

9-14-99
Great Neck Senior Center

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Great Neck, New York

September 14, 1999

I want to thank the citizens of Great Neck for the wonderful (inaudible) that is being done to celebrate the Millennium and I'm very proud of that Mayor and I'm also delighted to be here with Tom DiNapoli who I've been with (applause) and Tom has done a wonderful job and certainly has been a great advisor and counsel to me and I want to thank Barbara Reed and everyone who is a part of this very impressive Center. I've been looking forward to coming and to having a chance to talk with you and hear about the concerns of the people of Great Neck and the particular concerns of older citizens, which are of particular interest to me.

I want to start by saying something about what's going on in Washington right now because often times we forget that what happened there is very important to the quality of life that we will have here in New York and our country. And today after some very tough decisions that have been taken by the President and his administration, leaders like Bob Rubin and Larry Plumpers and others who have been disciplined about our financial situation and because of the hard work of millions and millions of Americans, we are in the midst of a time of unprecedented prosperity. I mean it is a blessing to be an American at the end of this century and we all have to be grateful for that. Unemployment is at its lowest level since seven decades, and for the first time in a generation we have a government budget surplus at the Federal level so this is a unique and very precious opportunity.

But it is an opportunity that confronts us with a fundamental choice. Will we use this time of National prosperity to address some of the great challenges that still remain? Will we meet our responsibilities both to the generations to come and our children as well as to the older generations who have honored us with their commitment and responsibility for so long? Will we, therefore, honor our parents and our grandparents by saving Social Security and Medicare, the lifeline that so many Americans rely upon, or will we squander this opportunity? Now there is nowhere that the debate is more stark or more important than when it comes to

Medicare.

We face the very welcome prospect of a trillion dollar surplus over the next ten years. But currently, Medicare is due to become insolvent in the year 2015. And looking from my perspective at this audience most of us will be here in 2015. It's a very affable looking group with a lot of energy in it and it's not very long, just 16 years from now. Think about it. But if we become insolvent in 2015, then not only all of us who are here today, but all those Baby Boomers like myself and my husband are going to be reaching retirement age and, therefore, eligibility for Medicare in 2015 will find ourselves along with everyone else facing some even more difficult choices.

So Medicare deserves our attention and the benefits that it offers require modernization because, for example, Medicare offers no prescription drug benefits and 13 million seniors currently lack such coverage. So therefore I believe as the President does that we must extend Medicare's life by additional decade and offer a prescription drug benefit to all our Seniors. Now if I had come here five years ago and said that I think everyone would have wondered how could we do that? But we have the means to do it today. We can do this by investing a portion of the surplus, 15%, to extend Medicare solvency to first quarter of the next century, 2027, and to provide a prescription drug benefit.

Now in contrast to what the President's plans are and what I would like to see done and what the Democrats in Congress are supporting, the other Party has a tax and budget plan that does not invest a single penny in Medicare. Instead, it spends the entire surplus on a risky tax plan that threatens the economic prosperity we have and would return us to the era of webbed feet.

These are very real contrasts but they are not just contrasts in Washington and are a debate that is going on there, this will directly affect New Yorkers. There are 2.7 million Medicare beneficiaries in New York today. By the year 2025, a year that Medicare would be insolvent if we don't act, there will be 3.3 million New York Seniors on Medicare, a 38% increase. And that is a growth that is four times greater than the general rate of projected growth of the population in New York. If we don't extend the life of Medicare what do we say to these 3.3 million future Seniors? Also, in New York today

there are roughly 2 million Seniors who have no significant prescription drug benefits.

Now I know there are Seniors who are fortunate enough either through their pension plans that still provide some services to have prescription drugs or who are on a plan that does that. But nearly 2 million do not. And I think that we know from our experience that for many Seniors who have large prescription drug costs, it becomes a great financial burden to be able to take care of that. I have met so many Seniors, I've been all over New York as you may know in the last two and a half months, and I've had people come up to me holding their prescription drug bills and giving them to me, and giving me their utility bills, and giving me their rent or their mortgage payments, and asking me how on earth they can afford to can keep all of this in some kind of financial balance?

Well, I think we can do better by leaders in New York and throughout America. And the President's plan has specific reflections for low-income Medicare beneficiaries who would not be able to pay any premiums anyway for a prescription drug plan. And there are about a half a million Medicare beneficiaries in New York, 436,000 older men and women, who are close to or in poverty.

So I think there is a real difference in the debate that is going on in Washington. A difference between a plan that meets our obligations to our Seniors, our parents, our grandparents and a plan that simply doesn't. I believe that the Republican plan which they say will be sent to the President probably tomorrow would be in effect a statement that reacts us to cut and run on our obligations to older Americans. It would break our faith with the Seniors of New York and I would fight it if I were in the Congress now but as citizens I hope all of you would fight it as well because we have such a great opportunity and we should take advantage it to solve our problems.

I was talking with my mother the other day because she was asking me what I thought about all of this. She's 80 years old and thankfully in good health and as we were talking she kept saying I don't understand why people don't invest in the future, make the changes we know are needed. Your father would never do that. My late father, Gordon, didn't believe in credit cards so he never would have done well in the Federal government. But the point for my mother and for so many

people with whom I speak is you have this opportunity let's
not play politics with it, let's be responsible and meet our
obligations.

Thank you very much.