Remarks at a Reception for Senator Charles Robb

May 15, 2000

Thank you very much. First of all, I want to thank Ron and Beth for having all of us here and for being so generous with their time and their home. However, now that I—you know, I thought I knew them pretty well. I never knew they met at a Chuck Robb fundraiser. [*Laughter*] We ought to put that out. We can raise millions of dollars on this. [*Laughter*] All the lovelorn who can write a check or show up at your fundraisers—this is wonderful. So I want to thank them.

And I want to thank all of you for coming and for supporting Chuck, and in just a minute, I'm going to tell you why. Let me say to all of you, you went through the line and had your picture taken. I appreciate the many nice things you said and especially those of you who expressed your support for my wife, whom I hope will be helping to swell the Democratic majority in the Senate after November.

I want to thank Linda Robb for being our friend for probably 20 years now. We've watched our children grow up together. Chuck and I were Governors together in the early eighties. Out at Camp David I've got this beautiful picture of a carriage from colonial Williamsburg, from the Southern Governors' Association meeting in 1984, that Chuck Robb gave me. So we go back a long way.

And I want to tell you, quite briefly, why I'm here tonight, besides the fact that, yes, I'd show up if Ron and Beth asked me to come, and yes, I'd show up if Chuck and Linda asked me to come. But I passionately believe, number one, that Chuck Robb ought to be reelected, and number two, I believe he will be reelected, and I thought he would be reelected a year ago.

But there is a great question before the American people in this election, very different from the one we faced in 1992, but in some ways, maybe even more important and perhaps even more difficult to answer properly.

In 1992 the American people gave Al Gore and me a chance, but the country was mired in difficulty, and everyone knew that the way that things were being done in Washington was not working. You remember how it was then; you just took a position on an issue, and there was a position you had to take. If you were a Democrat, you had to take one position. If you were Republican, you had to take the other. And then you just stood off from one another and screamed as loud as you could and hoped you'd get your 10 seconds on the evening news, which might have been good politics but didn't move America forward very much.

So we set about turning the ship of state around. And without being self-serving, I think it's fair to say we did a pretty good job, and things are going in the right direction now. And I think it's one reason to vote for Chuck Robb and for Al Gore, because it wasn't because I was President; it was because we were all doing the right things. And I think that's very important.

I get tickled. You know, some of my adversaries, now that they want to win the election before us, they spent 7 years telling everybody how bad I was; now they say I'm the only guy that jumps higher than Michael Jordan—let's throw the other Democrats out. That has nothing to do with it. We did the right things, and it's very, very important.

So now the question is not, how are we going to turn the ship of state around; how are we going to build our bridge to the 21st century? The question is, what are we going to do with these good times? We never had such good times before. We never had at one time so much economic progress, social progress with the absence of severe domestic distress or external threat. So what are we going to do? That is the issue. And it's a very hard issue for a democracy to answer.

It's easy to get people together when they're under the gun. It's hard to get people together when things are fun. It's easy to be distracted when things seem to be going well. And what I would like to say to you is that I'm old enough to know that nothing lasts forever and that these moments come along once in a generation if you're lucky, and you've got to make the most of them.

I'm also experienced enough in politics to know that our adversaries, both in the Virginia Senate race and the White House, they'll be very adroit at speaking in reassuring

terms and helping to blur the lines of the election. But the truth is, as Senator Robb just said, there are huge consequences to the choices the American people will make. And you have to come to terms with that, as well.

If you want to change the economic policy of the country and go back to the way they did it, you can do it. If you like the way things are going, you've got to vote for Chuck Robb and for the Vice President. If you want someone to do something serious about gun violence, to keep building on the record of the last 7½ years, to keep crime coming down, you can have it. If you want someone who won't touch this issue with a 10-foot pole and won't do anything the NRA doesn't want them to do, you can have that, too. But you've got to make up your mind. And you can't pretend that there are no consequences to this election. There are.

You know, one of the things I really respect about Chuck Robb is, he is a fiscal conservative; he voted with me on that budget, knowing it could beat him in the '94 election. He did not blink; he got up there and voted in '93 for the budget. And if he hadn't voted for it, it would have never passed. You know? But also, after his distinguished career in the United States Marine Corps, he has supported me on every human rights initiative, including gay rights, I have ever advanced. And I respect that more than I can say.

And he has supported sensible efforts to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children. Yesterday Hillary and I had—and I like it, because Al Gore and I need some Southern cover, you know. [*Laughter*] I don't know if you saw it, but there was a picture in the paper that said, "gunnery sergeant for responsible gun control"—it was a great sign, yesterday at this thing.

You know, I just want to take a minute. This is a big choice you've got in the election. You've got to decide. But don't let anybody you know pretend that they're voting—the Senate race or the President's race isn't about what our policy is with regard to safety, public safety, or pretend that it's not about our policy with regard to human rights or pretend that it's not about our policy with regard to economics and whether you like having this surplus and you want to get America out of debt and keep investing in education or you'd rather go back and try it the way it was.

Now, there will be a great attempt to blur all this. I'm telling you, those are three inescapable consequences of this election and your choice. Will we change economic policy? Will we continue to try to make America a safer country and have responsible measures to promote gun safety? Will we continue to advance the cause of human rights? And the fourth inescapable consequence is, will we continue to grow the economy and improve the environment at the same time or let the old way prevail, and say the heck with that?

Now, there is no doubt about that. But you've got to decide. But don't let—if somebody asks you why you came here tonight, tell them because Chuck Robb played an inextricable role in the progress of the last 7 years, because you think there are choices that matter in this election, because you want to stand up for somebody that had as much courage in the United States Senate as he did in the toughest battles in Vietnam.

And I told him a year ago, when he was way behind in the polls, he was going to be reelected. And I believe it more strongly today. But we need your help. And you watch now—I've been watching this a long time. If you take this position, you will find all these people that will try to turn this election into Jell-o. And you will think you're punching a little sort of a pillow bag there. And everybody will say, "Oh, there aren't really significant differences, and I think I'll give the other guys a chance." That's not true. And you cannot afford to let people decide too late that there are great consequences here.

So I thank you for coming. You will rarely in your life get a chance to support anybody who has taken more chances to do what he thought was right, sometimes when he agreed with me and sometimes when he didn't, but always had his heart and mind and spirit in the same place as this man. He's a good man. His wife is a magnificent woman, and they deserve this reaffirmation, and our country needs it. That's the most important thing.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to reception hosts Ronald I. Dozoretz and Beth Dozoretz; and Senator Robb's wife, Linda.

Remarks on Prescription Drug Coverage for Military Retirees and an Exchange With Reporters

May 16, 2000

Resignation of Helen Thomas

The President. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Before we start, I would just like to say a few words of appreciation and respect about Helen Thomas, who has decided today to leave UPI after 57 years.

Presidents come and go, but Helen's been here for 40 years now, covering eight Presidents and, doubtless, showing the ropes to countless young reporters and, I might add, more than a few press secretaries. I hope this change will bring new rewards and new fulfillment to her. Whatever she decides to do, I know I'll feel a little better about my country if I know she'll still be spending some time around here at the White House. After all, without her saying, "Thank you, Mr. President," at least some of us might never have ended our news conferences.

Prescription Drug Coverage

When I gave my State of the Union Address this year, I said that in good conscience we could not let another year pass without finding a way to offer voluntary prescription drug coverage to every older American. I think we're beginning to make progress toward that goal. And today I want to support one step in the right direction, a congressional proposal, scheduled for a vote this week in the House, to extend prescription drug coverage to all retired military personnel over 65.

Keeping faith with men and women in America who have served in our armed forces is a sacred obligation for all of us. That's why we have raised military pay over 8 percent over the last 2 years, why we're working to provide our troops with better housing, and taking steps to improve access to medical care for all military personnel, families, and retirees. We asked them to risk their lives for freedom, and in return, we pledged our support.

Part of that promise is a medical network that helps to provide prescription drugs at reasonable costs. Some senior retirees are able now to take advantage of that network. But they're out of reach for as many as three of four of them.

This proposal would make sure that we meet our promise to more than one million older military retirees across the Nation, providing every single one of them with a prescription drug benefit, sharing with them the price discounts that the military negotiates with drug companies. At a time of unprecedented prosperity, there is no reason for military retirees to go without these prescription drugs that they need to live longer and healthier lives. We need to show them that they count, and they can count on us.

This initiative is another step for finding a way to offer every older American voluntary prescription drug coverage and affordable prescription drugs. That ought to be our next goal, because today, more than three in five American seniors lack such coverage. Too many spend huge percentages of their income on prescription drugs. Too many have to choose every month between filling those prescriptions and filling grocery carts. Too many are simply not getting the medicine they need.

If we were creating Medicare today, as I have said over and over and over again, we certainly would include a prescription drug benefit to give older Americans and people with disabilities access to the most cost-effective health care. Prescription drugs help to keep seniors mobile and healthy. They help to prevent expensive hospital stays and surgical procedures. They promote the dignity that every retired person is entitled to—the quality of life all of us want for our own parents. We should act this year to make sure all seniors have access to such coverage.

In my budget, I proposed a comprehensive plan to provide a Medicare benefit that is optional, affordable, and available to all, based on price competition, not price controls; a plan to boost seniors' bargaining power to get the best prices possible, just as this military plan would; a plan that is part