the front of the microphone and always got there with the exact compromise that was needed to bring our whole body together and that's kind of the way I think of Al. It's with a great pleasure today that I bring to you our president, somebody who Toni Cortese once described as AFT's national treasurer. The president of the American Federation of Teachers, Al Shanker.

ADDRESS BY AFT PRESIDENT ALBERT SHANKER:

ALBERT SHANKER: Thank you, Tom. It's good to be back here for the annual pool. I was told a little earlier today that it's getting to be very complex and I really need to get an explanation before participating, so I'll get your advice for the next time. I would like to start by asking each of you to remember a year ago when this body I think started with some great deal of skepticism as we were about to hear a candidate for president of the United States and one of the things that happened at last year's NYSUT convention as I talked to many delegates after Bill Clinton spoke was that a very
large number pretty much the same thing, I had a lot of doubts or I didn't like him before or he really changed my mind today. It's been quite an event. There are not many cases where a large number of people come together and end up changing their minds. Usually we get angry or we can be more inspired or more committed or we can get a little more knowledge or information, but it's not usual that we change. That was a very different kind of occasion. Most of us had not heard him speak. We had seen him on television on these talk shows or we had seen the little clips and we certainly did not see or heard a talk in which education was related to so many of the other issues in our society. I think at the outset it's very important for all of us to realize that without NYSUT he probably would not be the president of the United States today. The primaries were filled with problems. As it turned out, he suffered a number of losses and the projections were already saying that he's moving backward and had he not done well in this state it probably would have been the end. The work that
all of you did and our members really made a difference. We know it and I think everybody in
the administration knows it because whenever I call up to talk to somebody or walk into an office I can see that American Federation of Teachers sometimes if they are from New York NYSUT they really know what we did, they understand it, they appreciate it. It makes a difference. I think that as the program for this administration moves forward we'll all have reason to feel really good about what we did and we don't have to wait for that because there are already a number of things that have happened. I like all of you and like our members I watch the news in the evening, I pick up the paper in the morning and I get very disappointed when I see what happened to the stimulus package, that involved a very substantial amount of money, chapter one money and summer money which is really going to be missed unless there's some way of reintroducing that, but there are a lot of things that they happen one day and they don't even make headlines or we forget. For example, you'll remember that not very long time ago a whole bunch
of people down south who were plucking chickens and packing them died in a fire. They died because the place was kept locked up and because the safety conditions there were terrible and one of the reasons that happened is that under the Regan and Bush Administrations they got rid of a lot of safety inspectors and instead they employed a lot of inspectors to look at how unions were spending their money on political action. I don’t mind them looking at our books and we get examined quite regularly and we have not made any headlines and we’re very careful and I’m sure that we won’t, but this president of the United States knows that it’s a lot more important to go after people who are putting the lives of their workers in jeopardy, that that takes priority over looking over some of the books of unions. One of the first executive orders of the president was you remember that George Bush made sure that every federal employee received a notice saying that he was not required to belong to a union. Just think about it. Here’s a Federal Government with all sorts of problems and deficits and one of the priority items was to tell
every federal employee that they didn't have to belong to a union. Well, that's ended. When Secretary of Education Reilly was up for confirmation, one of the people on the committee said to him if you're against vouchers, what about having a small experiment somewhere with vouchers and Governor Reilly looked at him and said if something is bad for the country doing it on a smaller scale doesn't make it any better and he just dismissed the idea very quickly. Now we have a proposal from the president which is a combination of taxes and stimulus and I was pleased to be present a few days after his speech before Congress and a number of union leaders and President Clinton managed to bring together a very broad group of people from business and labor to support that program, but it's very clear that unless there is ongoing support that you can't count on the polls and the enthusiasm and the speech that builds up one week. If you wait a week or two or three or four that dissipates. You have to keep working on them. We will see a national health care program proposed in the month of May.
We will see the president proposing to abolish to repeal the current law which says that you have a right to go on strike and you may not be fired for going on strike, but you can be permanently replaced. I don’t quite know what the difference is between being fired and being permanently replaced, but for the first time in many years we have a president who is not only supporting Congress, but is pledged to a commission has been created. Again, it didn’t make headlines, but it should have. An actual commission has been appointed to review the labor laws of this country. You’ll remember that back in the late ’70s we came very close to getting somebody called labor law reform. In Canada which is not very far from here the labor movement is growing. The reason it’s growing is if the union walks in and signs up fifty percent of the members plus, if that union is recognized they don’t have to have an election. In the United States you can get sixty or seventy percent of the employees signed up and then the employer conducts a big campaign, frightens the people and before you know it the
sixty or seventy percent that signed up don't bother voting or they're frightened of voting the other way. This commission is going to look at why it is at least, at least part of their mission is to look at why it is that union movements are larger in other industrial countries whereas in the United States the trend movement is departing. Clearly the implication is there is not a level playing field, that the rules of the game are sort of loaded. That's a pretty gutsy thing for a president to do in the first hundred days to say that we're going to review the labor laws for this country and perhaps come forth with some which will be fairer than the ones that we have now. Today I was asked to be with the president down in New Orleans. I'm here because I couldn't miss the pool. He's moving ahead and very soon we will have this school board transition program, safe schools and a whole bunch of other programs which he has promised. Now, I think it's very important for all of us in this room and our members who are not here today, but with whom we need to communicate to share the idea that when you've got a friendly
administration in office you've got a different set of responsibilities. For twelve years we knew that we could not get a good piece of legislation through, it would be vetoed and in most cases the Congressmen never even bothered to try very hard, why try that hard when you know it's only going to get vetoed in the end anyway, but now we have the possibility of passing legislation. All we had to do was wait for the administration to propose something that was very bad which they did regularly and then get the word out saying here's what they're going to do to you, this is going to be terrible, and start calling your members of Congress and work again. That's not difficult to do when something bad comes along to mobilize people again. Now we're in a very different set of responsibilities. Look what happened in the last two months. We had some very good proposals out there in the stimulus package. A lot of that money would have come to schools. A lot of that money would have been used for programs that would help students and teachers to hire professionals to provide some additional help, care for youngsters.
I'm sure that there was overwhelming support for that program among our members, not all of them. Here's where the rug comes in. I didn't like the idea for assistant president of the United States to propose that federal workers take a pay freeze for two years. That's the unilateral proposal by an employer that a large number of employees be frozen. I thought it was a wrong thing to do. I also thought it would have a negative affect on many of us, that our school boards might very well turn around and say if the president can require federal employees to be patriotic by taking a freeze, how about you, our state and our community is not in very good shape. There may be other parts of it that we didn't like that much. That's the different position you're in when you got an overall package that's good. It's like negotiating an agreement, contract with the Board of Education. When you all finish, there may be one or two or three things in it that you'll like. There's certainly lots of things in it, but it would have been a lot better if you didn't have to negotiate them, but you could have written them.
yourself. A contract is always a compromise and legislation always is too and what happened is that very few of the groups that wanted this legislation to go through mobilized. We didn't do it, other unions didn't do it. As a matter of fact, I think the White House was so confident that this was going to go through that they didn't even call anybody to ask them to do it because they were pretty sure it was going to happen. I think we're learning a lot too. We're learning that when a program comes out that's pretty good and that we like we should wait until all the opponents go out and get the postcards, letters, telegrams in and get their shot and for kids and for teachers and people that we represent and good for the country we should sit back and wait and we're going to have to work for each and every one of these things and we're going to have to go out and explain to our members cases of which they're not going to be that enthusiastic about. That I think is probably the most important job that we're going to have throughout the rest of this administration and I'd like to deal with a few of the issues that are
coming before us which we need to play a very important part. One of the pieces of legislation that undoubtedly will resurface is something that we've been for for many many years and that's the idea that every kid who needs a head start should have a head start and we've been for that for a long period of time. However, throughout the period of Republican rule where we knew that they wanted to cut a lot of programs back, we were pretty quiet, we did not express the views that we're expressing now on some of these programs because we knew that if we said not everything about Carter is so good, we should expand it, yes, we should get more kids on it, but we should do the following because here's what's wrong with it, we knew somebody would grab hold of what's wrong with it and said let's get rid of the whole thing altogether, but now we've gotten an administration that's not going to get rid of it and so one of the things that we can do is be very open, honest and shape up some of these programs that have been there for a long time and they can be improved. About one-third of the Head Start programs across
this country are very good programs, but about two-thirds are not particularly good and they're not particularly good because the wages that they pay are a terrible shame. They are so bad that there is tremendous turnover, people come in, work a few weeks, a month or two, out they go, somebody else comes in and the last thing in the world that youngsters who are in poverty need is this constant movement from one person to another. Another thing that's not good about the program is it's just part of the day. Then perhaps an aunt or mother in the evening and there's constant shuffling of the youngster from one caretaker to another is very destabilizing and very bad. It's not a year-round program, it's not an all-day program and there is no -- basically there are no training programs that are worth anything. We are supporting more money, lots more money to the program, but first priority needs to be take the program we've got now and make it all excellent, make it really good and then experiment. We're working with the administration in terms of trying to do that. Another big one is going to come forward is the reorganization with
the elementary and secondary education. A major part of that is chapter one. When that legislation was first established, the Federal Government was very worried that when the money for kids who are poor kids got to a district the people in power would take that money that was meant for poor kids and they would give it to the kids who weren’t poor because they had more power, more voice, more influence in the system and so the way the law was designed to say to always spend this money on the kids who are supposed to get it and in most places that meant that the kids had to be pulled out for periods of time to get special instruction and of course when they were pulled out they missed the regular instruction and there’s a lot of research now that shows that most of these programs are not working for precisely that reason. What you’re getting, you’re getting some plus in the program, but then the minus from the program and therefore there is likely to be a big overhaul and the overhauls are going to be something like this, we’re not going to tell you how to use that money any more, we’re going to give it to you and you can
use it but we’re going to hold you responsible because we’re not going to tell you what the rules and regulations are any more, we’re not going to be bureaucratic any more, we’re going to let you use it any way you think is going to improve the achievement of these youngsters, but in exchange for letting you use that money we’re going to hold you responsible and we expect that these youngsters are going to improve and if they don’t improve something is going to happen. Now, what that is we don’t know yet, but that’s a set of proposals that we’re going to need to work out with the administration and it’s going to be tough because there are a lot of anti-teacher groups out there who essentially want a piece of legislation that’s going to end up being very punitive and very hostile teachers without -- one of the proposals was they either divide the school up in four parts, the top achievers, the next to top, the third and then the bottom and the school would be considered a failure unless students in all four groups make progress. Well, we haven’t made any educational progress in this country over twenty years. I
would think if you can make progress with
one-fourth of the kids you would be doing more than
we've done in twenty years, but here the proposal
here is that unless you make progress with all four
groups of kids you get punished, silly things like
that. That's going to be one. Look out. We will
be getting lots of material to you. We will be
informing you and please inform your members
about -- and as proposals in the Congress what the
hot issues are. There's another hot issue and that
is how much money. There is now an increase in the
number of children in poverty in California.
There's no decrease here, but the fact that the
proportions have changed will mean that New York
State will lose a huge amount of money unless
chapter one gets more money. In other words, why
should we say that just because more kids are
moving to California from other countries, we still
have all of our kids who got special problems.
there's no reason why we should take that money
from our kids and provide enough for the new ones
in California and keep the money that we have for
our kids who still need it. That's going to be a
big fight because of the entire budget deficit
situation, but it's one that we need to get ready
for. I'd like to spend a few minutes on the
national health care proposal. I was worried at
first that the administration was going to come in
with some sort of very modest proposal, something
that would be sort of a health care for people who
didn't have any health care and that it would be
something that would not help most of us because
most of us with all the problems we've got with
health care, namely increase in deductibles and
increase in co-pays and frequent negotiations with
efforts to take back and the squeeze where we got
if we want to keep our health benefits up we have
to suffer in terms of salary increases, with all
those problems by and large our members and for the
most part across the country have some of the best
health plans that anybody has in our country and so
we were concerned that the Federal Government would
create a mild plan which would make ours look so
rich that there would be pressure to move ours
down. Well, from the meetings that we have had.
we've had a number of meetings with Hillary Clinton
and we've had a number with the other people who are working on the team who developed the program, the latest that we have is it's going to be a very good national health care program, that it's going to be one that our members would be happy to be part of. They're not going to say that's okay for someone that doesn't have anything, but keep me out of it. It looks like they're going to come out with something which is very bold and very brave. The philosophy they have is the one successful program we got in this country that is very well protected is Social Security because everybody pays into it, everybody feels that's something I'm going to get when I retire and if somebody tries to go after it everybody is out to protect it and the philosophy that the Clinton Administration has with respect to health care is we'd like to create a health care program that the American people like so much that if anybody comes after it four or five, eight, ten, fifteen years from now it's going to be like coming after Social Security, people are going to say that's a great health plan and I want to keep it intact. There will be, however, some
things in it that may be better than what some of us have now and there will be other things in it that may not be as good. The important thing to understand is that we are not going to hold on to the plan that we now have because they have gone from proportioning eight percent up to thirteen, fourteen percent now, had it up to twenty-two percent, but costs are escalating very rapidly, we’re not going to be able to afford, the bubble will burst and if we pay more it’s going to be by getting those salary increases or by actually working backwards on salary. There’s no way we can maintain it without creating a new plan which has cost controls, so that’s what this is about. There will be a tremendous fight on this. It started already. You can be sure that it’s going to be a tremendous fight. I can tell you the UFD for many years has managed a health and welfare fund and one of the parts of the health and welfare plan is a prescription drug plan. You go to a pharmacy, almost every pharmacy, and you go in and for a very small amount of money you get your prescription drugs. Well, some of these pharmacists decide that
they will cheat the union. There are a number of things that they can do where they are essentially taking money from the unions' welfare fund without actually providing the services that the union has contracted with and the union has a bunch of pharmacists working for the union and the union analyzes these things and from time to time we were able to discover that a pharmacist was cheating. We had the right to go in and examine the person's books and what we found out the pharmacist was cheating. We would generally take him into court and we will also suspend him from the plan, you are cheating out the teachers, that money belongs to all of them and when you take that money and use it for something we would be throwing away money that's there for everybody, you're stealing from our members is what it amounts to, you're not part of this plan any more. The next day somebody would come downstairs, walk into this pharmacy, one of our members and the pharmacist didn't say I was cheating from you so I'm not in the plan any more. He would say, your union is very good for teachers, you want them to get higher salaries and
everything, they treat us so shabbily, they don’t want to give us decent amount of profits so that we can pay our employees enough money and so we’ve gotten out of the plan and you want to get your prescription filled for this nominal fee you’re now going to have to walk to some other pharmacy because we’re out. Well, what do you think happened? Well, the member was very angry. First of all, the member thinks we are mistreating the pharmacist. Secondly, that member now can’t just walk downstairs and get the baby’s medicine. They have to walk four blocks. That’s a great inconvenience. What happens? That member goes to the school and says to all the other members do you know what the union’s doing, my pharmacist told me a lot of pharmacists are going to get out of this thing because they’re mistreating pharmacists and before you know it we have to send representatives out to a hundred schools to talk to teachers and tell them that we’re not mistreating pharmacists. The relationship between doctors and their patients is a very intimate one and when your doctor tells you that there’s something you need and you’re not
going to be able to get it address that little phrase, that little expression is going to be enough to turn a lot of our members into opponents. The only thing that’s going to get a good proposal through is cost education on the part of our members during this whole campaign. Without us and without other people like us in similar organizations, it’s not going to go through. I know the polls right now show seventy-five percent of the American people are afraid they’re going to lose their coverage. We haven’t seen the campaign yet. All of us who watch the president speak to Congress, I was sure that the whole package was going to go through and we saw the polls the next day, we saw the people be interviewed and we saw the president going on for campaign. Sure, it was a done deal, right? Right now it’s a dead deal. Health care will be a dead deal unless we take it as something which is not just the president’s proposal to the Congress, but we ought to go forward and put on a tremendous campaign to make sure that it goes through. Now, in this range of issues, there’s going to be a lot of tough points.
For instance, schoolwork proposal, apprenticeship. They can do it in Europe. It's going to be very difficult to do here. When new employees are training as apprentices, the unions over there are not worried that the company is going to hire the apprentice at a lower wage and try to get rid of the unionized workers. Actually it's the unionized workers over there who do the training, train the apprentices. In the United States of course that's quite different. A lot of these things are going to have to be worked out. There is going to be a conflict in the Congress on the whole issue of dues in education. The administration has taken a very good position on this, but there are members of Congress who believe very strongly I believe very wrongly that you can't raise standards for youngsters unless you make sure that all the youngsters have an absolutely equal opportunity to learn. They've got a point. They're not typically even in tough areas, but they certainly show us how bad things are and something certainly needs to be done about that, but the fact is that some kids are always going to have advantages over other kids.
If we gave every kid in the United States a computer or if every kid had a computer some parents would use their own money and give their kids private computer lessons so they that get additional instruction over what they get in school. Foreign languages and the arts have just been added in the legislation to the national goals and that's going to be a very good thing. There will be kids who got to try to learn the foreign language in a few hours of classroom and there will be some parents that take their kids to another country for a couple months and give them the experience of using the language, so the idea that we can't have any standards in this country until every single issue is taken care of and we've got to remember that while we have temporarily pushed back the school voucher it's still there. The people of California will have a referendum on this, Illinois has proposals in the legislature. They came very close to passing the Pennsylvania legislature last year. We're not out of the woods on this. It's great to have a president going across the country saying good things about
teachers and about schools and about standards and new assessments or whatever and speak against private school vouchers. That all helps, but still it’s a movement within states and it’s a movement within localities and unless we can convince parents and citizens of this country that things are going to change in the next ten years they will look for other answers even if the answers are wrong. That’s another one. I can’t see many of our members writing letters to members of Congress saying we want legislation that supports high standards and better assessments. Very hard to get teachers to sit down and write. Now I’d like to spend just a few minutes talking about relations with the National Education Association because you’ve undoubtedly read these in Education Week and elsewhere, most of which -- well, some of them sort of indicated that were on the verge of merger for teacher unity, national. That is not so. What is so is this. We sat down and we said you got the most here, you take them, we’ve got the most here, we’ll take these, we don’t have anything here, let’s go and do it together and nobody spent
millions of dollars and we're basically doing it peacefully. We are instead of trying to beat each other to the gun and going to the president and Congress, we do a lot of things together. It's more effective that way. The AFT has had a committee and that committee is going to report to its convention and then we'll probably take a step, a big small step or a small big step, but it's just a step. Basically I think it's going to say that they're going to spend next year rethinking the question about what their relationship should be to the AFL-CIO or to the AFT, that they're not looked at in a long time, they're going to look at it again. I think it will propose that they meet with us and with the AFL-CIO to have these discussions. I think that's perfectly fine. We're working all together, we're cooperating, we work very closely together and engage in a joint campaign. Well, these are the challenges before us. As I indicated, we're going to have a lot of exciting pieces of legislation as you can see. Bill Clinton is not a person who says I can only handle one thing at a time. He's handling a lot. The
criticism may be too much. I don’t think it’s too much in terms of what the country needs. If we’re all in there working, it won’t be too much in terms of what can actually be dealt with and what could be passed, but for us it’s just going to be a tough period, but an exciting one. It’s tough because we’re not going to get any of these things without substantial and massive member support and involvement. We could see that now with the Congress, with the way the press handles everything which they think is a tiny little mistake. These things are not going to be easy. These are all things we could not have and would not have them during previous administration. The answers would have been very clear. We would have been losers on them. Here we have a chance to be tremendous winners, but it’s a chance and only a chance. Whether we’re winners in that chance depends on whether we can mobilize all of our members for each of these pieces of legislation the same way that we mobilize them to support the election of Bill Clinton. I’m here to urge you when you get these messages from Washington that we’re going to send
in the messages that mean that whether or not we’re in and in strong is going to make the difference of life and death. When you get those, please get the message out and we can have a great four years. Thank you again for your support and good luck.

THOMAS HOBART: I know that when Al finishes speaking there’s a rush to the doorway, but since it is about three minutes to six if you wait three minutes we can recognize some of the people that are with us today. I’d like to introduce to you Arnold Gardner. Arnold is the vice chairman of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York. He’s from Buffalo. He’s a very old friend. He was the president of the Buffalo Board of Education when I was president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. We learned about employee management relations early on. I also would like to introduce to you representing the bargaining units of the employees of NYSUT Bea who is the president of Local 1141 WCA. From PSA, the Professional Staff Association George Rubenstein. George. From the AFT, the regional director Sandy Nelson. Sandy. The director of higher education