

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

as a couple, they hadn't the same immigration rights coming into America as they did in either Canada or New Zealand. I don't think that's right. I think that ought to be changed.

But I think the first thing I want to say to you—I want to talk more about this, but I'm obviously giving a lot of thought these days to what happens to America over the long run. We enter a new century; we enter a new millennium; the way we work and live and relate to each other and relate to people around the world is changing in profound and speedy ways. It's almost difficult to grasp. More of it is good than bad.

But we all have to be much more open to each other if we want this to work. We've got to learn to listen as well as to talk. We've got to learn to feel as well as to think. We have to learn, as we're all told we should do from childhood, to stand in the other person's shoes. We have done what we could to make the future one of equal opportunity and equal responsibility and equal membership in our American community, whether it is in fighting to pass the hate crimes law or the employment non-discrimination act or to invest more in research, prevention, and treatment for HIV patients.

I would like to take just a few moments tonight to try to put all the things you care about into a larger context of where America is and where I hope America will go. When I started running for President, I did so because I thought the country was in trouble and without direction and growing more divided. First, economically, unemployment was too high; job growth was too low; incomes were stagnant; inequality was increasing; and there was a sense of literal despair about it in many places.

I worried about social division. You remember, we had a riot in Los Angeles. But everywhere, there was this quiet sense of unease. And every campaign, it seemed to me, was yet another example of how we could sort of carve up the electorate and make one group resent another and hope that your group was a larger group of resisters than the other group. And it seemed to me that that was a bad way to run a country.

And it wasn't just anti-lesbian and -gay; it was tensions between the races, tensions between immigrants and citizens. And it built on this whole pattern of thought that had accumulated in Washington over decades that everything had to be divided into hostile camps. You

couldn't be pro-labor if you were pro-business and vice versa. You couldn't be pro-economic growth and be in favor of improving the environment. You couldn't be pro-work and pro-family. We had to have these divided views. You couldn't have an urban policy if you really cared about what was going on on the farm.

You know, we don't think like that. None of us do, instinctively. We always try to think of how we can live an integrated life and how our minds will think in an integrated way that pulls things together and moves things forward. But everything about our politics was about how to pit us against one another.

And since we all wake up every morning—I know maybe none of you do, but some days I wake up on the wrong side of the bed, in a foul humor. *[Laughter]* I'm sure you don't ever do that, but I do sometimes. *[Laughter]* And it has occurred to me really that every one of us has this little scale inside, you know. On one side there's the light forces and the other side there's the dark forces in our psyche and our makeup and the way we look at the world. And every day we wake up and the scale is a little bit tilted one way or the other. And life is a big struggle to try to keep things in proper balance.

You don't want to have so much light that you're just a fool for whatever comes along. But if the scale tips dark even a little bit, things turn badly for people and those with whom they come in contact. And it can happen for communities and for a whole country.

So anyway, when I ran, I thought, maybe I can change the way we think about politics. And if we do, maybe we can change what we do and how we do it.

And you know, there's an old adage that the Lord never gives you more than you can handle, but I have been severely tested in this resolve. *[Laughter]* But most days, you know, it's been kind of fun but bewildering. *[Laughter]*

So anyway, we came up—Al Gore and I—well, for whatever reason—and the American people took a chance on me and Al Gore in 1992. And we got the Democrats together, and we tried to reach out to the Republicans. And usually they said no; sometimes they said—a few of them would say yes.

But we said, "Look, let's take a different direction on the economy, on crime, on welfare, on the environment. Let's try to think of a way to integrate the things that we want to achieve

and build a creative tension so we could move the country forward. And let's try to build a country where everybody has a place." And we just made an argument in 1992. It was just an argument. You—no one could know for sure whether it would work.

[At this point, a cellular telephone rang in the audience.]

The President. You know, I'm rethinking my position about wanting everybody to have a cell phone in this country. *[Laughter]* He's a good guy. Don't worry about it.

But anyway, so we made this argument, you know, and you guys took a chance. And New York really stood behind us, gave us a chance to serve.

But it's not an argument anymore. Those of you who've been with us 6½ years, when you go out to discuss citizenship and issues and the future, say, "Look, whatever you want to say about that crowd, there are certain things that you can't dispute. We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 29 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest crime rates in 26 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the first back-to-back surpluses in 42 years, the longest peacetime expansion in history, and 19½ million new jobs." You can't argue; that happened.

And every time—every time—every time we did something that tried to reconcile our economic objectives with our other objectives—whether it was family and medical leave or vetoing the first two welfare bills because they didn't have guaranteed food and medicine coverage for poor children and enough money for child care or trying to clean up the air and the water or saying that the system we had for taking care of little kids and immunizing them—we were nuts, and we were determined to reach 90 percent immunization, which we did, by the way—all of these things—people would say—or raising the minimum wage or you name it—that was always going to be something that would hurt the economy. It turned out that that was wrong, that putting things together made all of our efforts reinforce one another.

I feel even more strongly about that when it comes to putting people together. One of the things I've spent an enormous amount of time doing in the last 2 years is trying to make sure America is Y2K ready. I've even got these little things that look like beanie babies that

are Y2K bugs I have around just to remind me that we don't want there to be one.

You know, to most people, that's about adjusting a computer. But if you think about it, there is a lot more than mechanics involved in being ready for the new millennium, and a lot more than economics involved in being a successful country.

When I signed the Executive order to prohibit discrimination in the Federal work force based on sexual orientation, I thought I was helping us to come together. I think ENDA will help us to come together.

I think the fact that we have gay and lesbian Americans, like Jim Hormel and over 200 other openly gay and lesbian people, serving in appointed positions in our Government throughout the administration, doing normal jobs—I got so tickled when you were reading—you know, if you look at our people and what they do, they do real jobs. They're out there showing up. And every time they come in contact with somebody, they destroy another stereotype. They rob people of another attack.

You know, when we were in that awful battle that I waged and didn't win over the military service issue, there was a national survey run which showed that the most significant factor tilting people in favor of the so-called gays in the military policy was whether they consciously were aware that they had known a gay person. And those who said they were consciously aware that they had had a personal relationship, contact with a gay person were two to one in favor of the policy.

Now, I say that because I believe that our whole society is like all of us are individually. We've got these scales always tilting back and forth between the forces of hope and the forces of fear. And what people do not know, they more easily fear. What they fear, they can easily hate. And what they hate, they quickly dehumanize. And it is a slippery slope.

So I say to you, this hate crimes legislation is important. People say, "Well, you know, the killers of James Byrd got the death penalty in Texas, and maybe you don't need it." But we do need it, because there are 8,000 reported hate crimes in 1997 alone, about one an hour. And people need to focus on it.

When those kids got shot at the Jewish community center school, and then that Filipino postalworker got murdered, and then the former basketball coach of Northwestern and the young

Korean Christian walking out of his church got shot in the heartland of Illinois and Indiana. And all of those things happened. And all of you know that we are now observing the one-year anniversary of the death of young Matthew Shepard, and I want to say I am honored beyond words that his mother, Judy, is with us tonight. And I'd like to ask her to stand.

I thanked her tonight before I came out for her continuing work. And she looked at me, and she said, "I'm just a mom." But when I was in Los Angeles last week, speaking to the ANGLE group, a young person came up to me and said that I had given her more legitimacy and sense of security and self-worth than she had gotten in her own family. And I said to this child—I want you to know, because this is the point I'm trying to make; I'm not bragging on me, here. I'm here to make this point about our country. I said, "You've got to be patient with them. They're afraid. You've got to stay with them. They're scared."

And it is amazing to me. I have spent so much time as President, on the one hand trying to maximize your access to the wonders of the modern world—you know, we're hooking up all the classrooms to the Internet; we got this E-rate, so that the poor schools can reach across the digital divide and all the kids can work computers in every classroom in America; we have passed the Telecommunications Act, and we've got over 300,000 new high-tech jobs just in a couple of years; and we're trying to invest in a new generation Internet; and we're about to break the human genome code, and when we do that, when mothers bring their children home from the hospital after giving birth, they'll have little genetic maps that may, some people believe literally, may help to raise life expectancy for children born early in the next century to as much as 100 years. And you know, it's all so exciting. But it is profoundly sobering to consider that at the time of greatest technological change in all of human history, we are most bedeviled at home and around the world by the most primitive of human failings, the fear of the other.

Think about what I have done as your President, how much time I've spent trying to help the Nation heal up from all these school shootings or what happened in Oklahoma City and the hate crimes I mentioned. And then think about the parallels we have—they're all individual instances; I recognize that. But think

about the parallels in terms of the failings of the human heart and mind with the ongoing problems in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in Bosnia and Kosovo, in Northern Ireland, in the tribal slaughters of Rwanda and other places in Africa, where people really can't believe they matter unless they have somebody to look down on that they can dehumanize and justify killing. So that's how their life counts when we ought to be trying to tell people that they should be excited by the differences between people, secure in the knowledge that our common humanity is more important than all the differences that we have.

And somehow we have to do this. And words alone won't do it. And laws are important, but laws alone won't do it, either. And we've got to go out and confront our neighbors, including our own families. We've got to ask people to listen as well as to talk. And we have to help people to get beyond their fears.

You know, when I go and give speeches to political groups, I tell them that I want America to continue to change, that I myself would not vote for anyone who ran for President saying, "Vote for me. I'll do just what Bill Clinton did. He did a good job," because things are changing. And I talk about meeting the challenge of the aging of America and reforming Social Security and Medicare and meeting the challenge of the children of America, the largest and most diverse group ever, and giving them all a world-class education and meeting the challenge of a 21st century economy by putting a human face on globalization and trade by investing in the markets of America that had been left behind in the poor areas, by giving everybody access to the Internet so we can fully bridge the divide and by paying the country's debt off.

I talk about these things. I talk about meeting the challenge of global warming. And it's mostly modern stuff looking to the future, and it's all profoundly important. But if you look at the journey of a country to find its true spirit, the most important thing is that we try to be one America that is a force for the common humanity of the world.

It was, I think, a very human feeling that led the Congress finally to work with us to dramatically increase funding for all elements of the AIDS fight, so that now we have continued reductions in AIDS-related deaths and a commitment to genuinely find a cure and a vaccine.

I think it was a human thing. We've still got a long way to go. You know we do.

And we pick our targets when we, as a country, when we're defensive. I was outraged this week when the first African-American ever to serve on the State Supreme Court of Missouri was voted down after having been handily voted out of the Judicial Committee of the Senate with the Republicans voting for him. They voted him down on the floor of the Senate by misrepresenting his record on capital punishment so that the Republican Senator from the home State would have an issue to run against the Governor on relating to commuting the sentences to life without parole for those who murdered other people.

So who cares about the symbolism of the first African-American judge ever on the Missouri Supreme Court? You know, not many people, African-Americans, are going to vote for this guy anyway. "Throw him to the wolves. Destroy his career. Distort his record. Who cares? I need a political issue." And we all have to be afraid of that, of objectifying others for short-term gain.

On the other hand, look at the number of people now who are in the Government, in all forms of our economic and social life. There's a reason the President is here, besides my heart. It is the right thing to do, and you have been heard. You have been heard. You have been heard.

There is a reason the Senator is here. There is a reason Al Gore came here last year, apart from his passionate conviction about the moral propriety of being here and the right thing to do. We now know that because you are willing to work and speak and stand, we can move the body politic in the right direction.

People are fundamentally good, but they're paralyzed when they're scared. And in spite of all these issues that I go around advocating, that I passionately believe in, if I were told that I was going to have to leave this old world in 72 hours and I could just do one thing for America and that was it and I just had to pick one thing, I would try to leave one America. Because if we were together, if we were willing to have all of our differences be differences of opinion and not to be afraid of one another and never to dehumanize one another, we would be not only a better country here; our influence for good abroad would be exponentially greater even than it is today. We would have a chance

to give our children the millennium that they deserve.

So I say again, the most important thing I want to say to you is thank you. I'm proud of what we've done together. I wish we could have done better. I hope we can do more.

But never forget, you deserve most of the credit. And you will get more as you fight harder but also as you are human to people who do not see you. You must—you've got to believe in this great country, that this is fundamentally a good country, that Alexis de Tocqueville was right when he said, "America is great because America is good."

But you know, we've done a lot of things that were pretty lousy, starting with slavery, as Thomas Jefferson said. So we all are always in the process of learning to be better, of learning how our attitudes and our actions are in conflict with what we believe. Life is a constant struggle, therefore, for true integrity, for integrating your mind and your body and your spirit. And so is the life of a nation.

I am indebted to you because I happened to be President and to seek this job at a time when you were raising these issues, and you gave me a chance to make a contribution. You made me a better President; you made me a better person.

Don't give up, and don't you ever turn dark. Don't do it. We can still make the America of our dreams.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:56 p.m. at the Sheraton New York Hotel and Tower. In his remarks, he referred to Jeff Soref, executive director, and Kate Callivan and Matt Forman, cochairs, Empire State Pride; Mark Green, New York City public advocate; Emily Giske, vice chair, New York State Democratic Party; James C. Hormel, U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg; and Ronnie L. White, nominee for U.S. District Judge for the Eastern District of Missouri. The President also referred to ANGLE, Access Now for Gay and Lesbian Equality; the memorandum of February 20, 1998, on compliance of Federal agencies with the Patients' Bill of Rights (*Public Papers of the Presidents: William J. Clinton, 1998 Book 1* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), p. 260); and Executive Order 13087 of May 28, 1998 (3 CFR, 1998 Comp., p. 191).