

**Remarks at a Southwest Voter  
Registration and Education Project  
Reception in Beverly Hills**

November 30, 1999

Thank you very much, Antonio. I am delighted to be here. I know that all of you have come in support of the Southwest Voter Education Project. But I want to thank especially my good friend Gloria Molina; and Henry Cisneros; Assembly Speaker Villarraigosa—I see him over there; we’ve been making the rounds tonight; Congressman Becerra. And I think Lydia Camarillo, our DNC CEO, is here. I know this is a non-partisan event, but I wanted to acknowledge her presence there. Thank you, Lydia.

I have known about the Southwest Voter Education Project a long time, from the beginning. And one of the great honors I had as President was to award the Medal of Freedom to Willie Velasquez posthumously in 1995. The Southwest Voter Education Project has now registered, I believe, over 2 million Latino voters and well over 2,000 voter education drives.

And what I would—I just want to say a couple of things briefly tonight. Yesterday I signed the budget that we passed in the Congress right before they went home, the first budget of the 21st century. It contained the second year’s funding for our Hispanic education project, which is designed to reduce the gap in high school graduation rates between Hispanics and other children and to increase the college going rate. And I just give you that as one little example, although it is a very big thing—I think this is going to have a huge impact over the years if we keep doing it—of why it is so important for people to be registered and to vote.

I was thinking tonight about the meetings I’ve had with the Hispanic caucus. And Congressman Torres, we miss you. I’m glad to see you. Thank you for everything.

But what I was thinking about is, two things are certain. One is that the number of Hispanic Members of Congress will grow. The second, maybe more important, is the number of Latino voters in other districts will grow. And I honestly believe that the willingness of people to register and to vote will have a profoundly significant impact on sort

of the shape of American politics, on our immigration policies, on our education policies, on our economic policies, on the nature of our trade policies, and I could go on and on and on.

I have seen, just in the last two election cycles the profound difference it makes in terms of who shows up to vote. In 1998 the overall percentage of Americans voting was not that different from 1994, but the composition of those who voted was very different. And very often 4 or 5 percent of the people, whether they stay or go, will reflect the sort of accumulated feelings of maybe 60 or 70 percent of the American electorate. And whether they do or not, I can promise you, will affect the whole sweep of policy. I’m very conscious of this now. And I just want to mention one or two issues.

It has been, for me, an enormous privilege to serve as President these last 7 years. I have had a great deal of help from the most diverse group of Americans ever to serve an administration, including former HUD Secretary Cisneros. And I am very grateful that we have now the results that we have. We’ve got—in February we’ll have the longest peacetime expansion in our history. We have already nearly 20 million new jobs. We have the lowest unemployment in 30 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in 30 years. We have the lowest crime rate in 25 years, the lowest Hispanic and African-American unemployment rates ever recorded, the lowest African-American poverty rate ever recorded, the lowest Hispanic poverty rate in a generation, the lowest poverty rate among single-parent households in 40 years, the lowest unemployment among women in 40 years. What I want to ask you is, what do you mean to do with this? What do you mean to do with this?

I had—I see my sister-in-law, Molly, over there. We just had my big, extended family and Hillary’s family were all together for Thanksgiving. And we gathered up at Camp David, and then we had some of our friends come in from the area. And I had a bunch of little kids there. And this 6-year-old boy looked at me a couple days ago, and he said, “How old are you?” [Laughter] And I said, “I’m 53.” He said, “That’s a lot.” [Laughter]

And I regretted to say I had to agree with him; it was a lot.

In my lifetime—and that’s a lot—our country has never had this level of economic prosperity, social progress, and national confidence, and at the same time been free of external threats and internal crises, so that we are essentially free to face our big challenges and build the future of our dreams for our children.

So the real question is not whether we are going to change, because the world is changing at such a rapid rate that that’s not an option. The real question is, how will we change, and what will we do with this chance of a lifetime?

I hope we will use it to meet the big challenges of the future. But I’ll bet you every adult in this room can remember at least one, and maybe more, times in your personal life, your family life, or your work life when you made a big mistake because things were going well. When you should have been thinking about the long term, you got diverted, distracted, divided, and the moment was lost.

Now in my lifetime, we have never had a moment like this. We need to use it to give all of our children a world-class education. We need to use it to dramatically reduce poverty among our children and to bring economic opportunity to people and places that have been left out of this remarkable recovery. We need to use it to deal with the challenge of the aging of America and take Social Security out beyond the life of the baby boom generation and extend the life of Medicare and give prescription drug coverage to 75 percent of our seniors who can’t afford the medicine they need today.

We need to use it to prove we can grow the economy and improve the environment. We need to use it to pass the Patients’ Bill of Rights and extend health care coverage to people who don’t have it—these big challenges that we can meet.

But if I had one wish—if somebody said to me, “Well, you don’t have another year. I’m sorry, you have to go tomorrow, but we’ll let you be the genie, and you can have one wish.” I would wish to make America truly one America. Because if you look at what is bedeviling the world today—and this is

where you come in—isn’t it interesting that as you think about the future—somebody sent me an article today on the future of the Internet and how it wouldn’t be long before everybody would be connected to the Internet without needing a personal computer. We’ll have these little pads that a lot of you already have, and you’ll get it on your telephone; you’ll get it in your television; everybody will know everything and all the time. It will be unbelievable.

We are unraveling the mysteries of the human genome. We’re about to discover what is in those black holes in outer space. I mean, it’s unbelievable all this stuff we’re going to know. And yet, we are most bedeviled in the world by the oldest problem of human society. We still are kind of afraid of people who are different from us. They’re different races, different religions; they’re gay, they’re this, they’re that, the other.

And in America you can see it when a Jewish community center gets shot up, Filipino postman gets murdered, African-American basketball coach gets killed, and then a young Korean Christian gets killed walking out of his church by a guy that just murdered the African-American basketball coach. James Byrd gets dragged to death in Texas; Matthew Shepard gets stretched over a rack in Wyoming. These things happen. Why? Because if you are afraid of people who are different from you, it’s a short step to hating them. Then it’s a short step to dehumanizing them. Then it’s a short step to justifying violence. And all around the world what has bedeviled the world? Ireland, the Middle East, the Balkans, Bosnia and Kosovo, the African tribal wars. It’s just fascinating to me that we’re on the verge of a new millennium with all this modern stuff out there, but our biggest problem is the oldest problem of human society.

So the reason it’s important that you understand that your vote is your voice, is that you help to guarantee every time you empower people that their voices will be heard and that we will somehow understand that we’re not just supposed to tolerate each other; we’re supposed to celebrate our differences. Not tolerate—that’s not good enough—celebrate our differences, not because they are the most important thing

about us, but because they make life more interesting without letting us forget our common humanity.

And that is the only thing that makes democracy the best of all systems of government. If everybody participates, you have a high chance that we come to the right conclusion. And it is profoundly important. I just was thinking, I'm so grateful that we have made these huge steps forward in the Irish peace process. I'm very grateful for the progress we are making in the Middle East.

I was just in Kosovo with all those schoolchildren that got to go home because the United States and our NATO Allies stuck up for them and said they couldn't be wiped out just because of their religion or their ethnic background. But I know that if we want to continue to do good around the world, we have to be good at home. This Irish agreement, it's wonderful. How many people died to get there? And the Middle East, we've got a lot of hard decisions to make, but they're not hard when compared with the alternative.

And so I say to all of you, we have a chance to escape that and to meet these huge challenges when we've got more resources and more confidence and more evidence that we can make progress than any time in my lifetime. But we can only do it if we do it together.

You know, I just came from this gun violence group meeting. And I told them that the big fight we had over the Brady bill, the assault weapons ban, all these things, they really were sort of whole different views of the world about what is the nature of freedom, what is the nature of society, what is the nature of our responsibilities to one another. You know, to me, I came from a hunting culture, but it was a no-brainer to me that we ought to be for the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban, because I thought that a modest amount of inconvenience on the part of 95 or 99 percent of the people to find the 1 percent of the people who had no business with assault weapons, had no business with handguns, who were criminals, had other problems in their background. To me, that made me more free, not less free, because I think mutuality is important, the media. And you believed that.

And there is no group of Americans that has a bigger stake in our getting this right than Hispanic-Americans, the fastest growing minority, people who have known all the prejudice and all the promise of America, both, people who now are setting all kinds of records in new business growth and achievements in every area of our national life, but because we still have such a large group of first-generation immigrants, also have the highest high school dropout rates, the highest education problems.

Listen, we can get all this right—we can get all this right—if everybody has a voice that is heard. That is why what you are doing is so profoundly important.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 p.m. at the Grand Havana Room. In his remarks, he referred to State Assembly Speaker Antonio R. Villarraigosa; Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina; and Lydia Camarillo, executive director, Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project.

### **Letter to Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen on the Review of Space Launch Failures**

*November 29, 1999*

*Dear Mr. Secretary:*

Thank you for conducting and reporting on your thorough and in-depth review of the U.S. space launch failures that occurred in 1998 and 1999. I am pleased to know that you have identified the root causes behind each of the recent launch failures and that you have worked with NASA, the Intelligence Community, and industry to take corrective actions to prevent recurrences. I also appreciate your efforts, and the efforts of industry, in uncovering and addressing the broader systemic concerns that may have contributed to this series of failures.

I have asked Dr. Neal Lane, my Assistant for Science and Technology, and Mr. Sandy Berger, my Assistant for National Security Affairs, to review your report. Now and in the next century, our national security, civil, and commercial space sectors will continue to depend on reliable access to space to