

## Remarks on Signing the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999

December 14, 1999

Thank you. Thank you, please be seated. At this moment, about all I can think of is Merry Christmas. [*Laughter*]

Senator Rockefeller, Senator Collins, Representative Cardin, thank you all for being here. And Senator Chafee, thank you for being here, and with you, the spirit of your father, for all his great work on this.

I want to say a special word of thanks to our mayor, Tony Williams, and his mom, Mrs. Virginia Williams. He has become America's exhibit A of the potential for foster care success. He is a good man, and she is a magnificent woman, and we thank them for being here. Thank you.

I thank Secretary Shalala and all of her staff, and I thank Alfred Perez and Kristi Jo Frazier and the other young people behind me, for whom they spoke. They spoke so well and so bravely and so frankly. What they have achieved in their own lives is truly heroic, and we should all be very grateful that they are determined to make that kind of difference in the lives of other young people.

I want to thank the groups that have done so much to champion the cause of foster children, the Child Welfare League of America, the Children's Defense Fund, the Annie Casey Foundation, the Casey Family Program. I want to thank especially—I won't mention them, but they know who they are—the people who have come up to me personally and lobbied me on this issue over the last couple of years. [*Laughter*]

I've got a cousin that's been a friend of mine over 50 years, all my life; we were little kids together. She runs a public housing program in the little town in Arkansas where we were born. And she came up here to a HUD conference on kids aging out of foster care, and she spent the night with me at the White House. I got up the next morning—I never know, you know, what's on her mind—this is about a year ago. And she said, "Bill, you have got to do something about these kids that are aging out of foster care." She said, "It's a huge problem in New York and California, but believe it or not, it's a problem at home, too. And nobody's doing

anything about it." I want to thank all those people, and they know who they are.

And most of all, I want to thank Hillary. When we were in law school, she worked at the Yale Child Studies Center. Her first job was with what became the Children's Defense Fund. When I became Governor, in my first term she founded the Arkansas Advocates for Families and Children. She has always cared more about the welfare of all of our children than anything else and our mutual responsibilities to them. And she challenged us a long time ago not to forget those foster children who leave the system each year with no financial or emotional support, no one to turn to. She put a lot of herself into getting this bill passed.

Hillary likes to quote the Chilean poet and teacher Gabriela Mistral about our responsibility to children: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are formed, his mind is developed. To him, we cannot say 'tomorrow.' His name is 'today.'"

We are here today because all of you, and especially the Members of Congress from both parties, stood as one to say that America's foster children can finally have the name "today."

The Foster Care Independence Act expands access to health care, education, housing, and counseling for young people who must leave foster care when they turn 18. For the very first time, States will be able to pay housing costs and health insurance for people under 21.

The bill also gives States more resources and flexibility to help former foster children finish high school and go on to college, to help young people get jobs and vocational training, to provide counseling for young people learning to live on their own—you've already heard how important that is—and above all, to make sure young adults leaving foster care know they are not out there alone.

The bill makes \$700 million available to the States over 5 years under very flexible conditions. I challenge the States to use every penny of it, and I know I can depend upon the advocates here—[*laughter*]—to make sure they do.

You also have to help the States, though, to design good programs, to implement them

so the money will be spent with maximum impact. We simply cannot afford to have our high school students sleeping in metro stations, as some of these young people had to do.

We cannot afford to lose our future entrepreneurs and teachers and lawyers to the kinds of obstacles the young people behind me have faced. We can't afford to give up on the future, and these young people are a big part of our future and our shared responsibility.

We have tried to help America's most vulnerable children grow up healthy and safe, to make the transition into happy, productive adults. We've tried to encourage adoption so that we can end the sadness of young people shuttling from house to house and never knowing a home. We've made adoptions easier and more affordable, given States more flexibility, passed incentive programs for States to promote adoption. These worked so well, we actually ran out of money to reward the States. [*Laughter*]

I'm pleased that this bill also authorizes additional funds that program needs, because it is working. Our most recent figures show that adoptions are up 29 percent, the first significant increase in two decades.

Now when we get to the end of the session, sometimes we have to combine a bunch of things in bills, just to get all our work done. And I want to mention one other thing this bill does that is unrelated to young people aging out of foster care or to adoption. This bill includes a provision to honor and assist veterans from other lands who fought with and as a part of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. It creates a special cash benefit under Social Security for veterans who want to leave the United States and return to their homelands.

We have 10 such veterans, 10 Filipino veterans, who are here with us today. I want to thank them for their service, and I ask them to stand and be recognized. We thank you.

So this bill keeps a promise to our children and a promise to our veterans. It was passed with overwhelming support from both parties, proving that we can put partisanship aside, and when we do, it's good for America.

I hope that we will see more of this in the new year. I hope that we can use the historic millennial year to take the rest of the steps we need to deal with the aging of America, by securing Social Security and Medicare; to give our children health coverage; to raise the minimum wage; to pass the commonsense legislation on gun safety and hate crimes; to do the things that we need to do to support working family, including the Patients' Bill of Rights.

These young people here should give us all a lot of courage and a lot of heart. They represent, out of the most difficult circumstances, the very best not only of our country but of what is at the core of human nature. And in this special season for so many of the world's great religious faiths, we should be very grateful for the gifts they have given us, the gifts they will give us, and the gifts so many other children will be able to give because of this legislation.

Thank you very much.

Now, I'd like to ask the Members of Congress to come up here. We'll sign the bill.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:45 p.m. in Presidential Hall (formerly Room 450) in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Lincoln D. Chafee, son of the late Senator John H. Chafee; Mayor Anthony A. Williams of Washington, DC; Alfred Perez and Kristi Jo Frasier, who as children were in the foster care system; and Myra J. Irvin, section 8 program manager, housing authority, Hope, AR. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady. H.R. 3443, approved December 14, was assigned Public Law No. 106-169.

## **Statement on the Transfer of the Panama Canal to the Republic of Panama**

*December 14, 1999*

Today we commemorate the transfer of the Panama Canal from the United States to the Republic of Panama. The official transfer will take place on December 31 in fulfillment of the Panama Canal Treaties of 1978. I am delighted that President Carter, under