned up more toxic waste dumps, and we've also set aside more land than any administration except the two Roosevelts, we've still got 40 percent of the rivers and lakes in this country not fit to swim in.

We've got a lot of challenges to face. And man, I'm telling you, you ought to be attuned to this—there is a device in Washington—I had to learn about this; we didn't have these where I used to be involved in lawmaking—called a rider. That is not a person in a cowboy hat with spurs on. [Laughter] A rider is something you put on a bill that doesn't have much to do with the bill. And normally you put it on the bill because it couldn't stand on its own two feet so it's got to ride along on something that's got feet and legs and independence. And if you stick the rider on it, you know that the rider wouldn't be standing, so it's got to ride to get across the finish line of the law. And my job is to stop as many of those riders as I can. It's a big deal.

So I say to you, all of you, if you go back to the beginning, we are blessed. I am grateful. It imposes responsibilities. And the first and foremost of those is to say, what are the big challenges facing us on the brink of a new century and a new millennium? How are we going to be one America across all the lines that divide us? How are we going to keep growing? How are we going to fight the security threats like terrorism and weapons of mass destruction and seize the opportunities of this new world? I'll tell you, if we do what we're trying to do, we'll be doing our job.

So I say to you, we need more business support. We've got a lot more business Democrats than we had 6 years ago because we believe you can grow the economy and let people make good profits and still do right by the ordinary citizens of this country and lift the people up who deserve a fair chance. That's what we believe—that's what we believe.

So again I say, thank you for tonight, but remember those two things: We should be grateful, but we should be determined not to let America, her children, and her future down.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:45 p.m. in the East Room at the Mayflower Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, general chair, Leonard Barrack, national finance chair, Carol Pensky, treasurer, and Steve

Grossman, national chair, Democratic National Committee; C. Thomas Hendrickson, chair, and Mike Cherry, John Merrigan, and Chris Korge, cochair, Democratic Business Council; and Kathryn O'Donnell, widow of attorney Kirk O'Donnell.

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner *September 10, 1998*

Thank you so much. I want to thank Jim and Carol and Senator and Mrs. Pell, and all the others who had anything to do with this event tonight. This has been a particularly meaningful event. It wasn't just Jill who wanted Senator Pell's autograph; I got him to give me what he said about me, and I had him autograph it. *[Laughter]* I'll take it home, make sure my family believes me when I tell them he said it. *[Laughter]*

Thirty-four years ago I moved in across the street from this house, and I lived on the second floor of Loyola Hall as a freshman at Georgetown. And I looked out my window every morning into Senator Pell's garden—I don't want to you to think I was a peeping tom—*[laughter]*—I couldn't avoid it; I mean, if I looked out the window, I could see it. And I remember sometimes they would have garden parties in the springtime when the weather was warm, or I would see people come and go—famous people come and go. And it never occurred to me 34 years ago that someday I might be here with them, as President.

And I am very honored because, Senator, I thank you for the Pell grants. I thank you for your commitment to America's involvement in the world, for your belief in the United Nations and a world system of peace and prosperity. I wish you had another 35 years in the Senate. We need you there today more than ever. And I thank you.

So anyway, I'm feeling very, very nostalgic tonight. If anybody had told me when I was 18 I'd be in this backyard, I never would have believed it. I'd also like to thank all of you for your support, your personal support to me in this difficult time, in what I have tried to do to express apologies and seek forgiveness from the American people, but more impor-

tantly for your continuing commitment for what it is we're trying to do.

I saw a survey—I read something in the paper the other day that said that 91 percent of the American people were aware that the stock market had dropped 500 points, the day it dropped. Well, you know, 91 percent of the people—it's amazing that that many people would agree that the Sun comes up in the morning. I mean, that's a pretty high level. *[Laughter]*

And it's very interesting to me that—I now talk to all kinds of people. I was at a school in Florida yesterday, and the day before, a school in Maryland. And I would talk about this, and I'd say, "You all read about that, didn't you?" And they would say, "yes." And I said, "You read that the drop was generally attributed to developments beyond our borders that had no direct impact on the American economy." That is, no one could conclude from the momentary difficulties—or the difficulties, anyway, in Asia or Russia or whatever—that there was a direct impact on the economy today that was very severe. But we had this big drop.

And it's been very interesting, because these events and what people are learning about them and their apparent connection to the gyrations of the stock market have done more than anything—all the speeches I have given for 6 long years—to hammer home one point that I tried to hammer home when I ran for President in 1991 and 1992, which is: There is no longer an artificial dividing line between domestic and foreign policy, between economic and security policy; that we have to see a world in which we are growing closer together and an America in which we are growing ever more interconnected; and we have to look at the world in ways that enable us to fulfill our responsibilities toward peace and prosperity and freedom