

Remarks on the National Service Initiative at the University of New Orleans

given on April 30, 1993

Thank you very much. I ought to quit while I'm ahead. [Laughter] It is wonderful to be back in New Orleans and in Louisiana and to have the first chance I've had since the election to thank you for your support, your electoral votes, and the education you gave me on my many trips here during the campaign last year. I'm glad to be back on this campus. I want to thank your student body president, Robert Styron. I thought he gave a good speech. I think he's got
5 a future in politics, don't you? [Applause] And Chancellor O'Brien. I want to thank Senator Breaux for his kind remarks and for his leadership of the Democratic Leadership Council. I want to acknowledge the presence here of Senator Johnston and many members of the Louisiana House and many other Members of the United States Congress, along with many others who are here with the Democratic Leadership Council, including my good friend and former colleague, the Governor of New Mexico, Bruce King, who's here. There are two members of my Cabinet here, the
10 Secretary of Education, Dick Riley, and the Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Espy, also a DLC Vice Chair.

I want to thank all the people who are here representing volunteer organizations. I met with some young people just before I came in here who are scattered around near me from Benjamin Franklin High School just across the way. [Applause] Absolutely no enthusiasm in that place. [Laughter] From the Delta Service Corps., from VISTA, from Summerbridge, from Teach for America, we also have some students here, apart from all of you from UNO, we have
15 some students here who have worked in service projects at Xavier University and at Tulane. We also have people here who have been involved in service for a long time from ACTION, from the Older Americans Volunteer Program, from the National Association of Senior Companions and Foster Grandparents and the National Association of Retired Senior Volunteers. All these people I am very grateful to.

I'd like to just acknowledge in general the people who are here from law enforcement organizations and firefighters' organizations and public employees and teachers' groups who have helped us on this national service project. And I
20 want to say a special word of thanks to three other people. First of all, Gen. David Jones, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who has worked very hard helping us put together this program, who is here. General Jones, thank you for being here. Secondly, a remarkable gentleman from New Jersey, an immensely successful businessman who retired early and is devoting his entire life to community service to rebuild the lives and the neighborhoods of the
25 people in his community in New Jersey and now helping others around the country, a founding Member of the Points of Light Foundation, Mr. Ray Chambers, who is here. And I'd like to pay a little special attention to two members of Congress who are not here and to one who is, for their long work on the whole idea of national service. The two in the Senate who are not here are Senator Harris Wofford from Pennsylvania and Senator Sam Nunn from Georgia. And then Representative Dave McCurdy from Oklahoma, thank you for all of the work you've done on this over the years.

30 I am glad to be here. You know, when I come down here I always sort of relax. I don't know why that is. I timed it just in time for the Jazz Festival, but I left my saxophone at the White House.

This is the 100th day of my administration. In Washington, some say it marks a milestone. But in many ways it's just another day at the office for what we're trying to do in changing America. In the last 99 days we have worked relentlessly to address the pressing and long-ignored needs of the American people and to bring to the Government
35 something it has not seen in a long time: an acknowledgment that bold action is needed, and needed now, to secure and enlarge America's future, and that in order to do it we not only have to change programs, we have to change the way the Government works and engage the energies of the American people in the process.

In the last 100 days I think we have begun to change the direction in which our country has been going for a long time, and to go toward a new direction more like the one the American people demanded last November. We've also
40 started an unprecedented debate in our Nation's capital about big ideas and better lives across our Nation, ideas that in many cases were shaped and nurtured by some of the people who are here today, as Senator Breaux said earlier, the members of the Democratic Leadership Council, of which I am proud to be a founding member. Unlike most organizations, the DLC has done more than just talk about the problems in our country. It has made an honest effort to develop real ideas about how to restore the American economy, and make the Government work, and rebuild the
45 confidence and the link that exists between the American people and their Government when things are at their best here. And it's been a laboratory for experimentation and solutions.

During my years with the DLC we really tried to refine our philosophy of what it would mean to take not only the Democratic Party but the United States of America in a new direction, to make our country work again and to reward

work and family, to encourage education and enterprise, to establish what I have often called a new covenant with the American people: Creating opportunity but demanding responsibility from all so that once again we could be a true American community where we know and believe and live as if we're all in this together. This group has conceived many of the ideas that I've advocated since I've been in Washington from setting a limit on welfare and putting people to work to police reform and community policing to rewarding work of low-income working people by having an earned-income tax credit that would lift the working poor with children out of poverty. So we could say if you work 40 hours a week in this country, you have a child in the house, you ought not to be poor. These are the kinds of things that this organization has done. They helped to develop the idea I want to talk to you today about that has so much to do with the future of the young people here and throughout our country: national service. This is an organization about ideas.

Now in Washington, as you might imagine, we don't always agree with one another. And that is good—that's why we've got a system where the Government's divided up and we have two parties and we have people fighting all the time—as long as it's about ideas. But too often we've seen that the debate over big ideas gets mired in petty politics. I know one thing: The American people are tired of gridlock and petty politics. If we're going to fight, they want us to fight over ideas and the future of this country.

In the past 99 days we tried to address the problems the American people told me they wanted to be addressed. We focused more than anything else on the economy, passing the outline of a budget that will reduce the deficit by more than \$500 billion, increase investment in education and technologies and the things that will create the economy of the 21st century that all of you need so that you'll have good and decent jobs and a decent future laying the groundwork for a more prosperous tomorrow.

Just in 100 days we've announced a policy to help to convert the defense cutbacks and the economic opportunities for people who are losing their jobs because of the military cutbacks; to take a new direction in technology to create more opportunities for our people; to be more aggressive in preserving the environment, but do it in a way that creates jobs, not a way that costs jobs; to have a trade policy that will really reflect our common interest with other nations and expanding jobs and opportunities everywhere. We've begun the long-overdue renovation of the American economic base. The question now, unlike 100 days ago, the question is now not whether we're going to reduce the deficit but how and how much. The question now is not whether the Government will have a new partnership with the private sector to shape the economy but exactly what the details will be and how much our part will be.

We've also taken on the issue of health care, something million of Americans cried out for last year. I got a letter today from a young woman I shook hands with whose—literally, her life is on the line, and she cannot get health insurance. It is wrong that in this Nation—we are the only advanced country in the world with 34 million people without health insurance. It is wrong that millions of Americans cannot change their jobs without losing their health insurance because they or a child or a spouse has been sick. It is wrong that the price of health care goes up 2.5 times the rate of inflation every year. And it is wrong that we spend 30 percent more of our income than any other country on Earth on health care and have less to show for it. But it is also wrong to assume that there is some magic, quick answer. That's why we've been working with a task force headed by the First Lady and over 400 people from all aspects of health care to do something about this.

But now, for the American people the issue is no longer whether we're going to address the health care crisis, whether we're going to provide security to hard-working middle class Americans, whether we're going to cover the people who aren't covered, whether we're going to control costs, but how are we going to do it and how fast and when are we going to begin. I hope the answer is soon. And not too soon is soon enough for me.

There was a lot of discussion last year about how bad the Government was, and it didn't work, and it was bloated, it needed a change. Look at the last 100 days: I've tried to set an example by offering a budget to reduce the White House staff by 25 percent; by putting the lid on and reducing the Federal bureaucratic expenses, the administrative expenses of the Federal Government by over \$10 billion; by moving dramatically to reduce the influence of special interests on Executive Branch appointments by having the toughest ethics laws and restrictions on people becoming lobbyists for other interests when they leave the payroll of the President of the United States; by asking the Vice President to share the most sweeping review of the way the Federal Government works in a generation, with a promise of real reform and reinventing Government, something else this organization has long believed in.

We are moving. And the Congress is moving to join. The Congress has voted to cut the administrative costs of running the Congress, something many of you never thought you would see happen. They did that. The House of Representatives voted yesterday to give the President of the United States a modified line-item veto, and I hope the Senate will follow their lead. I hope soon they will send to my desk the motor voter bill which will make it easier for

young people and other people to vote and participate in their country's political process. And there will be campaign finance reform and lobby reform legislation and a crime bill that will put more police on the street and give us the capacity we need to take our communities back. These things are going on. The question is no longer whether we're
105 going to reform the way Government works but how fast and how much and how well. And those are the right questions, my fellow Americans, good questions to ask.

And now I come to the last, and in many ways the most important issue that we have tried to address—the economy, yes; health care, yes; reform in the way the Government works, yes—but also what about the American people. How can each American make a contribution? How can each American do the work that all Americans must, taking
110 responsibility for himself or herself and growing up into a vibrant community? We have tried to address those issues as well. The buzz word now people use is empowerment. I used to call it responsibility. I often have said, and I want to reiterate today, the United States Government cannot create an opportunity for anyone who will not be responsible enough to seize it. Opportunity is a two-way street and requires responsibility. That is the only way we'll ever rebuild the American community.

115 In the days and months ahead, you will see the Secretary of Education talk about his remarkable education program to provide tougher national standards in education but also to give people at the grass roots level more flexibility in making public education work. You will see the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development talk about how we can empower even the poorest Americans to start their own businesses, save their own money, and take control of their own future. You will see other people talking about how we can reform the
120 welfare system. All of these things are at the core of the notion that we ought to make it possible for every American to live up to the fullest of his or her Godgiven ability. And that is what in the end national service is all about: helping ourselves and helping each other at the same time.

On this 100th day of my administration I want to recommit myself and those who work with me to the values that have made our Nation without peer in all human history, those of opportunity, responsibility, community, and respect
125 for one another. Today I want to propose applying those values to a revolution of opportunity for our hard-pressed families and for those who have been left out. As a first step we're going to ease the terms of college loans, helping students from middle and lower-middle income families to clear a major path to the American dream, the path of higher education. In return we'll demand responsibility from young people. We'll make it easier to borrow money and much easier to pay it off, but this time you have to pay it off. You can't just default on the loan. And we will also offer
130 the young people of America the opportunity of paying their loans back by serving their communities in a new program of national service.

In just a few days I will send to the Congress two bills containing our proposals, first to strengthen college opportunity and to establish national service. Together they will revive America's commitment to community and make affordable the cost of a college education for every American. It's no secret that over the last 10 or 12 years the cost of a college
135 education is about the only essential thing that's gone up even more rapidly than health care costs. And middle class parents, and even upper middle class parents, not to mention lower income people, have borne the burden, paying now about five percent of median income just to put one child through a 4 year in-State public college. It costs an average of over \$5,200 a year for that education. That means families are depleting savings and many students are faced with cutting back to a part-time course load or having to drop out simply because of the cost of a college education. A
140 college dropout is now more than twice the high school dropout rate. We cannot afford that, and we can do better.

I propose a new way to finance college for millions of students who seek loans every year. We call it an EXCEL account. With it, students can repay the loans they take out not with a percentage of the loan they borrowed but with a percentage of their actual earnings. Now think about that. For students driven by debt into careers with high pay and low satisfaction this can be very liberating. Take a student torn, for example, between pursuing a career in teaching
145 and corporate law. This student now can at least make the career choice based on what he or she wants to do and not the size of the outstanding student loan, because we propose to let everybody have the option of paying the student loan back based on how much they earn not just how much they owe. That is an incredible incentive.

However, under the current system, as many of you know, students faced with big bills or just inconvenient responsibilities have too often taken the irresponsible route and defaulted on their loans or have been found in default
150 because they couldn't find a job. Often times there's no serious effort to collect the loan because the Government guarantees 90 percent of it. So if the bank makes the loan, it costs more than 10 percent to go collect it. What's the result? The taxpayers every year pay about \$3 billion on other people's loans, money that could be spent on your education, on the schools here, on the future of the children here, just for bad loans. It isn't right.

Under our system, the Department of Education would engage the Internal Revenue Service. We would have the

155 payroll records. And you wouldn't be able to beat the bill because you would have to pay the loan back as a percentage of your income, if you choose, but you'd have to pay it because you pay taxes and because we have your records and because you won't be able to get out of it. And that is the right thing to do.

But these EXCEL accounts are just the beginning. We hope they will lead more and more Americans not only to seize the opportunity of a college education and to exert a stronger sense of responsibility but also to seek to serve their
160 communities through a program of national service. It was Thomas Jefferson who first told the American people in essence that the more you know, the more you owe. In his words, and I quote, "A debt of service is due from every man to his country proportioned to the bounties which nature and fortune have measured to him." This statement reminds us that values never go out of fashion, that civic responsibility is as good for democracy today as it was when Thomas Jefferson said that, and that if you really want to be the best citizen of your country, you have to give
165 something back to your country. With national service, we can literally open a new world to a new generation of Americans where higher learning goes hand-in-hand with the higher purpose of addressing our unmet needs, our educational, our social, our environmental needs, to secure the future that we all will share. National service will mark the start of a new era for America in which every citizen, every one of you, can become an agent of change armed with the knowledge and experience that a college education brings, and ready to transform the world in which we live,
170 city by city, community by community, block by block. I say to you, we need you.

You know, there's a lot of talk in America today, and I spend hours every week worrying about the effect that automation and technology is having on employment. Indeed, as we see the productivity of American enterprises rise, their need for workers goes down because they can do more with computers that they used to do with people. So people ask me all the time, where will we find the jobs for this new generation of Americans? How can we drive this
175 unemployment rate down? But if you look around this country at all the human problems, all the homeless people, all the environmental waste dumps in our cities and our rural areas, all the problems that we've got in every community in America, and see all the kids that are in trouble—15 million of them at risk and needing somebody to pay attention to—you know where the work needs to be.

Late last night when I was preparing to come down here, I took a little time off at my desk and I read the letters that
180 my staff had given me. And I got a letter from a woman who grew up with me. I've known her since we were in grade school. In this letter she said, "You know, someone asked me a couple of days ago: How are we going to save all these kids in this country that are in trouble?" And she said, "Without even thinking, I blurted out, the same way we lost them, one at a time." And so today my fellow Americans, I issue a call to national service, to Americans young and old, Democrats and Republicans, white, black, Hispanic, Asian and you name it, all of us that make up this
185 great Nation. I call you to national service because it is only that together we can advance a tradition rooted in our people's history, helping our people to help themselves. And with national service we can rejoin the citizens in communities of this country, bonding each to the other with the glue of common purpose and real patriotism.

We have many young people here today, students of this place of higher learning where we're gathered. In you I know I see the builders of tomorrow. And I say to you, as good as the education is here and at the other great institutions
190 represented here today and all across America, the power of academic learning is incomplete unless every American can share in it. That is the only way we can lift our whole country up. I say to you further that our country needs you. We need your knowledge and your initiative and your energy. We need you because you are still stripped and free of the cynicism that has paralyzed too many of your parents and your grandparents, and led us to spend too much time talking about what we can't do instead of seizing what we can. You are not afflicted by that, and I pray you never will
195 be.

We need to make sure that we can use your energies and your talents. One way is by making sure that the low wages that public service often offers won't be a route to the poorhouse for someone with college loans. As I said, we're going to make it easier for you to pay off your college loan. But also, if you engage in national service, we'll make it easier for you to pay off a college debt or to earn credits toward it before you go to college, or while you're in college.
200 For each term of service, 1 or 2 years, participants in national service programs will receive benefits that can be used toward past, present, or future obligations, whether for college or advanced job training. You can get a college education and, in addition, through service, perhaps the best experience of your life. That's a pretty good investment.

I've talked a lot about the students here. And they do play a large part in this plan, but they're not alone. Here in New Orleans many of you already know what it means to make a difference in your community because you've just been
205 doing that for a long time. And I'm very proud, as I said. I'm going to get another cheer about this, but one of the models that I had a little something to do with is the Delta Service Corps, and I appreciate what they're doing.
[Applause]

There are people here working to restore housing. There are people here working in other ways. I just want to mention three: Lawrence Williams, a team leader in the Corps who has helped to restore housing for low-income people with the local Habitat for Humanity Project; Jane Sullivan, a retired public schoolteacher and a former VISTA volunteer who helps rural communities gain better access to health care, housing, and other assistance; and a young person I met just a few moments ago, Parris Moore-Brown, who works with parents in housing programs for drug awareness outreach and now plans to work with the physically challenged. She says that she has no tolerance for self-pity, and she lives what she preaches. She hasn't been slowed by what her birth dealt her, a brittle bone disorder that has left her as an adult, and by her own measure, 4 feet, 2 1/4 inches tall. Where are you? Stand up on here so we can see you. After my meeting with her and the other young people today, I'd say she stands about 10 feet tall in America today. There are tens of thousands of people like Parris and Jane and Lawrence and those of you who are here with these service programs who are dying to be called to a new season of service, and we want to do that.

Another part of our plan is to build on the National and Community Service Act that was passed in 1990, and the already flourishing programs that are started and up and going in every State in this country. National service is not going to be a Federal bureaucracy; it's going to operate at the grass roots with the real problems of real people and with the programs that work today. It will be locally driven because I trust the communities in this country to make decisions for themselves.

I also want to say that while we want very much to have young people in this program who are working toward earning credits for college or paying their college loans off through national service, we need so many other people in service projects. We need our older people who never will go back to college but have a lifetime of experience and energy to give to the young people of this country. We need young people who may not be old enough to drive a car or to qualify for this program but can have a dramatic impact on fellow students by helping them learn better study habits or just keeping them out of trouble. I've learned already that, as the parent of a teenager, that the peers can have a big impact on the shape and quality of a child's life. Even a child can serve in programs that now begin as early as kindergarten. We have no upper age limit in America, or lower age limit for being a good public servant.

To be successful, this national program will need the broad-based support of all the American people. Parents and children, churches and synagogues, colleges and universities and the potential providers and the beneficiaries of our services. In this vision of national service, everyone is a partner. And that includes, of course, the business community in this country. We need businesses to contribute to the effort, to match Federal money and local programs and to contribute at the national level, helping to make sure that the programs we choose are good ones indeed.

What will set this legislation apart from other similar efforts in the past that rewarded service to our country is that it will totally eliminate the Federal Government bureaucracy. And believe me, no one will miss that. We're going to set up a national service corporation that will run like a big venture capital outfit not like a bureaucracy. And communities, as I said, will have the flexibility to make their own programs work. I think that I've seen enough today and I've heard enough of your applause to know that the American people are hungry for a chance to serve their country and to reap the rewards of civic pride and education in the process.

In answering this call our people are following a proud history. More than a century ago President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, and the frontier of this country was settled by countless families who took up the challenge in exchange for 100 acres to call their own. In the 1930's President Roosevelt enlisted millions of young people to restore the environment through the Civilian Conservation Corps. FDR gave others a chance to support themselves through the buildings made possible by the Works Project Administration. I was in the United States Justice Department just yesterday, a building built in 1934 by people who were giving service to their country, and it's still a beautiful monument to the legacy of that kind of service. The parents of the baby boom had the GI bill, which was one of the best investments our Government ever made. A generation ago, the young people of my generation saw suffering in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and many rushed to the challenge laid down by President Kennedy when he created the Peace Corps, which became our country's greatest ambassador, building bridges of understanding to far off cultures. And now, three decades later, a challenge has been presented to all of you, a new challenge and an old one, as old as America and as new as your future.

A year ago when the Democratic Leadership Council met in New Orleans, I asked the following question: I said, I want you to think about what kind of citizens you're going to be—[inaudible]—administration that this was the day the American people were empowered to renew their Nation and their communities, to seize a better future for themselves, and to help all of us to be what the—[inaudible]—out of helping our fellow citizens and ourselves to become what we ought to be, this country will be all right.

Thank you very much, and God bless you all.

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