

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in New York City  
March 30, 2000

*The President.* Thank you. Well, thank you, Denise. If I come here one more time—[*laughter*—we should allocate part of the property tax assessment to me. I love coming here to this beautiful, beautiful place. I want to thank you, and I want to thank all the people who served us today and provided this wonderful meal. I want to thank the WLF, Laura, Betsy, Sharon, Susan, and Agnes, particularly. I want to thank Judith Hope, who has proved that someone from Arkansas can make it in New York—[*laughter*—which is becoming an increasingly important precedent in my mind. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, Mayor Rendell, and thank you Carol Pensky. I was trying to think of what I could possibly say, since most of you have heard me give this speech 100 times. And I was remembering, oh, 12, 13 years ago, maybe a little longer, Tina Turner came to Little Rock when she—you know, she went away for a long time, and she was abused in her marriage, and she had a lot of really tough times. And then she made an album after many years of being silent, called “Private Dancer,” which made her a big international star again. So she was taking and making her tours around, and so she came to Arkansas, to this place where we always had concerts. And the guy who ran the place knew that I just loved her. So Hillary was out of town, I remember, and he gave me like eight tickets on the front row, and I took all my pals and sat on the front row.

So she sings all her new songs; everybody goes nuts. At the end, she starts to—the band starts to play “Proud Mary,” which was her first hit. So she comes up to the microphone, and everybody cheers; she backs away. And she comes up again; everybody cheers again, and she said, “You know, I’ve been singing this song for 25 years, but it gets better every time I do it.” [*Laughter*] Anyway—I’ve got to do it. Very instructive, I’ll never forget it.

I want to tell you, we’re in this beautiful surrounding—I want you to know where I was last night. Last night, I was in the Bishop John Adams Hall of Allen University, an African Methodist Episcopal college, an AME college in Columbia, South Carolina. That’s where I

was last night, at a dinner sponsored by the State Democratic Party, with the new Democratic Governor there; Inez Tenenbaum—some of you may know her—she’s the Commissioner of Education now for South Carolina, longtime active in American Jewish colleges, a friend of mine for many, many years; and many others, in honor of the African-American Congressman Jim Clyburn from that district. It was a real picture of a new South, a different place than we have been treated to for the last several years in national politics. It was fascinating.

And I was talking to them about going to Selma a few weeks ago for the 35th anniversary of Bloody Sunday and walking over the Edmund Pettus Bridge with John Lewis and Hosea Williams and Dick Gregory and Coretta Scott King and Jesse Jackson, all the people that were in Selma 35 years ago. And this whole issue of the Confederate flag being on a flagpole in South Carolina was there. And I said, “I can’t say anything better to you than when the waving symbol of one American’s pride is the shameful symbol of another American’s pain, we still have another bridge to cross.” And the crowd exploded, and said, “We’re going to take that flag off the flagpole.” And it really made me feel proud to be an American, proud to be a Democrat, and proud to be a southerner.

And to see that the old—what we know now about South Carolina, most Americans who aren’t from there, is that President Bush went to Bob Jones—I mean, Governor Bush went to Bob Jones University. President Bush went there, too. And President Reagan went there, too. Bob Dole went there, too—and I let him get away with it because I didn’t know it. [*Laughter*] If I had known it, I wouldn’t have.

You can’t imagine what a big deal this was to a southerner. Anybody that went through the civil rights revolution was more offended by that, I think, than anything else—because—it’s okay. I’m sure there are a lot of—you know, there are good people everywhere. But if you’re going to go there, you should say, “I don’t agree with your racial and religious policies.”

But what I want you to know is, there’s a whole other group of people down there. And they’re involved in a struggle, *mano a mano*,

with the Republicans for defining the future of that State, and how they define it might have a lot to do with what America looks like in the future. And this is the struggle that's going on throughout the country.

I would also tell you that the second-biggest hand that anything got in the evening was when the Congressman said that he certainly hoped Hillary would be elected to the Senate from New York. And that South Carolina crowd erupted.

I say that to tell you that the reason I love being a member of this party and the reason that I am so grateful that I have had this chance to serve our country is that we really are now the only available national vehicle for the common aspirations of all Americans, people who can come to a wonderful lunch like this, people who serve the lunch that could never afford to come to one, all kinds of people in between.

And I just want to say, tell you very briefly—because I'm not on the ballot. I'm not running for anything. Most days I'm okay with it. [Laughter] Some days I'm not so sure. [Laughter] But what I thought I would do today is to try to just give you a little ammunition in an organized fashion, based on what's now going on in Washington right now and what certainly will be at issue in this election, about what the differences are, the practical differences and what the evidence is in terms of what works. And I'll start with an interesting thing, particularly—it always amazes me at these events. You could all be at one of their events and get a bigger tax cut. So let's start with their tax policy.

What's our tax policy? Our tax policy is: We've got a surplus; we can afford a modest tax cut as long as it doesn't interfere with our ability to balance the budget, keep paying down the debt, and save Social Security and Medicare, and have enough money to invest in education, health care, and the environment, science and technology, and medical research. And if we've got any—but we can have one. But we think it ought to be concentrated on increasing the earned-income tax credit, which is what low income working families get so they can support their kids.

We think we need a much bigger child care tax credit, and it ought to be refundable, because paying child care costs is still one of the biggest challenges that working families face.

With more and more people living longer, the number of people over 65 slated to double

in the next 30 years, and I hope to be one of them—[laughter]—more and more families making the loving but expensive choice to care for their relatives, we want a \$3,000-a-year tax credit for long-term care.

We want a tax deduction that will extend all the way to upper middle class people for up to \$10,000 for the costs of college tuition. We have made with our tax credits, effectively, we've made 2 years of college, at least at the community college level, universal in America, one of the major achievements of the Clinton-Gore administration. If this passes, we'll make 4 years of college access universal. It's very important.

So those are the kinds of tax cuts we want. We want to give people who have money big tax breaks if they will invest in the poor areas in America that are not part of our prosperity yet. I believe that you ought to have the same tax incentive to invest in inner-city neighborhoods in New York or Chicago or the Mississippi Delta or Appalachia or the Rio Grande Valley or the Native American reservations where unemployment rates still run as high as 70 percent on some of them—you ought to have the same tax incentives to invest in those areas that we will give you today to invest in Latin America or Africa or Asia. Not that I want to take the others away; I just want the same incentives here in our country.

Their tax program, under the guise of marriage penalty relief, is to get rid of the estate tax entirely and have other things that are concentrated overwhelmingly toward upper income people. There's a difference, a real difference. And it says a lot about most of you that you're here, because most of you would benefit more in the short run if you were there with them.

So what does that tell you about the Democrats? When I ran in '92, I said that I had a vision of 21st century America in which every responsible citizen had an opportunity, in which we would be a community of all people, and in which we would continue to lead the world for peace and freedom. And I think that we think that way because, basically, we believe everybody counts, that everybody should have a chance, that everybody should have a role to play, and we all do better when we work together. That's what we really believe.

And it matters. You should know, there's a huge, gaping difference on tax policy. Now, am I right, or are they right? We've had a lot of

tax cuts since I've been President: HOPE scholarship tax credit; we've doubled the earned-income tax credit; we gave a \$500-per-child tax credit; and there was a survey that came out the last day of my trip when I was gone that said that on ordinary Americans, the income tax burden in America, the percentage of income going to income tax—now, that's not Social Security or Medicare but just income tax—is the lowest it's been in 40 years. So I think we're right. And I'm not running—I can't make that case. But you can, and you must.

What about the budget? What's our budget policy? I want us to pay down the debt for the first time since 1835. And I think it's a liberal thing to do, not a conservative thing to do. Why? Because if we do that in a global economy, interest rates will stay down and ordinary people will be able to make their money go further. They'll be able to buy cars. They'll be able to take college loans. They'll be able to buy homes. And we'll have more money available for businesses to borrow at lower interest rates, because the Government won't be doing it, which means more jobs will be created. I think it's the right thing to do.

And I want to also save enough money so that when the baby boomers all retire, we'll be able to preserve Social Security and Medicare, and we'll have enough money to invest in education. We've got—this administration has done more work in more areas in education, I think, than anyone in history. And I've got a big program up there now, designed to help school districts turn around failing schools or shut them down, to provide after-school programs and other remediation programs to every kid in every troubled school in America, to finish our work of hooking all the schools up to the Internet, to repair 5,000 schools a year for the next 5 years, and to build 6,000 new ones. And this is important.

Now, what's their program? Their program is—their nominee, just as recently as last week, has reaffirmed that he supports a tax cut even bigger than the one I vetoed last year. And I can tell you what will happen if it passes. Here's what will happen. If it passes, we will go back to either running Government deficits, or there will be vast cuts in education, where Governor Bush says a lot of things—virtually endorsed our program in education to only give out Federal money to the schools if they support what works. The problem is, he can't keep his

commitments, because he's for a tax cut that will mean they'll have to cut education. And not just a little bit; I'm talking a lot.

They won't have any money to help Social Security and Medicare when the baby boomers retire, but that's okay with them, because they want to privatize both of them. And I think it's a mistake.

They can't support our plan to provide a prescription drug benefit with Medicare, which 60 percent of the people on Medicare need, by the way, not just poor people on Medicare. There are a lot of people who have middle class incomes who have huge medical bills, that are severely distressed by them, and they cannot get affordable coverage for medicine when they get older.

They can't support our program to let the parents of poor children that are in our children's health program buy into health insurance because they don't have the money, because they're going to give it all away in a tax cut. And we'll still have a deficit. Now, there's a big difference there.

And it's not like we don't have any evidence here. Our economic policies—we have doubled our investment in education; we've got the first back-to-back surpluses in 42 years. And I think the economic performance speaks for itself, the longest expansion in history and 21 million new jobs. So why are we even having this argument? Because we really have honest differences here.

If you look at other issues—I could just mention two or three more. Our view of the world—I got tickled the other day. I just got back from India and Pakistan and Bangladesh, and I stopped in Switzerland to try to make another effort on the Middle East peace. And I noticed a member of the other party in the Senate was criticizing me for going to India and Pakistan, because I didn't, quote, "get anything for it." That is, they didn't agree to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, or to the other efforts that I'm making to try to stop them from building up nuclear weapons.

Well, they didn't. What he didn't point out is that I lost all the leverage I had when the Republican Senate defeated the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. I thought, that is real gall. Man, for a guy to stand up and say that, that requires a lot of moxie, you know. *[Laughter]* One of their great strengths is, by the way, they have no guilt and no shame.

I mean, they'll say anything. [Laughter] You know, you'll never see them blink about it.

But I want to say, there are differences in that. And we do have some things in common. I compliment the Republicans that are trying to help me help Colombia to reduce the drug flow into America and to shore up a brave democratic government's fight there. And the people who are criticizing this, saying it's another Vietnam, are just wrong. We're not sending soldiers there. All we're doing is supporting the police and other efforts to build a civil society and give those farmers some reason to stop growing coca and grow something else. I support—I thank the Republicans who have helped me with the China agreement, because I think it's very important to bring China into the World Trade Organization.

But we have big differences. You know, I want to support the U.N. more; most of them want to support it less. I think we were right to go into Kosovo and save the lives and the livelihoods of a million Muslims. Most of them thought it wasn't worth the trouble, not all of them but most of them.

And so there are real differences here. And the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is the most stunning one. I mean, I cannot imagine a reason for the United States not to sign on to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty unless you believe that we will be more secure because you think we can always win any arms race, so it's okay if everybody else starts to get in the nuclear business as well. These are differences.

I'll just give you two or three others of these things we're fighting: The Patients' Bill of Rights, about 190 million Americans in these managed care plans, I believe they ought to have access to a Patients' Bill of Rights that's really strong and enforceable. And we're still fighting that. We may get it, but we're not there yet.

I think we ought to raise the minimum wage a buck over 2 years. You know, the last time I did it, they said it would wreck the economy. Since then, the economy's grown even faster than it did before we raised the minimum wage. [Laughter] It's not like there's an argument here that has any evidence behind it.

The gun safety legislation, you all know about that. I mean, they asked me in my press conference yesterday what I thought about all these terrible things Charlton Heston is saying about

me, and I said, "I still like his movies, and I watch them every chance I get." [Laughter]

But if you look at it—forget about the NRA, here. If you look at this view—should we close the gun show loophole and doing background checks. Well, when I signed the Brady bill, they all said, "Oh, it was the end of the world as we knew it. The hunters would be bereft, because they would be—their lives would be messed up." Nobody's missed an hour in the deer woods yet, and a half a million people who were felons, fugitives, or stalkers haven't gotten handguns. And gun crime is at a 30-year low in America because of that. But a lot of them still pick up these guns at urban flea markets and at these gun shows. And the technology is there to do the background check.

You know, people thought the assault weapons ban was terrible. But frankly, it's not as effective as it ought to be, because you can still import large capacity ammunition clips and then adapt the guns. And we ought to ban them.

We ought to have child trigger locks. We ought to be investing in safe gun technology so if somebody buys a handgun, you can equip it in a way that you have to show your fingerprints on the gun before it will fire. These things are worth doing.

And the difference I have—and the Republicans say, "Well, but you just ought to enforce the existing laws more." And a lot of you have heard me say this, but I want to hammer this home. It's a big issue. We have enforced the gun laws more than they were before. Prosecutions are up. I've asked for another 1,000 prosecutors and more investigators to enforce the existing gun laws, to get—the surprising number of guns used in crimes come out of just a few dealers. There's something to that. But their position is that guns are the only area of our national life where there should be no prevention.

I said this in the press conference the other day, but I want to say it again: If I gave you the following speech, you would think I was crazy. If I said, "You know, I've been flying on airplanes all my life, and most people who fly on airplanes are really good people. And it's a real pain, especially when you're late and airports are crowded, to have to go through these airport metal detectors. And if you've got a big old buckle or a highly metallic money clip, you may have to go through two or three times. You empty your pockets and everything.

And 99.99 percent of the people in those airports are good, honest people. Let's just rip those metal detectors out there, and the next time somebody blows up an airplane, we'll throw the book at them." Now, you think about that. That's the argument, right? But most people believe that you should prevent as many bad things from happening as possible in life. And it's far better to prevent bad things from happening, and then if something does happen bad, then you do what's appropriate. But these are huge differences.

The choice issue is going to be huge. The next President will appoint somewhere between two and four Justices in the Supreme Court. And their nominee's said repeatedly that *Roe v. Wade* was a bad decision; he'd like to see it repealed; he'd like to see it changed. And I can tell you, I've seen those guys work up there. This is—I'll put in a little plug for Hillary—[laughter]—no matter whether a Republican Senator says he's pro-choice or not, they will make their lives miserable, should they win the White House, if they don't back the White House. You can't imagine—I have seen them dance—

[At this point, a luncheon participant excused herself and said good-bye to the President.]

*The President.* Good. Bye-bye.

I have seen these things happen where I've had these Republicans come up to me in virtual tears and apologize for the way they were voting on first one thing and then another and just say they had to do it because they didn't want to lose their committee position or they didn't want to lose this, that, or the other thing that was being done.

Now, I don't think we're going to have a Republican President. I think Al Gore's going to be elected. But if you care about this issue, you should work harder for Al Gore and for people in the Senate that will support that position.

Now—and I'll just give you one other example. Ed Rendell was talking about the Log Cabin Republicans. I know that there have been a lot of people in America who won't support me because of the position I have taken on gay rights. But I have to tell you, I just don't see how you can run a democracy if you say that certain people, no matter how law-abiding they are, no matter how honorable they are,

no matter how talented they are, ought to be discriminated against. I just think it's wrong.

I don't think it's really complicated, and I think we ought to pass the "Employment Non-Discrimination Act" and the hate crimes bill. And I stood on the tarmac—let me just say this—I stood on the tarmac in Austin, Texas, at the airport and embraced the weeping daughter of James Byrd—who was dragged to death in Texas—who came all the way back from Hawaii to lobby for the hate crimes bill, pleading with the Governor to meet with her. He refused. Finally, he did, because it was a pretty hard case to make, why he wouldn't meet with her. And all he had to do was lift his hand, and they would have had a hate crimes bill. And it did not pass because they did not want it to pass, because they did not believe that gays and lesbians should be protected by hate crimes legislation.

Now, these are facts. And the American people can simply make up their own mind. But what you need to know is: When it comes to taxes, when it comes to the budget, when it comes to these other specific issues, there are huge differences.

And I don't have to condemn them and engage in the kind of politics of personal destruction that others find so helpful. I think most of them are good people who really just disagree with us. I don't think that somebody with a different political view is an evil person. I think our country's really been hurt by all this sort of attempt to believe if you don't destroy your opponent, there's something wrong with you.

I don't believe, by the way, that John McCain is against breast cancer research, either, which was the main thing I heard about in the New York primary. And I might tell you, that program was supported by me. It was in the defense budget. But that was a total misrepresentation of what was going on. It was completely unfair. And that's the most charitable word I can think of to characterize it.

But you need to understand here, I'm not running for anything, but I care a lot about what happens to my country. Yes, I want Al Gore to be President, because he's been the best Vice President in history and because I love him but also, more important, because he understands the future, and he's strong enough and experienced enough and smart enough and he cares enough about the policy issues to lead us there.

I'll just leave you with this thought: When we celebrated in February the longest economic expansion in American history, and all my economic advisers came in and said that, and they were all jumping up and down, I said, "Well, when was the last longest expansion in American history?" For a long time, it had been the longest peacetime expansion in history. I said, "When was the longest expansion of any kind in American history?" You know when it was? Nineteen sixty-one to 1969.

Now, here's what I want to tell you about this. A few of you are around my age, anyway. I graduated from high school in 1964. John Kennedy had just been assassinated. But the country had united behind President Johnson, and I was very proud of him. You know, he was from my neighboring State, passionately committed to civil rights.

And when I finished, in 1964, in high school, every kid my age was full of optimism. Unemployment was low; inflation was low; growth was high. We believed that all the civil rights problems would be solved by the Congress and in the courts, peacefully. We believed we would win the cold war because of America's values. And no one thought that there would ever be any trauma coming out of Vietnam. In other words, we were pretty relaxed about being, then, at the high point of the longest economic expansion in American history. We thought things were just going to take care of themselves.

Now, a year later there was Bloody Sunday in Selma. Two years later, there were riots in the streets. Four years later, when I graduated from college, it was 2 days after Robert Kennedy was killed, 2 months after Martin Luther King was killed, 9 weeks after Lyndon Johnson couldn't run for reelection because the country was split right down the middle.

And a few months later, Richard Nixon was elected President on the first of what became a whole series of what I called "us" and "them" campaigns. You remember what his slogan was? He represented the Silent Majority. You remember that? Which meant that those of us who weren't for him were in the loud minority. And it was a very clever slogan for the time.

But the point is, it was "us" versus "them." And we've been "us-ing" and "them-ing" for a long time ever since. And I have done my best to end that, here and around the world,

because I think it is dumb, counterproductive, wrong, and I haven't yet met a person who was genuinely happy demonizing other people.

But I'm telling you this to make this point: I have waited 35 years for my country to be in the position that we now enjoy today, where we can literally build the future of our dreams for our children, where we can be a force for good around the world, where we can take on all these challenges.

But what I want you to know is: I have lived long enough to know that the worst thing we can do is take all this for granted, to believe that no matter what we could do, that there are no consequences to this election, there are no consequences to how we behave in our lives and in our communities, that this thing is somehow on automatic and everything's just going to be hunky-dory. That's what I thought in 1964, and I have waited 35 years for my country to be in this position again.

So if somebody asks you why you came here today, you tell them what I told you, and you tell them we don't want to blow this chance. We have fewer crises abroad, fewer crises at home, and a greater opportunity to do right. And we're Democrats, and we need to do it.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:27 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to Denise Rich, Laura Ross, Betsy Cohn, Sharon Patrick, luncheon co-hosts; Susan Patricof, member, national board of directors, Women's Leadership Forum; Agnes Varis, president, Agvar Chemicals, Inc.; Judith Hope, chair, New York State Democratic Party; Edward G. Rendell, general chair, and Carol Pensky, national finance cochair, Democratic National Committee; Gov. Jim Hodges of South Carolina; Representative John Lewis; civil rights activists Hosea Williams and Dick Gregory; Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, Jr.; civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson; Gov. George W. Bush of Texas; Bob Dole, 1996 Republican Presidential candidate; Charlton Heston, president, National Rifle Association; and Renee Mullins, daughter of murder victim James Byrd, Jr.