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Remarks in Portland, Oregon. (Pres. Bill Clinton speech)(Transcript)
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Thank you. Good morning, Portland. Mayor Katz, Congresswoman Furse, Tom Bruggere, Darlene Hooley, Mike Dugan. Thank you all for being here with us. Madame Mayor and Congresswoman Furse, thank you for making us feel so welcome in Portland again. Maybe I come back here so often because I like it. I must say, I have to hand it to the Vice President. I didn't think anyone could keep a secret in Washington. Al Gore cut a book deal with a book full of secrets. It never leaked. Now he's telling it all, and he wrote the book under his own name. Al Gore is doing for the Federal Government what he did for the macarena. He is removing all the unnecessary steps. [Laughter] Now, he's got some funny names here. He calls for performance-based organizations - that's sort of a boring title. I think we ought to scrap that title and substitute something more exciting, like "Trailblazers." Would you like that? [Applause]

I want to thank Tipper Gore and the First Lady, too, for some things they've already talked about. You know, we've worked very hard to improve the health care of the American people. That's a big part of moving into the 21st century, to immunize more children, to increase medical research, to speed the movement of drugs to market. In only 4 years we've more than doubled the life expectancy of people with HIV and AIDS in just 4 years, as an example. Finally, we got the Congress to pass the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill that says to 25 million Americans, you can't lose your health insurance or have it taken away anymore just because someone in your family gets sick or because you change jobs.

And yesterday we had three big victories. Congress did, as Hillary said, answer our call to tell the insurance companies that newborns and their mothers deserve at least 48 hours in the hospital. They can't be kicked out 8 hours after delivery anymore.

Congress responded to the work that Tipper Gore has been doing for years and years and years, in a bipartisan fashion that also included Senator Domenici from New Mexico in saying that it is time to ensure that people who need treatment for mental illness get the treatment they need also and without discrimination.

And finally, I want to say a special word of thanks to the work that the Congress did in our continuing efforts to be fair to veterans and their families who have served us in foreign theaters and may have been exposed to dangerous chemicals, when they provided health benefits to veterans whose children are born with spina bifida. Those were three great things to do for America yesterday, and I thank the Congress for

doing it.

I'm happy to be back in Portland. I'll never forget what I saw here last spring when I visited during the floods: the true spirit of America, the pioneering spirit is alive and well in Oregon. But I was glad to hear the mayor remind me that you have 10 bridges here, and in Oregon you want to build a bridge to the 21st century.

In 1992, the people of Oregon supported the Vice President and me when we came here and asked you to help us to put people first and to change the direction of our country, to put America on the right track and to change the way Government works, to make sure that when we enter the 21st century, as I look out at this sea of people, that every one of you will enter a century with the American dream alive and well for every person who is willing to work for it, that we will enter a century in which America is coming together and embracing its diversity, not being torn apart by it as so many other nations are all around the world, and that we would not run away from our responsibilities to be the strongest force for peace and freedom and security in the world.

The best days of this country are still ahead of us if we build the right bridge to the 21st century. Now, in this election season you will hear a lot of rhetoric back and forth and maybe a lot of characterizations of people's motives. I've tried to stay away from that. I don't want to demean anybody. I want this to be an election season of ideas, not insults. I want to ask, what are we going to do, not who can we blame. How are we going to build this country and move it together.

But I must say, there are some facts that you can't get around. It is a fact that we have 10 1/2 million more jobs; the lowest unemployment rate in 7 1/2 years; almost 4 1/2 million new home owners; the deficit going down for all 4 years of an administration for the first time since before the Civil War, in the 1840's; a record number of exports; record small businesses. On October 1st, ten million hard-working Americans will get an increase in their minimum wage. Every small business in the country has been made eligible for a tax cut when they buy health insurance or if they invest more money in their business to hire more people and grow .and help America grow. The welfare rolls are down by 1.8 million. Child support collections are up by 40 percent - $3 billion. The drinking water is safer. The air is purer. Our food standards are much higher. As the Vice President said, just in the last week we have reached an agreement to restore the salmon on the Columbia River and an agreement to protect the old growth forest in Oregon and Washington. Just a couple of days ago I was honored to proclaim a 1.7-million-acre national monument, the Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument in southern Utah. We are moving this country in the right direction.

And now we have to continue to build that bridge to the future, a bridge where there is opportunity for all, starting with the best education for every single American. We ought to be lifting our teachers

and our students up, not running our teachers down, as some are doing in this election season.

I ask you to join me in helping every classroom to be connected to the information superhighway by the year 2000. If every classroom is tied into the Internet and the World Wide Web, we can make sure for the first time in history that every child in America, in the poorest rural district, in the most devastated economic areas of the country, in isolated inner-city districts, in middle class and wealthy districts, that altogether, at the same time, have access to the same information in the same way. It's never happened before. Will you help us make it happen in the future? [Applause]

I ask you to help me in opening the doors of college education to all Americans who want to go. In the past 4 years, we passed the AmeriCorps program, and 50,000 young Americans have built communities like Portland and earned their way through college. We've revolutionized the student loan program to lower the cost and improve the repayment terms so that anybody could borrow the money and know they wouldn't go broke trying to pay it back. But now we have to do more. I propose to make a college education universal by doing three things.

Number one, saying you can save in an IRA for years and years and then withdraw from that IRA tax-free if you're using it to pay for a college education or a health emergency or buying a first home.

Number two, saying we're going to make a community college education, at least 2 years of education after high school, just as common and universal in 4 years as a high school diploma is today. We need that to start the new century. And here's how we're going to do it. We're going to say to Americans, if you want to go to community college for 2 years, all you have to do is work hard, make your grades. You can take off your taxes, dollar for dollar, the tuition cost at the typical community college in the United States.

And number three, we want to say to all students of whatever age in whatever college in America, undergraduate and graduate, you ought to be able to deduct from your taxes the cost of college tuition up to $10,000 a year.

I want to build a bridge to the 21st century that keeps this economy going strong. That means we have to pay for those tax cuts and the tax cuts for childrearing, and for buying and selling your home in the context of a balanced budget that continues to invest in education, in the environment, in research, in technology, and protect our obligations through Medicare and Medicaid. We can do that if you will help us build that bridge to the 21st century

The crime rate has come down for 4 years in a row, the juvenile crime rate is starting to drop, the juvenile murder rate has come way down. We

are moving in the right direction, but I want to keep going. I want to rebuff those in the Congress who are trying to stop us from putting 100,000 police on the street. We're halfway home, I want to finish the job.

I want to see us - we passed the Brady bill. Now, we ought to extend the Brady bill. Sixty thousand felons, fugitives, and stalkers have not gotten handguns because of the Brady bill. I think we ought to extend it to people who beat up their spouses and their children. They shouldn't have handguns either.

I want to build a bridge to the 21st century where we have a stronger American community. I am very proud that the first bill I signed after becoming President was the family and medical leave law. Over the strong opposition of the leaders of the other party, we passed it. They said it would hurt the economy. They said it would weaken business. They said it would burden small business.

Well, 4 years later, we have 10 1/2 million new jobs, record numbers of new small businesses, record numbers of new businesses owned by women and minorities, and 12 million families have taken advantage of the family and medical leave law, to have a child born, to tend to a sick parent, a sick child, a sick spouse. I'm telling you, we're stronger because we did that. And I want to see us expand that.

I believe we ought to expand the family and medical leave law to say that parents should be able to go see their children's teachers on a regular basis and be able to take their kids and their folks to the doctor without losing their jobs. It won't hurt the economy, we'll have a stronger economy when people can care for their family members.

And finally, we have a lot of work to do in the environment to build the strong American community. Let me just mention one thing. We have 10 million children still living within 4 miles of a toxic waste site, even though we've cleaned up more of them in 3 years than were cleaned up in the 12 years before we took office. If you will give us 4 more years, we'll clean up 500 more, so we can say our children are growing up next to parks not poison. Will you help us build that bridge to the 21st century?

Now, let me tell you the reason we decided to do this reinventing Government announcement here is because Oregon and particularly the city of Portland have led the way in proving you can have a Government that actually works for people, that inspires confidence, that gets results.

When we took office, the deficit was $290 billion a year and going higher. We had the slowest job growth rate since the Great Depression. You have cheered for the achievements of the administration. You have cheered for the things we want to do. We cannot do these things, and we could not have achieved what has been done in the last 4 years had it

not been for the leadership of the Vice President and our determination to give you a Government that costs less and does more. That's what reinventing Government does. It makes it possible for us to do the other things that you have cheered for, that you are working for here today.

And so I say to you, this book the Vice President gives me today is a book that Americans ought to be interested in. It says we're bringing common sense to Government. In everything from hiring people to buying things, we've eliminated double talk and bureaucracy.

Do you know when I became President, if you wanted to buy - if a Government agency wanted to buy a $4 stapler, they had to do $50 worth of paperwork. Now we can buy a $4 stapler for $4. That's $46 we can spend on Head Start programs, on environmental protection, on investing in medical research.

The second thing we're doing is serving people better. We have ended the era when people could run for office, desperate to be in Government, by just bad-mouthing Government. A lot of our friends on the other side have amazed me; they bad-mouth and bad-mouth and bad-mouth the Government, but they can't bear to live outside of it.

We have proved that you can make Government work. One woman from Sacramento was so overwhelmed by the fast and friendly service she got from the Social Security office, she wrote to tell us it left her, and I quote, "dazed and confused." She could not believe that her Government would do anything that well.

Well, we're doing a lot of things that well. The direct student loan program cuts the cost of college loans, but improves the repayment terms, says you can only be required to pay it back as a percentage of your income. So go on and borrow the money and go to college and give yourself a better life.

The SBA loan program, which has helped us to start a record number of small businesses, has been cut down to one page. And we have dramatically increased loans to women and minority business owners without undermining the quality. We've proved that we can diversify educational opportunities and economic opportunities and achieve excellence in both.

At the Department of Housing and urban Development, Henry Cisneros has managed to cut about $1,000 off the closing costs for the average first-time home buyers and, in a time of budget cuts, to initiate programs that decrease homelessness in communities all across America. We can make this Government work for you, and we're determined to do it.

Wherever they have been wiling to do it, we've used businesses as partners. After all, what we want is cleaner air, cleaner water, safer

food. We don't want punishment. If government and business can work as partners, we want to do it.

And we want to be partners with communities. That's what Oregon is all about. Let me tell you, as you think about welfare reform, the partnership that the United States has had with Oregon and with the city of Portland can be a model for how we can make welfare reform work. I signed that bill because it has a new bargain for people on welfare. It says, we'll continue to have a national guarantee for health care, for nutrition for children. If you go to work, we'll spend more than ever on child care. But we're going to give the money that used to be in the welfare check to the States so they can develop community-based systems, not only to give income to people but to move able-bodied people into the work force.

The only way that can be done is if there is a community-based system where people are committed to going out and challenging employers and saying, okay, we'll give you some help to do it, but you've been cussing the welfare system all these years, now hire these people, give them a job. We'll support them with child care and education. That has to happen in the communities of America, and we trust Portland to do it. We trust Oregon to do it. You can lead America's way in doing it.

So yes, reinventing Government means doing more efficient things. It means doing better things. It means doing with less. It also means improvements in Medicare and Medicaid, in our educational programs, in our support for small business, in our environmental protection. It means improvements in our national parks, not selling them off, and it means help in emergencies.

I want to say that one of my proudest achievements as President is reforming the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It has become such a disaster itself that Congress even considered abolishing it. But as Portland, as Oregon, as Washington State saw during the flood, as California saw in earthquakes and fires and floods, as we saw in the Middle West where they had a 500-year flood and in the hurricanes along the Eastern Coasts of America, we have an Emergency Management Agency today that works with people on the ground and helps people and helps communities to rebuild their lives. That is something that is worth fighting for.

So, I want to ask you to support us in this effort. I want you to know that when we balance the budget in 2002, we're still going to be spending more money on education and research and protecting the environment. So we're going to have to have a smaller and more productive Government. We're going to have to privatize organizations that can now work better in the private sector, like Sallie Mae. We've got the direct student loan program. They need to be able to do some other things as well.

We want hundreds of organizations to become performance-based, to be

trailblazers in increasing productivity and making their customers happy. I don't want people to be dazed and confused if they're well-served by the Government, like that lady in Sacramento was.

Let me give you one example - very important in Oregon and every State with a high-tech base. We want the patent office to become performance-based. Today when an inventor applies for a patent, it takes almost 600 days for the inventor to get it. When we get done, we'll be able to give them those patents in 60 days, one-tenth of the time. That means more progress for America, more new jobs, more advances in high technology.

And finally, we want to use technology to open Government to people more. Today I want to announce that the White House home page, which many of you have already used on the Internet - see that sign "Portland wants Socks" - even my cat has a place on our home page. [Laughter] Now, we're going to make it a one-stop gateway to Government service. From now on, you can use the home page at the White House to apply for a passport, ask about veterans' benefits, even to buy postage stamps. Transactions, forms, information, it's all there. And it won't be like waiting in a line. There are no lines online. This is an example of what we can do to save money, serve you better, and free up money not only to balance the budget but to invest in our children's future.

If you want to build a bridge to the 21st century with a strong economy, good schools,safe streets, a clean environment, healthy children, successful families and communities, you must join us in this commitment to say we can make our Government work for all the people. Will you help us build that bridge in the next 6 weeks and 4 days? [Applause]

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:10 a.m. at Lownsdale Square. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Vera Katz of Portland; Senatorial candidate Tom Bruggere; and House of Representative candidates Darlene Hooley and Mike Dugan.