

Foreword

In 1996, the American people came together in a spirit of new optimism about ourselves, our country, and our future. It was a time of significant legislative achievement. Most notably, I signed into law landmark welfare reform ending a system that had trapped millions in a cycle of dependency. Within days, I also signed into law an increase in the minimum wage, signed legislation making it possible for people to take their health insurance with them as they move from job to job, and announced unprecedented steps by the Food and Drug Administration to protect children from the dangers of tobacco. These and other steps, and the continuing success of the American economy, inspired in our people a renewed sense of hope and confidence that our political system could meet our challenges.

Above all, this was a time when I sought to challenge the American people to turn toward the future. In August, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and in talks with voters across the Nation, I declared our mission must be “to build a bridge to the 21st Century.” I have used this metaphor for years. But in the hundreds of hand-painted banners at rallies, in the handmade bridges that were sent to my office by the dozens, in the thousands of letters we received, I could see that this time, this image had touched a nerve. Why? I believe “the bridge” evoked both the hope and the challenge of the new century. Our people know that this new era, with its stunning leaps of technology, rapid globalization, and many social changes, offers remarkable opportunities for our people. But they also know they need education, skills, and confidence to reap the rewards of this time. As I told so many audiences, it must be a bridge “wide enough and strong enough for every American to walk across.”

Vice President Gore and I were humbled and deeply gratified when the American people chose to ratify our course and return us to office for a second term. The election amounted to a ringing endorsement of the “vital center”—a call to both parties to set aside narrow agendas and work together in the national interest. That is what we pledged to do. And as I told the American people on election night, before the Old State House in Little Rock, Arkansas, “We’ve got a bridge to build—and I’m ready if you are.”

William Clinton