

As all of you know, Thanksgiving is a uniquely American holiday, dating back to the Pilgrims and Plymouth, Massachusetts. When the Pilgrims sat down for Thanksgiving dinner in 1621, of course, they didn't have the usual trimmings: no potatoes, no stuffing, no pumpkin pie. In fact, they didn't even have a turkey. They feasted on maize, squash, and venison.

A lot has changed in the last three and a half centuries in our country and not just the Thanksgiving dinner menu. But every year that I come here to do this ceremony, it seems we have more to be thankful for as Americans. Not only do we have turkey, mashed potatoes, and pie, but for this turkey and its owners, we have the Minnesota Vikings and their great season this year. [Laughter]

We're also fortunate this Thanksgiving to live in one of the most prosperous times in our history, with unemployment at its lowest level in 28 years, homeownership at its highest level ever. More Americans this Thanksgiving will spend this holiday in their own homes than ever before.

But we should never forget that there are still people in our Nation who need our concern and caring. The young people here today are interested in making the most of their own lives and in serving their own communities. They remind us that Thanksgiving is not simply a time for parades and a home-cooked meal but a time together with our friends, our families, our neighbors.

President Lincoln understood that when he issued the first official Proclamation of Thanksgiving during the Civil War. Although the American people then were engaged in a profound national struggle and, indeed, engaged with the very survival of our Nation, Mr. Lincoln reminded us that even in the darkest times, we all have something to be thankful for.

Therefore, I am honored to follow in the footsteps of President Lincoln, and President Truman who began this tradition 51 years ago of keeping at least one turkey off the Thanksgiving table. With this Presidential pardon, our friend here will retire to the petting zoo in Fairfax County, Virginia, to live out the remainder of his years surrounded

by friends, not peas and sweet potatoes. [Laughter]

So let's bring the turkey up here, and I hope you all have a wonderful Thanksgiving.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:47 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Frank Gessell, chairman, and Stuart Proctor, Jr., president, National Turkey Federation, and Mr. Gessell's friend Walter Gislason, charged with handling the turkey.

Remarks at a National Adoption Month Reception

November 24, 1998

Thank you very much. I asked Charday if she was happy about being here, and she said, "Yes, but I'm a little nervous." [Laughter] And I said, "Well, all these people are your friends, just remember that." And I thought she did a terrific job. Don't you think she did? I think she did. [Applause]

Governor and Mrs. Edgar, Senator Levin, Senator Landrieu, Congressman and Mrs. Oberstar, Mayor Barry, thank you all for joining us here today. I'd like to thank the previous participants on the program—Mayor-elect Williams, for the power of your example which speaks louder than our words. And Mrs. Williams, we're glad to have you here today, and we wish you well in your new endeavors. Judge Hamilton, thank you for your work and the power of your example. And, Dave Thomas, he said some very nice things up here about Hillary and me, but the truth is that no other citizen in the United States today or ever has done as much as a private citizen to promote the cause of adoption as Dave Thomas. And we are very grateful to him. Thank you, sir.

I'd like to thank Secretary Shalala, the longest serving, and notwithstanding her voice today, the most effective Secretary of Health and Human Services in our history.

I want to congratulate all the families who are here today and thank them for coming. And I hope Judge Hamilton is right; I hope that the images of them that go across America today will inspire other parents to do the same. I want to also congratulate the Adoption 2002 award winners and thank them for

the work they are doing in their States and communities.

I'd also like to say a special word today. Before we came in here, Dave Thomas said, "Well, you know, your administration has done more than any in history to promote adoption." And I told him that the real reason for that is because it has been a consuming passion of the First Lady for as long as I have known her. I remember when we were young and we hadn't been married long, when she had a client, a couple in Arkansas who were foster parents and who were in the foster system, and the rules then didn't permit them to adopt. And she waged a long and sometimes lonely legal battle through our courts to get that couple the right to adopt the child they loved very much and had already invested a great deal in. And it began to change things for a lot of families in our State.

I remember when she organized more than 25 years ago the Arkansas Advocates for Families and Children, and one of their missions was to improve the system of adoption, as well as the system of foster care in our State. And so I can tell you that while many people have played a role in what we have been able to do—especially in the remarkable bipartisan cooperation we've enjoyed in passing these two important adoption bills—no one deserves more credit than Hillary for what has happened in the last 6 years, and I'm very grateful to her.

As all the speakers have said, we are working hard on making good on our commitment to find our foster children the homes and the futures they deserve. We do want to double the number of adoptions by the year 2002. We want to reform our Nation's whole approach to this profoundly important issue, to make the system work better for the children and the families it should be serving. With pioneering efforts like those in the State of Illinois, we are getting closer to our goal of doubling the number of children adopted or permanently placed by 2002.

Between 1996 and 1997, the number of adoptions increased by 10 percent, from 28,000 to 31,000. We know, however, that that cannot be the sole measure of our progress. We also must ask ourselves whether our child welfare system always puts the

health and safety of our children above all else; whether children have the chance to live out their dreams and fulfill their potential; whether families who open their arms can actually reach to embrace a child in need.

As we celebrate National Adoption Month, Americans can take pride in the progress we're making, but we know there is much more work to be done. We know geographic and other barriers to adoptions still exist. We know we have to do a better job in informing America's families about the many children who wait in the foster care system for adoption.

To give those children the permanent homes they need, to give our families the opportunity to give them those homes, we must make technology a partner and propel the public welfare system into the 21st century. Today, therefore, I am directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services to work with the States, the courts, the private agencies, to report to me within 60 days on a plan for a national Internet-based registry of children waiting to be adopted everywhere in the United States.

As Hillary said, there are 100,000 children, just like those whom we clapped for today, in foster care still waiting for permanent adoptive homes. The Internet holds the potential to shorten their wait, to make an on-line link between foster care centers and families looking to adopt. Some States and private partners already are forging these connections, bringing together families in Alaska and children as far away as Pennsylvania, for example.

We want to build on these efforts to the extent that it is possible and appropriate, working closely with the States, supporting their efforts, learning from them. We can use the Internet to promote adoptions while protecting the confidentiality of children and families. Technology has given us an important tool, and we should use it.

Again, Thanksgiving is approaching. Families across our Nation will come together to express their gratitude for all the things that matter most. We sometimes speak of the comforts of home as the small blessings. But when you look into the eyes of these children today, we remember that there are few greater blessings.

I'd like to encourage more families to follow the example of those we have honored here today, to open their arms, their hearts, to children who need them very much, to give them the futures they deserve, and to make sure that in all of the Thanksgivings to come, we will all be blessed as a nation as more and more of our children come into loving homes.

A very happy Thanksgiving to all of you. And now let me invite all of you to join us to celebrate this special day with a reception in the State Dining Room.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:26 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Charday Mays, adoptee who introduced the President; Jean Oberstar, wife of Representative James L. Oberstar; Mayor Marion S. Barry, Jr., and Mayor-elect Anthony A. Williams of Washington, DC, and Mr. Williams' wife, Diane; Chief Judge Eugene N. Hamilton, Superior Court, Washington, DC; and Wendy's International, Inc., chairman Dave Thomas, founder, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Memorandum on Using the Internet To Increase Adoptions

November 24, 1998

Memorandum for the Secretary of Health and Human Services

Subject: Using the Internet to Increase Adoptions

Technology will be an ever more important part of achieving our national goals as we approach the new millennium. New technological tools mean new opportunities for progress—helping us to strengthen the global economy, bolster public education, and improve the health of American families. Technology can also assist our continuing efforts to meet our national goal of doubling, by the year 2002, adoptions and other permanent placements from our Nation's foster care system.

As we celebrate National Adoption Month, it is fitting that we reflect on the important steps we have taken to strengthen our child welfare system and, specifically, to improve the process of adoption. Through the Family and Medical Leave Act and tax credits, we

have made it easier for families to adopt children. We have worked to eliminate discrimination and delay based on race and ethnicity. And, last year, I was proud to sign into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act, tightening the time frame for decision-making and affirming that the health and safety of children in foster care must always come first.

We are making progress but there is more work to be done. Because geographic and other barriers to adoption still exist, we must do a better job of informing America's families about the many children that wait in foster care for permanent, adoptive homes. To give those children the future they deserve, to give our families the opportunity to provide them with happy, healthy homes, we must infuse the public child welfare system with the power of technology.

Therefore, I am directing you to work with the States, courts, private agencies, and others to develop a plan for expanding appropriate use of the Internet as a tool to find homes for children waiting to be adopted from the public child welfare system. There are approximately 100,000 children in our country waiting in foster care for permanent adoptive homes. Sharing information through a national Internet registry about children legally available for adoption could shorten the time needed to find adoptive families for such children. To take full advantage of the Internet's potential to promote adoptions while also ensuring appropriate confidentiality safeguards, close consultation with the States will be necessary.

You should report to me within 60 days with a plan to carry out this consultation; identify important issues and strategies to address them; and build on promising existing efforts to create an effective, national registry.

William J. Clinton

Radio Remarks on Disaster Relief for Central America

November 25, 1998

Throughout this week, families in the United States are coming together to give thanks for the blessings we enjoy. As we celebrate, we must remember our neighbors,