

Week Ending Friday, September 13, 1996

Remarks at Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida

September 6, 1996

The President. Thank you. Wow! Well, on the way up here Governor Chiles told me that—can you hear? We lost our sound. Can you hear me in the back? I'll just speak up—there it is. On the way up here Governor Chiles told me that as nearly as they could determine, I am the first sitting President ever to come to Panama City. Based on what I saw along the road coming in and the reception you've given us, I'd say the others don't know what they were missing. I'm glad to be here. [*Applause*] Thank you.

I'd like to thank President McSpadden and all the others here at the community college for making me feel so welcome. I'd like to thank these excellent young musicians who played for us, called the Optimistics. They were great, weren't they? Thank you very much.

Thank you, Dawn, for the power of your example and for your fine introduction, but mostly because you embody what the American dream is all about and the role of education in the American dream. I know all of you here who are students must have been very proud when Dawn Roberts was up here speaking, but I was proud just to be an American, to know that we have people like this and that there are opportunities like this school has given her to make the most of her own life.

I'd like to thank all the military people who serve our country who live in this area. And I'd like to thank all the people who work for Sallie Mae here, who have worked so hard to make college education affordable.

I want to thank Governor Lawton Chiles for being my friend of many years and for what he said today. A lot of people say, "Well, why are you going up there? They never vote for Democrats." And I said, "Well, I remember when Lawton Chiles ran for Governor

in 1994, and the Republicans said it was their year and that people in Florida would never reelect him. He kept coming up here and saying that he was going to remind everybody that the 'he-coon' walked just before the light of dawn. And I figured if I came up here, maybe I could find myself a 'he-coon.'" So I'm looking around trying to find one.

I thought I had personally used every down-home expression known to man until he said that. [*Laughter*] And I'm still learning things from Lawton Chiles after all of these years.

I want to say a special word of thanks and honor to your retiring Congressman, Pete Peterson. He has—as all of you know, he has served his country magnificently and at great sacrifice to himself and his family for a very long time, and I honor him. And I was honored to be able to nominate him to be our Nation's first Ambassador to Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam war. He will be terrific at it.

Now, in order for me to see his nomination through, I have to get my contract renewed. But if I do, that's a campaign commitment you can put in the bank. He will be the next Ambassador to Vietnam.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's hot in here, and I'm proud you came to see me, and most of what I have to say is preaching to the saved; I realize that. But I want to emphasize to you why we are here, not in Panama City, but why we are here at this community college, because I believe America ought to work the way the community colleges in America work. I believe they are the ultimate democratic institution, small "d": open to everybody, where everybody has a chance; results oriented; flexible, not bureaucratic; working in partnership with the private sector; guaranteeing opportunity for everybody who is responsible enough to seek it.

This is the way America ought to work. And this is what I have tried to work on for 4 years as President. I was sick and tired of

seeing Washington politics dominated by hot air, negative charges, and I sought to bring an end to the politics of "who's to blame" and to substitute for that "what are we going to do to make America a better place?"

I think it's plain that America is on the right track to the 21st century. We got some more information today: Last month our economy created another 250,000 jobs; our unemployment rate—as a nation our unemployment rate dropped to 5.1 percent, the lowest in 7½ years; wages are going up again for the first time in a decade. We have record numbers of new small businesses, record numbers of American exports all over the world. Our auto production is number one again in the world for the first time since the 1970's; home ownership at a 15-year high.

The minimum wage will go into effect, the increase, in October, and it will raise wages for 10 million of the hardest-working working people in this country. I think that's a good thing. Twenty-five million Americans, including some of you in this audience, I'll bet, will be helped by the passage of the Kennedy-Kassebaum health care reform bill, which says to Americans, "You cannot lose your health insurance or be denied it if you change jobs or just because someone in your family has been sick." That's what insurance is for.

For the first time since before the Civil War, in the 1840's, we have reduced the Government's enormous budget deficit in all 4 years, a total of 60 percent, for the first time in well over 100 years. We can be proud of that. We are moving in the right direction. We're on the right track.

There are 1.8 million fewer people on welfare than there were the day I took the oath of office. Child support collections are up 40 percent and up 48 percent in Florida. Thank you, Governor, and thank you, Florida; you're doing a good job.

We have worked hard to make sure that America would be the strongest force for peace and freedom and prosperity in the world. We have undertaken what anyone would say is the most successful restructuring of military forces in history. We have maintained the capabilities, the readiness, the qualitative edge of our Armed Forces. You

heard Governor Chiles say it, but I want to say it again: I'm glad that the F-22's are going to be headquartered here, and I know you will do a good job of helping to maintain America's defense.

But we still have more to do if we're going to build a bridge to the 21st century that everybody can walk across. We've got to keep economic growth going, which means we have to balance the budget without unfair cuts in education, in environmental protection, in research and technology, in Medicare and Medicaid. We've got to go forward together, investing in the things that will make us stronger. We have to give the right kind of tax cuts to America's families. They ought to be focused on raising children, on education, on emergency needs like health care, on buying that first home. And we ought to pay for our tax cuts and not have to cut Medicare, Medicaid, or education, the environment more.

And we ought not to let that deficit go up. Last year, before they changed their position, our friends in the Republican Party put out one piece of paper that I agree with. They said, "If we get off this plan to balance the budget and we send a signal that we don't care about it anymore, interest rates will go up 2 percent." Now, people always tell me, "Don't ever talk about balancing the budget. When the economy is good, people get bored by it. They only care about it when the economy is bad." You should care about it. If interest rates go up 2 percent because the Government is borrowing money when you're trying to borrow it, that means 2 percent on a home mortgage, on a car payment, on a credit card payment. Even more important than that, it means 2 percent for every business person that wants to borrow money to start a new business, to expand a business, to become more productive so that more people can be hired and more can get a raise. We've got to keep working to balance the budget in the right way to grow the economy.

We passed a welfare reform bill that says to everybody on welfare now, "We'll take care of your children with health care, with nutrition, with child care. But if you're able-bodied, you have to go to work." We've got to make sure there's work to do for those

people. We have to create those jobs so they can go to work.

The crime rate has come down in America for 4 years in a row. But we have to finish the work of putting 100,000 police on the street, and we have to continue to work to protect those who are trying to protect us. You know, in places like this part of Florida and nearly every place in my home State of Arkansas, when we passed the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, the awfulest hew and cry you ever heard went up, and all of these hunters were told that we were coming after their rifles. The truth is, for the first time in American history, we've protected 650 hunting and sporting weapons from any infringement by the Government. They've neglected to say that in the political rhetoric 2 years ago. But here we are, 2 years later, and every hunting season every hunter in Florida and Arkansas still using the same rifle unless they told you to get another one.

But to be fair and completely honest, there were some people who couldn't get guns anymore: 60,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers could not get them because of the Brady bill. We were right, and they were wrong.

Now, for reasons I will never understand, our friends in the opposition not only oppose us on that, they oppose putting 100,000 police officers on the street. Folks, when Hillary and I and Al and Tipper Gore took our bus trip after the convention through all of those little towns in Missouri, in Illinois, in Kentucky, in Tennessee, I went to some little towns where the police chief came up to me and said, "Mr. President, because of that 100,000 police program, in our little town we've doubled the size of our police department, and we cut the crime rate in half. Don't let them stop this program." This is something that's protecting all Americans, from the biggest cities to the smallest towns. So if you want to build a bridge to the 21st century for everybody, then our children have a right to be safe in their homes, on their streets, in their schools, in their future.

We've got to build a bridge to the 21st century that enables us to grow the economy and protect the environment at the same time. Ten million American children still live within 4 miles of a toxic waste site; that's wrong. We've cleaned up more in 3 years

than the previous administrations did in 12, but if you'll give me 4 more years, we'll clean up two-thirds of the rest, the worst, so that our kids will be growing up next to parks, not poison. And let me say this—

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The President. This is so important to Florida. You're growing so fast, but people come here because it's a beautiful place, because they love it. You have to find a way to grow and preserve the environment. Whether it's the quality of water, the Florida Everglades, all of the resources you have, Florida has as big a stake in America finding a way to balance environmental preservation and restoration and economic growth as any other State in America. And that is my solemn commitment to you. That's what we've done, and we're going to do more of it to build that bridge to the 21st century.

Let me just mention something else. When Dawn introduced me and talked a little bit about herself, I thought to myself: I wonder how many nontraditional students there are who have to balance work and school and taking care of kids. I bet a lot of you do. I never go into a crowd of ordinary Americans that I don't hear somebody talk to me about how one of their biggest concerns is how they can succeed in their work life and succeed in raising their children, in their home life.

Since most American parents, whether they're single parents or in two-parent households, are both working and parenting, I think you can make a compelling case that our country has no more important responsibility than doing everything in our power to help the American people succeed with their first and most important job, raising their children, and at work—both of them.

Now, when we pass—when the first bill I signed was the family and medical leave law, our friends in the other party, the leader said, "Oh, this is terrible for the economy. You will bankrupt the economy. This is awful. There won't be any small businesses can live with this."

Well, 4 years later, 12 million American families have been able to take a little time off for the birth of a child or a parent's illness without losing their jobs, and we have in

every single one of these 4 years started a record number of new small businesses in America. And the job growth rate in these 4 years has been faster than in any Republican administration in over 70 years. I think that we were right about that.

So I'd like to see us expand the family leave law just a little so that parents could have a little time off to go to regular parent-teacher conferences and regular doctor's appointments with their children. I think it would be a good thing to do. I'd like to see parents who have to work and get overtime have the choice of taking that overtime in cash, if that's what's best in their family, or in time, if that's what's best for their family, to support work and family.

And finally, let me say the most important thing and the reason I'm here today is that we've got to build a bridge to the 21st century that everyone can walk across, to a century where everybody who is responsible and willing to work has a chance to live their own version of the American dream and live up to their God-given capacities. And there is no way to do it unless we provide in this tough, competitive global economy the finest educational opportunities of any nation in the world to every single person who lives in the United States.

Now, as Lawton Chiles will tell you, I could keep you here until dawn—and then we'd see that "he-coon"—talking about education. I don't want to do that. But I want to tell you just three or four things that I think it's important that we do. Some of them affect you directly; some of them affect you indirectly.

Forty percent of the 8-year-olds in this country cannot read a book on their own—40 percent. Every child needs to be able to read a book by the time they're 8 and in the third grade. I propose—I propose to support our schools with 30,000 more mentors, AmeriCorps volunteers, college students on work study, other volunteers, to mobilize a million citizens to help children learn to read one-on-one so that by the year 2000 we can say, "We built a bridge to the future. Every 8-year-old can read a book. Every 8-year-old, by himself."

I believe—I bet a lot of you are a lot more proficient on your computer than I am and

hook into the Internet all the time. We're working hard not only to provide every classroom and library in America with adequate computers, adequate educational programming, and properly trained teachers—this summer we started a program with 100,000 teachers to train 500,000 more, to make sure the teachers could actually teach the kids—and a little bit of it will be the other way around—in how to make the most of computers for educational purposes.

But the real key is hooking all these computers up to the information superhighway, to the Internet, to the World Wide Web. You think about it. This is the first time in the history of the country when kids in the smallest towns in Florida and in the poorest inner-city neighborhoods anywhere in America can be able to get the same information at the same quality in the same time in the same way as children in the wealthiest school districts in this country. It will revolutionize education and lift our entire country. And we have to build that bridge to the 21st century.

And finally, I believe we have to make it possible for every single American of any age to go back to school at any time when they need to go back to school, starting with making 2 years of college, a community college degree, just as universal in 4 years as a high school diploma is today. And we can do that. We can do that. Because, thank goodness, almost every American is within driving distance of a community college, it won't be that hard. What we ought to do is to give every family up to 2 years of a \$1,500 refundable tax credit which will cover the typical tuition cost at any community college in the country. And that will help us to say to everybody, "It doesn't matter what age you are. It doesn't matter whether other people in your family are going to college, doesn't matter what your other problems are. Through the tax system, we'll pay you to go back to a community college if you'll do a good job while you're there, work hard, learn, and go forward."

And for people that go further, I think we ought to give families a tax deduction worth up to \$10,000 a year for the cost of tuition at any form of higher education, undergraduate, graduate, you name it. We ought to do

that as well and encourage people to go forward.

Again I say, you can only believe in this if you really believe not only in your own potential but the potential of every other American. This is a great country not because we are committed to one particular religious view, one particular racial view, one particular ethnic group. This is a country now where everybody can come and we say, "If you believe in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, if you're willing to work hard and show up tomorrow and play by the rules, you're our kind of American. You're part of our future." We want to build a bridge that you can walk across because we'll be stronger, too. We'll be stronger, too.

So I want to ask you—that's what this election is all about: a bridge to the future or a bridge to the past; a bridge to the future wide enough that we can all walk across or everybody trying to build their own little bridge and say we're on our own. I believe that my wife was right; I think it does take a village. We're better off when we help each other.

I believe that there is no country in the world—I don't just believe it, I know this—there is no country in the world as well-positioned for the 21st century as the United States. But we have to make some fundamental decisions. Do we really believe in opportunity for all, responsibility from all? Do we really believe that everybody who is willing to work hard has a part in our American community? If we believe that, and we're willing to build that bridge, America's greatest days are still ahead.

Will you help me build that bridge?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Thank you, and God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:26 p.m. in the college gymnasium. In his remarks, he referred to Robert L. McSpadden, president, and Dawn Roberts, student activities board president, Gulf Coast Community College. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks at a Reception for Representative Pete Peterson in Panama City

September 6, 1996

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you for being here. Thank you for waiting for us. You have no idea how hot it was in that rally. [*Laughter*] I'm surprised we've got the skin on our—[*laughter*—it was wonderful. It was wonderful, as Lawton said, seeing the crowds coming in.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know I came here for three reasons. I know no sitting President has been here before. The others didn't know what they were missing. But I came here, first of all, because Joe Chapman is my friend and he wanted me to come, and because his mother is the best politician I know and I wanted to see her, see if I couldn't get a few pointers.

The second reason I came here is that I did not want Pete Peterson to leave the Congress without my having a chance to come to his district and thank the people of his district for sharing him with the Nation and giving him to the Congress. He is a perfectly wonderful man.

I was really honored when he agreed to let me present his name to be the first Ambassador to Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam war. You can only imagine how momentous that appointment is, not only in our country but throughout Asia. The coming together of these countries, our effort to establish some decent and normal relations with them, our success in getting them to account for those people whom we still haven't accounted for who served in Vietnam and who are still missing, this is a huge emotional event for our country but also there. And it also has enormous political and commercial implications for our country over the long run. And I think there is no one in America who will serve our country better in every way and will embody everything that is best about America like Pete Peterson will. And I'm very grateful for this.

Third reason I'm here is, like Lawton said—what did you say? I want to try to remember what he said; it was one of those "he-coon" things. I think he said that no red-