

Foreword

During the first half of 1998, America crossed an historic threshold. Six years after we put in place a new economic strategy, America's economy continued to reach new heights. Most dramatically, the Federal budget deficit—a number once so incomprehensibly large that it had 11 zeros—became merely zero. By May, we were projecting the first budget surplus since Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. This seismic shift, from an era of deficits to an era of surpluses, was the result of 6 years of hard work by the American people, and of tough choices made in Washington. The new era of budget surpluses would mean new opportunities and new challenges, and it would demand a new national debate about how best to use our hard-won prosperity. In my State of the Union address I sought to launch and frame this debate with four words: save Social Security first. I believed we had a duty to use the fruits of our prosperity to prepare for the challenges of the 21st century.

In this time of great public controversy, I redoubled my efforts to focus on America's true priorities. I proposed a national effort to help reduce class size in the early grades by hiring 100,000 new teachers and by building or modernizing 6,000 schools. I called on the Congress to pass a patients' bill of rights for the 160 million Americans in managed health care plans. And as part of my initiative on race, we held conversations across the country, bringing citizens together across lines of race, religion, and ethnicity to build one America.

It was a time when we moved forward to build new institutions and strengthen and advance America's values and leadership abroad. In Geneva, before the World Trade Organization, I set out a vision for a new international trading system. I said such a system must be more open and dynamic, but that it must also honor our values by ensuring that spirited economic competition among nations does not become a race to the bottom in environmental protections, consumer protections, or labor standards. In the first-ever tour by an American President of sub-Saharan Africa, I met with President Mandela of South Africa and witnessed firsthand the workings of a new democracy in which former oppressed and former oppressor sit side by side in a unity government, and traveled to some of Africa's emerging countries, from Ghana to Uganda. On my trip to China, I spoke to the Chinese people about the meaning of freedom. I said America believes that individual rights, including the freedom of speech, association, and religion, are universal, and that the Chinese government's actions in Tiananmen Square in 1989 were wrong. I also emphasized the interests both our nations could further by engaging with one another. And in Northern Ireland, the people agreed to an historic peace accord, raising hopes that decades of violence will come to an end. Around the globe, we saw the good that can come when America fulfills its mission as the strongest force for peace and freedom.

William Clinton