

Remarks on Returning From New York and an Exchange With Reporters

September 12, 2000

Legislative Agenda for Education

The President. Good morning, everyone. I'm looking forward to a meeting this afternoon with congressional leadership, that will be an important part of our ongoing efforts to resolve the budget differences that we still have in these last few weeks, on the basis of good policy, not politics or partisanship.

Perhaps the most important issue is education, where politics always should stop at the schoolhouse door. We've worked very hard for 7½ years now for higher standards, more accountability, reforms that work, and greater investment. The results are coming in, and it's clear that this strategy is working, thanks to the efforts of our educators, students, and parents.

Today I'm releasing a report showing that American students in schools are making steady gains in almost every category. I urge Congress to invest more in the priorities that work well for our students, in smaller classes, good teachers, modern schools, more after-school programs and preschool programs, and accountability for results. The Vice President is also talking about this important issue today in Ohio.

In 1996 only 14 States had statewide academic standards. Today, with strong Federal incentives, 49 States have them. The results are measurable. Reading and math scores are up across the country. The number of African-American students taking advanced placement courses has nearly tripled, and for Hispanics the number has jumped 500 percent.

Over 90 percent of our schools are now hooked up to the Internet. Overall, SAT math scores are the highest since they've been since 1969, the year Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon. And thanks in part to the HOPE scholarships, bigger Pell grants, and more affordable student loans, more students are going on to college than at any time since the GI bill.

We've also been working hard to help more low-income students go to college, expanding the TRIO program, and pushing our

new GEAR UP initiative. GEAR UP is a partnership with low-income kids that says if you'll aim high and aspire to college, we'll help you get there with counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and financial aid. It sends a message that with hope, hard work, and high hopes—high expectations, you can go as far as your abilities will take you.

Today I'm releasing \$46 million in GEAR UP grants to create even more college opportunities. With existing funding, these grants will now enable more than 700,000 of our students to study hard, graduate, and get ahead. But we need to do more. For every student participating in GEAR UP, many more were turned away.

In fact, just a few days ago, I received a letter, signed by more than 100 college presidents, underscoring the need for more GEAR UP funding. That's why I'm asking Congress to increase next year's support to \$325 million, which would give another 600,000 students the chance to succeed.

Making sure these students get the attention and instruction they need is even more vital in the early grades. That's why we're working so hard to reduce class size by putting 100,000 good, new, well-trained teachers into our classrooms. Over the past 2 years, we've helped our schools to hire nearly 30,000 of these teachers, and this year we're asking Congress for the funding to make that 46,000.

And we can't act fast enough. This fall, our schools are overflowing with a record 53 million students. Around the country, school districts are struggling hard to find good teachers. They shouldn't have to shoulder this burden alone. That's why we've requested a billion dollars for recruitment and training to help to put a qualified teacher in every classroom.

We also need to ensure that the classrooms themselves make the grade. The average American public school was built 42 years ago. Time has taken its toll. Congress should act quickly to help districts modernize old schools and build new ones. It's high time we got our children out of trailers and into 21st century classrooms. As you know, our initiative would help to build or dramatically overhaul 6,000 schools and to repair another 5,000 a year over the next 5 years.

Yesterday the Urban Institute reported that at least 4 million American children between the ages of 6 and 12 are latchkey kids, fending for themselves every day after school, until a parent gets home from work. Experts tell us this is precisely the time of day when young people without adult supervision get into the most trouble. That's why after-school programs are so important.

We had the beginnings of our after-school program with a \$1 million demonstration program back in 1997. Now, it's a critical program providing a safe learning environment and extra academic support in the after-school hours to students all across the country. Last year the 21st Century Community Learning Centers provided after-school and summer school opportunities to 850,000 of our students across the country.

This year our budget would more than double that program to a billion dollars. If we more than double the 850,000, that will make a significant dent in the number of those kids who are latchkey kids.

These are just some of the education priorities that we need to address this fall. There are a number of others included in our budget. I hope they'll be in the final agreement. But we need to do this, again I say, based on good policy. We need to do right by our children, make smart choices, and give them and our Nation a better future.

Thank you very much.

Firestone Recall

Q. Mr. President, do you think that the Government dropped the ball in detecting the Firestone tire problem and was aggressive enough in ordering a recall?

The President. Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press], I honestly don't know. I have been following the congressional hearings, and as you know, I've been otherwise occupied for the last several days. So before I can give you an informed opinion, I need to be fully briefed, and I haven't been.

United Kingdom Petroleum Protests/ OPEC Production

Q. Mr. President, do you have any reaction on the situation in Britain, where they're protesting they don't have enough oil? Even

though OPEC has promised to increase output, there are still problems.

The President. Well, all I know about it is what I read this morning in the press. And I couldn't tell, frankly, whether the protest was over high prices, where 76 percent of the price is in fuel taxes—their gasoline prices, I think, are about more than 2½ times what ours are—or whether they're worried about short supplies.

But I don't think blocking the weight of the refineries is a way to deal with the short supply issue. I'm just not sure I know enough about the facts there.

I think what we need to be concerned about is what we're doing here. We're working very hard to make sure our home heating oil reserve is filled for the Northeast by the end of October. And I think we'll get there. The Secretary of Energy has let the contracts, and we're watching very closely what the market will do on prices, as a result of the recent OPEC initiative. And we're also examining what other options we might have in the event we have a tough winter.

So I think we need to look at that, and we need to make sure we do everything we can to get through this winter. The fundamental challenge here is that the economies are now strong in Europe and the United States; they're picking up in Asia. So oil price consumption is going up, and it has been above oil price production.

Oil price production can get above consumption again, and we can replace some of our depleted inventories, which are quite low in the United States, and I hope that will happen. But I also hope that the American people and the Congress will look at the long-term implications. I believe we can get through this winter, and we can get through another couple of years, by continuing to push production above consumption.

But it's clear, if you look at the United States and North America, where the population is just a little over—well, our population, combined with Canada's, is about 80 percent of Europe's, and our fuel, our oil usage is about 50 percent more than theirs. So I think that we have lots of low hanging fruit here for energy conservation that will create jobs, increase incomes, and reduce our vulnerability to the tight oil markets.

I have, for the last several years, asked the Congress to adopt some vigorous tax incentives to encourage both businesses and individuals to buy energy conservation supplies and appliances. I hope that Congress will consider them this year, favorably, and I hope that we will also increase our investments in high mileage vehicles and alternative fuels. We're on the verge of some very, very promising discoveries, and now is not the time to weaken our commitment to the partnership for the next generation vehicles that the Vice President has supported so strongly, and to developing these other alternative sources of fuels and other means of getting high mileage vehicles.

We've got to deal with the long term and the short term and recognize that, at least over the long term, we're going to have to have a combination of alternative energy sources and greater conservation. And it can be a great job boon to our country, and it can save money for ordinary Americans if we do it right. So I'm hoping we'll have a short-term and a long-term resolution.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:20 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Congressional Leaders and an Exchange With Reporters

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Legislative Agenda

The President. I'd like to make just a couple of brief remarks and then ask the congressional leaders to speak. Let me, first of all, thank them for coming here. I'm looking forward to our meeting and to these last few weeks of working together before they adjourn for election season.

I'm hoping that we can resolve our differences over the budget, especially in the area of education, and I made a more detailed statement about that earlier today. I'm also hoping that we can pass a Patients' Bill of Rights and hate crimes legislation and a minimum wage agreement that will have some small business tax relief in it and perhaps some other things that I think there is

bipartisan support for, like the long-term-care credit.

I hope that we can reach agreement on the new markets legislation that passed the House overwhelmingly in a bipartisan fashion and, I think, has big bipartisan support in the Senate. And I still have some hope we can reach agreement on this Medicare drug issue, and I'll keep working.

But the main thing is that we're here meeting, and we'll see what we can do together. And I think we ought to do just as much as we possibly can, and I'm looking forward to the meeting.

Mr. Speaker.

[At this point, Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Dennis Hastert, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle, and House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt made brief remarks.]

Q. Mr. President, is the 90 percent of the surplus set aside, is that acceptable for you? And given the proximity of the election and the major philosophical differences over a Patients' Bill of Rights and how to do a drug benefit, any realistic chance in your view of getting that done?

The President. Well, let me answer the two substantive questions. Then I'll talk about the budget.

I think the—we have honest differences over the Medicare drug issue and how to achieve it. Whether we can bridge them or not, I don't know, but we ought to try.

Secondly, on the Patients' Bill of Rights, I think we're almost down to one issue—one or two issues—and I think we could get a majority for a good bill if we really work at it. I think the chances of that are reasonably good, still, and I'm prepared to do everything I can to keep working on it.

Now, on the budget, let me say, I presented a budget back in January which saves 90 percent of the surplus for debt reduction. And obviously, I agree with that. I think the most important thing is whether we're on a glide path to pay the debt off over the next 10 to 12 years, which is what I think we ought to do, because I think it will keep interest rates lower, and that will save people money. That amounts to a huge tax cut. If you keep