

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 8, 2000

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
ON RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE

The South Lawn

10:31 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think the rest of us need to say much. (Laughter.) I want to thank Senator Kennedy and Congressman Gephardt, Congressman Bonior, and all the members of the House who are here with us today. I want to thank the members of the administration who are here, in addition to Mr. Podesta -- Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, Gene Sperling, Deputy Labor Secretary Ed Montgomery. I thank the religious leaders who are here, including Reverend Paul Sherry, the former President of the United Church of Christ; the Reverend David Beckmann, the President of Bread for the World; and the other community leaders.

But most important of all, I want to thank Cheryl Costas for being here, because we're here today on behalf of her and so many people like her all across our country. People who work for the minimum wage often don't get a chance to see the White House. They don't have time to come, even for the public tours. They work hard every day; they stock our store shelves, wash dishes at our restaurants, clean our offices at night, care for our kids during the day. They're in every town and every city in our country. They're of every racial and ethnic and religious group. They have in common the minimum wage. And they need a raise, and as you saw, they deserve a raise.

We are here today to ask Congress to give it to them. Ever since I ran for President in 1992, I've had a vision of making our nation a place where everyone -- everyone -- responsible enough to work for it could have a share of the American Dream. Over the last seven years, with the help of a lot of you here today, we've made a lot of headway toward that goal -- turning the economy around and continuing the longest economic expansion in our history. I want to continue doing that.

I want us not to squander the surplus, but to save Social Security and Medicare, to invest in education and to pay our debt down. I also have tried very hard not just to generate jobs, but to help people who are working hard for less. That's why we expanded the earned income tax credit, and I've asked Congress to expand it again. That's why we passed the Family and Medical Leave law, and I've asked Congress to expand it again. And that's why with

bipartisan support in 1996 we raised the minimum wage to \$5.15 an hour, over two years. And now it's time to do it again, to \$6.15 an hour.

We have bipartisan support again in Congress, but, once again, the Republican leadership is trying to stop us. They know they can't win on the facts. Back in 1996 -- listen to what was said the last time we tried to raise the minimum wage. In 1996, Republican leaders said that a higher minimum wage -- and I quote -- "was a job killer cloaked in kindness." They warned that it would throw young minorities out of work and lead to -- listen to this -- a juvenile crime wave of epic proportions.

Time has not been kind to their predictions. (Laughter.) Today, I release a report from the National Economic Council that puts to rest any of the lingering myths about the minimum wage. Since the minimum wage was raised in 1996, our economy has created over 10 million new jobs. The unemployment rate is at its lowest point in 30 years; the employment of minority youth has gone up, juvenile crime has gone down. We now have the lowest poverty rates in 20 years and the lowest African American and Hispanic unemployment rates ever recorded. We've cut the welfare rolls in half-- and, thanks, in part, to the minimum wage increase, millions have moved from welfare to work, and incomes for even the poorest Americans are rising for the first time in decades.

Now, that's what happened the last time we raised the minimum wage. There are no facts on which to base this opposition anymore. The new report I release today also dispels another myth about the minimum wage, that those who benefit are mostly middle-class teenagers working for gas money. Cheryl probably feels a lot like me -- I wish I were still a middle-class teenager working for gas money. (Laughter.)

But the fact is that 70 percent of the people on the minimum wage are adults, 60 percent are women, and almost half work full-time. Many are the sole breadwinners, struggling to raise their children on \$10,700 a year. And I think Congress ought to think about them when this vote comes up.

Today, there are more than 10 million Americans like Cheryl working for \$5.15 an hour. You heard her say it's hard to live on that -- especially if you have children. But no Americans who work full-time should raise their children in poverty. This modest increase would simply restore the minimum wage to what it was in real dollar terms in 1982. People who are against this should have to confront that fact.

For a full-time worker, however, this would mean another \$2,000 a year. And if you're on the minimum wage, that's real money -- enough money for a family of four to buy groceries for seven months or pay rent for five months.

This is the right thing to do for working families, the right thing to do for our economy, at a time when we've got labor shortages that will draw more people back into the labor market.

Studies from Princeton to my own Council of Economic Advisors show that's exactly what happens when you raise the minimum wage. Increase the reward for work and people who weren't looking for jobs decide to look and go to work.

There are a dozen good reasons to raise the minimum wage, and not a single good argument against it. Even the Republican leadership understands that. So instead of arguing the facts, they're playing legislative sleight of hand. For example, they're now using the minimum wage as a vehicle to repeal worker protections, and pass irresponsible tax cuts that would threaten our fiscal discipline and jeopardize our ability to save Social Security and Medicare and pay the debt down by 2013.

They also say they want to put this in over three years, not two. That would mean \$900 less in wages for a full-time minimum wage worker. If Republican leaders send me a bill that make workers wait for another year for their full pay raise, and holds the minimum wage hostage for risky tax cuts that threaten our prosperity, I'll veto it. (Applause.)

It is time to stop nickel-and-diming the American working people out of the money that they need and deserve. This is just wrong. This is wrong. We have destroyed every single argument against raising the minimum wage. They're gone. All you've got now is legislative game-playing. And it's wrong.

I want a clean, straightforward bill to raise the minimum wage by a dollar over two years, and I intend to sign it. (Applause.)

Let me say to all of you, I am profoundly grateful for the prosperity our nation enjoys today, grateful for the opportunity that our administration has had to play a role in it. But I will never be satisfied as long as there are people like Cheryl out there. I mean, what else can you ask this woman to do? She's kept her family together. Her husband has a disability; she's supporting four kids. She's going to school full-time. Now, how can Congress justify saying no to her?

That's what I want to know. Let's play games on another bill. They're going to pass a lot of other bills. Can't we put the working people of this country first for a change here, put political games second? (Applause.)

I'd like to now introduce to speak the first of a series of members of Congress, without whom this fight could never be waged. And I am profoundly grateful to Representative David Bonior for nearly 25 years of fighting for people like Cheryl Costas.

Congressman Bonior. (Applause.)

* * *

THE PRESIDENT: Ladies and gentlemen, all that needs to be said has been said. But what needs to be done has not been done. So I ask you to leave here remembering the stirring words of our leaders in Congress and the profoundly moving story of Cheryl Costas.

And just remember there's a lot more people like her out there. Remember what Dick Gephardt told you -- just ask every member of Congress to imagine how long they could live on the minimum wage.

This is the right thing to do. We're still here after over 220 years because when the chips are down, we mostly do the right thing, in spite of ourselves. Ask them to do the right thing.

Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

END 10:58 A.M. EST