

remarks were also made available on the White House Press Office Radio Actuality Line.

Remarks at a Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Dinner September 18, 1999

Ladies and gentlemen, the main thing I want to say tonight is, thank you. Thank you to the Congressional Black Caucus for your leadership and your partnership, for your genuine friendship. Thank you to Jim Clyburn; to my friend of 27 years Eddie Bernice Johnson; to Eva Clayton; to the dean of the delegation, John Conyers; to your retiring member and a great champion of education and human welfare, Bill Clay; to Corrine Brown and Elijah Cummings and Sheila Jackson Lee and all the other members of the CBC, I thank you for your kindness, your friendship, your support to me, to Hillary, to Al and Tipper Gore, to what we have done together. I thank Senator Carol Moseley-Braun for her continuing willingness to serve.

I welcome and congratulate the award winners, my friends Julius Chambers and Alvin Brown and Tom Joyner. Can you imagine Tom Joyner and his son thanking Al and me for being on his radio program? *[Laughter]* You know, even the people that don't like us don't think we're stupid. *[Laughter]* And I want to thank and congratulate Rear Admiral Evelyn Fields, who has done such a great job. She started as a cartographer and went on to chart a new course of opportunity not only for African-American women but for all women. And thank you for honoring them.

I also would like to welcome the President of Haiti here, President Rene Preval. We're delighted to have him here, and we thank him for his friendship.

There are so many people here who have been associated with our administration, and they were all asked to stand. You know them well. I want to just mention two, if I might. One is my chief speechwriter, Terry Edmonds, because he's the first African-American to ever hold that job, and the reason I'm introducing him is, since Al and Eddie Bernice and Jim talked, I can't give half the speech that he wrote for me, so the least I can do is acknowledge

that he did it. Thank you my friend. You're doing great.

The other person I want to thank for his extraordinary leadership as our special representative to the continent of Africa is Reverend Jesse Jackson, and I want to thank him very much for that and particularly his role in ending the disastrous conflict in Sierra Leone.

I want to congratulate some of the current judicial nominees, more than half of whom are women and minorities, including Judge James Wynn, who would be the first African-American to serve on the fourth circuit; Judge Ann Williams, the first African-American on the seventh circuit; and this week I nominated Kathleen McCree Lewis to serve on the sixth circuit. I congratulate them.

There are just two more people I want to thank. I want to thank my wife for her love, her friendship, and for her leadership for our children and our future; for the way she has represented us around the world and for having the courage to stay in public service. After all we've been through, she would be the best United States Senator you could ever elect to anything.

I also want to thank all the members of the administration here, the Cabinet members; some are African-American, some are not. But one of the most interesting things that anyone ever said to me is—the Presidential scholar, that the Vice President and I knew, came from Harvard one night to a dinner at the White House, and we were pretty low. It was after we had been waxed in the '94 congressional elections; and this man said, "I have been studying administrations for a long time, and you should know that I believe that yours will be reelected; and one reason is, you have the most loyal Cabinet since Thomas Jefferson's second administration." So to all who are here—Secretary Slater, Madame Attorney General, Secretary Herman, any other members of the Cabinet who are here,

our Veterans Affairs Secretary, all the others—I want to thank them.

And finally, and most of all, I'd like to thank the Vice President, without whom none of the good things we have accomplished together would have been possible. He has been, by far, the most influential, active, passionate, intense, effective Vice President of the United States in the history of our Republic, and I am very grateful to him.

Now, you know, this has been an exciting year for African-Americans. A lot of things have happened. I mean, Serena Williams became the first black woman since Althea Gibson to win the U.S. Open; Ken Chenault was named the first black CEO of American Express; and this is very important—I want you all to listen to this—the magnificent African-American writer Toni Morrison agreed with an extreme rightwing journalist that I am the first black President of the United States. *[Laughter]*

Chris Tucker came to see me today—*[laughter]*—and I was in stitches. He's here somewhere tonight. Where are you? Stand up there. *[Applause]* So Chris Tucker is in there; he looks at me with a straight face and says he's coming in to case the Oval Office because he's about to make a movie in which he will star as the first black President. I didn't have the heart to tell him I had already taken the position. *[Laughter]*

I want to make a couple of points. Most of what needs to be said has been said. One of the most interesting books of the Bible is the Book of James. It challenges us to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only." This truly is a caucus of doers. And I'm grateful for all the things that have happened that everyone else has mentioned. But none of it would have been possible without you.

Now we come again to what has become a fairly usual moment in the last 2 years—the end of another budget year in which we must all make an accounting of ourselves to the American people for what we have done and what we are about to do and what we are going to do with the money they give us from the sweat of their brow.

Now, our Republican friends have sent me a tax bill, and it is quite large. The middle class and working class and lower income relief in it is, oh, about the size of our bill, but their bill is more than 3 times the size of ours. And people in upper income groups who are doing

pretty well in the stock market get all the rest of the relief.

But the main thing is that the bill makes choices. We all make choices in life, often when we pretend not to and often when we deny that we are, but we do. And so even when things don't seem to be happening, sometimes decisions of the most momentous consequences are being made. The Vice President courageously presented himself for public office, for the highest office in the land. Many of the rest of you will be running this year; perhaps the First Lady will be among you.

But while we are doing these things, which we know are big, decisions will be made in this Congress which will affect what they can do if the American people are good enough to send them into office.

Why do I want to veto this bill? Not because I enjoy these interminable partisan fights; I frankly find them revolting most of the time. It's not really what the framers had in mind. They wanted us to debate our differences in advance and then figure out what we could agree on and go on and do it. But there are choices here.

Do you know the number of people over 65 is going to double in the next 30 years? I hope to be one of them. *[Laughter]* When that happens, there will be two people working for every one person drawing Social Security and Medicare. We ought to use this surplus to deal with the challenge of the aging of America and take care of Social Security and Medicare and give a prescription drug benefit.

Do you know we've got more kids in our schools than ever before? You heard the Vice President talk about what our agenda is and what he wants to do. Well, you can't do it if you give away the store first. We ought to invest in our kids. We have the most diverse, largest group of children ever in our schools, and they are carrying our future in their little minds every day when they show up. And we need to give them all a world-class education.

And if we do this right, believe it or not, we'll be paying down the debt. We could actually make America debt-free for the first time since Andrew Jackson was President in 1835. Now, here's why progressives ought to be for this: Because if we do that, we'll drive down interest rates, and we'll be able to get more people to go invest money in places that haven't yet felt our prosperity. We'll keep interest rates

down for homes, for college loans, for car loans, for credit cards. We'll guarantee that we'll have a generation of prosperity. We will pass something on to our children. This is a choice.

What I want to say to you is, I want us to get as much of this done as we can so that we leave for our successors in office the chance to do something meaningful. Nothing, in some ways, is more important than trying to make sure every American has a chance to participate in our prosperity. I was so proud of Alvin Brown tonight when I was listening to his speech on the film, getting ready to give him his award; so grateful that the Vice President gave him a chance to lead our empowerment zone and enterprise community programs; so glad that we are continuing to try to involve businesses. The Vice President is determined to bridge the so-called digital divide and put computers in every classroom in America, not just those who can afford it on their own, and make sure they can afford to use them. Thank you, Chairman Kennard, for what you've done on that.

It's very important that we fund the next round of empowerment zones, that we fund the new markets initiative, that we give Americans the same incentives to invest in poor neighborhoods here we give them to invest in poor places overseas. I want to continue with all these incentives. I wish we did more for the Caribbean, for Central America, for South America, and for Africa. I just want to do the same thing for the poor neighborhoods of Appalachia, of the Mississippi Delta, of the Indian reservations, of the cities that have been left behind.

All the things that have been mentioned, I just want to say, me too. To the fair and accurate census, me too; to making sure that our children have safe and good places to learn, me too; to meeting the challenge of quality health care and passing an enforceable Patients' Bill of Rights and doing more in the battle against AIDS, here at home and around the world, and restoring trust between the community and police, passing the hate crimes legislation, and passing the other things that we talked about.

I want to say a few words, seriously, about a topic that the Vice President touched on, and I really appreciated it. And I don't want to trivialize this. I think the killing of innocent people, en masse, in America has been the most painful thing that he and I and our families have had to endure in discharging our respon-

sibilities to the American people—the bombing at Oklahoma City; the terrible school violence at Littleton, Colorado; and before that, across the country, Arkansas and Mississippi, all the way to Oregon, and all the other places that were affected; this awful spate of race-related killings, and then, apparently, people just with their anger out of control, from Illinois and Indiana out to Los Angeles, over to Georgia, and back to Fort Worth, Texas.

None of us should seek to make any capital out of this, but all of us should seek to make sense out of it. That's why we started this big grassroots campaign against youth violence that I hope all of you will be involved in. Two or three people came up to me tonight and said you were doing things back in your home communities, and I'm grateful.

But the Vice President brought up this subject about whether it was evil rather than guns, since that is the debate as it has been posed in the paper and by some others, to explain the terrible thing that happened in the church in Texas, and many of these other things. And he said, essentially, both.

I just want to ask you to think about this, because you think about how many times in your life you're in a—[inaudible]—and you would like to avoid taking responsibility for something that you could actually do something about, in your personal life, in your work life, as citizens. You can always find some other cause for the problem that you can still do something about.

You know, our country has the highest murder rate in the world. And here, I'll tell you another thing you probably didn't know. The number of children who die accidentally from gun deaths in the United States is 9 times higher than the number who die in the next 20 biggest economies combined. Now, if you believe this is about the human heart, you must believe two things: If the murder rate is higher here and the accidental death rate is exponentially higher, you must believe that we are both more evil and more stupid than other countries. Don't laugh. I know it's kind of funny, but don't laugh.

The point I'm trying to make is, the NRA and that crowd have got to stop using arguments like this as an excuse to avoid our shared responsibilities. It may be true that if we had passed every bill that I have advocated, and every bill that the Vice President says he'd pass

if he were President, that some of these killings would have occurred. But it is undoubtedly true that many would not. And that is what we have to think about.

And when we go into this political season, where everybody will turn up the rhetoric, you ought to have your antennae working real good, and ask yourself, are these people looking for a way to assume responsibility, or to duck it? And when I say that, I mean no disrespect to anyone.

Of course, it is because something horrible had happened to that man's heart that he walked into that church in Texas and killed those people, of course it is. And the same things that happened to the children in Los Angeles and the Filipino postalworker, and the same thing that happened to all those people in Illinois and Indiana, of course it is. But we cannot use that as an excuse not to ask ourselves, what's the difference between our setup here and everybody else's setup? And is it worth the price we're paying, or is there something we can do collectively to make America a safer place and make it clear that more of our children are going to grow up safe and sound and healthy? That's what we ought to be doing. Make this election year about assuming responsibility, not ducking it, for America's future. You can do it, and we need you to do it.

Finally, let me just say for the record and for the press here, most of the things the Congressional Black Caucus has really worked for in the nearly 7 years I've been privileged to be President have not benefited African-Americans exclusively, sometimes not even primarily. Most of the things that you have fought for were designed to give all Americans a chance to live up to the fullest of their God-given capacity, designed to give all Americans a chance to live on safe streets, designed to give all Americans a chance to come together.

And in that sense, it may be that, in the end, the efforts we have made—now manifested in our office for One America in the White House, that Ben Johnson leads—to bring this country together as we move forward may be the most important of all. You know, no one can foresee the future. I have loved doing this job, and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability every day that I have left on my term. I am going to do it to the best of my ability. I am going to be a good citizen for the rest of my life and tell people exactly what I think.

But no one can see the future, and no one has all the answers. But I know this, and you do, too. If every American really believed that we were one nation under God, if every person really believed that we are all created equal, if every person really believed that we have an obligation to try to draw closer together and to be better neighbors with others throughout the world, then all the rest of our problems would more easily melt away.

And so I ask you, as we go through the last difficult and exhilarating challenges of this year, as you head into the political season next year, keep in your mind—especially those of you in this Congressional Black Caucus—the enormous potential you have to reach the heart and soul of America, to remind them that we must be one.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 10 p.m. in the ballroom at the Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Representatives James Clyburn, chair, Eddie Bernice Johnson, first vice chair, and Eva M. Clayton, John Conyers, Jr., William (Bill) Clay, Corrine Brown, Elijah E. Cummings, and Shelia Jackson Lee, members, Congressional Black Caucus; Tom Joyner's son Oscar; and actor Chris Tucker. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on September 20.

Remarks to the Community in Tarboro, North Carolina *September 20, 1999*

Thank you very much. Well, let me begin, ladies and gentlemen, by thanking Mayor Morris for welcoming me. And I thank Mayor Perkins

from Princeville. I flew over there and saw all the houses still buried underwater. I want to thank all the city officials, all the county officials,