

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in Phoenix June 22, 2000

Thank you, Fred. Thanks for the great work you did at the White House. Thanks for this today. Thank you, Steve. And to all of you who contributed and raised money and made this a success, I thank you.

I want to thank Mayor Rendell. Remember that old joke about W.C. Fields? He said he wanted on his tombstone, "All things considered, I'd rather be in Philadelphia." [*Laughter*] Mayor Rendell would always rather be in Philadelphia. But he's seen a great deal of America here, and he's done a great job for us.

I also want to introduce Congressman Bob Filner and his wife, Jane, from San Diego, who's here with us today. I'm glad to see you. They're taking me to San Diego after I leave you.

I know about half of you were in the other room, and I'm loath to repeat my speech, although I'm reminded once I went to—I once went to a concert when I was Governor of Arkansas that Tina Turner held in Little Rock. And the guy that ran the place where we had the concerts knew that I was a huge Tina Turner fan. And so was Hillary, and she was out of town, and she was really steamed that she couldn't go. So I took six of our friends, and I went to this Tina Turner concert. And she was just making her big comeback, and she sang all these new songs. Then at the very end of the concert she started—the band started playing "Proud Mary," which was her first hit, and we'd all heard it before. And so Tina Turner goes up to the microphone, everybody cheers like crazy, and she said, "You know I've been singing this song for 25 years, but it gets better every time I do it." [*Laughter*] So maybe I should just give the same speech I just gave. [*Laughter*]

I want to say to all of you how much I have loved coming here to Arizona and working with the people here on a wide variety of issues; how grateful I am for the service of all the Arizonans in the administration, including Fred and Bruce and Hattie and all the others; and how profoundly grateful I am that we actually won Arizona's electoral votes for the first time since Harry Truman was President.

I want to say a special word of appreciation to the Native American tribal leaders who are

here. When I became President, I had spent a lot of time—and so had Hillary, actually—going out into Indian country, across America. And first of all, there is no monolith there. Some of the tribes have great wealth and success because of their gaming operations, and some of them have diversified into operations. Others, including the Navajos in northern New Mexico, up near the Colorado border, the Lakota Sioux in southern South Dakota, are still so physically isolated that more than half the people are unemployed. In some places, more than half the people don't have telephones. And the relationship between our National Government and the Native American tribes, in my judgment, have never really been as it should have been, and certainly has never been consistent with the promises we made in return for all the land and minerals and other things that we took so long ago.

So, shortly after I became President in 1994, I invited all the tribal leaders in America to come to the White House, for the first time since James Monroe was President in the 1820's. And we had an incredible day there. But it was very instructive for the senior members of my administration because we had people who could fly in on their private jets, and other people where the tribal members had to pass the hat to raise enough money to buy an airplane ticket.

And I just say that to you here in Arizona because we have to keep working on this. We have come a long way. We've made a lot of progress. We've done a lot in education. I've got an economic initiative out there that I think we'll pass this year, that I believe will make a big difference. But we have a lot of work to do. And we are beginning to build—I'm happy to say, we're beginning slowly to build some bipartisan coalition for building the right kind of commitment to empowerment and equality. But I thank you all for being here, and I think the Vice President will show up at your meeting. [*Laughter*]

I would like to also say that a lot of people are—when I go to these events, people say thank you, and I look around and wonder if they're talking about somebody that's still

breathing. [Laughter] And so—I got a great call the other day from a very distinguished gentleman who said, “You know, Mr. President, for a lame duck you’re still quacking quite loudly.” [Laughter] I like that.

We’re trying to get a lot of things done, but we’re also in an election. And I just want to give you a couple of observations. First of all, insofar as we have had any success over these last 7½ years, the real credit belongs to the people of this country for supporting us and for what they do outside the Government sphere all day, every day, and to the fact that I think we had good ideas. People come up to me all the time, and they say, “Gosh, you really brought a certain political skill to the office.” And I said, “What difference does it make? If we had the wrong ideas, we wouldn’t be where we are.” It really matters what your ideas are and whether you can turn those ideas into policy.

And Janet Napolitano said in the previous event something that I really appreciated very much. She talked about the work I did in 1990, when I had no idea that I would be here, to write a document for the Democratic Party through the Democratic Leadership Council, that said, okay, here’s where we think America is; here’s what our core values are; here are the specific things we would do if we had a chance to govern.

Really it’s like, being President’s not all that different from any other job. It matters how hard you work, and it matters whether what you’re working on is right. And I say that because we’re so fortunate this year to have such a good set of circumstances in the country, although we are reminded to be a little humble about it—like the gas price rises in the Middle West—there should be a little reminder that there’s no such thing as a static reality. Things are changing in this country very rapidly, and in the whole world.

But we’re very fortunate. And the only thing that I really worry about is whether we kind of get lulled to sleep in the midst of our own prosperity and progress and think that there are no serious consequences to this election. This election is every bit as important as the elections of 1992 and 1996.

In ’92 we all knew what we had to do; we had to change something. We not only had to change the economic and social policies of the country; we had to change the way politics

works, because Washington had virtually become paralyzed in the shouting match between the two political parties. I’d sit home in Little Rock and look at the news at night, and it appeared to me that the paradigm for how it was working was something like, “I’ve got my idea. You’ve got your idea. Let’s fight, because if we don’t fight, neither one of us will get on the evening news. Now, we won’t get anything done, but we might get on the evening news.”

And I was stunned that when I became President and I started trying to implement some of our ideas, say, for welfare reform; people would say, “Well you can’t do that. That’s supposed to be a Republican idea.” And I’d say, “Well, what is that?” And there was never any substance; it was just like a tag. And if you had the tag, whether it was crime or welfare reform, that was a Republican tag. If it was education or health care, that was a Democratic tag. And that doesn’t tell you very much. That’s just a category. That’s a word; you have to give meaning to it.

So we’ve really worked very hard in the last 7½ years to actually show up every day, have ideas, and try to implement them. And it’s amazing; it’s like any other kind of job. It actually yields to effort. And I say that because it’s very important to me, as someone who is not a candidate for the first time in more than a quarter-century, that you understand that this is a really, really significant decision that is in your hands, and that we are very fortunate to be able to make this decision at a good time for our country.

And I hope we will make it in a very positive way, which doesn’t mean that I don’t think there ought to be any fights and arguments. That’s what elections are for. Then you have to do your best to govern after the election. But I’ve been so troubled, in the last 20 years, how many elections seem to have revolved around both sides, as I said in the other meeting, trying to convince the voters that their opponents were just one notch above a car thief. And the truth is, if you look at the whole history of American politics, Presidents pretty much do what they say they’re going to do when they run. And when they don’t do it, we’re normally glad they didn’t. [Laughter]

I’ll give you an example. Aren’t you glad that Abraham Lincoln didn’t keep his campaign promise in 1860 not to free the slaves? Aren’t

we glad that—he basically said, “My commitment is to limit slavery, but I won’t try to free them.” And he got in the middle of the Civil War, and he realized that in good conscience, it was wrong. At least three times a week, I walk into the room in the White House where Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and thank God that he changed his mind.

Aren’t you glad that Roosevelt didn’t keep his campaign promise in 1932? Look at Bert laughing over there; he brought me a Roosevelt letter the last time I was here, so I could read it. And he promised in ’32 that if he got elected, he’d balance the budget. Well, it was a good thing for me to promise, but a very bad thing for Roosevelt to promise, because the unemployment rate of the country was 25 percent. And if he’d balanced the budget, it would have made the economy worse. So, instead, he experimented until he found something that was working. But by and large, people do what they say they will do.

One of the nicest things that I have read—and I have read some things about myself that weren’t so nice, as you might imagine—[*laughter*—but one of the nicest things that I’ve read—way back in ’95, when we were in political trouble, a distinguished Presidential scholar of the Presidency and the media named Thomas Patterson did an analysis of our record and said that I had already kept a higher percentage of my campaign commitments than the previous five Presidents, even though I made more of them.

I say that—the people on our side, we took these ideas seriously. We took these policies seriously. We really worked at them. And this is—I’m not giving you a slogan or a 30-second ad, but I’m saying how I hope you will approach this election. We can approach the election and say, “Okay, we’ve got two candidates for President that are honorable people. We have candidates for the Senate and the House that are honorable people. Let’s tee it up and see what they expect to do with this magic moment.”

The most important thing for the Democrats is that people understand how important the election is. We knew what the deal was in ’92, and we knew it was real important. We had a huge turnout. The country was flat on its back. But I say this over and over again, but I’m going to say it again: There’s not a person in the world over 30 years old that cannot remember at least one instance when you made

a personal or a professional mistake not because things were so bad but because things were so good that you thought there was no consequence to the failure to concentrate. There is nobody who has lived very long who can’t remember at least once when that happened to you. That is what we have to avoid.

If we understand that this is like the moment of a lifetime, and then we say, okay, what are we going to do with our prosperity, I hope the answer is, big things. It’s a chance to paint the future that we all want for our children.

How are we going to deal with the aging of America? When all the baby boomers like me get in the retirement system, there will be two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. How will we manage that? Both candidates have an idea about Social Security; the Vice President said more about Medicare. Who’s right?

How are we going to grow the economy and deal with the challenges of the local environment, where you have a lot of growth, and the global environment and global warming, which is real and can change everything about the way our children live? How are we going to be a force for peace and freedom and decency throughout the world and minimize the new security challenges that the young people in this audience will face from chemical, biological, nuclear weapons that like everything else will benefit from, unfortunately, new technology and miniaturization? How are we going to give all of our kids a world-class education? How are we going to make sure everybody has got a chance to participate in this economy?

One of the things we are doing in a bipartisan fashion in Washington now is pushing this new markets legislation of mine. I’ve been on two reservations lately to say that America ought to give people with money the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America we give them to invest in poor areas in Latin America and Asia and Africa, because we’ll never have a better chance to bring the benefits of free enterprise to neighborhoods that have been left behind.

See, these are big questions. These are questions—most of these questions we couldn’t even ask back in ’92 because we were \$300 billion in debt.

Now, so it’s a big election, ought to be about big things. As Ed said, there are real differences. I’ll just mention three or four. There’s a huge

difference between the Democratic take on where we are and how to keep the prosperity going, and the Republican take. They think that we ought to have a tax cut that costs somewhere between \$1.3 trillion and \$1.6 trillion. And they say, "Well, the projected surplus is bigger than that." But if you take their Social Security proposal and other things, the missile defense and all those other proposals, it's way more than the projected surplus.

We think—the Vice President said the other day—we ought to take \$400 billion of this projected tax cut, that's going to come right out of the Medicare taxes you pay, and take it out of the budget, save it, wall it off, and use it to pay down the debt until we need it for Medicare. Now, that has two benefits. First of all, you're protecting the money and paying down the debt. Secondly, you're protecting yourself in case all that projected surplus doesn't materialize.

I think it is really a mistake to decide now to spend all of this projected surplus over the next 10 years, which may not materialize. And they say back, "Well, you guys want to spend a lot of it." We do. But the difference is you have to approve the spending bills every year, so if the money is not coming in, you just don't approve the bills. But if you build it all into a tax cut on the front end, it's gone.

So we want a tax cut, too, but we think it ought to be more modest in scope because the main thing we can do for the economy is to keep these interest rates down, keep paying that debt down, keep this thing going. That's a big difference.

Then what about including people? We think we ought to raise the minimum wage again; they don't. We think we ought to pass a Patients' Bill of Rights; they don't. We think we ought to provide a Medicare prescription drug benefit to every senior at an affordable price on a voluntary basis; and their plan doesn't do that.

Now, you ought to tell your friends out here that are independents and Republicans—you ought to listen to them, hear their side out, let them say why they differ with us. But don't pretend they don't differ. I got a big laugh in the other meeting when I said there are three things you need to know about this election: It's important; there are differences between the candidates and the parties; and only the Demo-

crats want you to know what the differences are. But there's a certain truth to that.

And I think it's important that we have a great, decent, candid, clear national debate without trying to impugn anybody's personality, integrity, but to say this is—we have been given a gift here, and we can talk about it, and we can chart our future. We're not bailing water out of a leaky boat anymore; now we've got a chance to really just think about where we're going.

There are lots of other issues. This country is fast becoming the most multiracial, multi-ethnic, multireligious democratic society in the world. How do we intend to go forward into the future, actually not just tolerating each other but celebrating our differences and feeling secure enough to do it because we know our common humanity is even more important than all of our differences? This is a huge question.

You think about what I have to—how have I spent the time you gave me as President on foreign policy? I worry about Northern Ireland. I worry about the Middle East. I've worried about Kosovo. I've worried about Bosnia. I worry about the tribal wars in Africa. All over the world, in this so-called modern world, people are still out there killing each other because they're from a different tribe, a different faith, a different race, a different ethnic group. And still in America we have hate crimes where people get killed just because of their race or their religion or because they're gay.

This is a big deal. We've got to figure out—we're not going to be able to do good around the world unless we are good here at home. And we have the opportunity to honestly discuss this. How are we going to get this done now? And you can say, "Well, you can say all this high-minded stuff because you're not running." [Laughter] In the end there will be some 15-second slogan that will pierce to the heart of this. That does not have to be the case. That does not have to be the case.

We had two guys offer, I think—or one man offered the other day a million dollars to the Presidential candidates' favorite charity, \$500,000 each, if they'd just show up and have a debate on nothing but education—and he happens to be a Republican. And the Vice President—I was proud of him—said, "Absolutely, right now, I'll do it."

But I think the more we just sit around and treat each other like we've got half-good sense

and we know what we're doing and we talk about what kind of future we want, the better off we're going to be. Now, do I believe it helps the Democrats? You bet I do. Do I think, if that's the environment of the election, Al Gore will be elected, that we'll pick up seats in the Senate, including one I hope in New York, that we'll take the House back? Yes, I do. I think that. But I might be wrong. I trust the American people. Why are we around here after 200 years? Because most of the time we get it right, if we have enough time and enough information. The sort of internal compass of the American people, if it's not threatened, normally comes out all right. That's why we're still around here after all this time.

So that's what I'd like to ask you all to think about. I'd like to ask you to go out and talk to people about it, because there is a lot more consensus on a lot of these issues than I think we think, number one; number two, there are a lot of these issues that nobody has got the answer to, that we need debates on.

I mentioned in the other room—I want to mention again—I was thrilled when I found out that your Republican Governor and the whole Democratic legislature, all the Democratic legislators were pushing an education initiative to lower class size, raise teacher pay, and improve the quality of education. That's a great thing. Because I can tell you this, if we can't provide a world-class education to all of our kids, then we will never be the country we ought to be.

And I can also tell you that we can do it. I was in a public school in Spanish Harlem in New York the other day. Two years ago, 80 percent of those kids were reading below grade level and doing math below grade level—2 years ago. Today, 74 percent of them are at or above grade level—in 2 years.

I was in a little school in Kentucky the other day where way over the half the kids are on free or reduced lunch. They were identified as a failing school that had to do better. They were going to have to shut down or turn around. And in 3 years, they went from 12 percent of their kids reading at or above grade level to 57 percent. They went from 5 percent of their kids doing math at or above grade level to 70 percent. They went from zero percent of their kids doing science at or above grade level to two-thirds of them. And it's one of the 20 best grade schools in Kentucky today—over half the kids from very poor homes.

So we can do this. That's another thing. I'd like to see this debated. I've been working on this school reform business for 20 years. And when we started—when Hillary and I started with the schools at home, we kind of thought we knew what needed to be done, and some of the stuff was obvious. But now, we actually know. Now there are a remarkable number of success stories like this about educating our children. We know how to do it now. There's not a State in America where you can't identify a cluster of schools that were in the tank that are performing at very high levels now—not a one. So, what's our excuse for the others? That ought to be a big source of debate in this election.

How are we going to close the digital divide? What about the Indian reservations, where half the people don't have phones? I was introduced the other day, on the Navajo Reservation, by a 13-year-old girl that won a contest—and she was very brilliant—and she won a contest; she won a computer. And she couldn't get on the Internet because there was no phone line in her home. So who's got the best ideas about what to deal with that?

The point I'm trying to make is, there's plenty of stuff to debate. And I don't think the American people would be bored if we had an honest, civil, explicit discussion about the big challenges out there. Now, do I think we would win? You bet I do, in a heartbeat. I believe that. But I might be wrong. We ought to suit up and find out.

And I'll just say this about Al Gore: I think I now know Al Gore better than anybody, outside his family. We had lunch once a week, the whole time we've been there together, except when he had something more pressing to do, when he started running for President. And I picked him not only because we shared a certain orientation toward the challenges of the 1990's but because he had experience in Washington I didn't have and he knew things about technology and the environment and arms control and foreign policy I didn't know. And it has been one of the best decisions I ever made in my entire life about anything.

And I can tell you, on every tough decision that I had to make—and we made some tough ones. When we decided to help Mexico, something that would have a big effect on Arizona—the Mexican economy, it collapsed a few years ago—the day we did it, there was a poll that

said by 81 to 15, you, the American people, thought I shouldn't do it. That was a real tester. [Laughter]

But we did it, because I knew it was the right thing to do. And I figured, a poll is like a horserace; it's not over yet. People pay you to win and to do the right thing for the country, and if it comes out all right, it's all right.

But Al Gore was for that. We went into Bosnia and Kosovo; Al Gore was for that. When we went in to save democracy in Haiti, Al Gore was for that. He broke the tie on the economic plan of '93, where we had no votes from the other party. And if it hadn't been for that economic plan passing, the rest of us—we wouldn't be sitting here in this nice hotel having this lunch today.

So he is a person of extraordinary intelligence, extraordinary energy, and like me, he loves all these issues. He also knows a lot about these technological issues that we're going to have to face. For example, we've got to close the digital divide. Wouldn't you like to have somebody as President who knew how to do it, and who had been working on it for 6 or 7 years?

We've got to deal with the privacy issues. We're all going to have all our records on computers, all our financial records, all our health care records. If you had to put up health care

records to get health insurance, don't you think there ought to be some limit to who gets access to them? Shouldn't you have to give your own permission before you give them up? Do you think you ought to be denied a job because somebody can log on to the Internet and find out something about you your first cousin may not know? These are big issues.

So anyway, I realize this is not a traditional political speech; this is a conversation. But you just remember what I told you. It's a real big election, real big issues, honest differences—not bad guys and good guys, honest differences. And if people know what they are, we'll win. That's what you have to help us do.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. in Salon 1 at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to luncheon cohosts Fred DuVal and Steve Owens; Edward G. Rendell, general chair, Democratic National Committee; Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and his wife, Harriet C. Babbitt, Deputy Administrator, U.S. Agency for International Development; Janet Napolitano, Arizona attorney general; Thomas Patterson, professor of government and the press, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; and Gov. Jane Dee Hull of Arizona.

Statement on Proposed School Modernization Legislation *June 22, 2000*

Every year that Congress stalls on passing critical school modernization legislation is another year our children have to go to class in trailers, in crowded classrooms, in crumbling schools. A new U.S. Department of Education survey of the condition of American schools gives cause for concern. Rising enrollments and years of deferred maintenance have taken a serious toll, jeopardizing our children's health and the quality of their education. According to the report, our schools require \$127 billion in repairs and 3.5 million students attend school in buildings that need to be replaced altogether.

Children cannot learn in crumbling schools. It is clear that additional resources are needed to accommodate record enrollments and allow

smaller classes. I have called on Congress to enact my proposal to repair 25,000 schools over the next 5 years. In addition, I have proposed a school construction tax cut that would help communities build and modernize 6,000 schools. Representatives Charles Rangel and Nancy Johnson have introduced legislation to do just that. While there is broad bipartisan support for this key school modernization legislation, congressional leaders have refused to even bring it to a vote. Congress should act now to give all our children the safe, modern, world-class schools they deserve.