

Economic Council/Domestic Policy Council report was entitled "America's Seniors and Medicare: Challenges for Today and Tomorrow, a State-by-State Status Report."

## Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in West Palm Beach, Florida

February 29, 2000

Thank you very much. First of all, Bren, thank you for your wonderful remarks and for opening your home to us today, giving those of us who suffered through an unusually long, cold Washington winter a chance to gaze out on the Atlantic under different circumstances, and for always being there for us.

I also want to thank you for what you have done for the most important U.S. Senate candidate in the country to me. Hillary had a wonderful time here, and I thank you and the rest of you who helped her. I thank you for that.

I'd like to join with Joe Andrew in expressing my appreciation to all the other officers of the Democratic Party and the Florida officials that are here. Congressman Peter Deutsch and Lori flew down with me today. We had a good time, and I was glad to be able to ferry them back home, for a few hours anyway.

I'd like to thank Danny Abraham, Cynthia Friedman, the Carters, all the others who have done this fine work today, and I'd like to put in a special plug for my longtime friend Representative Elaine Bloom, who is running for Congress here. She was for me in December of 1991, when only my mother thought I could be elected President. *[Laughter]* And I am for her in 2000. I'm going to do what I can to help. But I thank you for running for Congress. Thank you.

Let me just say a few words today about this millennial election and about why we're where we are. Eight years ago, when I ran for President, I did so because I thought Washington had become a place that was almost turned in on itself, obsessed with itself, and stuck in the thinking and the debate of a time that was long gone. It was obvious then that we were moving into a global economy, into a global society, that the whole way we work, the way we earn a living, the way we relate to each other and the rest of the world was undergoing a profound change. And yet, in

Washington, we just kept repeating over and over and over again the same debates. Each party took the same sides, staked out the same opposite position. Paralysis occurred, and the results were not particularly satisfying to the American people.

And so I decided that I would ask the American people to give me a chance to try a different approach: to try to have a politics that would unite and not divide; to try to have a budget policy that would restore basic arithmetic to the American budget and to stop pretending that we could ever get rid of high interest rates and low investment and slow growth until we got rid of the Government deficit; to put the American people first in profound ways, so that it would no longer be about Washington but about how people lived out here.

And we've been working at it pretty steady now for 7 years and a month, and the results have been good. We have the longest expansion in history and the lowest unemployment rate and welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, lowest crime rates in 25 years. Adoptions are up. Ninety percent of our kids are immunized for the first time. The college-going rate's increased a lot. We've got 150,000 young Americans who are doing community service through the AmeriCorps program, 1,000 colleges with their kids out, going into grade schools every week to teach people to read. The country is coming together and moving forward. And that is the good news.

But I think the most interesting thing about this election is, in my judgment, that the winner will be determined by what the election is about—in the President's race, in the Congress races, in the Governors' races. And you have to help decide what the election is about. And there's more latitude now because things seem to be going well, so we're under the illusion that there is more latitude to decide what the election is about.

I always tell people the Presidential election is the world's greatest job interview, except that the job interview, unlike most jobs, this job interview has two components. First of all, people have got to be able to look at you and size up, "Can I imagine this person having this job?" And then they have to decide what the job is about. And they are two different things. If you don't pass the first test, you don't get to take the second one.

Now, I think all four of the candidates that are left passed the first test. The American people can look at them and imagine them being President. But the winner will be determined by, what is the job about? What is the election about; what is the charter; what do you want; what are we to do with this enormous amount of prosperity, this historic moment where we can make peace?

Very often, democracies mishandle good times, because people are under the illusion that it's just sort of on automatic and it goes on forever. And when I gave the State of the Union Address, I asked the American people to work with me this year and the Congress to try to overcome the partisan divides and to take a long look ahead at the big challenges facing America. I asked them to pay the debt off, get America out of debt for the first time since 1835. I asked them to deal with the aging of America. We're going to double the number of people over 65 in the next 30 years.

I released a Medicare report today that said the fastest growing group of seniors are people over 85. They will spend almost a quarter of their lives on Medicare. And since 70 percent of our seniors don't have access to affordable quality medicine, I'd like to see them get it under the Medicare program. But we also have to change the program so it will last longer.

We have to lengthen the life of Social Security. I persuaded this Congress to save the Social Security surplus—that is the surplus that we get because you pay more in Social Security taxes than we pay out now—but I haven't persuaded them to do anything with it. So the good news is we're paying down the debt. But the bad news is we haven't saved Social Security yet. Because if they would just take the interest savings we get from a lower debt and put it into the Social Security Trust Fund, we could run it out to 2050, which would take it beyond the life expectancy of all but the most fortunate baby boomers. We have to deal with this.

We've got to face the fact that we have the largest and most diverse student population in our history, and we no longer have an excuse for not making our schools excellent. We now know how to do it. We were talking the other night with the Governors, who just left town, in Washington. And there were a couple of people, one in my Cabinet, the Secretary of Education, and one retiring Governor, the Governor of North Carolina, who has the best school improvement record in America, and we were laughing about what it was like when we started as young men together 22 years ago as Governors. Everybody wanted to make the schools better, but we didn't really know how. Now we know. We have mountains and mountains of evidence of what works. And the National Government should play a role in that. There's nothing more important than giving all our kids a good education. Is that going to be a part of this election, or not?

We've got the crime rate down 7 years in a row. It's the lowest it's been in 25 years. But nobody seriously believes this country is as safe as it ought to be. We can make America the safest big country in the world. Columbine happened a year ago, and I'm still waiting for Congress to close the gun show loophole, to stop the importation of these large capacity ammunition clips, and to require child safety locks on guns.

Today in Michigan in a school, a 6-year-old boy, with a gun that his brother gave him, shot a 6-year-old girl. And she died. The child was 6 years old. How did that child get that gun? Why could the child fire the gun? If we had the technology today to put in these child safety locks, why don't we do it? I don't know what the facts were in this case, and I don't want to prejudge it or condemn anyone. But I know this: I know that the accidental gun death rate of children—the accidental gun death rate of children in America is 9 times higher than that in the other 25 biggest countries combined—combined. So we know what to do. We just don't have any excuses. Is that going to be a subject of this election, or not?

You have to decide that. And the same is true with health care. The same is true with the environment and whether we can grow the environment and improve the economy. The same is true with our obligations around the

world. How do we define America's responsibility to fight biological and chemical and nuclear warfare, to fight terrorism, to advance the cause of peace, to fight against the racial and ethnic and tribal turmoil around the world, to advance the cause of peace through expanding trade?

I strongly believe—and our party's divided about it, I know—but I strongly believe we ought to let China in the World Trade Organization. Everything I've learned as President and everything I've learned in 53 years of living is that you get a lot more from people if you give them a chance to work with you than you do if you tell them you don't want to fool with them any more.

And we've got a big stake in how China turns out. I don't know how they will and neither does anybody else, but I know this: If we put them in this trade organization, they'll have to open their markets to us just like our markets are open to them. So it's a no-brainer economically. But politically, it's important, because they will have an incentive to make good choices in the future about their role in the world. If we keep them out, they'll still keep selling stuff here, they'll relate more closely to others, and they'll have no incentives to be responsible partners in the world.

If we do this, 20 years from now we'll wonder why we ever debated it. If we don't do it, 20 years from now we'll be still kicking ourselves. That's what I believe. So I'm going to fight for it.

But these things ought to be the subject of this election, because you know the world will grow smaller, not larger. We have the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, much lower than anybody thought we could have without exploding inflation. But there are still people and places that have been left behind. Should they be the subjects of this election?

There are rural areas, Indian reservations, and inner-city neighborhoods where there are still people willing to work; where there is no free enterprise, no investment; where we could, by changing our tax laws and giving people like you the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America you have today to invest in poor areas in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia—I'm for that, by the way. I'm trying to get America to invest more money overseas, but we ought to have the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America.

Does this matter to you? I think it should. By the way, it's not only morally right; it's a good way to keep the economy growing without inflation. There are Indian reservations in this country where the unemployment rate is still 70 percent. If you cut it to 20 percent, just to 20 percent, all those people would become consumers as well as workers. It's noninflationary growth.

I'll just mention one other issue. You have to decide. I have found it incredibly ironic that in this most modern of ages, where I meet all these young people that have made fortunes in their twenties off dot-com companies—you know, I'm too old to make a living in this flourishing sector of our economy. And it is growing like crazy, you know. I just was at the Business Roundtable, and all these heads of these Fortune 500 companies were trying to figure out why the Dow was going down while the NASDAQ was going up. And we're doing all these incredible things.

I went in a little African village, and I saw a hookup from an American cable company and what they were putting in there so these kids could get modern maps to learn geography. I went into a *favela* in Rio with Pelé, the great soccer player, and saw what an American company was doing there, through technology, to try to get these poor children in Rio a chance to have a different life. I have seen all these efforts to bridge the digital divide in America, all this neat stuff and a lot of more mundane things. I have a cousin in Arkansas who plays chess once a week with a guy in Australia. I mean, you know, it's the modern world out there.

I know in a couple of months, I'll have an announcement that will be one of the great honors in my life. I'll be part of—we will announce that the human genome has been fully sequenced, and we can now set about the business of analyzing the very blueprint of life and why we turn out the way we do and how we deal with various things. We may be able to block broken genes with gene therapies to stop people from ever developing diabetes, to stop people from ever developing Alzheimer's, to stop people from ever developing breast cancer, all of these things. It's just going to be unbelievable.

Now, don't you think it's interesting, with all this stuff going on, that the biggest problem we face as a society is still the oldest one?

We're still scared of people who are different from us. And it's easy, once you are frightened or uncertain, to turn that into distrust, to turn that into dehumanization, to turn that into violence, and then to have no conscience about it because they didn't matter anyway.

I mean, it's interesting—you look around the world, and you see tribal wars in Africa where hundreds of thousands of people die in a few days. You see continuing religious and ethnic tensions in the Middle East, and religious tensions continue in Northern Ireland, where I thought we had the door closed, and it got knocked open again. And what—this is outrageous—what happened in the Balkans, the problems they're having in Russia in Chechnya. You just look around the world, on any given continent.

And in America you say, "Well, look at us. We're the most successful, diverse democracy in history." That's true, but we had a shooting at a Los Angeles Jewish center, where Jewish kids were shot at because they were Jewish. A Filipino postal worker was killed because he was both Asian and a Federal employee, and the guy that killed him thought that was a double shot. Matthew Shepard was killed because he was gay. The guy in the Middle West killed the former African-American basketball coach at Northwestern, killed a Korean Christian walking out of church, and three or four other people, and he said he belonged to a church that didn't believe in God but did believe in white supremacy. And I could go on. You know all these issues.

What I want to say to you is that times are good, but we should be humble about this. We should be grateful, and we should be humble, because we have, number one, not repealed all the laws of human nature, which means there is still the darkness of the heart to deal with, and number two, good times are either made the most of or squandered.

And I just want to leave you with this. A lot of you here are younger than me, but a lot of you are about my age, maybe a little older. When we celebrated earlier this month the longest economic expansion, peace or war, in our history, I was very interested in that, because I love economics and I study it every month. I read all the numbers and everything and try to keep up with what's going on. So I went back and studied the last longest economic expansion in our history. Do you know

when it was? Nineteen sixty-one to 1969, the years of my childhood and youth, when I should have been doing dot-com companies. [Laughter]

But let me tell you about them. In 1964, the height of the expansion, I graduated from high school. My President had been killed a few months before, and the country was heart-broken. But contrary to a lot of the Monday morning quarterbacks that look back, it was not the beginning of American cynicism. That's not true. We united behind President Johnson. He got off to a great start. He was leading us toward passing civil rights legislation, legislation to help the poor. And in 1964, when I finished high school, there was this enormous sense of optimism and confidence in the country that, A, the economic good times would go on forever; B, we would resolve in a lawful way, through our Congress, our civil rights challenges; and C, we would certainly prevail, without controversy in our country, in the cold war against communism. Those things would happen. Everybody thought so.

Two years later, we had riots in our streets. The country was already divided over Vietnam. Four years after I graduated from high school, I was graduating from college 2 days after Robert Kennedy was killed, 2 months after Martin Luther King was killed, 9 weeks after Lyndon Johnson said he wouldn't run for election. And the country was totally divided. And there were more riots in the streets, and the National Capital was the scene of a riot in which block after block burned to the ground.

A few months afterward, we had a Presidential election, the first Presidential election in modern times fought on the grounds of "us" versus "them," where President Nixon, a man of immense talent, I might add, was elected on a theme of the Silent Majority. Now, some of you remember that. Now, if there's a Silent Majority, there must, by definition, be a loud minority, right? I was one of them; I know. [Laughter] So it was "us" and "them." A few months after that, the economic expansion was over. And we've been having "us" and "them" politics ever since. And for 7 years, I have worked to end that, I think with greater success out here in the country than in the Capital, but nonetheless, it's been an honor to try.

I'm telling you this as a citizen now, why I'm glad you're here. You have to help us define what this election is about. And that's what we're going to use your contribution for. But

those of you who are older, like me, you remember what it was like in the mid-sixties. As a citizen, I have waited for 35 years for my country to be in a position to build the future of our dreams for our children. That's what this is about. It's not just about choosing a person. We have to define the job and the direction. Then the choice will take care of itself. You know what I think. But just remember how quickly these things can get away and what a heavy responsibility we have to make the most of a truly magic moment.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to Bren Simon, Danny Abraham, Cynthia Friedman, and John and Nancy Carter, luncheon cohosts; Joseph J. Andrew, national chair, Democratic National Committee; Lori Deutsch, wife of Representative Peter Deutsch; Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina; 6-year-old Kayla Rolland, who died after she was shot by 6-year-old classmate Dedrick Owens at Theo J. Buell Elementary School in Mount Morris Township, MI; and former professional soccer player Pelé, Minister of Extraordinary Sports of Brazil.

## Remarks on the Shooting Death at Theo J. Buell Elementary School in Michigan and an Exchange With Reporters in West Palm Beach February 29, 2000

*The President.* I would just like to say how very sorry I am about the shooting death of the first grade student at Buell Elementary School in the Mount Morris community near Flint, Michigan. I know the prayers of America are with the child's family and fellow classmates and all the people of that small community.

I think it is important that today our thoughts be with them. And I don't know, obviously, all the facts; I may not even have as many as you do. But I think this is once again a call to us to do whatever we can to protect our children from this sort of violence and this tragedy. And I'm just very, very sorry, and I wanted to say that.

### *Gun Safety Legislation*

Q. Mr. President, is there anything that can be done to stop tragedies like this?

*The President.* Well, what I'd like to do, Mark [Mark Knoller, CBS Radio], is make sure I have all the facts before I say that, you know, if we had had one of the laws that we're proposing, it would make a difference. I don't want to—I think today is a day for grieving and regret, sympathy and support for the family and the community and the other kids and the people in that school. This must be an agony for all of them.

But I think that—I do think just generally that we should be really pushing for the child safety locks and even more for the investment

in safe gun technology so we can complete this research and see if we can't develop guns that can only be fired by their adult owners.

I think that I'm very troubled. I don't want to comment too much on the facts of this case, but if you get away from this case, as I said when I was inside, just the accidental death rate of our young people from guns is so much higher than any other country that it's clear that we need to keep working on this, and I hope that we will.

Q. You said inside it has been a year since Columbine. Is there anything you can do, a stick you can use to get Congress to move? Are you willing to say, for example, that you would veto Commerce-Justice if it doesn't have the protections you're looking for?

*The President.* Well, I believe that we will get some action this year, and I wouldn't rule anything in or out. But I don't want to get into the tactics now, except to say that—keep in mind there is a budget—there is a bill in conference, and one of them is pretty good, and one of them is not. We've got to try to get the best bill we can out of conference. And I just hope that everyone will weigh in and try to get this done. It's very important to the future.

Q. You did seem to indicate in your speech inside that this should be an election issue.

*The President.* Oh, I do believe that. I think the issue of—not this terrible tragedy but the