

Remarks at a National Labor Research Association Dinner in New York City
October 7, 1999

Thank you for that nice, restrained welcome. [Laughter] It is wonderful to be here with all of you and to see your enthusiasm. And I thank you for it. I want to thank all of you for being here and for the purpose that you're here. Brian McLaughlin and Lee Saunders and Representative Loretta Sanchez is here. Basil Patterson, I was delighted to see him. Randi Weingarten and so many old friends of mine are here. I want to say a special word of congratulations to Jim Hoffa and Ed Ott on their awards.

Thank you for making New York the biggest, strongest union city in America. I also want to thank Greg Tarpinian and the Labor Research Association. You know, when people hear the words "think tank," they don't think about dinners where people behave the way you are right now. [Laughter] They think about really button-down types, chewing on their pipe stems, musing about the higher things. Well, you're not in an ivory tower, and it's important that people with feet on the ground do the thinking in America. And I thank you for doing it.

I would just say one other thing about this dinner tonight, and your work and deciding to honor Jim and Ed. They represent the vitality and the strength and the intensity and the compassion and the direction of the modern labor movement in America. One of the things that I wanted to do when the Vice President and I came into office is to change the way America thought about labor. I was so sick and tired of more than a decade of people trying to make unions the whipping boy of whatever it was that was wrong with America they wanted to make right.

And when I asked—I never will forget this—when I sat around and talked to Hillary and my other close friends, and I was trying to decide—[applause]—well, that's good, too. We need that response in New York especially, I think. [Laughter]

But we were trying to decide, you know, what we ought to do with this whole Vice Presidential thing. And I said, "Look, I think I'm going with Gore, because he's the same age I am"—he's actually younger, as he never tires of telling people—[laughter]—"and we're from the same

part of the country, and we're from the same sort of general wing of the Democratic Party." But I think that's good, because what I want to do is change the way America thinks about politics.

Because everybody in Washington had created an environment, particularly the previous two administrations, where you couldn't be pro-business if you were pro-labor. You couldn't be pro-economic growth if you thought we ought to try to preserve the environment. You couldn't be for doing something about the deficit if you wanted to invest in our children's education. And it was this kind of nutty world that didn't exist anywhere I knew in America except in Washington and in the political choices we were given.

And so we made this argument to the American people. We said, "Look, give us a chance to prove you can be pro-business and pro-labor. Give us a chance to prove you can be for protecting the environment and growing the economy. Give us a chance to get rid of this deficit and invest more in the education of our children and the future of our country."

And it was just an argument—just an argument. But the people of this great city and this wonderful State and our great country gave us a chance. And every step of the way, you were with us. And now, after 6½ years, thanks to you, those who produce ideas and those who do the work, it is not an argument anymore. The evidence is in, and we were right.

Thanks to you, we raised the minimum wage; we got family and medical leave on the books; we cut taxes for millions of low income working families by doubling the earned-income tax credit. And whenever our friends on the other side of the aisle in Congress try to roll back the rights of workers, we turn them back. And every time we did that, every time we did it, they said we were hurting the job climate in America. "If you raise the minimum wage, you'll hurt small business. If you pass family and medical leave"—after the previous administration vetoed it—"you'll hurt business. We won't have job growth. If you don't get rid of the Davis-Bacon law, you're going to hurt the business

climate. If you double the earned-income tax credit that goes to people who are working their hearts out, with kids and barely above the poverty line, you know you'll waste a lot of tax money on people who will take advantage of it, weaken the economy—be hard to balance the budget.”

I heard all those arguments over and over again. Well, the evidence is in. We didn't get a single vote from the other side for our economic plan in 1993 that the labor movement stood with us on. And we stayed strong for all these other things because we believed you could be pro-labor and pro-business; we believed you could be pro-family and pro-work. And after 6½ years, thanks to you and all those who stood together, we have the lowest unemployment rate in 29 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest poverty rate in 20 years, the first back-to-back budget surpluses in 42 years, the highest homeownership in history, 19½ million new jobs, and the longest economic expansion in peacetime in the history of the United States of America.

Now, the question is, what are we going to do now? There will be a great debate across this country over the next year, between now and the next election for President, for the Senate, for the Congress, and people will say, because they know we Americans all like to hear it, “Well, we ought to have a change.” And guess what? I agree with that. I agree with that. If there were any candidate for President on the horizon today who said, “Vote for me, and I'll do exactly what Bill Clinton did,” I'd vote against that person. [Laughter] I would vote against that person, because the world is changing too fast.

We've worked hard to turn this country around and get it going in the right direction. And I believe that the changes we ought to be focused on are those which, now, we have the luxury of embracing, to just totally rewrite the future for the United States and much of the rest of the world for our children and our children's children.

Yes, we ought to change. But what we ought to do is build on what we've done to reach for the stars, not take a U-turn and get us back in the same trouble we were in 1992, when we got here. And so I say to you, now that—in the presence of a think tank—we need the best ideas to reach for the stars.

The number of people over 65 in America is going to double in the next 30 years. I sure hope I live to be one of them. [Laughter] And there will be two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. Social Security Trust Fund's supposed to run out of money in 2034. We have the money now. We ought to save Social Security for the baby boom generation, for their children, and their grandchildren.

The average 65-year-old American today has a life expectancy of 82. Those of you who are young enough to still be having children, when we get the human genome project finished, it will be normal for young mothers to come home from the hospital with their children, with a roadmap of their children's biological future, in ways that will maybe raise their life expectancy into the high eighties or the nineties, maybe even to 100 years. Things that are unthinkable.

But today, over three-quarters of the elderly people in this country do not have the prescription drug coverage they need. So I say we ought to modernize Medicare, lengthen the life of it so it can take on the baby boomers, but give those people a chance to have affordable prescription drugs, as we should have done long ago.

We ought to raise the minimum wage again. You can't raise a family on \$10,700 a year. Hallelujah, the House of Representatives, on a bipartisan vote, passed the Patient's Bill of Rights today, but we ought to make it the law of the land, and we're a long way away. We need your help on that.

We ought to bring economic opportunity to all the people in places that haven't reached it yet. You know as well as I do, there are neighborhoods in this city and communities in this State that have not participated in our prosperity. From the time I started the empowerment zone program, that the Vice President has led so ably, in 1993, to the proposal I made for new markets; from the small towns to the inner-city areas, to the Appalachians to the Mississippi Delta to the Indian reservations of this country, I believe we ought to give people with money in this country the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America we give them to invest in poor areas in Latin America, and the Caribbean and Africa, in Asia.

I think we ought to bridge the so-called digital divide. Our administration's worked very hard to make sure we get all the classrooms

in this country hooked up to the Internet and they can all afford to do it by the year 2000. But think of this: I was out in California last week, and I met with some people that work for eBay. Did you ever buy anything off eBay? I bet there are people right here who have done that.

Twenty thousand Americans, including people who used to be on welfare, are now making a living trading on that company. But there are still a lot of people that wouldn't know one end of a computer from another. Think about what it would be like if, for every American family, access to the Internet were as universal as access to the telephone. I don't want to see a digital divide for our kids in this country. I want every single child to have access to that high-tech future.

I think—I'll give you another example. The crime rate is at a 26-year low. In every big city in America, it's way down. And everybody involved deserves a lot of credit, including the Congress who voted for the Brady bill, the assault weapons ban, the 100,000 police, more help for the cities to prevent crime. But it's not low enough. Does anybody really think America is safe enough?

The crime rate is at a 26-year low. That's the good news. The bad news, I can't get one person out there to stand up and say, "I'm satisfied with the safety level in America." If we're the biggest and most powerful economy in the world, if we're the freest country in the world, if we have the most vibrant democracy—we now know something we didn't know in 1992; people didn't have any idea we could turn the crime rate around in '92. We know we can now. So why don't we set a real goal worthy of America? Why don't we make up our mind we're going to make this the safest big country in the world—that is a worthy goal—and come up with the resources and the plans necessary to do it?

The last thing I want to say is this. I think that the Congress ought to take one major part of my budget, which is to save enough money to pay the debt down so that in 15 years, for the first time since 1835 when Andrew Jackson was President, America can be out of debt.

And let me tell you why I think every union member ought to be for that. You know, when I studied economics in college, every professor I had said that this debt's a good thing. Every country needs a certain amount of debt. And it was good when we were borrowing money

to build interstate highways; we were borrowing money to build airports; we were borrowing money to build America. But for the last 30 years we've been borrowing money to go to McDonald's at night or come to dinner here or whatever else the Government does. We're borrowing money just to get along through the day.

Meanwhile, interest rates are set in a global economy. And nobody can keep their money if somebody else will pay a higher price for it. You've seen that happen in country after country. That's what happened in Asia a couple of years ago.

But if we got the Government out of the borrowing business, it means that everybody that all of you work for could borrow money for less. It means there would be more businesses, more expansion, more jobs, higher incomes. It means that all the families in this room tonight would have lower interest rates for college loans, for home loans, for car loans, for credit card payments. It means we would be more immune to future problems around the world. And we ought to do it for our children's sake. We ought to do that.

Now, one thing I want to say in closing. You said the NAFTA thing; I'll tell you one thing I've done that the Teamsters agree with. I don't intend to allow the trucking rules to be changed until there's safety there that we can know about. That is—the big problem I have with trade is not the problem some of you have. The problem I have is that it's too hard to enforce the rules. This is a rule we still have control of, and we now have evidence that two-thirds of the trucks that come across the border are not safe. They don't meet our standards. And I intend to see that the rules are followed before I follow the rules on this. I think that's important.

I want to say something about trade. Generally, the American labor movement has supported trade with countries that are in our income groups and worried about trade when we're trading with countries that are poorer than we are because they pay lower labor costs. But it bothers me that we have 4 percent of the world's people and 22 percent of the world's income, and we're facing rising protectionism from people unwilling to buy our products around the world. We see it in Europe. We see it elsewhere.

So what I think we need to do is to come together, as I did when John Sweeney went with me to Switzerland the other day, to the International Labor Organization to call for a ban everywhere in the world on child labor. I think what we need to do, I think we need a policy, a progressive policy, on putting a human face on globalization so we don't leave people behind, so we have rising labor standards, rising standards of living, rising environmental standards as a part of expanding trade.

If that happens, nobody will be the loser, and you can look at trade everywhere the way generally the labor movement looks at trade with Canada and Europe today. I think that we can't run away from the global economy, but we can sure put a more human face on it. And we ought to take the lead in shaping it, instead of being passive and being shaped by it.

And one final point I want to make. I am grateful to the American labor movement, in some ways more than anything else, for standing through—for decades and decades and decades for the cause of civil rights and human rights at home and around the world.

We had a memorial service for Lane Kirkland the other day at our common alma mater; Lane and I both graduated from the school of foreign service at Georgetown. And Lech Walesa, the former President of Poland, came all the way from Poland to speak at his friend's memorial service, because Lane Kirkland and the American labor movement stood for the freedom of the Polish dock workers and the Polish citizens in throwing off the shackles of communism. And I have seen it here at home, where the American labor movement has always been in the forefront against discrimination.

And I just want to leave you with this thought. It's really interesting—I see more and more people in all kinds of work working with computers. Most of you, if you're like me, have got kids that know a lot more about computers than you do. We're all sort of entranced by what's happening in the modern world. I was talking to some people about the library I hope to build when I leave office, and they said, "Well, Mr. President, you need to get some virtual reality in your library." [Laughter] And I said, I thought that was what Washington, DC, was all about. [Laughter]

So I said—so, you know, I'm sort of technologically challenged. They make fun of me at

the White House. I said, "Now, tell me what you mean by that." And they said, "Well, what we mean is, if you have virtual reality in your library, then instead of showing people a movie about something like the Middle East peace signing between Arafat and Rabin, people will walk into a room and everything will get dark, and they'll feel like they're there, and a part of it." That sounded pretty impressive to me.

So anyway, we're going to live in this world where we're just enthralled by all these advances. Don't you think it's interesting that in a world that will be dominated—historians will say, with the most strange of all times, we had unparalleled prosperity, unparalleled technological advances, and yet what bedeviled us the most, from Northern Ireland to the Middle East, to Bosnia and Kosovo, to the tribal wars of Africa? What bedeviled us the most from James Byrd being torn apart in Texas to Matthew Shepard being laid out on a rack in Wyoming to these kids being shot at at the Jewish community center and that poor Filipino postalworker being murdered to the people in the Middle West: the basketball coach at Northwestern and the Korean guy coming out of church? What bedeviled us most, at home and abroad, in the modern world? The most primitive failing of human beings: We're afraid of people who are different from us.

It's easy to go from fear to hatred. Once you get to hating people, it's easy to dehumanize them. And before you know it, you're killing them. And I think you ought to think about that.

One of the things that is really important about the American labor movement is that you never wanted to go forward in the future leaving anybody behind. You never wanted to look down your nose at somebody because they were different. And you never wanted to forget about your neighbors around the world who were denied the right to organize, the right to vote, the right to speak, the right to live free.

So I ask you, as we look toward the future, don't forget your old mission. Because if we could all get along and treat each other as human beings, we'd be a lot better off.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:43 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the New York Hilton. In his remarks, he referred to Brian McLaughlin, New York City Central Labor Council president, Ed

Ott, New York City Central Labor Council director of politics, and John J. Sweeney, president, AFL-CIO; Lee Saunders, district council 37 trustee, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; Basil Patterson, partner, Meyer, Suozzi, English, and Klein; Randi

Weingarten, president, United Federation of Teachers; James P. Hoffa, general president, International Brotherhood of Teamsters; and Greg Tarpinian, executive director, Labor Research Association.

Remarks at an Empire State Pride Gala in New York City October 7, 1999

The President. Thank you very much for your energy and your enthusiasm, your passion, and your wonderful welcome. I want to begin by thanking Jeff, who has been a wonderful friend and adviser, a prodder and supporter to me. And I thank him so much.

Thank you, Kate Callivan, for your work tonight. Thank you, Matt Forman, for your leadership of Empire State Pride. And thank you, Chuck Schumer, for running and winning and for all you have done to make this a better State and a better country.

I'd also like to thank two other Members of the Congress who are here, Congressman Jerry Nadler and Congressman Anthony Weiner, for the work they do for you. Thank you. I'd like to thank my longtime friend, the New York public advocate, Mark Green, who is here, for his steadfast support of your agenda. Thank you, Mark.

I understand the borough president of Manhattan is here, Virginia Fields. Thank you, Virginia. We're glad to have you. There are members of the State Assembly and members of the City Council here. Emily Giske, the vice president of the State Democratic Party, is here. I thank her. And we've got all these great people from the administration. A lot of them stood up, but I want to mention their names: the two highest ranking openly gay and lesbian appointees in the White House, Sean Maloney and Karen Tramontano; my good friend Richard Socarides, who is leaving; Fred Hochberg, the Deputy Administrator of SBA; and two former appointees, Roberta Eichenberg and Ginny Apuzzo are here. I thank them for what they did. I'd also like to thank Marsha Scott, who was my first liaison to the gay and lesbian community this year. And the head of our anti-HIV and -AIDS efforts, Sandy Thurman, who's

done a wonderful job this year. I thank her for being here.

Let me begin by saying something I need to say a lot in the time I have left as President: Thank you. Thank you for the support, the guidance, and the urging you have given to the Vice President and me and to our administration and our families. Thank you for the example you have set. Thank you for helping Chuck Schumer to get elected. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to learn and grow and do our jobs better and serve all Americans better.

Jeff said that, you know, last year the Vice President came, and this year Chuck and I are here. And you're looking for a speaker. I think, you know, you ought to invite a woman to speak next year. And if you want, I have a suggestion. [Laughter]

Actually I talked, as chance would have it, to both the Vice President and to Hillary this afternoon—[laughter]—not so I could tell you that I did, either. [Laughter] But they asked me what I was doing. There's a lot more attention on what they're doing than what I'm doing now, but they did ask me what I was doing, which was nice, that someone, somewhere in America still cared what I was doing. [Laughter] So when I told them what I was doing, they said to give you their best wishes, and they wish they were here.

Jeff mentioned that 7 years ago, when I first ran for President, I said I had a vision for America, and you were a part of it. I met with a group of activists from your community here in early 1992, and in California in late 1991. And I began to try to listen and to learn and to understand why so many of these issues have presented such big problems for America.

One couple came through to see me earlier tonight, two men; one was from Australia, the other from New Zealand, and they said that