

Remarks at St. Sebastian's Parish Center in Queens, New York
October 30, 1998

Thank you very much for the warm welcome. Thank you, Monsignor Finnerty, for greeting me when I came through the door of St. Sebastian. Thank you, my longtime friend Claire Shulman, for being here. Thank you, Joe Crowley, for presenting yourself as a candidate for Congress.

He got good marks from Chuck Schumer as an athlete, and you must have noticed that he's quite a large man. I told him that next January I'd like him to be one of the whips in the Congress to get the votes gathered up, because I think people would be reluctant to say no to him.

I love coming to Queens. I never will forget the first time I came out here when I was running for President in 1992, and Harold Ickes was helping me. And he said, "We're going to go out to Queens, and we're going to meet with the Queens County Democratic Committee. And Congressman Tom Manton is the chairman of the committee." And he said, "I think we can get them to be for you."

I said, "Now, why in the world would they endorse me? Most of those people have probably never thought about Arkansas, much less been there." And he said, "Yes, but they're a lot like you out there in Queens. You'll be right at home. You'll like that." [Laughter]

So we got on the subway, and there was a television camera or two with me. And no one in New York knew who I was at the time, so they probably thought we were filming a commercial or something. We were on the subway banging everybody around, and then we got off and took a beautiful walk to the place where we had the committee meeting. And Tom had already convened the committee, and I walked up the stairs, and at length they introduced me.

And it was a setting sort of like this, and I was coming in from the back, and we walked down the middle of the aisle. And I got about halfway down the aisle, and there was this real tall African-American man standing there on the aisle, a member of the Democratic committee in this county. And he put his arm around me and he said, "Hey, Governor." He said, "Don't worry about this." He said, "I was born in Hope, Arkansas, too. You're going to be just fine." [Laughter]

Tom Manton has been taking care of me ever since. And I want you to know that he has done a wonderful job in Congress, and I appreciate what he did for you and for New York and for our country. And I will miss him very much. Thank you, friend.

You know, on the way out here we were standing out in the hall, and I first met Gert, and we started laughing about John Glenn going up in space yesterday. And she said she thought that was a fine thing for a young man like him to be doing. [Laughter] I want you to hold that thought, because I'm coming back to it. [Laughter] There's a real reason why we're here today.

And finally, let me thank Chuck and Iris Schumer for their friendship to me. I was in their home in 1992 over in Brooklyn. And I met their friends and relatives and the people with whom they worship. It was quite an exciting day for me. And I have been proud of the campaign that they have made together with their family and friends, starting out against overwhelming odds, bravely soldiering on, and, I'd say, doing right well on this eve of another election.

I'd like to ask all of you to think about something as New Yorkers, as well as Americans. New York at extraordinary times has given this country extraordinary leadership in the United States Senate. New York gave the American people Robert Wagner and Herbert Layman and Jacob Javits and Pat Moynihan in the United States Senate. New York gave the American people Robert Kennedy in the United States Senate.

And once, Robert Kennedy said, and I quote, "There is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities." I've worked with Chuck Schumer a lot. He's an idealist who is always struggling to get something done. And the longer I serve as your President, believe it or not, and in spite of everything, the more idealistic I am about America, what it stands for, what it means, and what it can do, but the more determined I am that every day should be used to turn ideals into action.

When it comes to education or Social Security or health care, when it comes to all those ideas, I can think of no person with whom I have

worked in these last 6 years in the entire Congress who I think has more ability to turn ideals into action than Chuck Schumer. And that is one reason I am very proud to be here by his side and in support of him today.

Now, let me say also to all of you, this is not an ordinary election. I want you to go vote Tuesday, even if you are not going to cast your ballot the way I want you to. I hope you will, however. *[Laughter]* But I want you to go, because in this election we're going to choose the Congress of the 21st century. Really, the decisions that will be made, a lot of them in the next couple of years, will shape the way we as a people will live for far more than the next 2 years.

Now, for 6 years, since the people of New York gave the Vice President and me and Hillary and our whole team a chance to serve, we've turned the country's economic policy around. We've changed our social policy. We have essentially tried to make America work again so that we could take advantage of these incredible changes that are going on in the world and have a very strong economy but make sure we kept a human face on it, that we gave everybody a chance to benefit from his or her labors, and that we took care of those who through no fault of their own needed a little help to get by, and that we tried to bring the country together instead of driving it apart.

And after 6 years, we saw again today that our economy grew at 3.3 percent in the last quarter. We've had the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years; nearly 17 million new jobs; the lowest percentage of Americans on welfare in 29 years; the first balanced budget, as you heard Chuck say, in 29 years; and a surplus. For the first time in history, last week, thanks in part to the heroic efforts of New York's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Andrew Cuomo, we announced a year and a half ahead of time that we had met our goal. Now over two-thirds of the American people live in their own homes for the first time in the history of the United States. So we are moving in the right direction. That is a good thing.

And as I told somebody, we had also reduced the size of the Federal bureaucracy so that the Federal Government is now the smallest it was since the last time John Glenn went around the Earth. *[Laughter]*

Now, I thank Tom for what he said. Our administration has tried to be a force for peace

and freedom around the world. We've worked hard to help the Irish reconcile with one another. We're working hard to promote peace in the Middle East, and we had a big breakthrough there last week on this day; we announced it on this day last week. If I seem a little slow of speech today, you'll have to forgive me, but on that last day I was up 39 hours without sleep. And the real way we made the agreement was I was the last one standing—*[laughter]*—and so they finally agreed so they could go to bed. *[Laughter]*

I say that because America has unique responsibilities and unique opportunities. Today I announced a program that I believe will help us to keep the world economy growing and to roll back some of the financial turmoil you read about that's engulfing the rest of the world. Now, that's a big deal because a quarter of our growth in the last 6 years has come from our ability to sell what we have to sell to other people, so that more and more, the success of every American business, even small businesses here in Queens, will be indirectly affected, at least, by the success of our friends and neighbors throughout the world.

Now, against that background, at this golden moment for our country, I think we have to look ahead to the future and say, "Well, what are we going to do with the first surplus in 29 years? What are we going to do with the lowest unemployment rate in 29 years? What are we going to do with this time when we seem to be doing pretty well, but a lot of our friends are in trouble around the world? What are we going to do with all those neighborhoods in New York City and elsewhere which haven't yet felt the economic recovery of the last 6 years? Shall we just sort of relax and enjoy it, which means that at midterm elections half the people just stay home? Or shall we instead look ahead to the future and say, you know, times like this don't come along very often."

Those of you out here who've seen a lot of years, how many periods in American history have we had like this? Not many in your lifetime. Not many. And nothing lasts forever. So that when you have these times like this, it is terribly important that we as Americans look to the future and take on our real challenges.

To me, that's the most important decision the American people have to make. Do you want to think big, think about what America should be like for your children, your grandchildren,

your great-grandchildren? What can we do now when we are strong to give that kind of America to the Americans of the 21st century?

That's what this whole saving Social Security issue is about. When I heard Gert talking about it, I thought, you know, Social Security for us has become even more than a check in the mail, even though fully one-half the seniors in America would be in poverty today without it. Even though most people have some other source of income in addition to their Social Security check, nonetheless, if there were no Social Security, half the seniors in the country would be in poverty without it, instead of the 11 percent, which is the actual rate today. It's a huge deal. We're talking about untold millions of lives changed.

But in addition to the money, it is the symbol of our determination to honor family, to honor the contributions of those who went before us, to honor the proposition that in America we want to reward people who are good at what they're doing. We don't begrudge the athletes their success, the business people their success. But we know that a country is great because of the great mass of people who get up every day, work their hearts out, obey the law, pay their taxes, raise their kids, and build up neighborhoods. And they should be a part of our prosperity. We don't believe in leaving people behind who do their part for America. And Social Security symbolizes that.

Now, what's the issue here? Why is Social Security in trouble? First of all, if you're getting a check now, relax; you're going to be fine. That's not the issue. The issue is this: We are living longer. The baby boomers are coming up for retirement, and those of you who gave birth to baby boomers know that until this crowd started school last year, this crowd of children in school, the baby boomers were the largest American generation ever and larger than our children.

So that when we retire, the baby boomers, there will only be about two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. To give you an idea, today there are more than three people working—about three and a half people working for every one person drawing Social Security. In addition to that, there will be more and more and more women retiring and living on Social Security because women, on balance, have a longer life expectancy. And they are less likely to have pensions or personal

savings. For 25 percent of the women on Social Security, it's the only income they receive.

Now, when the 75 million baby boomers retire and when there are only two people on Social Security for every one person—two people working for every one person drawing, we will, in about 20 years, start having to pay out of the Social Security Trust Fund, as provided by law, benefits, because the annual income won't be enough to cover the annual outgo. Then in about 34 years, even the Trust Fund won't be enough to cover the benefit.

Now, here's what this is all about. If we start now and make some modest changes now that don't have to affect people on Social Security at all, and if we use this money that we have in the surplus which, I think I should add, was produced entirely by the Social Security tax itself, then we can make modest changes and preserve Social Security in the 21st century in a way that will accommodate the changing population patterns and still make sure it's there for the people who need it.

If we do not do that, if we say, "Well, heck, we waited 29 years for this surplus, let's take the money and run. Let's have a little fun. Give me a tax cut. Give me a new program. Give me this. Give me that, before we know whether we need this money to save Social Security"—and keep in mind it was produced by the Social Security tax—and we miss this opportunity, then what's going to happen? Sooner or later, within a few years—keep in mind, every year that goes by, the problem is only going to get tougher; it's not going to get easier, because you have less time to fix a big problem—then sooner or later we'll be forced with the choice of either saying, "Well, I'm sorry. We can't do this so we're just going to have to cut benefits 22 percent"—in which case a lot of seniors will be in deep trouble—or we'll say, "Our conscience won't let us live with ourselves, so we're going to raise the taxes 22 percent," and that's a whopping tax increase. And keep in mind, the payroll tax is paid by small businesses in years where they make money and years when they don't make any money; the payroll tax is paid by people on modest incomes as well as by wealthy people.

And if we did that, we'd be saying, "Okay, we didn't fix this when we had a chance back in 1999, and because we didn't do it, now we're going to have to lower the standard of living of our children and their ability to raise our

grandchildren because we didn't do the right thing."

Now, the generation that got us through World War II and built the greatest middle class in history and was educated by the G.I. bill knows that America should do right by the future. This is a huge issue.

For a long time I thought that this would be a completely bipartisan issue. All year long we had forums around the country, Democrats and Republicans together, talking about these ideas, honestly debating what the options were. But then the leadership in the House of the other party wanted to have a huge and permanent tax cut right before the election, disproportionately benefiting upper income people like me, before we did anything to fix Social Security and before we knew what it would cost.

Well, we beat that. Thanks to Chuck Schumer and Tom Manton and a lot of other people, we rolled that back. But just the other day, they reaffirmed their desire to do that, to deplete this surplus before we know how much we need for Social Security. And the majority leader in the Senate said that he might not even want to work with me next year on fixing Social Security.

So I say to you, I did not come here to trouble you about your Social Security. Your Social Security is okay. If we don't do anything, you'll be fine. But if you believe it's been a good thing, and if you want it there for the baby boomers, for your children, and if you want your children to be able to retire without having to undermine the incomes and the standard of living of your grandchildren, then I implore you to speak with a loud and clear voice and say, "Look, we have lived a long life, and sometimes you can't do the easy thing. We shouldn't take the money and run. We should save the money, save the surplus, and fix Social Security. If there's anything left over, then we can talk about what to do about it. But we cannot endanger this fundamental compact between the generations that has helped to make America what it is today. Save Social Security first."

That's the big reason I wanted to come here, the big reason I'm proud to stand with Chuck Schumer. There are other things. You heard—I think it was Tom who said we voted in this budget—we got one of our most important ideas in this budget: to hire 100,000 teachers to take class size down to an average of 18 in the early

grades. But if you go around New York, you will see a lot of school buildings with rooms that can't be used. If you go to Florida, where I was yesterday—I went to a little town in Florida not very long ago, a small town. I went to one elementary school. There were 12 trailers out back; one school, 12 trailers to accommodate all the extra kids.

So one of the things we didn't succeed in doing in this election—and again I ask you to think about your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren—if we're going to have more teachers and smaller classes, they have to have someplace to teach. That means we have to build schools where we need them and we have to repair schools where we have them.

We have school buildings in the cities of this country, like New York and Philadelphia and Chicago, where I've been, that are priceless buildings. No one could afford to build such buildings today. They're great buildings, but they've been allowed to fall into such disrepair that they can't even be hooked up to the Internet. And all this work we're doing to bring our kids into the modern age is not possible. So that's another big issue that I think is important. And I thank Chuck Schumer and Tom Manton for their support for building and repairing 5,000 schools. And we need to do that next year.

We've tried to get a Patients' Bill of Rights passed for a year, and the health insurance companies persuaded the majority in Congress to beat us. But you know, Chuck talked about Medicare. We have the same challenges in Medicare, by the way, we do in Social Security. But one of the things that bothers me is more and more Americans are in managed care plans and HMO's. Now, that can be good if they just save money that would have otherwise have been wasted. Don't forget, 6 years ago inflation in health care costs was going up at 3 times the rate of inflation. And for elderly people that was a really troubling thing, since you use more health care. It was going to bankrupt the country. So to manage the system better is a good thing. But to manage the system only to save money without regard to whether it's good for health care is not a good thing. Doctors, not accountants, should ultimately make health care decisions.

We're trying to pass this Patients' Bill of Rights that simply says, look, we believe very strongly that we should have a law which says

every person should have a right to see a specialist if his or her doctor recommends it; that every person in an accident should have a right to go to the nearest emergency room, not one halfway across New York City just because that's the one that's covered by the plan; that if a person is in a treatment, a chemotherapy treatment or a young woman being treated by an obstetrician, who's pregnant, and their employer changes health care plans, well, you ought to be able to keep the doctor you're dealing with until the treatment is over, until the baby is born; and that your medical records ought to be private.

Now, this is something that affects Americans of all ages, but disproportionately seniors who are in managed care plans. A lot of seniors want to go into managed care plans, Medicaid, Medicare, because they give prescription drugs which otherwise aren't covered. There are a lot of good things. But in the end, everybody ought to have those rights, those basic rights. And that's a big issue in this election that affects you and your children and your grandchildren.

So finally let me just say that there are a lot of things out here that you have to think about. And I've been urging the American people to vote and hoping we can get a little more balance in this Congress so that we can have people like Chuck Schumer who will put Social Security first, who will pass a Patients' Bill of Rights, who will make it possible for us to modernize and build our schools, in short, who will be thinking about the long term.

The temptation is great for people just to pass; they say, "Gosh, things are going so well, why is the President so agitated?" Because my job is to think for all the American people about next year and 5 years and 10 years and 20 years down the road. And I would argue that those of you who are senior citizens, your job is to think for all the American people about next year and 10 years and 20 years down the road.

We were sitting here talking about John Glenn going up 36 years ago, and Tom Manton said, "I remember when he went the first time,

and it seems like it was yesterday." Doesn't it to you, the ones that remember it? It seems like it was yesterday.

I remember once I met a man who is a friend of mine, who was 76 at the time, at an airport in Little Rock, and he looked terribly sad. And I said, "Why are you so sad?" He said, "Well, my sister just died, and I'm here to meet some family members." And he said, "When you came up to me, Bill," he said, "I was thinking about when we were 5 years old." He was 75. And he put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "Let me tell you something. It doesn't take long to live a life."

And all of you know that. We all are given our share of time here. We all try to make the best we can. We all try to build our families and build our lives, enjoy our friends, pursue our faiths. America is the greatest country in the world for giving us that chance.

All we all owe back to America is good citizenship. So I ask you, please, at this golden moment for our country, stand up for the proposition that we should save the Social Security system before we throw this money away that we've worked 6 years to build up; stand up for the proposition that every person ought to have decent integrity in their health care system; stand up for the proposition that children you and I may never know should have a world-class education in the 21st century.

I ask you for that and for your help for this good man, Chuck Schumer, and for all people who are always thinking about America's tomorrows.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:43 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. D. Joseph Finnerty, pastor, St. Sebastian's Catholic Church; Claire Shulman, president, Borough of Queens; Joseph Crowley, candidate for New York's Seventh Congressional District; senatorial candidate Representative Charles E. Schumer and his wife, Iris; former Deputy Chief of Staff Harold Ickes; and Gertrude McDonald, senior citizen, Long Island City.