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Remarks at a World Trade Organization luncheon in Seattle

William J Clinton

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Thank you very much. Ambassador Barshefsky, thank you for your remarks and your work. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very large delegation from our administration here today, and I hope it's evidence to you of our seriousness of purpose. I thank the Commerce Secretary, Bill Daley; the Agriculture Secretary, Dan Glickman; our SBA Administrator, Aida Alvarez, my National Economic Councilor, Gene Sperling; Ambassador Esserman; and my Chief of Staff, John Podesta, all of whom are here, and I thank them.

I want to say that I agree that Mike Moore is the ideal person to head the WTO, because he has a sense of humor, and boy, do we need it right now. [Laughter] Did you see the gentleman holding up the big white napkin here before we started? He was doing that to get the light for the television cameras. But he was standing here holding the napkin and Mike whispered to me, he said, "Well, after yesterday, that could be the flag of the WTO." [Laughter] We'll have rolling laughter as the translation gets through here.

Let me begin by saying welcome to the United States and to one of our most wonderful cities. We are honored to have you here on a very important mission. Today I want to talk a little bit about the work that we're all here to do: launching a new WTO round for a new century, a new type of round that I hope will be about jobs, development, and broadly shared prosperity and about improving the quality of life, as well as the quality of work around the world, an expanded system of rule-based trade that keeps pace with the changing global economy and the changing global society.

Let me begin by saying that 7 years ago when I had the honor to become President of the United States, I sat down alone and sort of made a list of the things that I hoped could be done to create the kind of world that I wanted our children to live in, in the new century, a world where the interests of the United States I thought were quite clear: in peace and stability; in democracy and prosperity.

To achieve that kind of world, I thought it was very important that the United States support the increasing unity of Europe and the expansion of the European Union; that we support the expansion of NATO and its partnership with what are now more than two dozen countries, including Russia and Ukraine; that we support the integration of China, Russia, and the Indian subcontinent, in

particular, into the large political and economic flows of our time; that we stand against the ethnic and religious conflicts that were still consuming the Middle East and Northern Ireland, then Bosnia and later Kosovo; that we do what we could to help people all over the world to deal with such things, including the tribal wars in Africa.

And I thought it was important that we give people mechanisms by which they could work toward a shared prosperity, which is why we wanted to finish the last WTO round; why we are working hard with our friends in Europe on a Stability Pact for the Balkans; why we know economics must be a big part of the Middle East peace process; why we have an Asian-Pacific Economic Forum, where the leaders meet; why we've had two Summits of the Americas with our friends in Latin America; why we're trying to pass the Africa and Caribbean Basin trade initiatives; and why I believe it is imperative that we here succeed in launching a new trade round that can command broad support among ordinary citizens in all our countries and take us where we want to go.

There are negative forces I have tried to combat, in addition to the forces of hatred based on ethnic or religious difference: the terrorists, the problems of disease and poverty, which I hope that the large debt relief initiative that we are pushing will help to alleviate.

But in the end, all of these changes in my view will only give us the world we want-- where the poorest countries have children that can at least live through childhood, and where the boys as well as the girls can go to school and then have a chance to make a decent living; where countries with governance problems can work through them; where wealthy countries can continue to prosper but do so in a way that is more responsible to helping those who still have a long way to go economically; and where, together, we can meet our common responsibilities to human needs, to the environment, to the cause of world peace-we will not get that done unless we can prove, for all of our domestic political difficulties and all of our honest differences, we still believe that we can have an interdependent global economy that runs alongside our interdependent international information society.

And we are called upon here to meet against a background of a lot of people coming here to protest. Some of them, I think, have a short memory, or maybe no memory, of what life was like in most of your countries not so very long ago. So let me say again, I condemn the small number who were violent and who tried to prevent you from meeting.

But I'm glad the others showed up, because they represent millions of people who are now asking questions about whether this enterprise in fact will take us all where we want to go. And we ought to welcome their questions and be prepared to give an answer, because

if we cannot create an interconnected global economy that is increasing prosperity and genuine opportunity for people everywhere, then all of our political initiatives are going to be less successful. So I ask you to think about that.

When I hear the voices outside the meeting rooms, I disagree with a lot of what they say, but I'm still glad they're here. Why? Because their voices now count in this debate. For 50 years--one of the reasons I said we needed a leader like Mr. Moore, with a sense of humor, because for 50 years global trade, even though there were always conflicts-- you know, the United States and Japan, they're our great friends and allies; we're always arguing about something. But to be fair, it was a conflict that operated within a fairly narrow band. For 50 years, trade decisions were largely the province of trade ministers, heads of government, and business interests. But now, what all those people in the street tell us is that they would also like to be heard. And they're not so sure that this deal is working for them.

Some of them say, well-and by the way, they're kind of like we are; a lot of them are in conflict with each other, right? Because a lot of them say, 'Well, this is not a good thing for the developing countries. They haven't benefited as much as they should have, while the wealthy countries have grown wealthier in this information society." Others say, "Well, even if you're growing the economy, you're hurting the environment." And still others say, "Well, companies may be getting rich in some of these poorer countries, but actual working, laboring people are not doing so well." And others have other various and sundry criticisms of what we have done.

I would like to say, first of all, I think we need to do a better job of making the basic case. No one in this room can seriously argue that the world would have been a better place today if our forebears over the last 50 years had not done their work to bring us closer together. Whatever the problems that exist in whatever countries represented here, whatever the legitimacy of any of the criticism against us, this is a stronger, more prosperous world because we have worked to expand the frontiers of cooperation and reduce the barriers to trade among people. And we need to reiterate our conviction that that is true. If we were all out here going on our own, we would not be as well off in the world as we are.

Secondly, at the end of the cold war, I am sure everyone in this room has been struck by the cruel irony that in this most modern of ages, when the Internet tells us everything, as Mr. Moore said, when we are solving all the problems of the human gene and we will soon know what's in the black holes in the universe, it is truly ironic that the biggest problems of human society are the oldest ones, those rooted in our fear of those who are different from us--different races, different ethnic groups, different tribes, different religions. All over the world, people consumed by differences.

When people are working together for common prosperity in a rule-based system, they have big incentives to lay the differences down and join hands to work together. So if we just make those two points to our critics, I think it's very important: Number one, the world is a better place than it would have been, had we not had the last 50 years of increasing economic cooperation for trade and investment; and number two, the world of the future will be a safer place if we continue to work together in a rule-based system that offers enormous incentives for people to find ways to cooperate and to give up their old hatreds and their impulses to violence and war.

Now having said that, we now have to say: What next? I think we have to acknowledge a responsibility, particularly those of us in the wealthier countries, to make sure that we are working harder to see that the benefits of the global economy are more widely shared among and within countries, that it truly works for ordinary people who are doing the work for the rest of us. I think we also have to make sure that the rules make sense and that we're continuing to make progress, notwithstanding the domestic political difficulties that every country will face. We all benefit when the rules are clear and fair. I think that means we have to cut tariffs further on manufactured goods and set equally ambitious goals for services. I think we should extend our moratorium on E-commerce. I think we should treat agriculture as we treat other sectors of the economy.

But we all have domestic political constraints. Everybody knows that. I think we have to leave this luncheon saying, in spite of that, we're going to find some way to keep moving forward because the world will be a better place, and the world will be a safer place.

Now, let me offer a few observations of what I hope will be done. First, I think we have to do more to ensure that the least developed countries have greater access to global markets and the technical assistance to make the most of it.

Director-General Moore has dedicated himself and this organization to extending the benefits of trade to the least developed countries and I thank you for that, sir. Here in Seattle, 32 developing nations are moving toward admission to the WTO. EU President Prodi and I have discussed this whole issue, and I have assured him, and I assure you, that the United States is committed to a comprehensive program to help the poorest nations become full partners in the world trading system. This initiative, which we are working on with the EU, Japan, and Canada, would enhance market access for products from the least developed countries consistent with our GSP preference access program and our Africa and Caribbean Basin initiatives, which, I am glad to report, are making good progress through the United States Congress.

Building on our recent collaboration with Senegal, Lesotho, Zambia,

Bangladesh, and Nigeria, we would also intensify our efforts to help developing countries build the domestic institutions they need to make the most of trade opportunities and to implement WTO obligations. This afternoon I will meet with heads of international organizations that provide trade-related technical assistance and ask them to help in this effort.

And I will say this. I do believe, after the Uruguay Round, when we set up this system, that we did not pay enough attention to the internal capacity-building in the developing nations that is necessary to really play a part in the global economy. And I am prepared to do my part to rectify that omission.

We also must help these countries avert the health and pollution costs of the industrial age. We have to help them use clean technologies that improve the economy, the environment, and health care at the same time. And I will just give one example.

Today is World AIDS Day. And today the USTR, our Trade Representative, and the Department of Health and Human Services are announcing that they are committed to working together to make sure that our intellectual property policy is flexible enough to respond to legitimate public health crises.

Intellectual property protections are very important to a modem economy, but when HIV and AIDS epidemics are involved and like serious health care crises, the United States will henceforward implement its health care and trade policies in a manner that ensures that people in the poorest countries won't have to go without medicine they so desperately need. I hope this will help South Africa and many other countries that we are committed to support in this regard.

More generally, this new round should promote sustainable development in places where hunger and poverty still stoke despair. We know countries that have opened their economies to the world have also opened the doors to opportunity and hope for their own people. Where barriers have fallen, by and large, living standards have risen, and democratic institutions have become stronger. We have to spread that more broadly.

So secondly, I want to say what I said at the WTO in Geneva last year. I think it is imperative that the WTO become more open and accessible. While other international organizations have sought and not shied from public participation-when that has happened, public support has grown. If the WTO expects to have public support grow for our endeavors, the public must see and hear and in a very real sense actually join in the deliberations. That's the only way they can know the process is fair and know their concerns were at least considered.

We've made progress since I issued this challenge in Geneva last year, but I believe there's more work to be done from opening the hearing room doors to inviting in a more formal fashion public comment on trade disputes.

Now look, let me just say, I know there's a lot of controversy about this. And as all of you know, I'm about to enter the last year of my Presidency. I will not be around to deal with the aftermath. But I'm telling you, I've been in this business a long time. And in the end, we all serve and function at the sufferance of the people, either with their active support or their silent acquiescence. What they are telling us in the streets here is, this was an issue we used to be silent on. We're not going to be silent on it anymore. We haven't necessarily given up on trade, but we want to be heard.

The sooner the WTO opens up the process and lets people representing those who are outside in, the sooner we will see fewer demonstrations, more constructive debate, and a broader level of support in every country for the direction that every single person in this room knows that we ought to be taking into the 21st century. So we can do it a little bit now and a little bit later. We can drag our feet, or we can run through an open door. But my preference is to open the meetings, open the records, and let people file their opinions.

No one--no sensible person--expects to win every argument, and no one ever does. But in a free society, people want to be heard, and human dignity and political reality demand it today.

Third, as I have said repeatedly, I believe the WTO must make sure that open trade does indeed lift living standards, respects core labor standards that are essential not only to worker rights but to human rights. That's why this year the United States has proposed that the WTO create a working group on trade and labor. To deny the importance of these issues in a global economy is to deny the dignity of work, the belief that honest labor fairly compensated gives meaning and structure to our lives. I hope we can affirm these values at this meeting.

I am pleased that tomorrow I will sign the ILO convention to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. And I thank the United States Senate on a bipartisan basis for supporting us in this. I believe the WTO should collaborate more closely with the ILO, which has worked hard to protect human rights, to ban child labor. I hope you will do this.

Let me say in all candor, I am well aware that a lot of the nations that we most hope to support, the developing nations of the world, have reservations when the United States says we support bringing labor concerns into our trade debate. And I freely acknowledge that,

if we had a certain kind of rule, then protectionists in wealthy countries could use things like wage differentials to keep poorer countries down, to say, "Okay, you opened your markets to us. Now we'll sell to you. But you're selling to us, and we want to keep you down, so we'll say you're not paying your people enough."

The answer to that is not to avoid this labor issue, not when there's still child labor all over the world, not when there are still oppressive labor practices all over the world, not when there is still evidence in countries that ordinary people are not benefiting from this. The answer is not to just throw away the issue. The answer is to write the rules in such a way that people in our position, the wealthier countries, can't do that, can't use this as an instrument of protectionism. We can find a way to do this.

But there is a sense of solidarity all over the world, among ordinary people who get up every day, will never be able to come to a luncheon like this, do their work, raise their children, pay their taxes, form the backbone of every nation represented here. They deserve basic, fundamental decency, and the progress of global trade should reflect, also, in their own lives. I do not want the United States, or any other country, now or later, to be able to use this as a shield for protectionism. But to pretend that it is not a legitimate issue in many countries is another form of denial, which I believe will keep the global trading system from building the public support it-deserves.

Finally, we must work to protect and to improve the environment as we expand trade. Two weeks ago, I signed an Executive order requiring careful environmental review of our major trading agreements early enough to make a difference, including the input of the public and outside experts and considering genuinely held concerns. We stand ready to cooperate as you develop similar systems, and to integrate the environment more fully into trade policy.

We are committed to finding solutions which are win-win, that benefit both the economy and the environment, open trade and cutting-edge clean technologies, which I believe will be the next industrial revolution. We will continue to support WTO rules that recognize a nation's right to take science-- based health, safety, and environmental measures, even when they're higher than international standards.

Now I want to say something about this. Again I know, there are some people who believe my concern and the concern of the United States about the environment is another way that somehow we can keep the developing countries down. That is not true. There are basically two great clusters of environmental issues facing the world today. First, there are the local issues faced primarily by the developing nations: healthy water systems and sewer systems, systems to restrict soil erosion and to otherwise promote the public health.

It is in everyone's interest to help those things to be installed as quickly and efficiently as possible. But the real issue that affects us all, that prompts my insistence that we put this issue on the agenda, is global warming and the related issue of the loss of species in the world as a consequence of global warming.

And the difference in this issue and previous environmental issues is this: Once the greenhouse gases get in the atmosphere, they take a long time, 100 years or more, to dispel. Therefore, one nation's policy, including ours-and we are now the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, in the United States. We won't be long, but we are now. But we have to do something about this. And I want to say to you what I said to the people at our table. There is now clear and compelling scientific, technological evidence that it is no longer necessary for a poor country growing rich to do so by emitting more greenhouse gas emissions. Or in plainer language, a nation can develop a middle class and develop wealth without burning more oil and coal in traditional manners. This is a sea change in the reality that existed just a few years ago.

And let's be candid, most people don't believe it. A lot of people in our country don't believe it. But in everything from transportation to manufacturing to the generation of electricity, to the construction of buildings, it is now possible to grow an economy, with much less injury to the atmosphere, with available technologies. And within 5 years breathtaking changes in the way automobile engines work and in the way fuel is made, especially from biomass, will make these trends even more clear.

I do not believe the United States has the right to ask India or Pakistan or China or any other country to give up economic growth. But I do believe that all of us can responsibly say, if you can grow at the same rate without doing what we did-that is, fouling the environment and then cleaning it up-Mr. Kono remembers-I remember the first time I went to Tokyo over 20 years ago, people wore masks riding their bicycles around. And now the air there is cleaner than it is in my hometown in Arkansas.

What is the difference now? It is not just a national issue. If you foul the atmosphere and then you later clean it up, the greenhouse gases are still up there, and they'll be there for 100 years, warming the climate.

Now, we do not have a right to ask anybody to give up economic growth. But we do have a right to say, if we're prepared to help you finance a different path to growth, and we can prove to you-and you accept, on the evidence-that your growth will be faster, not smaller, that you'll have more good jobs, more new technology, a broader base for your economy, then I do believe we ought to have those kind of environmental standards. And we ought to do it in a

voluntary way with available technologies. But we ought to put environment at the core of our trade concerns.

Now I don't know if I've persuaded any of you about any of this. But I know one thing: this is a better world than it would have been if our forebears hadn't done this for the last 50 years. If we're going to go into the next 50 years, we have to recognize that we're in a very different environment. We're in a total information society, where information has already been globalized, and citizens all over the world have been empowered. And they are knocking on the door here, saying, "Let us in and listen to us. This is not an elite process anymore. This is a process we want to be heard in."

So I implore you, let's continue to make progress on all the issues where clearly we can. Let's open the process, and listen to people even when we don't agree with them. We might learn something, and they'll feel that they've been part of a legitimate process. And let's continue to find ways to prove that the quality of life of ordinary citizens in every country can be lifted, including basic labor standards and an advance on the environmental front.

If we do this, then 50 years from now the people who will be sitting in all these chairs will be able to have the same feelings about you that Mr. Moore articulated our feelings for the World War II generation.

Thank you very much, and welcome again.

NOTE: the President spoke at 3:05 p.m. in the Spanish Room at the Four Seasons Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Ambassador Susan G. Esserman, Deputy U.S. Trade Representative; Mike Moore, Director-General, World Trade Organization; Romano Prodi, President, European Commission; and Minister of Foreign Affairs Yohei Kono of Japan. The President also referred to GSP, the Generalized System of Preferences; and Executive Order 13141 of November 16,1999 (64 FR 63169). A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.