

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Dinner

March 16, 1998

Thank you very much, Len and Steve. Ladies and gentlemen, a lot of you go to a lot of these dinners. I was sitting here thinking, what could I say to you tonight that you have not heard already? Then I thought, well, maybe I should say to you tonight what you have heard already.

You may have heard me tell this story, but one of my favorite insights into communications came not at a political speech but at a rock concert several years ago, where Tina Turner was singing when she made her great comeback. She finished this new album, "Private Dancer," and she was going around the country doing these concerts. And she sang all the new songs; all the young people in the audience loved the songs. At the end she started to sing "Proud Mary," which was her first hit, and all the old guys like me loved that. And so she started to sing it a couple of times, and the crowd was cheering so loud she backed away. And finally she said, "You know, I've been singing this song for 25 years, but it gets better every time I sing it." [Laughter] So maybe I should just say the same old thing.

Let me say today—I'd like to talk to you about what I did today, in two different ways, because I think it stands for what I believe we ought to be doing as a country. I started today by getting in a car and driving out to suburban Maryland to a high school to meet with two dozen people, including experts in national testing, other education experts, experts in science and math education, the mayor of Los Angeles, the mayor of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the Governors of West Virginia and Maryland, the superintendent of schools in New York City, and the State superintendent in Kentucky, a number of others, to talk about math and science education and why Americans scored so low in the international math and science test for high school seniors when we were near the top of the scores of the international math and science test for fourth graders. What happens between the 4th grade and the 12th grade?

Then tonight, before I started my rounds, I was meeting—having the first of a whole

marathon set of meetings I'll be having over the next 30 hours or so with participants in the Irish peace process, trying to get it back on track and hopefully bring it to a successful conclusion this year. Two apparently disparate things, but they both represent—especially since the high school where we met in Maryland had students who were basically white students, students who were African-Americans, students who were Hispanic students, who were Asian, who were south Asian, Arab-Americans—I mean, it's an amazing student body—both things represent to me what we ought to be doing now, which is looking to the long-term interests of the country, preparing for the 21st century, thinking about the big issues.

And that's what I tried to talk about in the State of the Union Address. It's all very well to say—and, believe me, I am profoundly grateful that we have the lowest unemployment and crime rates in 24 years, 15 million new jobs, and all-time high homeownership, lowest inflation rate in 30 years, and the lowest welfare rolls in 20 years. I am profoundly grateful for that. And for all of you that helped me do any of that and helped the American people achieve that in your private capacities or as citizens, I'm grateful for that. But we need to take this time, which is highly dynamic, and imagine what we want this country to look like in 20 years and do what it takes to get us there.

And so I just mention those 2 examples because they're 2 of 10 I could mention. That's why I want us to reform Medicare and Social Security for the 21st century and the baby boom generation before we go about spending this budget surplus that is just now beginning to materialize. It's why I want us to take a serious look at our educational and environmental challenges and prepare for the 21st century.

You think about it. Everybody in this country knows we've got the best college system in the world, the best system of higher education in the world. No one in America believes we have the best system of elementary and secondary education in the world. And yet, we have wonderful people involved in it, teaching in it, being principals in it, trying to make it go every day.

There are systematic problems here that have nothing to do with the overwhelming difficulty of the task, because we have not put our minds to it: setting national standards and having some national measure of whether our kids are meeting those standards, whether they're in south Alabama or north-east Maine; making sure that when teachers teach math and science they have actually had the requisite academic background. This is the only advanced country in the world where people teach—regularly teach math and science to our children without not only a major or even a minor in the subject in school—because of the teacher shortage in these areas—requiring our students to take more courses if they want to go to college or even to have a high school diploma. It's breathtaking when you see what happens as more and more students go all the way through high school without taking algebra or trigonometry or calculus or physics or chemistry.

You know, we say this is an age of science and technology. We've done everything we could to hook up all the schools to computers—hook up computers to all the schools and classrooms. But unless we have trained teachers and students taking those courses, we are going to continue to fare poorly compared to other countries.

What is the practical matter? We have such a powerful economy; maybe if only half of our kids get it, we'll be able to keep the economy going, but the society will not be as strong as it should be if half of our young people drop out because they never got on the escalator when they were in the seventh grade, the eighth grade, the ninth grade. So anyway, it's a big issue.

The Irish peace process—I could talk about the Middle East or Ireland or anyplace else. I'm grateful for the fact that the United States could play the role it's played in Ireland, the role it's played in Bosnia, the work that the Secretary of State is doing now with our allies to try to keep Kosovo from causing a new turmoil in the Balkans, the fact that I will become the first President ever to take a real trip to sub-Saharan Africa ever in the history of the country, starting at the end of this week. Why? Because I'm thinking about what it's going to be like for us 20 or 30

or 40 years from now, as well as in the immediate future. I want to get a settlement and legislation passed in this tobacco case to end this whole chapter of our history in a way that will enable us to save a thousand lives a day and protect the health of our children in the future.

These are the things that we try to do. So when you go home tonight, before you go to bed, I want you to think about why did I come to this dinner? Why did I do that? Why did I show up there? Why didn't I stay home and watch pro basketball or whatever? And I hope that the reasons will be part of your vision for America in the 21st century.

I'm grateful for what we've achieved, but what we've achieved simply imposes on us an even greater obligation to use the success of the country, the confidence of the country, the elbow room that this kind of new prosperity gives us, to really look at the long-term challenges our people face and to meet them.

We've got 3 years to do it, and I am convinced that 3 years from now this country will be in even better shape than it is today thanks to the support of people like you.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:12 p.m. in the South Drawing Room at the Decatur House. In his remarks, he referred to Leonard Barrack, national finance chair, and Steve Grossman, national chair, Democratic National Committee; Mayor Lee R. Clancey of Cedar Rapids, IA; Rudy Crew, chancellor, New York City public schools; and Wilmer Cody, Kentucky commissioner of education.

Remarks at a Saint Patrick's Day Ceremony With Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland

March 17, 1998

President Clinton. Good morning. Please be seated everyone. This is a wonderful day for all of us here at the White House. It's a great pleasure to welcome the Taoiseach here. Bertie Ahern has given great leadership to the people of Ireland and to the peace process. This is his first St. Patrick's Day here since assuming office, and we're very grateful for his presence. We welcome him.