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Greeting the Future with an Outstretched Hand

President William J. Clinton[†]

When I became President in 1993, America and the world were entering an era of unprecedented interdependence. Throughout my two terms, I tried to prepare our nation as best I could for success in the twenty-first century—to embrace the forces of integration sweeping our globe, reconcile the oldest hatreds that had been plaguing mankind for centuries, and help people take advantage of new opportunities to earn a good living for themselves and their families. Twenty years later, our fates are even more closely bound to those of people living thousands of miles away. Whenever anything happens anywhere, we are all a part of it. Trade, travel, investment, and information circle the globe instantaneously, accompanied by the consequences—both good and bad—of our decisions and events beyond our immediate control.

The benefits of our interdependence are all around us. In the twenty-five years leading up to the 2008 financial crash, the global economy helped more people break the chains of poverty than any other time in history. There have been remarkable advances in global health. The rise of the Internet and mobile technology has created new platforms for economic empowerment in the developing world, enabling people in remote locations to access banking services and other financial tools for the first time in their lives. It's also made it easier for people to participate in politics, and harder for oppressive governments to quiet dissent. The ease with which we can cross national borders, both physically and virtually, has made societies around the world more diverse and has helped us better understand our common humanity. Explorations of the human genome and advancements in nanotechnology are teaching us

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more about ourselves and how we can better identify and fight illness. It's an exciting time to be alive.

But despite the advantages of living in this new age of discovery, our world is threatened by three major challenges.

First, there is still too much inequality in incomes—both within and across borders—and in access to the basic systems that give people the opportunity to succeed. Half the world's people live on less than two dollars a day. Two and a half billion people have no access to basic sanitation, and one billion have no access to clean water. One quarter of all deaths on the planet result from AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and infections related to dirty water—diseases that are especially devastating to the poor. More than 100 million children never go to school, and an even larger number attend schools without proper learning materials or adequately trained teachers. This is not only a burden on our conscience; it is a severe constraint on growth.

The possibility of getting ahead is necessary to reward talent and promote innovation, but when large segments of the population face a steeper climb than others, it holds back an entire country's potential. This is true for developing economies as well as wealthy nations like the United States. Even before the economic crisis hit in September 2008, the U.S. was struggling with declining job creation, growing income inequality, increasing poverty, and rising costs, especially in health care and higher education. From the day I left office to the day of the crash, 90 percent of income gains went to the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans, while the median family income, adjusted for inflation, decreased by \$2,000. It's no coincidence that the economy only produced 2.5 million jobs during this period, as a growing number of citizens saw their opportunities to take risks, change careers, and start businesses disappear. As the jobs crisis deepened, the slowdown made these problems even worse—just as it did in virtually every nation, rich or poor, around the world.

The second major challenge of the twenty-first century is that there is too much instability in our economic, political, and security systems. Any system based on the free exchange of ideas, goods, and services requires some inherent degree of flexibility, but if there is too much instability, investment, lending, and borrowing shuts down in the face of fears and uncertainty. And because information crosses borders instantaneously in our interdependent world, things can shut down in a hurry.

The economic crisis offers one of the best examples. The crash began in the U.S., where banks made too many risky gambles—especially on mortgages and their derivatives—with insufficient capital reserves and too little government oversight, and quickly spread to the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, and other European economies. Then, countries that rely heavily on exports found that the markets in the U.S. and Europe were crippled and began shedding manufacturing jobs—China alone lost 35 million. Unresolved issues resulting from the financial crash continue to be significant factors in the slow pace of the recovery. When banks began building back their cash reserves, they were afraid to lend money and people were afraid to borrow it. We went from a climate where credit was given too freely for bad subprime mortgages to one where people found it extremely difficult to finance anything.

The instability of our modern world is evidenced in many other ways: our vulnerability to acts of terrorism perpetrated by people who know they cannot win a conventional fight; cyber threats with the potential to paralyze our banking system or our electrical grid; political violence that topples governments and causes destruction and loss of life; and the speed with which local outbreaks of disease can become global epidemics. We must continue to find ways to minimize these risks.

The third major challenge we face is that our current methods of producing and consuming energy are unsustainable—and the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that they are depleting local resources and causing our climate to change in dangerous ways: temperatures are increasing, species are disappearing, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent, sea levels are rising, and ice caps are melting. Just last year, NASA recorded melting on 97 percent of Greenland's ice sheet—the highest figure in more than a century, and about twice the historic average. Greenland's ice contains 8 percent of the freshwater on Earth, and if it all melts and flows into the North Atlantic, it could block the Gulf Stream and make everything within 500 miles of the equator hotter while northern Europe becomes as cold as it was in the Little Ice Age 700 years ago.

Insured losses from natural disasters have tripled in each of the last two decades. In the U.S., we've seen tornadoes hit further and further north with increasing frequency and severity, devastating communities in Missouri and Oklahoma and even striking places like New York and Massachusetts, where

they've historically been extremely rare. Climbing temperatures are causing more powerful hurricanes, and rising sea levels are making storm surges higher and more destructive. A recent report issued by New York City estimated that by 2050, a quarter of the city's land would be in a flood zone. "Once in a century" storms like Katrina and Sandy are not likely to be the worst we see in our lifetimes.

Perversely, the people bearing the most adverse effects of climate change are also the world's poorest and most vulnerable. The World Health Organization estimates that the effects of climate change are responsible for about 140,000 additional deaths every year worldwide, with Africa being hit the hardest. Frequent floods don't just cause drowning deaths and property destruction—in developing countries they contaminate drinking water and provide a breeding ground for mosquitoes. As a result, infection rates of diarrhea, cholera, dysentery, and malaria soar—all of which often prove fatal in countries without adequate health infrastructure. The intense droughts brought on by climate change in some parts of the world also cause famine and food insecurity. These crises are especially disastrous in developing countries that lack the basic capacity to store bumper crops or the transportation systems to distribute from areas of abundance to areas of scarcity.

The challenges we face are daunting, but not insurmountable if we begin with the right end in mind: a world of shared opportunity, shared responsibility, and a shared sense of community. We no longer live in a zero-sum world; humanity is destined to rise or fall together; our differences are important, but our common humanity matters more.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of every citizen and every nation to maximize the positive forces of our interdependence and minimize the negative ones. The challenge is different for developing and developed countries. Developing countries need basic systems that provide security, predictability, and opportunity—health systems, economic systems, education systems, legal systems, and government service systems. Wealthy countries already have those systems, but must constantly work to reform them. Over time, they atrophy, as the people running them and those benefiting from them become more interested in holding on to their power rather than advancing the purposes for which the systems were established; more interested in holding on to present gains than creating future opportunities.

In every country, regardless of the challenges of providing the appropriate responses, the best outcomes are born of creative cooperation—when people in business, government, and non-governmental organizations work together to solve problems and seize opportunities. One of the most encouraging trends of the past two decades has been the explosion of the NGO movement in all parts of the world. NGOs have always stepped in to fill the gap between what the private sector can produce and the public sector can provide, and in the twenty-first century they are playing an increasingly large role in determining how to solve problems faster, better, and at lower cost through creative networks of cooperation.

Some of the most impressive examples of creative cooperation are related to the development of clean energy, in which intelligent investments are giving countries like Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands faster growth and lower unemployment rates, while slowing resource depletion and cutting greenhouse gas emissions. In a time when much of the world is struggling to create jobs, sustainable energy and greater efficiency should be priorities for every nation—especially the U.S., which has enormous capacity to generate electricity from the sun and wind, and to lead a global push to reduce more rapidly dispersing greenhouse gases, as President Obama and President Xi pledged to do with hydrofluorocarbons at their recent summit.

Costa Rica, thanks to a coordinated effort to become the greenest country in the world, already generates 92 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, and hopes to soon reach 100 percent by tapping its geothermal potential. They've protected 26 percent of their land as national parks and increased total forest cover from 41 percent to 52 percent in just a decade. Costa Rica's ecotourism sector is booming, and their per capita income is more than twice the Central American average. This success has only been possible because people from all parts of society, and across the political spectrum, have worked together toward a shared goal.

Brazil, which had significant economic growth and declining inequality over the last decade, has also dramatically reduced rainforest destruction, aggressively prioritized its cane ethanol production, and introduced innovative sustainability projects in its cities. They've accomplished this in part through some of the most inclusive policy debates I've ever seen, involving government, utilities, business and labor, biofuel companies

and sugarcane growers, environmental advocates, and representatives of rainforest tribes. Mexico has dramatically improved the air quality in Mexico City and closed its largest landfill with similar forms of inclusion and cooperation, while also enjoying robust growth, increasing numbers of college graduates, and declining inequality.

Our world will only continue to get smaller as the positive and negative forces of interdependence pull us closer together. Success in the twenty-first century will depend on whether we choose cooperation over conflict and pursue policies that make our global society more equitable, stable, and sustainable. It will depend on whether we accept the great convergence of identities, races, and religions as an opportunity to celebrate our common humanity instead of retreating to timeworn conflicts. It will depend on whether we greet the future with an outstretched hand or a clenched fist. The choice is ours.