

## BILL CLINTON, REMARKS AT THE WELFARE REFORM BILL SIGNING (1996)

*President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. This welfare plan is designed to restructure the welfare system, requiring participants to work in exchange for limited assistance and returns much of the welfare responsibility to the states.*

. . . I asked Carol Rasco to find me somebody from our state who had been in one of our welfare reform programs and had gone to work. And she found Lilly Harden and Lilly showed up at the program. And I was conducting this meeting, and I committed a mistake that they always tell lawyers never to do: never ask a question you do not know the answer to. But she was doing so well talking about it, as you saw how well-spoken she was today, and I said, "Lilly, what's the best thing about being off welfare?" And she looked me straight in the eye and said, "When my boy goes to school and they say 'What does your mamma do for a living?' he can give an answer." I have never forgotten that.

And when I saw the success of all of her children and the success that she's had in the past 10 years I can tell you've had a bigger impact on me than I've had on you. And I thank you for the power of your example, for your families, and for all of America. Thank you very much.

What we are trying to do today is to overcome the flaws of the welfare system for the people who are trapped on it. We all know that the typical family on welfare today is very different from the one that welfare was designed to deal with 60 years ago. We all know that there are a lot of good people on welfare who just get off of it in the ordinary course of business, but that a significant number of people are trapped on welfare for a very long time, exiling them from the entire community of work that gives structure to our lives.

Nearly 30 years ago Robert Kennedy said, "Work is the meaning of what this country is all about. We need it as individuals. We need to sense it in our fellow citizens. And we need it as a society and as a people." He was right then, and it's right now. From now on our nation's answer to this great social challenge will no longer be a never-ending cycle of welfare: it will be the dignity, the power, and the ethic of work. Today we are taking an historic chance to make welfare what it was meant to be: a second chance, not a way of life. The bill I am about to sign, as I have said many times, is far from perfect. But it has come a very long way.

Congress sent me two previous bills that I strongly believe failed to protect our children and did too little to move people from welfare to work. I vetoed both of them. This bill had broad bipartisan support and is much, much better on both counts.

The new bill restores America's basic bargain, of providing opportunity and demanding in return responsibility. It provides \$14 billion for child care, \$4 billion more than the present law does. It is good because without the assurance of childcare it's all but impossible for a mother with young children to go to work.

It requires states to maintain their own spending on welfare reform, and gives them powerful performance incentives to place more people on welfare in jobs. It gives states the

capacity to create jobs by taking money now used for welfare checks and giving it to employers as subsidies, as incentives to hire people. This bill will help people that go to work so they can stop drawing a welfare check and start drawing a paycheck.

It's also better for children. It preserves the national safety net of food stamps and school lunches. It drops the deep cuts and the devastating changes in child protection, adoption and help for disabled children. It preserves the national guaranty of health care for poor children, the disabled, the elderly and people on welfare—the most important preservation of all.

It includes the tough child support enforcement measures that as far as I know every member of Congress and everybody in the administration and every thinking person in the country has supported for more than two years now. It's the most sweeping crackdown on deadbeat parents in history. We have succeeded in increasing child support collection 40 percent. But over a third of the cases where there are delinquencies involve people who cross-state lines. For a lot of women and children, the only reason they're on welfare today, the only reason, is that the father up and walked away when he could have made a contribution to the welfare of the children. That is wrong. If every parent paid the child support that he or she owes legally today, we could move 800,000 women and children off welfare immediately.

With this bill, we say, if you don't pay the child support you owe, we'll garnish your wages, take away your driver's license, track you across state lines, if necessary make you work off what you owe. It is a good thing, and it will help dramatically to reduce welfare, increase independence and reinforce parental responsibility.

As the vice president said, we strongly disagree with a couple of provisions of this bill. We believe that the nutritional cuts are too deep, especially as they affect low-income working people and children. We should not be punishing people who are working for a living already; we should do everything we can to lift them up and keep them at work and help them to support their children.

We also believe that the congressional leadership insisted on cuts and programs for legal immigrants that are far too deep. These cuts, however, have nothing to do with the fundamental purpose of welfare reform. I signed this bill because this is a historic chance where Republicans and Democrats got together and said: "We're going to take this historic chance to try to re-create the nation's social bargain with the poor. We're going to try to change the parameters of the debate. We're going to make it all new again and see if we can't create a system of incentives, which reinforce work and family and independence." We can change what is wrong. We should not have passed this historic opportunity to do what is right.

And so, I want to ask all of you, without regard to party, to think through the implications of these other non-welfare issues on the American people, and let's work together in good spirits and good faith to remedy what is wrong. We can balance the budget without these cuts. But let's not obscure the fundamental purpose of the welfare provisions of this legislation, which are good and solid, and which would give us at least the chance to end the terrible, almost physical isolation of huge numbers of poor people and their children from the rest of mainstream America. We have to do that.

Let me also say that there's something really good about this legislation. When I sign it, we all have to start again. And this becomes everybody's responsibility. After I sign my name to this bill, welfare will no longer be a political issue. The two parties cannot attack each other over it. The politicians cannot attack poor people over it. There are no encrusted habits, systems and failures that can be laid at the foot of someone else. We have to begin again. This is not the end of welfare reform; this is the beginning. And we have to all assume responsibility. . . .

I've worked hard over the past four years to create jobs and to steer investment into places where there are large numbers of people on welfare because there's been no economic recovery. That's what the Empowerment Zone program was all about, that's what the Community Development Bank initiative was all about, that's what our Urban Brown Field Clean-up initiative was all about, trying to give people the means to make a living in areas that had been left behind.

I think we have to do more here in Washington to do that, and I'll have more to say about that later.

But let me say again, we have to build a new work and family system. And this is everybody's responsibility now. The people on welfare are people just like these three people we honor here today and their families. They are human beings. And we owe it to all of them to give them a chance to come back.

I talked the other day—when the vice president and I went down to Tennessee, and we were working with Congressman Tanner's district, we were working on a church that had burned. And there was a pastor there from a church in North Carolina that brought a group of his people in to work, and he started asking me about welfare reform, and I started telling him about it. And I said, "You know what you ought to do, you ought to go tell Governor Hunt that you'd hire somebody on welfare to work in your church if he'd give you the welfare check as a wage supplement, and you'd double their pay and you'd keep them employed for a year or so and see if you couldn't train them and help their families and see if their kids were all right." I said, "Would you do that?" He said, "In a heartbeat." I think there are people all over America like that. I think there are people all over America like that.

That's what I want all of you to be thinking about today: What are we going to do now? This is not over, this is just beginning. The Congress deserves our thanks for creating a new reality, but we have to fill-in the blanks. The governors asked for this responsibility, now they've got to live up to it. There are mayors that have responsibilities, county officials that have responsibilities.

Every employer in this country that ever made a disparaging remark about the welfare system needs to think about whether he or she should now hire somebody from welfare and go to work, go to the state and say, "Okay, you give me the check, I'll use it as an income supplement, I'll train these people, I'll help them to start their lives, and we'll go forward from here." Every single person needs to be thinking, every person in America tonight who sees a report of this, who's ever said a disparaging word about the welfare system, should now say, "Okay, that's

gone. What is my responsibility to make it better?

Two days ago we signed a bill increasing the minimum wage here and making it easier for people in small businesses to get and keep pensions. Yesterday we signed the Kassebaum-Kennedy bill, which makes health care more available to up to 25 million Americans, many of them in lower-income jobs, where they're more vulnerable.

The bill I'm signing today preserves the increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit for working families. It is now clearly better to go to work than to stay on welfare, clearly better. Because of actions taken by the Congress in this session, it is clearly better. And what we have to do now is to make that work a reality. . . .

Today we are ending welfare as we know it, but I hope this day will be remembered not for what it ended, but for what it began: a new day that offers hope, honors responsibility, rewards work, and changes the terms of the debate so that no one in America ever feels again the need to criticize people who are poor or on welfare, but instead feels the responsibility to reach out to men and women and children who are isolated, who need opportunity, and who are willing to assume responsibility, and give them the opportunity and the terms of responsibility.