

May 15 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

L. Alexander and his wife, Nanci; and Loretta Perrot, sister of team member Kim Perrot, who died of cancer.

Remarks at a Reception for Representative Robert Wexler

May 15, 2000

Thank you very much. When Rob started saying all that, I had to pinch myself and make sure I was still alive. *[Laughter]* I want to, first of all, thank all of you for being here for Rob and for Laurie. And I want to thank you for your support for what his career has embodied.

I feel just as strongly about him, if not more strongly, as he apparently does about me. I was very pleased. I admire him because he stands up and fights for what he believes in. He'll take a tough vote when it has to be taken, and he tries to think things through in ways that always have an eye on the future.

You know, the great problem that any advanced society has is that it's always well organized, and that's good. But the bad news is, too often there are too few people who will be willing to change and move us toward the future.

And he was a part of this, what we called the New Democratic movement, when I started back in '93. We believed we could be pro-business and pro-labor. We thought we could balance the budget and still invest in education more. We thought we could be pro-economic growth and pro-environmental preservation. And I think part of it was his experience with State Government before coming here, because a lot of us who had lived in the real world before we moved to Washington—*[laughter]*—thought that it was sort of strange here. Everybody expected you to get on one side of an issue or another, and then just scream as loud as you could and hope every third or fourth day you'd get your 15 seconds on the news. It wasn't a very efficient way to govern or run a country, and we were paying for it.

And so we've had a pretty good run here. But you must understand that very little I've achieved would have been possible if I hadn't had the support of Members of my own party in Congress at critical times. And nobody embodies, in my view, the approach we ought to

be taking toward the future any better than he does. I'm really proud of him.

And we have a lot of big decisions to face this year and next year. But when you encapsulate them all, I would say, here's the story line: When I took office in 1993, a lot of people didn't know whether America would work or not. If I said to you in '92, in the election, "Vote for me, folks, and when I get done here, we will have turned deficits into surpluses, and we'll pay off \$300 or \$400 billion on the national debt," you'd say, "You know, he seems like a pleasant young man, but he's slightly deranged. We'd better send him home." *[Laughter]*

So what did we do? We had to worry about, first of all, getting our priorities in order, putting people first, as I called it in '92, getting the right kind of ideas, and then, basically, pointing the country in the right direction. That was the metaphor I used in our '96 campaign, building a bridge to the 21st century. And a lot of it was really tough.

We passed our economic plan by one vote in the House and the Senate in '93. And there were several other times during the last 7 years when we won by one vote, especially in the Senate. As Al Gore always says, "Whenever I vote, we win." *[Laughter]* And lamentably, he had to vote a lot. So it wasn't easy.

Now the country plainly is going in the right direction. Just last week we announced that for the eighth year in a row, crime is down, gun crime down 35 percent since '93, the lowest overall crime rate in over 25 years. So it's not just the economy—welfare rolls cut in half, 90 percent of our kids immunized for the first time in history. And I could go on and on.

So what's the question this time? The question this time is, what do we as a people propose to do with this prosperity? When you go home tonight you ought to think about it. Those of you that brought your children, you ought to look at them before you answer.

You know, as I get older—and unfortunately, it seems to be an irrevocable process—[*laughter*]*—*and I have a longer memory and probably more days behind me than ahead—there are some good things about it. And I know that it is a very rare time when a country has so much prosperity, so much social progress, so little internal dissension and relatively distant external threat. And a time like this comes along just once in a while. But it's happening now at a time of breathtaking change. So nothing lasts forever, and a long time is quicker than it used to be.

So this is very, very important. This election this year is just as important as the ones we had in '92 and '96, don't kid yourself. And yet, the danger is, because things seem to be going very well, everybody will take a relaxed attitude. And in fact, you should say, "Goodness gracious, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'm going to think real hard about what to do with this election."

For me, this kind of opportunity means just one thing: We have the space, the emotional space; we have the money; and we have the knowledge to identify what the big, outstanding challenges are facing this country and what the greatest opportunities are and to actually go after them. In other words, in '93, we were bailing water out of America's boat. Now we have a chance to build the future of our dreams for our children, and in so doing, I might add, to be a much more responsible and constructive member of the world community.

I appreciate what you said about what we did in Kosovo and Bosnia before, and what we tried to do throughout the world on ethnic and religious and racial conflicts. We have to decide, what are we going to do?

Now, I gave the Congress an agenda that would choke a horse back in my State of the Union Address because I wanted to make the point that we ought to be building the future of our dreams for our children, and that if we let this moment get away from us, if we're at all confused about what the subject of this election is, we'll never forgive ourselves, especially those of us who are old enough to know better.

And I'll just tell you one last little story here. The last time we had a time which even approximated this was in the mid-sixties, the early sixties. We just celebrated the longest economic expansion in American history, longer than any expansion, including all the ones including our

wars. But the last longest economic expansion was during the Vietnam war, 1961 to 1969. But it started in peacetime.

Frankly, I think people—those of us who came of age—I graduated from high school in 1964. We thought the thing would go on forever. I'm telling you, I graduated from high school with an attitude like I am afraid people will take in this election. Oh, I was for all the right things. But I thought the economy would expand forever. I thought the civil rights crisis of America would be resolved in the Congress and the courts, not in the streets. I never dreamed Vietnam would tear this country in two. And neither did most other people, and they didn't think about it when they were voting.

And by the time I got ready to graduate from college in 1968, it was 2 days after Robert Kennedy was killed, 2 months after Martin Luther King was killed, 9 weeks after Lyndon Johnson said he couldn't run for reelection, and just a few months before the longest economic expansion in American history came to a shrieking halt, with not much to show for it.

And I can tell you—I'm not running for anything, you know? [*Laughter*] And pretty soon I'll be Joe Citizen again. I'm telling you, as an American citizen, I have been waiting for 35 long years to see my country once again in a position to build the future of our dreams for our children. And we ought to be doing these big things. That's why I was thrilled all those million moms showed up here yesterday. You know, yes, we've got the lowest crime rate in 25 years. Does anybody think it's low enough? We can make America the safest big country in the world, but not if we don't have prevention. And he's taking this issue on, and I appreciate it.

I told somebody the other day, every time we get ready to do something that make sense, the other side screams "gun control," talks about we're infringing on the constitutional right to keep and bear arms. And yesterday I said what I always say, "You know, there's a constitutional right to travel, too." There is. But when we have speed limits and seatbelt laws and child restraint laws and we require drivers to get a drivers' license, you don't hear people standing around on street corner screaming about car control. [*Laughter*] They're talking about highway safety, and we like it, and we wish there were more of it, don't we? Now, if I come get your car and take it away from you, that's

car control. Otherwise, it's highway safety. And it's the same thing here.

It's a classic example of what I mean. It's easy to take a pass on a tough issue like that because times are good and your constituents are in a good humor. But it's not the right thing to do. The right thing to do is to say there will never be a better time to take on the big challenges; there will never be a better time to seize the big opportunities. And we need

more people in public life who have the kind of mind and the kind of heart that he does. That's why I'm here tonight.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:35 p.m. in the Dining Room at the Hay-Adams Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Representative Wexler's wife, Laurie.

Remarks at a Reception for Senator Charles S. Robb

May 15, 2000

Thank you very much. First of all, I want to thank Ron and Beth for having all of us here and for being so generous with their time and their home. However, now that I—you know, I thought I knew them pretty well. I never knew they met at a Chuck Robb fundraiser. *[Laughter]* We ought to put that out. We can raise millions of dollars on this. *[Laughter]* All the lovelorn who can write a check or show up at your fundraisers—this is wonderful. So I want to thank them.

And I want to thank all of you for coming and for supporting Chuck, and in just a minute, I'm going to tell you why. Let me say to all of you, you went through the line and had your picture taken. I appreciate the many nice things you said and especially those of you who expressed your support for my wife, whom I hope will be helping to swell the Democratic majority in the Senate after November.

I want to thank Lynda Robb for being our friend for probably 20 years now. We've watched our children grow up together. Chuck and I were Governors together in the early eighties. Out at Camp David I've got this beautiful picture of a carriage from colonial Williamsburg, from the Southern Governors' Association meeting in 1984, that Chuck Robb gave me. So we go back a long way.

And I want to tell you, quite briefly, why I'm here tonight, besides the fact that, yes, I'd show up if Ron and Beth asked me to come, and yes, I'd show up if Chuck and Lynda asked me to come. But I passionately believe, number one, that Chuck Robb ought to be reelected, and number two, I believe he will be reelected.

And I thought he would be reelected a year ago.

But there is a great question before the American people in this election, very different from the one we faced in 1992, but in some ways, maybe even more important and perhaps even more difficult to answer properly.

In 1992 the American people gave Al Gore and me a chance, but the country was mired in difficulty, and everyone knew that the way that things were being done in Washington was not working. You remember how it was then; you just took a position on an issue, and there was a position you had to take. If you were a Democrat, you had to take one position. If you were Republican, you had to take the other. And then you just stood off from one another and screamed as loud as you could and hoped you'd get your 10 seconds on the evening news, which might have been good politics but didn't move America forward very much.

So we set about turning the ship of state around. And without being self-serving, I think it's fair to say we did a pretty good job, and things are going in the right direction now. And I think it's one reason to vote for Chuck Robb and for Al Gore, because it wasn't because I was President; it was because we were all doing the right things. And I think that's very important.

I get tickled. You know, some of my adversaries, now that they want to win the election before us, they spent 7 years telling everybody how bad I was; now they say I'm the only guy that jumps higher than Michael Jordan—let's