

Remarks at a Reception for Senator Mary L. Landrieu May 9, 2000

I think that young is a relative term. [*Laughter*] I've decided that young is anybody today younger than I am. [*Laughter*]

Let me say, I want to thank Jim and Ann for having us in their beautiful, beautiful home. I love this place. I always love to come here. And I want to thank Mary and Frank and little Connor, who I knew even before he was here. And I want to thank all of you for being here for Mary. A lot of you must feel old, you come—you do all these things over and over again. So I thank you on behalf of Senator Landrieu and Senator Daschle and Senator Lieberman and Senator Breaux and Senator Lincoln and Senator Edwards. And Congressman Jefferson, thank you for being there for us.

I can't help but tell you, we did this great event for China today, where President Ford and President Carter came, and Henry Kissinger came. And he always sounds like God with a German accent. [*Laughter*] Maybe God has a German accent, for all I know. [*Laughter*] And Jim Baker—and they all gave great talks. And we talked, and I looked out there, and I realized that there are all these former Secretaries of State, Secretaries of the Treasury, National Security Advisers, chairmen of the Foreign Relations Committee of the House and Senate, Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was the most—Trade Ambassadors—the most astonishing group of Americans.

And Gerald Ford got up and started talking about a vote he cast in 1949 for trade with China that was joined in by John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Carl Albert, and Albert Gore, Sr. And I realized that I was there with people that represented the last 50 years of American history. And then I realized there was one person there that represented the whole 20th century, Mike Mansfield, who is 97 or 98 now. Didn't tell the truth about his age when he was 15 and talked his way into the Marines in World War I. And then he came home and studied Asian-Pacific affairs, became a professor at Montana, became a Congressman, a Senator, President Kennedy's Senate majority leader, a post he held for about 14 years, I think, a long

time anyway. Then President Carter appointed him Ambassador to Japan.

And when Mary said I was young, it reminded me of a story. Shortly after I became President, when my mentor, Senator Fulbright, was still alive—he was 87 and Mike Mansfield was 91, and they had lunch together one day. And the next day Senator Fulbright came to see me. He was hitting us all up at the time, and he was still in great shape then. And Mike Mansfield looked at him and said, "Now, Bill, how old are you again?" He said, "I'm 87." And Mansfield said, "Oh, to be 87 again." [*Laughter*] So this youth, you know, it's a relative thing.

I will be very brief. First of all, I first met Mary Landrieu when she was a very young State representative and I was a young Governor, and neither one of us looked our age. And she still looks younger than she is, and I now look more than my age. [*Laughter*] But I thought she was great when I first met her. I always loved her daddy, from the time I worked with President Carter and his administration when I was attorney general in my home State, and I've known her a long time. And I thought when she ran for the Senate that if she could be elected, she would be uncommonly effective. Senator Breaux worked hard for her; Congressman Jefferson did; Mayor Morial of New Orleans did; and I certainly did. And it all worked out pretty well, and she has exceeded even my very high expectations.

I think sometime in the next day or two, the House of Representatives is going to pass a House version of this bill that she and others have been working on for a long time, to create a permanent conservation fund that could literally change the face of hundreds of American communities and give us a permanent conservation legacy in America, the likes of which we have never had before. That's quite an achievement for a first-term Senator. Now, we have to do it, but—[*applause*].

She is also, as you heard, supporting the administration's initiative to get permanent normal trade relations with China. And we had that meeting today, and there's no point in me repeating what Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and all the others said, but I will tell you this:

This is the most important national security vote we will make this year.

A lot of you here agree with this issue because you understand the economics of it. And as I pointed out today, most of the people who are against this are against it out of their frustration or their anxiety about globalization, generally, or their frustration because China keeps doing things they don't like in human rights, or they don't like the way the World Trade Organization operates, or some other reason. It has nothing to do with whether or not this is or is not in our economic interests or our national security interests.

But this is an easy vote for a Democrat to say no to. And that's another reason I'm here, because Mary Landrieu says yes, because it is a significantly important vote. And we will be paying the price for a decade if we fail to adopt this. And we could start paying the price within a matter of months. It is a profoundly important issue to the world that our children and grandchildren will live in. And so I'm here for that reason.

And the third thing I want to say is that Mary and a lot of her colleagues have supported our efforts to raise education standards. One of the things that bothered me when I ran for President was that people, even people who were supporting me, they wanted to vote for change. They thought I had a lot of energy, but a lot of them, frankly, didn't believe we'd make any difference. They had been so disappointed for so long and heard so much political hot air that they didn't think we could make a difference. They didn't think things could be better.

And—welcome, Senator Robb. Thank you for being here. You'll forgive me for being impertinent. If you hadn't given him a contribution, I hope you'll give him one, too. [Laughter] If ever a person deserved to be reelected, he does. And he's going to be, and you might as well help him because he needs your help.

Well, anyway, the thing that bothered me, even in my campaign there were people who thought, "Well, I like old Clinton's ideas, but you know, we can't really turn this deficit around or make much of a difference in the economy or reduce the welfare rolls or"—you know, I heard it all.

And now, you know what's happened. We've gone from deficit to surplus. When I leave office, we will have paid off \$355 billion of the

national debt. And I'm very proud of that. And we'll have the longest economic expansion in history and the lowest unemployment in over 30 years, but also the lowest African-American and Hispanic unemployment ever recorded, the lowest female unemployment in 40 years, welfare rolls half the size they were when I took office, and 8 years of declining crime.

Now, what's the point here? We don't have an excuse not to do our best anymore, because we know that our common challenges are like all other problems: They do yield to intelligent effort.

And the reason education is so important—I took this education tour last week, and I don't want to bore you with the whole thing, but I'll just give you three examples. I went to the first charter school in the country, which is a public school set up outside the normal rules and regulations to serve a specific population or to pursue a specific education mission. And if they do well, they can stay in business. And if they're not, they're supposed to have their charter jerked. That's the whole idea, that they're super-accountable.

Now, they haven't all worked well. We've had problems with one or two here. But you should know that when I ran for President, there was one; today there are 1,700. Mary's voted to help me create more. Overall, they've done better than average schools, and they're vastly oversubscribed. People want to get into them.

And I visited this school in St. Paul, Minnesota, where there are over 100 kids who have had terrible problems in their lives, terrible problems in school. They were all in school. None of them were dropping out. There were no violence problems, no drug problems, no nothing. They were showing up every day and learning, and they felt like they had a home. And they were performing at a high level.

I went to Columbus, Ohio, to a school in a very poor neighborhood, where they—in Columbus, they've got 55 of these 100,000 teachers we got out. And we've been attacked by the Republicans. We got attacked by their nominee for President. They say we're trying to micro-manage the school system. The people met me, everybody from the superintendent on down, to thank me for the fact that we were giving them teachers and the money had to go for teachers in the early grades. They've gone from 25 average class size down to 15.

And in this one school, in a very poor neighborhood, in one year they went from 10 percent of the kids reading at or above grade level to 45 percent, 10 percent of the kids doing math at or about grade level to 33 percent, 10 percent of the kids doing science at or above grade level to 30 percent—in one year. And they have two of those teachers.

And then I went to Owensboro, Kentucky. Four years ago the Congress required the States—first we required the States to set up school standards. Then we required the States to identify schools that weren't making it and to come up with a strategy to fix them. Kentucky got out there early. Four years ago, they identified 170 failing schools. Within 2 years, 91 percent were off the failure list.

This school I visited had two-thirds of its children eligible for the free or reduced school lunch program. And they had one of those teachers we required to lower class size in the early grades. Listen to this. In 4 years, here's what they did—two-thirds of the kids on free or reduced lunch. They went from 12 percent to 57 percent reading at or above grade level. They went from 5 percent to 70 percent doing math at or above grade level. They went from 0 to 64 percent doing science at or above grade level. They ranked 18th in the entire State of Kentucky in academic achievement. Ten of the 20 best grade schools in Kentucky now have over half the kids eligible for free or reduced lunch. Race and income are not destiny. And we can also turn the schools around and give everybody excellence in education in this country. And that's another thing that brought me here tonight.

Now, this is the last thing I want to say. You want to know how this Presidential election is going to come out, how these races for the Senate and House are going to come out? It depends upon what people think the election is about. Whatever they decide the question is will determine the answer.

What do you think it's about? If you don't remember anything else I say, you remember

this. I think it should be about, what are we going to do with this moment of promise? I think the answer to the question should be: We're going to meet the big challenges and seize the big opportunities. How are we going to do it? We're going to do it not by doing just what I've done but by changing in the direction we're moving and not taking a U-turn on economic policy, on education policy, on any of these other policies.

So what do you think the election is about? Do you really believe it's about making the most of this moment? What does that mean? It means taking on the big challenges and opportunities. How should we do it? We ought to keep changing in the direction that brought us here.

Now if people believe that, then Al Gore will be elected President. We'll pick up seats in the Senate. We'll win the House back. And within no time at all, the Democrats will be rewarded by the American people for the good governance they have brought. That is really the issue.

But to do it, we have to keep meeting the challenges every day. We can't duck the hard votes, like this China vote. We've got to show up, be counted, and deliver for the American people.

I hope you will share this with people. Somebody asks you why you came here tonight, tell them you love Mary Landrieu, just like I do; you think she's done a great job; but you don't want to see America blow the most terrific opportunity we have had in my lifetime to prove we can build the future of our dreams for our children. And we've got to have people like her to do it.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:45 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to reception hosts James and Ann Free; Senator Landrieu's husband, Frank Snellings, and their son, Connor; former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and James A. Baker III; Mayor Marc H. Morial of New Orleans, LA; and Gov. George W. Bush of Texas.