

Remarks on Signing Legislation To Establish the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site

November 6, 1998

Thank you very much. You know, when Ernie was up here introducing me, I remembered that he was the only senior among the Little Rock Nine. He graduated in the spring in 1958, and when they called him up to receive his diploma, the whole auditorium was quiet, not a single person clapped. But we're all clapping for you today, buddy.

I would like to thank all the members of the Little Rock Nine who are here, including Elizabeth Eckford, Carlotta LaNier, Jefferson Thomas, Minnijean Trickey, Terrence Roberts. Melba Pattillo Beals is not here. Gloria Ray Karlmark is not here. Thelma Mothershed-Wair is not here. I think we should give all of them another hand. *[Applause]*

I would like to thank Congressman Elijah Cummings, Congressman Gregory Meeks for coming; Mayor Woodrow Stanley of Flint, Michigan; Commissioner Edna Bell, the president of the National Association of Black County Officials, from Wayne County, Michigan. I'd like to thank and welcome the mayor-elect of Washington, DC, Anthony Williams. I told him I'd be for more Federal aid if he'd teach me how to tie a bow tie. I never learned how to do that.

I would like to thank Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater and the Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt for their presence and leadership. And I would like to say a special word of welcome, and profound appreciation for his historic role in Tuesday's historic turnout of voters, to Reverend Jesse Jackson. Welcome, sir, we're delighted to have you here.

I thank the United States Marine Band, as always, for their great performance, on the occasion of John Philip Sousa's birth anniversary. And let me say a special word of welcome again to the White House to the magnificent young people of the Eastern High School Choir from Washington, DC. Thank you.

Let me say, since we are here to talk about our reconciliation, I hope you will forgive me for taking just a moment—and I know I speak for all Americans who are here—to express my sympathy to the people of Israel, who this morning were once again the target of a vicious ter-

rorist attack. No nation should live under the threat of violence and terror that they live under every day.

When Prime Minister Netanyahu and Chairman Arafat signed the Wye River agreement, they knew they would face this moment. They knew when they went home both of them would be under more danger and the terrorists would target innocent civilians. They knew they would have to muster a lot of courage in their people to stick to the path of peace in the face of repeated acts of provocation.

There are some people, you know, who have a big stake in the continuing misery and hatred in the Middle East, and indeed everywhere else in this whole world, just like some people had a big stake in continuing it in Little Rock over 40 years ago.

I ask for your prayers and support today for the Israelis and the Palestinians who believe in this agreement and who are determined to carry out their responsibilities and who understand that the agreement is the best way to protect the safety of the Israeli people. It was tenaciously negotiated, hard fought, but it is the best way to safety for the Israelis, the best way to achieve the aspirations of the Palestinians, and in the end, the only answer to today's act of criminal terror. I hope you will all feel that in your heart.

Let me say, this is a very, very happy day for the people who were part of the Little Rock Nine experience, for the people of Little Rock, all the Arkansans who are here, African-Americans from throughout our country. There was an earlier reference made by Congressman Bennie Thompson—and I thank him for his outstanding leadership in this endeavor and for his fine remarks today—about the election.

Now, most of the publicity about the election has been the enormous turnout of African-American citizens in a midterm election that resulted in the victories that have been well publicized for non-African-American elected officials. And having been one of those on several occasions, I am immensely grateful. *[Laughter]*

But what has received less publicity that I would like to point out, because this too was

a part of the road that the Little Rock Nine began to walk for us, is that on Tuesday in the State of Georgia, an African-American was elected the attorney general of the State, an African-American was elected the labor commissioner of the State. And in the South on Tuesday, African-American Congressmen were re-elected in majority white districts, with large majority—large majority. That is a part of the road we have walked together, a part of what we celebrate today.

There are so many here who played a role in it. One more person I would be remiss if I did not recognize, that Hillary and I love so much and are so grateful to, is the wonderful Dr. Dorothy Height, chairman of the National Commission of Negro Women. Thank you for being here, Dorothy. Let's give her a big hand. *[Applause]* Thank you, and bless you.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is only one bittersweet element in this magnificent moment for Hillary and for me, and that is that we are celebrating the last piece of legislation passed by our good friend Dale Bumpers. We have walked a lot of steps together since I first met Dale Bumpers about 25 years ago when he was Governor. And we've had a lot of laughs at each other's expense. After I became President, just to make sure that I didn't get the big head, he went around Washington introducing me to people as the second-best Governor Arkansas ever had. *[Laughter]* Today I told him that I hadn't had much time to review my remarks and, therefore, hadn't had the opportunity to delete all the nice things that had been written for me to say about him. *[Laughter]*

But I do want to tell you that this is a truly astonishing public servant. Hillary and I admire him, admire his wife Betty, admire the things that he's stood for and she's stood for, and we will miss them. Last month, in a final and, as always, brilliant speech on the Senate floor, Dale mentioned an inspiring teacher who once stopped him when he was reading out loud and said to the whole class, "Doesn't he have a nice voice? Wouldn't it be tragic if he didn't use that talent?" I think it's fair to say that Dale Bumpers has done his teacher proud, because he used that eloquent, impassioned voice to make sure that all the children of his State and our Nation could make use of their God-given talents.

We owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for his nearly five decades of caring, often courageous public service, and I cannot thank him enough.

The bill that Senator Bumpers and Congressman Thompson have presented to me for signature today recognizes the courage of the Little Rock Nine and that of their parents, their leaders, their community leaders, especially our great friend Daisy Bates, who could not be here today.

Because of all of them, Central High has become a hallowed place, a place every bit as sacred as Gettysburg and Independence Hall. Interestingly enough, back in the 1920's, it was voted the most beautiful school in America. It is still a functioning school, very much so. There are some years when its students comprise 25 percent of our State's entire roster of National Merit Scholars. It's a place where children can still go and study Greek and Latin, something that's rare in all school districts throughout America. It is, I believe, about to become the only open, fully operating school that is a National Historic Site.

As Ernie said, Hillary and I welcomed the Little Rock Nine back to Little Rock on the 30th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School. Then I was profoundly honored to hold open the door of the school so they could walk through on the 40th anniversary. Today I was able to welcome them all to the White House to the Oval Office and now on the South Lawn.

On the fateful day they slipped into Central High School and were removed by the police, President Eisenhower was on vacation in Newport. When he learned what had happened to them, and that Governor Faubus had turned over the streets to the mob, he realized that—even as a conservative—the Federal Government had to act. The next day he flew back to the White House. His helicopter landed just a few steps from here. He had just ordered General Maxwell Taylor to put the might of the 101st Airborne Division behind their righteous march through the doors of Central High.

Now, thanks to Senators Bumpers and Congressman Thompson, and many others, as they said, our Nation has found two very fitting ways to honor that march to ensure that the memory of the Little Rock Nine and all they represent remains alive long after those of us with living memories are gone.

As part of the budget I signed 2 weeks ago, I was authorized to confer Congressional Gold Medals, the highest civilian honor the Congress can bestow, on each and every member of the Little Rock Nine. It was only a few months ago that we presented President Nelson Mandela with that same award, and he spoke so movingly of his long struggle to tear down the walls of apartheid. The Little Rock Nine broke through the doors of apartheid. I can't wait until the artists finish creating your medals and we can bestow them upon you, an honor you richly deserve.

And then, of course, the main reason we're here today is to make a living monument forever out of the setting of your struggle. Again, I thank Senator Bumpers and all the others. The bill will allow the National Park Service to work with the community to maintain and protect Central High's magnificent building. It will also allow the Park Service to start acquiring land in the surrounding neighborhood to create new facilities where people can learn about the origins and the aftermath of the 1957 crisis, topics that simply can't be fully explored in the existing visitor center's limited space.

Children will never fully understand what you experienced in 1957. Maybe that's not such a bad thing. But they need to know. And now, for all time to come, children will have an opportunity to walk the stairs you walked, to see the angry faces you braved, to learn of your sacrifice, and about what, as a result of your sacrifice, you, your fellow Arkansans, and your Nation have become. Perhaps they will even see what it was about the Little Rock confrontation that made racial equality a driving obsession for so many of us who were young at the time and seared by it.

Again, I want to thank you for staying together over these 40-plus years now, for being willing to show up and be counted and to remind us, for showing us the shining example of your lives so that we could never forget all those who went before you who never had the chance that you gave to all who came after.

Monuments and medals are important reminders of how far we have come, but it is not enough. The doors of our schools are open, but some of them are falling off their rusty hinges. And many of them are failing the students inside. The economy has never been stronger, but there are still striking disparities in jobs, in investments in neighborhoods, in edu-

cation, and criminal justice. Still too many break down along what W.E.B. Du Bois first called the color line. And while the Little Rock Nine have enjoyed great success in business, in the media, in education, they can tell you that in spite of what we celebrated on Tuesday, there is still discrimination and hatred in the hearts of some Americans.

All of that we found in our Presidential initiative on race. And we must never forget that it is our continuing obligation to the Little Rock Nine and all others who brought us to this point to fight this battle.

The last point I want to make to you is that the face of America is changing and changing fast. I went to an elementary school last Saturday to talk about the need to build and modernize our schools. There were children from 24 nations there. The principal said, "Mr. President, we're so glad to have you here, and we've got all the parents here. I only wish that we could have translated your talk into Spanish and Arabic."

America is changing, and it is a good thing, if we remember to live by the ideals on which this country was founded, if we remember the sacrifices of the Little Rock Nine, if we listen to our teachers, like Dr. John Hope Franklin. We, in other words, have a whole new chapter in the Nation's march to equality to write.

Remember what Senator Bumpers' teacher said, "Wouldn't it be tragic if he didn't use that talent?" That's exactly what the struggle for one America is all about, because that is a question that should be asked of every single child in our country.

When we ask that question with the Little Rock Nine in mind, it helps us to keep our eyes on the prize, the prize of true equality and true freedom, that ever elusive, always worth seeking, more perfect Union.

These people that we honor today, in the school we save today for all time, have given us all a great and treasured gift. May God bless them and the United States.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:43 a.m. in the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ernest Green, one of the Little Rock Nine; civil rights activists Rev. Jesse Jackson and Daisy Bates; Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel; and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. S. 2232, approved

November 6, was assigned Public Law No. 105–356.

Remarks at the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Dedication Ceremony in Highfill, Arkansas

November 6, 1998

Thank you so much, Secretary Slater, for your support of this project and your terrific work. Thank you, Administrator Garvey, Senator Hutchinson, Congressman Hutchinson, Senator-elect Blanche Lambert Lincoln. Now, up here in northwest Arkansas, from my point of view, she's got the best of all worlds; she's a Democrat with a Republican last name. *[Laughter]* I want you to get to know her; you'll like her a lot.

Congressman Dickey, Congressman Hammerschmidt, Mr. Green, thank you for your marvelous work here. Mr. Bowler, thank you for bringing American Eagle here. I want to thank the Springdale Band and the Fayetteville Choir. I thought they both did a superb job.

You know—I've got all these notes, but I don't really want to use them today. I was flying home today, and I have to begin by bringing you greetings from two people who were with me this morning who, for different reasons, wanted to come and couldn't. One is the First Lady, Hillary, who wanted me to tell her friends in northwest Arkansas hello and to say she wished she could be here. And the other is Senator Bumpers, who has a sinus condition and was told by his doctor not to get on the airplane, although I told him I thought it was a pretty nice plane I was trying to bring him down here in—*[laughter]*—and that we were trying to demonstrate that northwest Arkansas had a world-class airport. But he asked to be remembered to you.

I want to thank my good friend, former Chief of Staff, and our Envoy to Latin America, Mack McLarty, for being here. And all of you all out here—I've been looking out in this crowd at so many people I've known for 25 years, many more—I've been sort of reliving the last 25 years. I think I should begin by saying that in every project like this, there are always a lot of people who work on it. Rodney mentioned that many years ago, Senator Fulbright, who was my mentor, had the idea of there ought

to be an airport here. I know how long Congressman Hammerschmidt has worked on this. This project started in the planning stage under the Bush administration, and we completed it. We had bipartisan support, and as Senator Hutchinson said, invoking our friend Senator McCain, we had bipartisan opposition to it as well. *[Laughter]*

And I have found that there is in any project like this a certain squeaky wheel factor; there are people that just bother you so much that even if you didn't want to do it, you'd go on and do it anyway. And I would like to pay a certain special tribute to the people who were particular squeaky wheels to me, starting with Alice Walton, who wore me out—*[laughter]*—Uvalde and Carol Lindsey, who guilt-peddled me about every campaign they'd ever worked for me in; and Dale Bumpers, who made me relive every favor he'd ever done for me for 20 years. *[Laughter]* Now, there were others as well, but I want to especially thank them.

I want to say to all of you, I'm delighted to see Helen Walton here and members of the Walton family. I, too, wish Sam were here to see this day. I thank J.B. Hunt, who talked to me about this airport. George Billingsly once said, "You remember, I gave you the first contribution you ever got in Benton County; now build that airport." *[Laughter]* I have a lot of stories about this airport. I want you to understand how high public policy is made in Washington. *[Laughter]* And we're all laughing about this, but the truth is, this is a good thing, and it needed to be done.

You know, when I was a boy growing up in Arkansas—Tim talked about how we were all raised to believe you could build a wall around Arkansas—we thought in the beginning, for a long time, that roads would be our salvation. Forty-two years ago President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act into law, a bill sponsored by the Vice President's father,