

crisis; we had the Vietnam war. Now we have no excuse. But a nation is no different from a business or a family or an individual. You are most vulnerable to making a mistake in life when you think everything is peachy-keen, because it's easy to just relax, it's easy to get distracted, it's easy to do something that's in the short-term selfish interest that doesn't deal with the long run.

The challenges this country faces is no different than the challenges that you have seen in your businesses, in your families, and in your lives. When things are really good, it's hard to muster the vision, the will, and the focus to do the right, big things. That's what the candidates should all be questioned about this year.

The most important reason for his candidacy and his leadership is so we can save Social Security for the baby boom generation, so we can modernize Medicare and put a prescription drug benefit, so we can radically improve the education of the largest and most diverse group of kids in the country's history, so we can bring prosperity to the people and places that still haven't felt it, so we can keep on until we pay down the debt completely for the first time since 1835, so we can stop all these assaults on the environment and prove that we can clean the environment and grow the economy at the same time, so that we can meet our responsibilities in the world.

David is an internationalist, and Gerald Ford spoke so passionately today about the importance of a bipartisan commitment to our global responsibilities, which means, do what it takes to continue to fight for peace and against ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, continue to support the Irish peace process, continue to support the Africans, who want to stop further tribal wars, continue to work for peace in Northern Ireland, continue to work for peace in the Middle East, continue to work against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, continue to work for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, continue to work against terrorism.

This is an important part of our future. If you don't think that all this stuff we're enjoying could be interrupted tomorrow by a collapse of the international economic system, by a rise in global terrorism, by America

walking away from its responsibilities to peace in these important areas—think again. So I say to you, this is an important part of it.

And the last thing I'll say is, we Democrats, we may have lost a lot of votes over the last 30 years because we believe in one America, without regard to race or gender or religion or sexual orientation. But if you look at the way the world is in turmoil today and if you look at the horrible, though isolated, instances of hate-related violence in America today, I think you will agree that it's pretty important that we hang in there together.

Dave Bonior has a big heart, a good mind, and a steel spine. He will fight a buzz saw for what he believes in. And that's why the people who follow his lead both respect him and love him. You did a good thing in coming here tonight, but we've got a lot of work to do between now and next year at this time. If we do it, we're going to have a lot to celebrate.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:40 p.m. in the Concorde Room at the Hay Adams Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to former Representative Vic Fazio; and Judy Bonior, wife of Representative David Bonior.

Remarks at an Awards Ceremony for Blue Ribbon Schools

October 28, 1999

Thank you. Good morning. Congratulations. I want to begin by thanking Ruth Summerlin for her introduction and for the power of her example which includes not only turning her school around but asking for a little more help. Did you notice the way she slipped that in there? [*Laughter*] That was pretty impressive.

I want to thank Secretary Riley for his wonderful leadership. All the things he said about me, he might have said about himself. He is clearly not only the longest serving but the ablest, the most dedicated, and most effective Secretary of Education we have ever had.

When the new millennium rolls around in January, we will have completed 21 years of working together, as friends and colleagues,

since we were young Governors in the South trying to start our education reform programs, more than two decades ago. And every year has been a joy, and I'm very grateful for what he's done in this administration.

I want to acknowledge the presence in the audience of Vincent Ferrandino, the executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. And I also want to thank Bill Ivey, as the Secretary did, the chair of the NEA, and say just a brief word about—before I get into a couple of other announcements—about what Ruth said about bringing the arts back into the schools. I would urge all of you to see this new movie that's out, that I had screened at the White House, starring Meryl Streep, called "Music of the Heart," about the East Harlem violin program.

But I have been mortified at the collapse of the availability of music and the arts in the schools all over America because of all kinds of issues that you understand better than I do. But I've been active in VH1's effort to get people to donate instruments and other support for music programs back in the schools. The NEA has worked very hard to support arts programs in the schools.

There is not only concrete evidence that such programs improve student learning in others areas because of the way they make the brain work; there's also a lot of evidence that many people with equal learning capacities learn in different ways, in ways that sometimes are nonlinear. And I think it is a terrible mistake to deprive these children of access to music and the arts if we can avoid it at all. So I urge you to look at the movie. And for those of you who agree, this movie may give you a lot of boost, because I'll be surprised if it's not also a commercial success. It's a terrific film.

Now, I'd also like to say a word about some new economic news before I get into talking about education. When I came here as President, almost 7 years ago, our administration—Vice President Gore and I—we said we would try to turn America around. And a lot of people have forgotten it. There was a lot of economic distress then, an enormous amount of social division—we'd had that big riot in Los Angeles—a lot of alienation, and a sense of political drift. And so we said,

"Give us a chance, and we will have economic policies that promote opportunity for all, social policies that promote responsibility from all, and a community of all Americans. We'll try to pull this country together and move it forward."

A big part of our economic policy was investing in our people, from early childhood up, also expanding our ability to sell American products, and finally, getting this deficit down and getting rid of it, which was keeping interest rates high and stagnating the economy all over America.

We just got the news today that in the third quarter of this year—that is the quarter ending on the last day of September—our economy grew at an amazing rate of 4.8 percent, after growing 4.3 percent last year, 4.1 percent in 1996, and all of this with the lowest inflation rate in decades, while we were actually cutting the size of the Federal Government.

So in the years since I've been President, the economy has grown 3.8 percent. If you take out the shrinking of the Federal Government and the shrinking of the deficit, it's grown over the last 7 years by well over 4 percent and with no inflation. It's virtually, as far as I know, unprecedented in our time.

It has given us over 19 million new jobs; along with the welfare reform law, it's given us the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years; the lowest poverty rates in 20 years. And in the new housing numbers released today, more Americans now own their own homes, over two-thirds of us, for the first time in the history of the United States.

The percentage of Hispanic- and African-American homeowners has also broken new records, as Hispanic- and African-American unemployment has dropped to record lows since we've been keeping separate statistics, nearly 30 years ago.

This new report shows, once again, that if we have strong fiscal discipline, strong investment, and a strong commitment to education and the new economy, we can get an investment boom and maximize the benefits of the information and technology revolutions now going on all over the world.

If we keep this going, in February, without having had a war, we will have the longest economic expansion in history. It's now the

longest peacetime expansion in history. Wars guarantee you an economic expansion. In February, it will be the longest economic expansion of any kind in history, without a major conflict. And we can be very grateful for that. It's a tribute to the American people and their innovation.

Yesterday I pointed out that we had the first back-to-back budget surpluses in 42 years—42 years since the Government was in the black 2 years in a row. And that has saved us about \$1.7 trillion in debt over what it was projected to be when I took office. And those savings are worth, to the average American family, \$2,000 in lower mortgage rates; \$200 in lower car payment rates; \$200 in lower college loan rates.

This is the good news. But we now have a chance that no generation, at least in my lifetime, has had to shape the future of our dreams for our children in the absence of an overarching threat from without and in the absence of an overarching crisis within our borders. And I say that because the last time the economy was remotely this good was when I was a young man finishing high school in the early 1960's. But we had to deal with the civil rights challenge. It was an honor and a responsibility, but it had to be done. And then we had to deal with all the controversy about the war in Vietnam, our role in it, the cost of it, and we never got around to finishing our assault on poverty and doing a lot of other things.

But a lot of great things happened then, including Medicare and Medicaid and the first substantial Federal aid to education, because of the potential. But never in my lifetime have we had the chance we now have to shape the future of our dreams for our children.

And since all of you deal with children all the time, I think you know the wisdom of something a wise, old sage told me 20 years ago in politics when I got elected Governor at 32. I was too young to know what I was doing, I think, at the time. [*Laughter*] But he said, "Let me tell you something, Bill. In this life, you're always most vulnerable when you think you're invulnerable." And if you think about it, what I want you to understand is, countries are no different than businesses or schools or families or individuals. When

things are rocking along really good, because we're human, it's easy to get distracted. When there is a threat, it's easy to be focused.

I told somebody the other day—I got a big laugh—I said, "You know, I get so angry at all these conflicts around the world and these expressions of hatred here at home based on race or religion or sexual orientation. If we were being attacked by space aliens, like in that movie, 'Independence Day,' we'd all be looking for a foxhole to get in together and a gun to pick up together." The absence of a threat sometimes causes us to lose our sense of focus, our center, our concentration.

But the truth is that this is the greatest opportunity that we've had in my lifetime. And so we have to look to the great challenges of the future, because we know that they're out there. There's going to be twice as many of us over 65 in 30 years, only two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. So for younger people, it's imperative that we reform Social Security and Medicare, so that the baby boom generation, when we retire, doesn't bankrupt our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren.

We know the recovery of our economy has left a lot of people and places behind, probably in a lot of communities represented here. We now have a chance to embrace those places and the working poor of our country in a way we never have. And we better do it now, when the economy's good.

We know that we have a chance to get not only—now we're paying down the debt. We paid the debt down \$140 billion in the last 2 years. The most we ever did. We can actually get rid of it in 15 years. Can you imagine, in 1992, if I'd run for office and said, "Folks, we've got this \$300 billion deficit. Vote for me. I'll give you back-to-back surpluses. I'll pay \$140 billion on the debt, and I'll show you how to get us out of debt for the first time since 1835?" People would have said, "You know, he seems like a nice young man, but we'd better send him home to Arkansas. He's a little touched in the head." [*Laughter*]

But we can do that now. And we ought to do it, because we ought to keep the interest rates down, we ought to keep the economy going, we ought to keep things moving. And I'm smart enough to know when this happens, the State taxes roll in, and the State coffers are in good shape, and they have more money to give to schools. And that's important, to keep the economy going to help the schools. It's important.

But one challenge above all we have to look at, and that is the fact that we now have the largest and most diverse group of students in our history and more diversity everywhere. And my home State of Arkansas, which, in the 1980 census was second only to West Virginia in having the highest percentage of people living in the State that were born in the State, this year was second in the country in the percentage growth of the Hispanic population. There's a Catholic church in the northwest part of my State in an area where there were no minorities 20 years ago, literally, none when I started out in politics, that now has to have mass in Spanish every single Sunday.

Across the river here, there's a Baptist minister from Arkansas who is the cousin of my minister at home, who moved up here to find that the biggest congregation he had besides the regular one at 11 o'clock every Sunday morning was a separate Korean congregation. And he now has these massive language classes in his church. These things—America is changing, and all of you are dealing with this.

Now, our Founders understood all this. If you go back to the dawn of the Republic, Thomas Jefferson said, "an enlightened citizenry is indispensable to the proper functioning of a republic." And keep in mind, what does the Declaration of Independence say? We're establishing a democratic republic because it's the best way for people to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Then Jefferson said, because an enlightened citizen is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic, he went on to say, "therefore, educate and inform the whole mass of people."

So they knew then what is even more true today because of the nature of the economy and society in which we live. Every one of

you representing every one of these 266 blue ribbon schools is, therefore, living out the faith of the Founders of this country, that all of our children can learn and that all of them must learn. And for that, we are all in your debt. There are schools here from every region and every neighborhood. In each of your schools there are many differences, but in each school, students are learning at a high level.

We have already made some real progress in the last few years, and I think it's worth pointing out. The very idea of standards, which was championed in our Goals 2000 legislation and embodied in 1989 in the National Education Goals, is now taking root across the country. But it takes a good while to turn the education system around. In 1996, as late as 1996, there were only 14 States with measurable performances for students, measurable standards for students' performance—1996. Today, there are 50. That may be one reason why reading and math scores are up nationwide, including in some of our most disadvantaged poor areas, urban, small town, and rural.

More and more schools are reducing class size with the help of the initiative begun last fall the bipartisan support of Congress to put 30,000 of our goal of 100,000 new, highly trained teachers in the classroom. Greenwood Elementary in Newport News, a blue ribbon winner, hired new teachers this fall, bringing class sizes down in the first and second grades, from 27 children per teacher to 20. And you just heard Ruth say that they had used the class size funds to have teachers in her school.

Many other blue ribbon schools are using the Vice President's E-rate program to connect their classrooms and libraries to the Internet. I just want to talk about that a minute. A few years ago the Vice President and I went out to California for the first of our NetDays, and we hooked up—we wired a school so that all the classrooms could be hooked up to the Internet, as part of our goal of trying to get everybody hooked up by the end of next year. And we were wiring this school, and I looked at him, and I said, "Well, how are these places going to afford to use the Internet?" It's sort of an Alphonse and

Gaston routine we do; the fact that I'm technologically challenged has become legendary in our administration. [Laughter]

And he said, "Well, we've got to give them a discount." And so we came up with this idea in the Telecommunications Act of giving the Federal Communications Commission the ability to give a discount for schools and hospitals and libraries. And there was the awfulest squalling about it you ever heard around here for a long time. And our political opponents started calling it Gore tax—[laughter]—you know, on the takeoff, because he likes to run around in GORETEX, I guess. But anyway—[laughter]—but we were attacked for it. We were opposed in it, but we hung in there. And it was the right thing to do, and that E-rate has literally empowered—some of our poorer schools get a 90 percent subsidy for the E-rate. And it has been a wonderful thing, because one of the things we cannot do in this country is allow a digital divide to develop. It already exists. We're determined to close it.

Our objective is to see Internet access in America become as universal as telephone access. And if we can do that we will open up all kinds of educational and economic opportunities to people and places left behind. I also believe if we can have the same sort of penetration around the world in poor countries of cell phones and the Internet as quickly as possible, a lot of countries with whom we deal and whom we'd like to help could skip 30 years of economic development and make a great leap into the new century.

So I want to thank you, all of you who supported us with the E-rate program, because it's making a big difference. For example, to mention one of the schools here, with the help of the E-rate, seventh graders at Whitehead School in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, are communicating directly with scientists conducting research in Africa. I didn't do that when I was in the seventh grade. [Laughter] Students are writing papers based on that research. The E-rate gives every seventh grader in America at least the chance to do that as we get the schools wired and hooked up.

And Secretary Riley would never forgive me if I didn't mention this, just parenthetically. Some of our schools are too old to be

wired and too decrepit. And they need to be modernized and rewired in all kinds of ways. One of our proposals here that is not particularly costly would allow us to help local school districts build or modernize 6,000 schools. And if you're for that, I hope you'll help us pass it.

In Philadelphia, the average school building is 65 years old; New York City, 40 percent of the schools are over 70 years old—40 percent. All kinds—there's a large number of schools that are schools that are still heated by coal furnaces. And then I've been to—I was in a little town in Florida the other day where they had a dozen trailers behind the school building—a dozen—just one little school. So this is a big issue, and I hope that we can continue to work on it.

But to begin with the good news. You should all be very proud, not only of what you have done but of what you represent. In the last 16 years since the issuance of the "Nation At Risk" report in 1983, there has been a sea change in attitudes and commitments on the part of American educators and their supporters, among parents and business leaders and community leaders, and a genuine commitment to excellence in education from all kinds of schools in all kinds of places.

And it's been a difficult process because some schools have adequate funding and some don't, and because, at least for the public schools, they get their money from three different places, which means that you have to hire more people in the administrative arm of the schools to keep up with and be accountable to. And there are all kinds of issues here.

But we are getting it, and you prove that all of our kids can learn and that we can turn America's education system toward the 21st century, and that is the good news. But it is terribly important that we all recognize that we still have work to do and that this will always be a moving target. No one believes, yet, that we are giving every child in America a world-class education in K through 12. Everybody knows we have the best system of higher education in the world. Therefore, we cannot quit until we know that we have done the same with K through 12.

And I think that this is the attitude we ought to have. Keep in mind, you don't know

when we'll have an economic time like this again. You don't know when we'll be living through a time when we feel secure from outside threat again for this long a period of time. And I think when you go home, you need to try to give people some historical sense of this. And in your communities, you need to get people imbued with a passionate commitment about this and every other challenge.

I'll give you another example. We've got the lowest crime rate in 30 years now. Now, that's wonderful—[inaudible]—everyone who thinks it's low enough, please raise your hand. [Laughter] You see what I mean? So why should we quit until America's the safest big country in the world? If we want to be the freest big country, why not? Why shouldn't we be the safest big country in the world? Why shouldn't we keep working to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children? Why shouldn't we keep working to make our—we should do it.

The point I want to make—again, I know I'm preaching to the choir, here, but this is important—is that this is a time for intense focus and commitment, and we are most in danger of being distracted and drifting around because things seem to be going so well. But make no mistake about it, we will pay an enormous price in opportunities foregone and future problems in our lap if we don't use this magic moment to build the future of our dreams. And it's especially true in education.

And I am worried that what we see in Congress today in this debate on education is an example of the kind of mental lapse or focus on short-term politics that we can see in other areas, not only in the Congress and in Washington but in the country, because it's so easy to indulge yourself in whatever's in front of your nose when things are rocking along and you're doing well. But it's a huge mistake.

Now, in Washington the good news is—assuming we work through this attempt to have an across-the-board cut, which includes education, that I'm against, but assuming we do that, the big issue in Washington now is more on how we spend money. I mean, I've been fighting for 4 or 5 years on whether

to spend adequate amounts of money; now, we're fighting about how to spend it.

For example, last year we reached an agreement with Congress to begin hiring 100,000 new, highly trained teachers to lower class sizes in the early grades for obvious reasons. The size of our schools is exploding. And the research is clear that smaller classes and quality teachers bring higher achievements. Last year congressional Republicans not only agreed to it, they went home and campaigned on it and bragged about the fact that the proposal I made reflected Republican principles, because there was no bureaucracy in it. We just gave the money to the schools, and they hired the teachers. We disbursed the money; schools have gone out; they've hired new teachers.

Now suddenly, the same people who, just before the election last year, thought this was the greatest thing since sliced bread, have not only refused to add any more teachers, they have abandoned the commitment to the ones we've already hired and proposed, basically, to just send the blank check to the districts, and if they don't keep the teachers, fine.

So you have to understand, one of the key things in my mind about what this education debate is about is whether we're going to keep what we've done and continue to add to our goal of putting 100,000 teachers in the classroom. [Applause] It's very important. This debate is eerily reminiscent of the debate I had in 1994 in the Congress about putting 100,000 police on the street. And it wasn't rocket science: Violent crime tripled between 1964 and 1994, and the size of our police forces went up 10 percent. A third-grade arithmetic student could figure out the ratio had gotten worse, and that was part of the problem. And part of the reason we've got the lowest crime rate in 30 years is we put those 100,000 police out there, ahead of schedule and under budget.

So if it was true in law enforcement, it will be even more true in education. It's a very important issue. I thank you for your applause, but I want you to stay with us on this. This is not a partisan issue anywhere but Washington. And frankly, I still can't figure out how it got to be a partisan issue since

just a year ago we were all being canonized by the same people for doing this.

Now the budget debate is also about accountability, about getting real results for the education dollars. When all of us are held accountable for meeting higher standards and all the actors in education are given the resources they need to meet those standards from smaller schools to after-school programs, we have progress. And we have seen whole schools can be turned around in a relatively short period of time. Ruth explained how her school was selected by the State of South Carolina, given more resources, and turned itself around. This is not an isolated case.

Two years ago, North Carolina drew up a list of the State's 15 worst performing schools, sent assistance teams to each school, and focused on them. A year later, 14 of the 15 schools had been taken off the bad performance list.

Last year, I was in Cabrini-Green in Chicago, one of the biggest housing projects in the country, one of the most difficult areas in the country, and one of the poorest areas in any big city in the country, to visit an elementary school which has had unbelievably poor performance. In 2 years, under the new system they have there, they doubled their math scores and tripled their reading scores. That's pretty good in 2 years. And even though they started from a low base, they're moving in the right direction. If you double your performance every 2 years, you can go from a very low base to 100 percent in no time. So it's very important.

Our budget has dedicated \$200 million to set aside funds to help States and school districts all over America put together teams that would identify and help to turn around or shut down the lowest performing schools. It's not a lot of money, but it's a very big deal because not every State is doing this. And I have a very strong conviction that—you know, I believe that social promotion should be ended. But I don't think you should identify schools or students as failures and then tell the kids there is something wrong with them when the system is failing them. So I think we have to have systems in every State in the country to turn around

these schools, because they can all be turned around.

I don't understand why the Congress has refused to put a dime into this \$200-million proposal to turn around low-performing schools. I know there is not going to be a press conference where the Republican leaders stand up and say, "We are unalterably opposed to accountability," or, "We're fine on accountability, but we want to punish the students instead of make the schools better." Maybe they think people just wake up in the morning knowing how to do this. But if everyone knew how to do it, it would be done now in every State in the country, in every school district.

So again, I ask for your help here. I presume in this room there are people who are Republicans and Democrats, people who disagree on all different kinds of issues. But if we've got something that we know works, then—to go back to the Framers; they said all of the States were supposed to be the laboratories of democracy. But in a laboratory, when you find a scientific discovery, you publish the results as soon as possible. Then everybody takes it on board, and they build on that scientific discovery and go on to the next one.

In education, when somebody does something that's a true breakthrough, sometimes it takes 3 years to get 15 miles down the road. [*Laughter*] You know this is true, don't you? You know this is true. This is true. I've been working this for 20 years. I can say it's one of our continuing difficulties here. So that's what we're trying to do.

Now, I don't believe that the leaders in Congress can explain why they thought the 100,000 teachers was a good idea last year and this year they're against it. I don't believe they can explain why we have a measure here that we know has succeeded in turning around failing schools in more than one State—that, I might add, the Republican Governors have come out and endorsed—that they won't fund.

They also are opposed to our proposal to help build or modernize 6,000 schools. Now, they also are opposed to funding our troops-to-teachers program, which has been very successful but very limited, trying to get retired military people to go into the schools

in the areas where there's a teacher shortage. Very important where we need more male teachers, particularly for role models. It's a very important issue here.

Although, I might say, because the military has opened up more opportunities for women, more and more women are staying as career officers and coming out, too, and enlisted people. But this is a really successful program. And I asked them to make it much bigger because we've got to hire 2 million new teachers, as Dick Riley has been telling me for years, as so many retire. So we've got a large number of teachers retiring, more and more kids coming into the schools; we've got to hire more teachers.

But again, for reasons I do not understand, there was no funding for our troops-to-teachers program to get more of these good people who are leaving the military, many of them quite young, in their forties, to go into the schools and give 20 more good years or more to the education of our children.

So the labor and education appropriations bill that the Congress is about to consider shortchanges education. You should also know that now they're proposing to make across-the-board cuts in everything from the FBI to national defense to the environment to education. Now, if that bill passes, I will veto it, because I think we need more teachers, more accountability, and more investment in education.

I do not believe that the proper response to America's education challenge is fewer teachers, no accountability, and across-the-board cuts in education. I want to hire 100,000 more teachers, 50,000 more police. I want to protect the environment. I want us to invest in education strategies that work.

Look, we've got the first back-to-back surpluses in 42 years. The debate you're hearing over the budget is because, for the first time in decades, it is now possible for us to separate the budget that comes from—the surplus that comes from your Social Security taxes from the surplus that comes from other things. All these years before last year, all these years, for 20 years, you've been seeing what the deficit was. If you took away the surplus we got from people paying more into Social Security than they were taking out, which was a way of preparing for the baby

boomers, the deficit would have been much bigger.

So for the first time—you need to know that's why we're having this—you must think this is crazy, why—they've got a surplus, and they're cutting stuff. What is going on here? What you need to know is that leaders of both parties agreed at the beginning of this year that they would not spend the Social Security surplus anymore and only spend money coming out of the non-Social Security surplus.

Now, the good news is that that helps us pay down the debt. It doesn't do anything for Social Security, however, unless you take the interest savings from paying down the debt and put it into the Social Security Trust Fund, as I have recommended, so we can take it out to 2050 and take care of all the baby boom retirement, take a big burden off all your minds. That's another issue that I want to do.

But—so, the reason we're having this budget fight is that our prosperity and this surplus made it possible for the first time in two decades to segregate out the Social Security surplus. We've been spending the Social Security surplus up here since who shot John. *[Laughter]* And economically, there's no difference in the two. It's just a good thing to set it aside, because it helps us to pay the debt down. And then it will make it easier, I hope, for Congress next year, if not this year, to agree with me to take the interest savings from paying the debt down and put it into Social Security, which so far, they haven't done—which leaves a much smaller amount of money to fund things. And this Congress has already spent \$18 billion more than that, and they tried to say they weren't spending the Social Security surplus, trying to blame us with wanting to, which is a miracle how they got that done. *[Laughter]*

But you need to know, and when you go back home, I can imagine the American people must be totally bum-fused—keep announcing surpluses, and we keep having budget fights. That's what's going on here. They committed to start right now not spending the Social Security surplus. So I said, "Okay, if you want to do that and you want to spend all this money on defense and we're

going to adequately fund education, the environment, and health care, then here's what we ought to do. Here's some corporate loopholes we ought to close. We ought to make the polluters pay for their toxic waste dumps. And I think we ought to have an increase in the cigarette tax, and that's good health policy anywhere." That's what I said.

They said, "Na, we don't want to do any of that." So they did things like say the census was an emergency. We've seen it coming for 10 years; most emergencies are something of a surprise. [Laughter] They said that—I mean, this is a strange world up here. [Laughter] I want you to know what's going on here. They also said that a lot of the ordinary expenses of the Pentagon—I mean, people go to work over there every day—they've said that these are emergencies, even though the cold war's over. Just showing up for work is an emergency. [Laughter] I mean, this is—because if they can—you know, they take this stuff off the books, and then that helps them play these budget games.

And then when I say, "But you're not spending enough on education, and we've got to fund the Middle East peace process, and we've got to fund our efforts to take down and destroy nuclear weapons in Russia, make the world a safer place, and we've got to fund our responsibilities to the United Nations," then they go out and say, "Oh, Bill Clinton wants to spend the surplus for foreign aid," run all these little ads and stuff. It's a strange world up here.

And what I'm saying is—you all laughed when I said this before, I referenced that movie, "Independence Day," but, you know, if we were being attacked by space aliens, we wouldn't be playing these kind of games. These kind of games are only possible because the economy is strong and the American people are self-confident, and people believe, therefore, that this is a moment when they can do frivolous things that they otherwise would never consider doing to try to get short-term political advantage. But it's a huge mistake, because our children are still out there and they are bigger and more diverse than ever before as a group and they have these massive challenges. And all of you have proved that we can give them a world-class education. So we don't have any excuse

anymore. You show up in town, and you say, "Look, all children can learn. Look what we did. We don't have any excuse."

So I will say again, this should not be a partisan issue. We can find a way through this budget business. It's about accounting and taking modest, difficult measures. But we cannot sacrifice our responsibility to meet these big, long-term challenges, because we have never had a chance like this in our lifetime. Everybody in this audience that's anywhere remotely my age, you just think about it. Think about it.

We spent the 1930's trying to survive the Depression. We spent the 1940's trying to survive World War II and get ready for the cold war. We spent the 1950's and the 1960's trying to survive the cold war, dealing with the civil rights crisis and then dealing with Vietnam, and it drug into 1975. And then we had the oil price shocks and all of our economic problems that went all the way into the 1980's. The Berlin Wall fell 10 years ago. We spent the early part of this decade turning the economy and the social problems around of this country and getting us in a position where we could literally explode. That's where we are now.

You represent proof positive that we can give every American child the education that he or she deserves, not only to thrive in the new century but to ensure the success of the United States. And your dedication to tomorrow and the fact that every day you have to get up and think about not only today's lessons plan but what these little children are going to turn out like—that is the attitude we need here in Washington, across party lines.

So I ask you all—you have shown us the way—do what you can to effect the attitudes here. Do what you can to be heard here, and say, "Let's take this way beyond partisan politics. There's plenty to argue about down the road, but our children deserve our best. And our best should be driven by what our local principals and our local educators say, what the education research says, what we know works."

You have proved to us what works. All I'm trying to do is to figure out how to spread it more quickly and give people who are in

real economic binds the opportunity to access things that others regularly take for granted.

We could be going into America's greatest years. I believe we are. But we dare not squander this magic moment.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:23 a.m. in the International Ballroom Center at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Ruth Summerlin, principal, Beaufort Elementary School, Beaufort, SC. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

The President's News Conference With President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria

October 28, 1999

President Clinton. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Please be seated. President Obasanjo, Mrs. Obasanjo, members of the Nigerian Government, welcome to the White House.

The President has served his country in many ways, including a previous term as President, which was distinguished by his insistence on a peaceful transition to a successor chosen by the people. His recent election marks an even bigger turning point.

Since its birth in 1960, Nigeria's progress has been thwarted over and over again by military leaders with little concern for the 110 million people. For years, its most courageous citizens were jailed or killed; its vast wealth was lost to waste and corruption; its potential to lead its region and the continent toward a better future squandered.

In an early poem, "Flowers For My Land," Nigeria's Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, wrote that his beloved country had become a garden of decay. But President Obasanjo's election in May has signaled a new day for Nigeria and new hope for Africa, a fitting capstone to a decade of remarkable democratic revolutions from Poland to South Africa, to the important transition now underway in Indonesia.

It is very much in America's interests that Nigeria succeed, and therefore, we should assist them in their success. We intend to

increase our assistance to Nigeria to expand law enforcement cooperation and to work toward an agreement to stimulate trade and investment between us. We intend to do what we can to help Nigeria recover assets plundered by the previous regime.

But we must do more to realize the promise of this moment for Nigeria and for Africa. I want to mention just three issues.

First, we need to recognize that barriers to trade are barriers to opportunity for Africans working hard to catch up to the global economy and for Americans who want to work with them. That's why it is vital that the Senate approve the "African Growth and Opportunity Act," which is now pending and on which I spent much of the afternoon working.

A second concrete step we can take, as President Obasanjo has reminded us, is to help relieve the crushing debt burden that is making it so hard for developing nations to get on their feet. It is neither morally right nor economically sound to say that young democracies like Nigeria, as they overcome the painful legacy of dictatorship or misrule, must choose between making interest payments on their debt and investing in the health and education of their children. As Nigeria undertakes its reforms, I will support generous debt rescheduling through the Paris Club and encourage other countries to take further steps.

Finally, we must keep doing our part to bring an end to Africa's remaining conflicts. Many of you have heard about the unspeakable atrocities visited upon the people of Sierra Leone. Nigeria spent billions of dollars leading the international force that ended civil wars there and in Liberia. And for that, the whole world is in its debt.

Now in Sierra Leone as well as in Congo and hopefully soon in Eritrea and Ethiopia, we have a precious opportunity to work with Africans to make peace last. African countries are assuming the largest burden and the greatest risks. All they ask is that we support their efforts, through the United Nations and their own regional organizations. The United States must not let them down.

That is another reason why it is so vital that we honor our obligations and pay our debts to the United Nations. If we fail to