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September 22, 2009

Remarks by the President at the Clinton global initiative

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Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 22, 2009

**REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT THE CLINTON GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

Sheraton Hotel

New York, New York

5:15 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Please, please, have a seat. Thank you. Thank you so much. Good evening. And thank you, President Clinton, for the extraordinary brief introduction which (laughter) -- during the U.N. General Assembly week does not happen that often. (Laughter.)

I want to acknowledge Bob Harrison and the outstanding work that he's doing as CEO of CGI -- (applause) -- as well as Ed Hughes, the deputy director of CGI, for their excellent work.

Some of you are aware that last week President Clinton and I were here in New York together, we were having lunch in a small Italian restaurant. And we talked about the economy, we talked about health care, we talked about pressing global challenges. And then he said to me, "Would you pass the Parmesan?" (Laughter.) And then he said to me, "Would you speak to our annual meeting?"

Now, I think everyone knows what it's like when Bill Clinton asks you to make a commitment. (Laughter.) He looks you in the eye; he feels your pain. (Laughter.) He makes you feel like you're the only person in the room. What could I say? I was vulnerable just as all of you have been vulnerable to his charms. (Applause.) So I am happy to be here and honored by the invitation. And I've always appreciated President Clinton's valuable advice and the ideas he's offered my administration. I do understand that the President has been having trouble getting a hold of my Secretary of State lately. (Laughter.) But I hope he doesn't mind, because Hillary Clinton is doing an outstanding job for this nation and we are so proud of her. (Applause.)

I also want to just very briefly take this opportunity to thank President Clinton for his service. In his eight years in office, he helped swing open the doors of opportunity and prosperity to millions of Americans. And as the first U.S. President to face the full force of globalization, he worked to share that prosperity with people around the world -- from promoting trade to expanding education to forging a historic global compact on debt relief.

After a lifetime of service, he would have been forgiven had he settled for a life of quiet, a life of ease, a life of improved golf scores -- my understanding is they have not improved that much since he was in office. (Laughter.) But he chose a different path. He asked, "What can I do to keep making a difference?"

And what an extraordinary difference he, working with all of you, have made. For the victims of disaster, from the Asian tsunami to Hurricane Katrina, he's made a

difference. For those in need, from parents and children battling HIV/AIDS to your efforts today on behalf of the people of Haiti, he's made a difference. It's no exaggeration: Around the world, Bill Clinton has helped to improve -- and save -- the lives of millions. That is no exaggeration. (Applause.)

And this week, even as we gather at the United Nations to discuss what governments can do to confront the challenges of our time, even as we've -- we're joined tonight by so many extraordinary leaders, Presidents and Prime Ministers -- this Global Initiative reminds us of what we can each do as individuals: that you don't have to hold a public office to be a public servant.

That's the beauty of service -- anybody can do it. And everyone should try.

To all the CGI members here tonight, I want you to know how grateful I am for your efforts -- and I know that those efforts require greater commitment at such difficult economic times. Indeed, your work -- and the spirit of service behind it -- is deeply personal to me. I've seen it. I've been shaped by it my entire life.

I first saw it in my mother -- she was an anthropologist who dedicated her life to understanding and improving the lives of the rural poor, from Indonesia to Pakistan. Whether working with USAID or the Asian Development Bank, the Ford Foundation, Bank Rakyat in Jakarta or Women's World Banking here in New York, she championed the cause of women's welfare and helped pioneer the micro loans that have helped lift millions from poverty.

My mother understood that whether you live in the foothills of Java or the skyscrapers of Manhattan, we all share common principles: justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. And we all share common aspirations, for ourselves and our children: to get an education, to work with dignity, and to live in peace and security.

That's where I first saw that spirit. That's who planted it in me. And I saw this spirit again when I moved to Chicago, working as a community organizer on some of the poorest streets in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the United States; in neighborhoods devastated by steel plant closings, I worked with local churches to help people in need. And change didn't come easy, but with a lot of time and effort, it did come -- block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood.

That's when I learned that real progress does not just come from the top down, not just from government, it comes from the bottom up -- from people.

(Applause.) If you want to bring about change in the world, you can't just be an advocate of somebody else doing it. You can't just preach lofty goals and wait for somebody else act. You have to step up. You have to serve.

I've seen this spirit of service in my wife Michelle -- one of the millions of people whose lives has been touched by AmeriCorps, created by President Clinton. She left her job at a law firm to be the founding director of an AmeriCorps program in Chicago that trains young people for careers in public service. I've seen the

transformation that occurs -- in their lives, in hers -- when people are empowered to live their dreams.

And that's the spirit that's represented here tonight -- in the difference that CGI members have made around the world. The greenhouse gases you've cut. The entrepreneurs you've empowered with micro loans. All the people, many of them children, you've helped to lead healthier, more productive lives -- more than 200 million in more than 150 countries.

That's the meaning of service. That's the difference we can make -- when we remember our common humanity, or when we embrace our common responsibilities, when we recognize our common destiny.

Your ability to serve people in the disconnected corners of the world reminds us of another truth. We stand at a transformational moment in world history when our interconnected world presents us at once with great promise, but also with great peril.

The very technologies that empower us to create and build also empower those who would destroy and disrupt -- the extremists in the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan who fuel attacks from New York to London to Bali, from Mombasa to Madrid to Mumbai.

Reckless speculation in any financial sector of the world, or someone's failure to pay a mortgage in Florida, can contribute to a global recession that undermines all of us. Poverty in Somalia, the poppy fields of Afghanistan, the northbound flow of drugs from Colombia and the southbound flow of American guns and cash into Mexico -- all this fuels violence that endangers each and every one of us. A flu that starts in one country can become a pandemic that sickens millions. Carbon emissions from cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are melting the ice caps and imperiling the planet. And by the way, we're joined here by the leader who made that particular truth impossible to ignore -- former Vice President Al Gore, and we owe a great debt of thanks to him. (Applause.)

These are the threats of the 21st century. These are the challenges we face. And just as no nation can wall itself off from the world, no one nation -- no matter how large, no matter how powerful -- can meet these challenges alone. Nor can governments alone. Today's threats demand new partnerships across sectors and across societies -- creative collaborations to achieve what no one can accomplish alone.

In short, we need a new spirit of global partnership. And that is exactly the spirit that guides this organization; I hope that it is the spirit that guides my administration.

Here at home, we've summoned the American people to a new era of service: launching a historic expansion of community service; more than tripling the size of AmeriCorps; creating a new model -- an innovation fund to bring together

nonprofits, foundations, the private sector and government to find the community solutions that work, to fund them and then replicate them across America.

Around the world, even as we pursue a new era of engagement with other nations, we're embracing a broader engagement -- new partnerships between societies and citizens, community organizations, business, faith-based groups. That's why we've been speaking directly to people around the world, including our friends across the Muslim world with whom we've launched a new beginnings based on mutual interests and mutual respect. It's why you've seen Secretary Clinton in so many countries -- at town halls, on local television programs, reaching out to citizens and civil society -- that's why she's created a new initiative to promote global partnerships between business, nonprofits and faith groups to promote development.

In fact, this spirit of partnership is a defining feature of our foreign policy. Because government and the military can work to disrupt, dismantle and defeat terrorist networks. But while the violent extremists only destroy, we have to make it clear the kind of future we want to build. That's why we're investing in people's education, and health and welfare -- as we are doing in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And we need to build new partnerships across regions and religions -- and that requires religious leaders, and NGOs, citizens to help build the good governance, and transparent institutions and basic services upon which true security depends.

We're making historic investments in clean energy and working toward deep cuts in emissions. But we still need business to unleash new innovations and nonprofits to keep up the pressure to end the threat of climate change.

We're making substantial increases in foreign assistance. But we still need civil society to help host nations deliver aid without corruption. Because foreign assistance is not an end in itself. The purpose of aid must be to create the conditions where it is no longer needed -- where we help build the capacity for transformational change in a society.

We're pursuing a comprehensive global health strategy -- building on successes in the fight against HIV/AIDS and working to end deaths from malaria and TB and to end polio. But these efforts will only be sustained if we improve the capacity of public health systems to deliver care, especially for mothers and children.

We're making major new investments in food security. But this can't simply be hand-outs of American food. We need to share new methods and technologies so that countries and communities can become more self-sufficient.

In short, we're renewing development as a key element of American foreign policy -- not by lecturing and imposing our ideas, but by listening and working together; by seeking more exchanges between students and experts; new

collaborations among scientists to promote technological development; partnerships between businesses, entrepreneurs to advance prosperity and opportunity for people everywhere.

That's how we'll confront the challenges of our time. This is how we will seize the promise of this moment in history. Standing together. Working together. And building together.

It's the spirit I've seen in my travels around the world -- in elected leaders and entrepreneurs, the heroic civil society groups, in the students from Ankara to Cairo, from South Bend to Strasbourg -- the optimism and the faith and the confidence that we each can make a difference.

And that's the spirit that I see here tonight. The spirit that says we can rise above the barriers that too often divide us -- country and culture, color and creed, race and religion and region. That we can come together. And that we can leave this world even better, even more hopeful than we found it.

So to all of you, thank you for your vision, for your engagement, for your stick-to-it-ness. As hard as it may be to sustain during these difficult times, your commitments have never been more needed, they have never been more inspired. And I am grateful to President Clinton for having the vision and leadership to help catalyze this extraordinary collection of individuals and the commitments you make that are making such a difference all around the world. Thank you very much, everybody. (Applause.)

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5:45 P.M. EDT

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