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Remarks at the White House Conference on Raising Teenagers and Resourceful Youth

May 2, 2000

Thank you very much. Thank you, and good morning. I want to join with Hillary in welcoming you to the White House and thanking all of you for coming. I thank the foundations that have helped us. And thank you, David Hamburg. I still remember when we worked on a report about the developmental needs of young adolescents back in the late eighties, in which we recommended, among other things, that there ought to be community service in all of our schools, something that we're finally getting around to.

I thank all of those who are here. I see so many people out here in this audience who have done so much to help our young people, our teenagers, live better lives. I see one of the founders of the City Year program in Boston. I see a man who has adopted a huge number of children, along with his wife, and personally made sure that they got through their teenage years. There are many, many stories here. I'm grateful to all of you.

I'm very grateful to Secretary Shalala and Secretary Herman and our National Service Chairman, Senator Harris Wofford, and Deputy Attorney General Holder and Janice Lachance and all the others who are here from the administration—the Deputy Director of our drug office, Donald Vereen. And thank you, Representative Stephanie Tubbs Jones. I thank you all for what you are doing.

I want to thank the panelists and those who will come on afterward. And I think we ought to give one more hand to the families that were in the film, that walked in with Hillary and me. They did a great job. *[Applause]*

You know, we've worked very hard on these family issues for a long time, and Hillary has done so for 30 years. But the way I see this as President, as well as a parent, looking ahead to the kind of America we're trying to build in the new century, when I became President, we had to worry about whether everybody who

wanted or needed a job could get one. And that was very important. And the dignity of work is very important to families. It helps to define the shape of family life in ways that are by and large positive.

I'll never forget once when I was Governor, I had a panel of former welfare recipients that were in the work force, and one of my colleagues asked the lady from my State, said, "Well, what's the best thing about having a job?" And she said, "The best thing about it is, when my boy goes to school and they say, 'What does your mama do for a living,' he can give an answer."

But by the same token, we live in a country that's very good at creating jobs but is not as good at providing family supports, in which people are busier and busier and busier, and in which virtually everybody has some trouble balancing work and family during the period of the child's life. Even parents who are staying at home have trouble doing it.

And it is a problem that is more severe for single parents and people that have more than one job or people that have trouble getting around. It's a problem that's more severe for people that work for very modest incomes. But I don't think I know any parents who are working who have not had some periods in their lives when they worried whether they were letting their kids down because they weren't spending enough time with them or whether there were too many forces out there that were kind of undermining that.

And one of the things that I have learned in ways large and small, over an unfortunately increasingly elderly existence—*[laughter]*—is that everybody has got a story—everybody. And every child has a spark inside. And I believe that everyone has a role to play and ought to be given a chance. And as important as work is—and I say that coming from a family of

workaholics—the most important work that society does is still to raise children. And if that work is done well, the rest of it pretty well takes care of itself.

And so we're here, basically, to do all the things that Hillary said. I think when a tragedy befalls a child or a child is involved in a tragedy, a school shooting or this terrible incident at the Washington zoo, it throws it up in large relief. But I think that one of the things we ought to do in beginning this conference is to take a more balanced view. And I want to be very brief because I want you to have the maximum amount of time with the keynote speaker and with the panelists. But I think it's important that we have a balanced view of what teenage life is like today.

And I asked the Council of Economic Advisers to actually get me a statistical portrait of teenage America. And here is a brief summary. The good news is that the teenagers are far healthier, more prosperous, and look forward to more promising lives than ever before in our history. The economic rewards of education are at an all-time high. Teens have responded by completing high school and enrolling college at record rates.

Last year, for the first time in the history of the country, the high school graduation of African-Americans and the white majority was almost statistically identical. The dropout rate among Hispanic young people is still too high, but that's largely explained, I think, by the fact that we have still a very large number of Hispanic children in our schools who are first-generation immigrants whose first language is not English, and they come from families that are struggling to make ends meet, and very often they drop out to go to work still. But we're making progress there, as well.

More teenagers than ever before volunteering to serve through community service. Many harmful behaviors are actually on the decline, including youth violence, homicide, suicide, teen pregnancy, and, in the last couple of years, drug use. That's the good news.

The report also highlights some significant challenges. There are still significant opportunity gaps between white students and students of color. Teen smoking, drug use, and pregnancy are still far too high. And despite a marked decline in teen homicide over the past few years, still far too many communities are scarred by gun violence.

Interestingly enough, statistically, the Council of Economic Advisers found that gun-related teen deaths from deliberate acts and from accidents are highly correlated with gun ownership and possession rates. In States with fewer guns in fewer households, there are fewer gun deaths.

Perhaps the most empowering finding in the new report is the extent to which parents have the opportunity to guide their teenagers properly. Sitting down to dinner can have an enormously positive impact. The report found that teenagers who had dinner with—listen to this: The report found that teenagers that had dinner with their parents 5 nights a week are far more likely to avoid smoking, drinking, violence, suicide, and drugs. This holds true for single-parent as well as two-parent families, across all income and racial groups. Now obviously, if that is not possible, and sometimes it's not possible, then it's really important to find some way to fill that gap. But it's a stunning statistical finding.

For the past 7 years, the First Lady and I have worked with our administration to try to support parents' efforts to raise healthy, hopeful, and responsible children. I'd also like to acknowledge the invaluable efforts of Vice President and Mrs. Gore, who have had—even before he joined me, they were sponsoring a family conference every year in Tennessee to deal with these issues. It's really one of the most astonishing, consistent commitments, I believe, in the country. And they've done a world of good, and I'm very grateful to them.

I'll always be proud that the first bill I signed as President was the Family and Medical Leave Act, a law that now has given more than 20 million Americans the opportunity to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave without losing their jobs. And I remember when I signed it, it had previously been vetoed on the theory that it would hurt the economic growth of the country. If that's what it was designed to do, it's been a very poor failure. *[Laughter]*

What it has done is to prove that it's good economics to balance work and family, that the more parents can succeed at home, the more free they are psychologically to be productive at work. And we ought to do more.

I have asked the Congress to include more firms in the family and medical leave law and to expand the purposes for which people can take family leave. We have also tried to give States the flexibility to use funds in Federal accounts to help to finance paid leave. We've

worked hard on this, and I think it's very important that we recognize that the United States has done a great job at creating jobs, but we still give far less support to the responsibility of balancing work and family than virtually every other industrialized country in the world. And it is very important to do that.

We've also worked hard to turn teenagers away from unhealthy lives toward healthy futures. The rate of drug use has been cut, in part, by the powerful antidrug messages that have been broadcast, and some of you here have helped us with that. We have done our best to engage the tobacco industry in what has been a fairly epic and sometimes frustrating struggle to reduce teen smoking. We made the single largest investment in children's health care since Medicaid was created. And we're working to get more of our kids—and increasingly, I hope, this year, their parents—enrolled in the Children's Health Insurance Program. And we're working to make our schools safer.

I think that we also need comprehensive strategies to stem violence both in and out of schools. Our program would dramatically expand quality after-school programs. When I started, we had a million dollars for after-school programs; then we went to \$20 million; then we went to \$200 million. This year we've got \$400 million in after-school programs. And I've proposed a billion dollars, and if we pass it, we'll be able to say that every child at least in every troubled neighborhood in the United States of America can be in an after-school program. This is a big deal, and I hope you will support it.

I also want to say a word of thanks to all those who have supported AmeriCorps, including City Year and its other components. We've now had more than 150,000 young people earning money for college while serving in their communities. And we're trying to get more and more people to start earlier, to get high school kids, junior high school kids, involved in community service.

Maryland has become the first State in America to require community service as a condition of a high school diploma. And listen to this: The study found that teens who participate in service projects in their communities are 75 percent less likely to drop out of school, because they're connected in a way that I think is profoundly important.

Hillary talked about the work we're doing with the industry to give parents the tools to

protect their children in the new media age. I do think we need a voluntary system that goes across TV, movies, and video games. If we can find some way to develop that, it would make a lot of sense. There's a lot of information coming at parents. You know, I try to sort it all out when I see it. And I think it would be better if there was—it's almost like you need a dictionary to explain the differences in the TV ratings and movie ratings and the video game ratings. So we have to find some way this can be made more usable.

And today I want to just mention two things that we're trying to do to help parents and their teenagers. First, I'm signing an Executive order to prohibit discrimination against parents in the work force of the Federal Government. Believe it or not, there are still some employers who are reluctant to hire or to promote employees who have children at home. Some of you may have experienced this yourselves. The goal of this order simply says, no glass ceiling for parents. The job they're doing at home is more important, anyway, and if they can do your job, you ought not to stop them.

Second, I am pleased to announce that our National Campaign Against Youth Violence, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, and Tobacco-Free Kids, and the National Government have teamed up to produce a comprehensive guide to help parents support their teenagers through this crucial and often difficult developmental period.

Now, I want to introduce our keynote speaker now and say I'm sorry that I can't stay for the rest of the day, but after he speaks, I'll have to leave. But let me say that I want to thank you for coming, again. I want to thank so many of you here for a lifetime of commitment. People ask me all the time, why are we focusing on these things when all the indicators are good and things are going better? This is the time to be thinking about—I will say again—how we can deal with the significant challenges of this country. And anybody that thinks that we've done everything we need to do to help the parents with teenagers hasn't had teenagers and hasn't been around lately.

It seems to me that if we can't deal with these big social issues now, when we're prosperous, when we're doing well, if we can't strengthen the bonds of our community now, when will we ever get around to doing it? That's why we're here.

I want to introduce a person who embodies much of the good that's going on to help parents through having the village do its part, in the First Lady's words, to raise our children. Ben Casey is the president of the YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas. He has degrees in psychology and counseling from UCLA and Chapman College. He currently oversees programs—listen to this—145 program centers that serve a quarter of all the families in the greater Dallas region. We've asked him to speak to us today about his extensive experience with teens, the wise new poll which also has some important findings about the way teens and parents view their communication and time together.

And let me just finally say, Mr. Casey, as I bring you up, every minute I have ever spent with young people, as President and before, but especially as President, has reaffirmed to me

how special they are, what enormous potential they have. Even the ones that can't make it really want to and wish they could. And what a profound responsibility we have. And I want to honor you, sir, because you spend every day trying to make sure we don't lose a single one.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:45 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to children's advocate David A. Hamburg, president emeritus, Carnegie Corp. of New York. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete. The Executive order of May 2 concerning equal employment opportunity in Federal Government is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks at the Council of the Americas 30th Washington Conference *May 2, 2000*

Thank you very much. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. And thank you, Buddy MacKay, for that fine introduction. That introduction was a classic example of Clinton's third law of politics: Whenever possible, be introduced by someone you have appointed to high office. [*Laughter*] They will always make you look good in good times and bad, whether you deserve it or not.

I want to thank the Ambassadors of Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil, who are here, for their interest and their presence; and all the people in the State Department who work on the Americas. David Rockefeller, I want to thank you for taking the lead 35 years ago now in establishing the Council of the Americas. And I want to thank the Council for its support of our efforts, beginning with NAFTA, alleviating the financial crisis in Latin America, the free trade area of the Americas, and the Caribbean Basin Initiative, as well as our efforts with Colombia.

I want to thank Buddy MacKay for his work as my Special Envoy and especially for the work he's doing now on Capitol Hill as our point person for the Caribbean Basin Initiative. I'd also like to thank my former Chief of Staff and

the first Special Envoy to Latin America, Mack McLarty, for the work he has done. And let me say, the two of them together, I hope, will convince the next President and all future Presidents, without regard to party, that we have made a change in the configuration of the White House which ought to continue. I think that for decades to come, every President should have a Special Envoy to the Americas, because we have a special relationship with the Americas. And I hope those of you in this room of both parties who agree with that will do what you can to see that it happens after next January. I think it's a very, very important thing to do.

Let me say to all of you, especially to you, David, and to all of you who have been involved in this endeavor for a long time, you had the vision to see that North and South, in this increasingly small globe of ours, could come together, and that free trade could be a force for peace as well as prosperity, the basis of our partnership across the whole range of other areas in this hemisphere. You saw that in the middle of the cold war when most people only saw the world divided by East and West here