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years now, the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has been indispensable to the preservation of life on this planet from nuclear holocaust, to the security of the United States, and to the march of freedom across the world.

Fourteen Americans of great ability and even more intense patriotism have occupied that office and made it indispensable. So, too all of those who are here, and their families, and those who are not here today, a grateful nation says, thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. at Summerall Field. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary Cohen's wife, Janet Langhart Cohen; General Shelton's mother, Sarah Laughlin Shelton; Gen. Wesley K. Clark, USA, Supreme Allied Commander Europe; former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, USN (Ret.), and his wife, Carrie; Gen. David C. Jones, USA (Ret.), and his wife, Lois; Gen. John W. Vessey, Jr., USA (Ret.), and his wife, Avis; Adm. William J. Crowe, Jr., USN (Ret.), and his wife, Shirley; Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, USA (Ret.), and his wife, Joan; and Gen. Colin Powell, USA (Ret.), and his wife, Alma.

Remarks at the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps Graduation Ceremony

August 9, 1999

Thank you. When I came up here, Josh said, ''I warmed them up for you.'' [*Laughter*] He certainly did that. Now he's sitting in my seat, which might be—[*laughter*]—might be a good omen. [*Laughter*]

Let me thank all of you for being here today. I want to say a special word of thanks to Harris Wofford, who, as you heard from his own speech, his public service to America goes all the way back to World War II. He was a major player in the civil rights revolution, the establishment of the Peace Corps. He served in the United States Senate. He agreed to come back and run our national service program and to do it in a way that reached out to all Americans from all walks of life and all political backgrounds. And he has done a superb job. I'm very grateful to Senator Harris Wofford for his leadership of AmeriCorps. He's been great in our whole national service program.

I want to thank General Chambers and Kate Becker for their leadership, and welcome all of you here, but especially the AmeriCorps NCCC graduates. Senator Wofford mentioned that on the morning you were sworn in with great symbolism in front of the FDR Memorial, it was quite cold. But within, literally 24 hours, many of you were already off to Texas and Puerto Rico to help the victims of a hurricane and a flood. After a year of such duty—I think you call them spikes, just like these fellows did so many years ago—you have fulfilled your AmeriCorps pledge. You have made a difference; you have gotten things done for America.

So to all the parents and family members and friends here today, let me say that your sons and daughters may look about the same as they did a year ago, but they have grown in remarkable ways. They are now firefighters, homebuilders, relief workers, community organizers, mentors, educators. They are confident. They are leaders; they are also servants as they lead.

Congratulations to Class Five of DC. Like the CCC alumni here today, you have touched lives and changed communities in ways that will be remembered and appreciated for years and years to come.

You know, in so many ways, AmeriCorps is the embodiment of the deal I struck with the American people in 1992. At the time, unemployment was high; the debt had quadrupled in the previous 12 years; social division was increasing; political stagnation was the order of the day in Washington. And I wanted our country to change course and come together. I acknowledged that Government can't solve all the problems, but we can't leave the people that you've been helping out there to sink or swim on their own, either. And so I wanted to create a Government that would give people the tools to solve their own problems and live their own dreams and to basically have a new compact in which we said, we will attempt to create opportunity for all Americans who are, themselves, responsible, and we will attempt to build an American community of all responsible citizens.

AmeriCorps embodies that. You go out there creating opportunity every day. You are

fulfilling your citizen responsibilities. And you have certainly helped us to build one American community.

So far, as Harris said, there have been 100,000 of you. You have built tens of thousands of homes, immunized hundreds of thousands of children, taught millions of students to read, planted millions of trees, and are now in New Jersey enrolling children in the new Children's Health Insurance Program, an initiative I hope to take nationwide, because we have still over 8 million children without any health insurance in American today, and we now have the funds in Washington to cover most of them. We just have to get them enrolled.

Now we're trying to take AmeriCorps up to 100,000 a year. Think what we could do; just think about everything you've done in this last year. Think how we could change the face and future of America if there were 100,000 of you out there every single year from now on doing what you have done. Think how many more young people would also be able to use the AmeriCorps scholarships to go on to college. Think how that would change the face and future of America, the range of opportunities available, the lives that people would live.

I think this is a very important moment for America. We have the strongest economy in a generation, the lowest minority unemployment rate ever recorded, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest crime rate in 26 years, highest budget surplus we've ever had, highest homeownership in history. What are we going to do with it?

I think we should use it to meet our big long-term challenges. The baby boomers, people like me, when we retire, if we don't do something now, Social Security and Medicare won't be able to sustain the burden of our numbers. But we now have the ability to fix Social Security and Medicare in a way that enables us to retire without imposing burdens on you, so that you will be able to raise your children without having to spend your hard-earned money to support your parents. I think that is very important.

Because of the surplus, we can get this country out of debt, for the first time since Andrew Jackson was President in 1835. And if we do that, if we do that, it means that when you go out into the world, interest rates will be lower, businesses will be stronger, jobs will be more plentiful, incomes will be higher, homes will be more affordable, and so will college education. It's important.

It means we can invest in the education of all of our children and meet our other fundamental responsibilities and still afford a modest—not a big, but a modest—tax cut designed to help people deal with the biggest challenges they face.

It means that we can go out into the areas that you know all too well, which, in spite of this fabulous economy, have not yet felt this recovery. I was in Appalachia, in the Mississippi Delta, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in south Phoenix and East St. Louis and Watts and East L.A. And you know as well as I do that for all the economic progress of the last few years, there are still some people who are living only in the shadows of this prosperity.

All of this we can do now. And I think it is my responsibility—and not just my responsibility as President, but my responsibility as a member of my generation, and that of every other member of my generation—or to leave you an America in the 21st century that is strong and that is worthy of the service you have just rendered. That is really what we're discussing up here.

You heard Josh talking—we don't have to put up with things we don't agree with in America, with conditions and human suffering and problems that we know we can change. It doesn't have to be this way. You have proved that lives can be changed. You have proved that circumstances can be improved. You can prove—have proved that dreams can be realized, not only yours but the people you've tried to help. And this is sort of a magic moment for our country, and if we do the right things now, then the feelings you have from your service as AmeriCorps volunteers are things that you will be able to put into practice, to good effect for your country and for young people that come along behind you for the rest of your lives.

I can tell you now, having lived a good deal longer than you have, there are two

things that I want to tell you about the difference in my age and yours. One is, it doesn't take long to close the gap. [*Laughter*] Right? Is that right? [*Applause*] I mean, when I said that, every person here in this room that's at least 50 years old was thinking the same thing: It seems like yesterday when I was 20. [*Laughter*] Isn't that right? We're all sitting here thinking the same thing. By the way, I'd let you be President for a year and a half if you'd let me be 20. [*Laughter*] I'd take my chances on doing it again. One.

Number two, there are certain chances that come along every day and others that just come along once in a lifetime. For example, my parents' generation won World War II and endured and whipped the Great Depression. The youngest of them are about Senator Wofford's age. He looks a lot younger than he is and acts even younger than that. And they did that, and they were called upon to do that when they were young, to save freedom and to beat a depression.

Then in the intervening generation, they dealt with the civil rights revolution in America and gave us an America that looks more like this AmeriCorps class. And thank God for them, all of them.

Our generation was blessed to be raised with enormous material satisfaction, and when I was young, it was the last time the economy was about as good as it is now. And we have waited a long time for the time when we would be presented with our one great opportunity and responsibility of a lifetime. We have it now in the present economic conditions of America.

I've tried to fulfill our generation's responsibility by giving you the chance to serve and by helping to build one America across all the racial and religious and cultural and other lines that divide us. But we are being tested now, and our values are being defined.

One of the things that is most amazing to me is that there are still some Republicans—and I want to say the word some; we've had good bipartisan support for AmeriCorps—but there are still some who are determined to zero out funding for AmeriCorps, in other words, ideological argument in the face of all the evidence of all the good you've done. Well, if they zero out the funding, their bill has zero chance of becoming law, because I will veto it.

But the AmeriCorps budget is just one example of what will happen, or would happen, if their big tax cut could become law. I mean politicians normally, when they have money, like—you give it back to people in an election season, say, ''This is your money. I'm going to give it back to you. Please vote for me.'' And that's normally a better political position than the one I'm in, which is, ''It's your money, but I don't think we can give it back to you, at least we can't give as much back as they want to give back to you.'' You can readily see which is the more appealing position, can't you?

Remember when you were kids, you used to argue about your parents, you know. You can just hear them arguing up there: ''My tax cut is bigger than your tax cut.'' [*Laughter*] But that's not really the question.

The question is, what does it take to save America's future in the face of the aging crisis? It means you have to lengthen the life of Social Security past the lifespan of the baby boomers. That's what it means. And my plan takes Social Security out to 2053. A lot of you will be around then, but I probably won't. But we owe it to you to lengthen Social Security beyond the lifespan of the baby boomers. It means we should strengthen Medicare and provide for a prescription drug benefit because of medical revolutions which enable people to live longer and better if they can access medicine. It means we should get out of debt, so we can give you the strongest possible economy. It means we should invest in education and the environment and health care and national defense, and saving our farmers that are in so much trouble today, and the care of our veterans. And then we should give what is left in a tax cut.

The reason that you have people up there trying to zero AmeriCorps is they know they can't pay for their tax cut without big cuts. There are special interest tax breaks in this tax bill that I threatened to veto, just special interest provisions, that would fund AmeriCorps 10 times over. And I would urge the American people to look at the fine print of this bill, because it also has big cuts in education, in research and development, in the environment. It could even force closure

of some of the national parks you worked on.

And again I say, this doesn't have to be a partisan issue. This should be a generational issue. And—just like when you go out on a project, you have to do first things first. If you're working on a mountain, you've got to put the right kind of shoes or boots on before you go up there. This debate over this tax cut in Washington has not actually been a very good object lesson for the older generation to you. This debate is like a family getting around the table and saying, ''Hey, let's take the vacation of our lifetime, the vacation of our dreams, and when we get home we'll see if we can't pay the mortgage and send the kids to college.'' That's what's going on.

It is the reverse of what you have done: getting things done for your country, making a difference, thinking about the future.

So I say to all of you, I hope you will always believe you can make a difference. And I hope all of the leaders here in Washington will realize that we have the chance of a lifetime to make a difference.

When you leave this program, I hope you will remember the other thing I said to you, which is that the distance between your age and mine is shorter than you think. It looks like a very long way from where you are, but from where I am, it looks like it happened in the flash of an eye. What you have done for your country and also what you have done for yourselves proves that it is truly more blessed to give than to receive and that in giving you do receive.

All over the world today there is turmoil, from the Balkans, Kosovo, and Bosnia, to Northern Ireland to the Middle East to the tribal conflicts of Africa, where people are fighting and dying because their vision is so limited that they believe their life only counts if they can lift themselves up by putting someone else down, someone of a different race, someone of a different religion, someone with a different slant on life, someone in Africa of a different tribe. All over the world this is happening.

AmeriCorps is living, daily, practical, flesh-and-blood proof that there's a better way to live; and that what we have in common is more important than what divides us; and that if we work together and hold hands and believe we're going into the future together, we can change anything we want to change.

You are the modern manifestation of the dream of America's Founders. And I hope, when you leave here, you will never, ever, ever stop being proud of what you've done. And I hope you will never stop preaching the lessons you have learned. For in the end, if we're all working toward one America, the chances are we'll get where we're going.

Good luck, and God bless you. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:16 p.m. in the Sidney Yates Auditorium at the Department of the Interior. In his remarks, he referred to AmeriCorps service corpsman Joshua Watson, who introduced the President; AmeriCorps officer Lt. Gen. Andrew Chambers, USA (Ret.), Director, National Civilian Community Corps; and Kate Becker, Director, National Capital Region Campus.

Remarks to the American Bar Association in Atlanta, Georgia

August 9, 1999

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. I want to say to all of you how very grateful I am to be here today at the American Bar Association, and especially under the leadership of my long-time friend Phil Anderson. I'm sure you could see there was a sort of an Arkansas tilt to a lot of the people who were introduced here today. [*Laughter*] Bruce Lindsey used to be one of his law partners. He even had his minister here. [*Laughter*]

What you may not know is, the reason I'm here is that I got beat for Governor in 1980, and I was the youngest former Governor in the history of America. I had extremely limited career prospects, and Phil Anderson is the only guy in Arkansas that offered me a job. [*Laughter*] He's either a great prognosticator or a good gambler—[*laughter*]—and he's done a superb job.

Let me say, seriously, how very much I appreciate the remarks that he made on the issue of gun safety at the outset of your convening here. It's a very important issue to the Attorney General and me and, of course,