

Oct. 7 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1999

Sperling for their hard work to provide this important new protection for American workers.

Statement on Senate Action on Proposed Education Appropriations *October 7, 1999*

Today the Senate passed a spending bill that woefully shortchanges America's children. The Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriation bill fails to make vital investments in our Nation's children. It undermines the commitment we made last year to hire quality teachers and reduce class size in the early grades. It underfunds after-school programs and such important efforts as the GEAR UP mentoring program.

If this bill were to come to me in its current form, I would veto it. I have already sent Congress a budget for the programs in this bill that provides for essential investments and is fully paid for. I urge Congress again to work on a bipartisan basis to develop legislation that truly strengthens public education and other key national priorities.

This bill is a catalog of missed opportunities and misguided priorities. I am particularly disappointed that the Senate defeated a common-sense measure to make schools accountable for results. The Bingaman-Reed-Kerry amendment would have set aside funds for States to turn around failing schools. By rejecting it, the Senate lost a chance to make accountability more

than just a slogan. The Senate also rejected amendments to increase the number of qualified teachers in high-need districts and to help States improve the quality of their teaching forces.

The Senate properly rejected two wrong-headed amendments that would have hurt workers. One would have barred implementation of the ergonomics rule so key to safeguarding worker health. The other would have barred enforcement of the Davis-Bacon law in natural disaster areas, a law which assures workers appropriate wages.

While the Senate did make important strides by committing to increase child-care funding next year, the bill underfunds many other efforts, including public health priorities in preventive and mental health, programs that give millions of Americans better access to health care and critical social services for vulnerable families. The bill also does not provide aid to families caring for elderly or ill relatives through the family caregiver initiative. Even worse, in expressing support for an across-the-board cut in all discretionary programs, the Senate has shown its unwillingness to address America's needs in a responsible and comprehensive way.

Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Reception in New York City *October 7, 1999*

Thank you. Please be seated.

Let me, first of all, thank Dennis and all of you for this event and for your support for the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee. Senator Schumer was supposed to be here tonight, but they're voting late, so he's working for you, and I'm filling in for him. *[Laughter]* That's sort of getting prepared for my life after the Presidency. I'm sort of the stand-in speaker tonight for Chuck Schumer. *[Laughter]*

I'd like to thank you again for your support for the Senators, and I'd like to thank, as I always try to do, the people of New York City and New York State for being so very good to me and the Vice President and our whole administration over these last 6½ years.

I would like to just make a brief statement about the event that we're here for. I think all of you know that we Democrats have maintained a constant commitment to the health care

of our people and to the well-being of the health care network. We all are very well aware that, as Hillary warned us back in 1994, the number of uninsured people continues to rise and will continue to do so until we do things that cover more people and stem the hemorrhaging of loss of coverage.

I will say this: We've got some specific proposals out there that I think will begin to make a dent in that this year. This is the first year that all the States are enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program. Now what we have to do is go out and get the children enrolled. The States are enrolled. We have to get the children enrolled. As all of you know—I see a lot of you nodding your heads—it's easier to say than to do; to find these people, to tell them that even though they may be Medicaid-eligible, they are eligible for this; please come enroll. But we need to make a huge, Herculean effort over the next 6 months, to get every single eligible child in America enrolled in these programs. It will also help to alleviate the financial problems of a lot of our health care providers, and we need to do it.

The second thing I would note is that in my Medicare reform this year, I have asked the Congress to allow people between the ages of 55 and 65 to buy into the Medicare program. A lot of the people without health insurance between 55 and 65 can't get health insurance from anybody else. But they're middle-class people, and they do have the funds to afford a Medicare buy-in. We can do that with the present budget I've given the Congress, and I hope we will do it.

The third thing I would note is, I do believe that some time before the Congress goes home, they will pass what is known as the Kennedy-Jeffords bill, which will allow disabled people on Medicaid to go into the workplace and keep their Medicaid, which will put more people in the workplace and continue the flow of funds to the health care system and enable them to keep their health care.

There will doubtless be more to be debated about this. Now, let me say a word about what happened in 1997. I am not at all surprised that the 1997 Balanced Budget Act imposed greater burdens on the health care system than were estimated. And some of you were involved in that and know that we had a figure of the savings we wanted to achieve, and we, in the administration, having good data from all of you,

gave the Congress a set of changes we thought would be necessary to meet that figure.

The Congressional Budget Office did not believe we would achieve those savings and therefore said we had to do more things. So we did everything that the CBO said we had to do, and we had more savings than we needed to meet the original budget targets, and it came right out of the teaching hospitals, a lot of the therapeutic services people, a lot of the other things. All of you know this.

We are working hard now. I've had a conversation—every time they come back from New York or anywhere else, Hillary and the Vice President ask me, "When are we going to do something about this Medicaid problem? We've got to deal with this." We understand that. I think that there is now a consensus in the Congress in both Houses and, I think, increasingly in both parties, that part of the last budget negotiations will require funds flowing back to deal with this problem, and I will do the best I can with that.

Let me just make some general points here. When I came to New York in 1992 as the nominee with my family and my then very new Vice Presidential partner and his family and asked the American people and the people of this State to take a chance on us because we thought we could turn the country around—and it's been so long since things were bad, people had forgotten how bad they were in 1992, but they were quite bad, indeed—I asked you to take a chance based on an argument I made. I said, "You know, I think that the politics of division in Washington are hurting America. You've either got to be pro-business or pro-labor. You've got to be pro-growth or pro-environment. All these things have to be opposed to one another. You have to be for big deficits or cutting spending on education." And I just don't believe that's the way the world works. I never have believed that. All of us in our own lives try to find ways to unify our objectives and pull things together to go forward.

And so I said to the American people, "Look, give me a chance to try to push a policy that will provide opportunity to every responsible citizen and will bring all people together in one community, that will allow us to be pro-business and pro-labor, pro-environment and pro-growth, get rid of the deficit but continue to invest in education."

And it was just an argument, but the American people decided to give us a chance, probably, frankly, because the country was in such tough shape. It was really tough.

Well, after 6 years, it's not an argument anymore. There is now evidence. And I'm very proud that with the help of the Democratic Members of the Senate, without whom none of this would have been possible, we now have the lowest unemployment rate in 29 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the highest homeownership in history, the first back-to-back balanced budget surpluses in 42 years, and the longest economic expansion in peacetime in our history, with over 19 million new jobs. It's not an argument anymore.

Now, the issue before the American people is, some say, whether we should change. That is not the question. We are going to change. This country's been changing for over 200 years; that's why we're still here. We're adaptable. We always have new challenges. We always have new opportunities. The question is not whether we'll change; the question is how we're going to change.

We can take a U-turn and go back to the policies that got us in trouble in the first place. I've tried to stop those. Some of the most important achievements of the last 6 years involved stopping the Contract With America, stopping this ill-advised, huge tax cut that I vetoed, which, by the way, would have made it utterly impossible to do what we ought to do in Medicare.

But I would just ask you as citizens to think about the big things we can do now because of the country's prosperity. And let me just mention three. And it's time to think about the big things.

Big thing number one that all of you deal with in health care, we've got to deal with the aging of America. People are living longer, and the number of people over 65 will double in 30 years. I hope to be one of them. And we have a chance and, I would argue, and obligation to save Social Security and push the life of Social Security out beyond the life expectancy of the whole baby boom generation. We can do that now.

We have an obligation not only to properly fund Medicare but to extend the life of it and to add a prescription drug benefit. I was just asked again today about all these people who

live in New York, Vermont, Maine, along the Canadian border, going across the border to Canada to buy American drugs much cheaper than they can buy them in America. If we would give people on Medicare the option, purely the option, to buy into a prescription drug program that could use market power to get discount prices, we could deal with the problems of 75 percent of the seniors in this country that don't have access to those pharmaceuticals now. I think it's important.

That's big challenge number one. Big challenge number two, as New York knows, we have the largest and most diverse student population in our schools in history. We have done everything we could with the HOPE scholarships and other aids to give everybody who can go access to college. But no one believes that we're giving a world-class education to every child in K through 12 yet.

So it's time to build them modern schools and give them more teachers and have high standards but give them access to summer school and after-school and mentoring programs, so you don't declare the kids failures when the system is failing them.

This is important. We ought to say, "We're not going to rest until the children in our public schools have the same access to quality education that children in our institutions of higher education do." That's a big idea worth fighting for.

The third thing I'd like to say is, we need to think about the 21st century economy. As you know here, from upstate New York to some neighborhoods in New York City, not everybody has participated in our prosperity. As a matter of fact, part of the problems our hospitals have today is that not everybody has participated in our prosperity. You still have a lot of poor people who can't afford to pay who have to have care.

I have offered the American people, from the empowerment zone program in 1993 to our new markets initiative now, a way to bring more people into our enterprise system. I think people with money in America ought to get the same tax breaks and other incentives to invest in poor areas in America we today give them to invest in Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa. I don't want to take those other incentives away, but I think you ought to have the same option to grow a business here you do in our poor countries to the south and around the world.

And finally, I think we ought to get this country out of debt for the first time since 1835. We can do that in 15 years. Now, anybody in this room over 40 who took economics in college was taught that a country should always be a little bit in debt, that somehow that's healthy. And when we learned it, it was true. It's not true anymore for rich countries because interest rates are set globally, and if we can make America debt-free over the next 15 years, it means lower interest rates for business loans, for hospital construction, for college loans, for home loans, for car loans. It means more jobs and higher incomes. It means when our friends around the world who have to buy the things we produce get in trouble, they can borrow money to get out of trouble at a lower cost. It could ensure a generation of prosperity. We can do it now. We should think big.

Now, let me just mention one final issue. I could talk about this all night, because I want America to start thinking big about it. We have the lowest crime rate in 26 years, and I'm proud of that. And it's nationwide in every big city—we're seeing—with the same strategies there that have worked here, community policing and careful targeting of certain kinds of crime in certain areas. But no one thinks it's as low as it ought to be. No one thinks America is as safe as it ought to be. So I would like to see people stand up and say, "Okay, we've got the lowest crime rate in 26 years. Now we need a real goal. Let's make America the safest big country in the world." If we're the most prosperous big country in the world, if we have more freedom than anybody else in the world, we ought to be able to make it the safest big country in the world.

We have to do more to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. We have to do more to keep guns out of the hands of children who die at an accidental rate—listen to this—accidental rate from gun deaths in America, 9 times higher than the next 25 industrial countries in

the world combined. But we can do it if we make up our mind to do it.

In closing, let me say the other thing that I'm proud to be a Democrat about, besides these big ideas, is that we stand for the idea that we can be one America across all the racial, religious, gender, sexual orientation, and other lines that divide us. We believe our common humanity is more important than our differences, which make life interesting, but which are not fundamental to our common cause.

If you look at all the trouble we've had in the world in the last 20 years, just the trouble we've had in the world in the last 6½ years since I've been President, from the Middle East to Northern Ireland, to Bosnia and Kosovo, to the tribal wars in Africa, our continuing inability to get over our fear, loathing, and dehumanization of people who are different from us is the number one problem the world has. And it is quite interesting, as we deal with the miracles of modern medicine, the miracles of the modern Internet, we look forward to the human genome project, giving every mother a map of her baby's life when she goes home from the hospital, we are beset by the most primitive of all human problems, the continuing fear of people who are different from us.

I can just tell you that the people that we're running and the policies that will be followed—and you know, I'm not running for anything. I'm selling this as a prospective citizen and what I want for my daughter and my grandchildren's generation. We'll stand up for one America, and we'll change. But we don't want a U-turn. We've got this country going in the right direction, and we want to reach for the stars.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:50 p.m. in the penthouse of the McGraw-Hill Building. In his remarks, he referred to Dennis Rivera, president, National Health and Human Services Employees Union Local 1199.