

PRESIDENT REBUTS SOME G.O.P. THEMES ON ECONOMIC WOES

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Body

Directly challenging some of the Presidential campaign themes of California's Republican Governor, President Clinton today told a cheering crowd here that immigration, affirmative action and welfare were not responsible for the economic distress of the middle class.

In a day that strongly resembled a Labor Day campaign kickoff, in a state crucial to his re-election hopes, Mr. Clinton said the answers to stagnant wages lay instead with a higher minimum wage and more education and training programs for workers, two initiatives the White House has advocated against Republican opposition. And he reminded his listeners to remember their roots.

"We should never, ever permit ourselves to get into a position where we forget that almost everybody here came from somewhere else and that America is a set of ideas and values and convictions that makes us strong," the President said to cries of support from more than 10,000 people.

Mr. Clinton came to California, a state that has lagged much of the nation in economic recovery, to dedicate a new state university at Monterey Bay. The university is at the former site of Fort Ord, an Army post that was closed in 1994.

The President did not mention the state's Governor, Pete Wilson, by name. But he stepped squarely onto the turf of Mr. Wilson, who has based much of his campaign for the 1996 Republican Presidential nomination on a crackdown on illegal immigration and an end to racial preference programs, as well as budget cutting and tough laws against career criminals.

Mr. Clinton noted that despite a thriving economy the median wage had dropped by 1 percent over the past 30 months. "In the next year or so, all of you are going to have to decide what you think the answer to this wage problem is," he said. "There are people who will tell you that the answer, the real reason middle class wages are stagnant, is that welfare people are taking all your money away or that we have too many immigrants, or that affirmative action is destroying opportunities for the middle class."

Mr. Clinton conceded that the country had too many illegal immigrants, that an overhaul of welfare was needed and that some affirmative action programs had to be changed. But, he said, "that's not the real reason for the middle class economic anxieties."

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In a jab at Mr. Wilson, he said: "We've done what we could to close the borders and send people back. But you know what? This is a nation of immigrants. Most of us do not have ancestors who were born here."

Freshly sunburned and appearing rested after three weeks of vacation, Mr. Clinton also looked toward the confrontation looming with the Republican-dominated Congress over the budget. Advocating his own plan to balance the budget over 10 years, he said, "The decisions made in the next 60 to 90 days will determine what kind of country we're going to be in the 21st century."

Mr. Clinton carried California in 1992 with 46 percent of the vote, and he has marked its significance to his re-election chances by returning here 19 times since he became President. Yet another visit is planned in two weeks for fund-raising events in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Mr. Clinton spoke of a Japanese-American veteran with whom he had played golf in Hawaii, where he had gone over the weekend to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. The man, the President said, had fought for America although he had been placed in an internment camp and two of his brothers were in uniform in Japan. One of the atomic bombs dropped in Japan damaged the man's former home and his mother and youngest brother subsequently died of radiation poisoning.

"There's not another country in the world that could tell that story," the President said. "Why? Because people all over the world wanted to be part of what is America. And we should never forget that."

On affirmative action, the President said he opposed quotas and reverse discrimination. "But I am for making a conscious effort to bring the American people together," he added.

Despite his strong defense of immigrants today, Mr. Clinton has called for a crackdown on illegal immigration at the border. And he has endorsed a recommendation of a commission on immigration reform, headed by former Representative Barbara Jordan of Texas, that legal immigration into the United States be sharply reduced.

In an interview with The San Jose Mercury News given on his way to California, he said, "You can make a good case for a modest reduction of the quota on legal immigration."

Mr. Wilson was out of the state today, in Washington to hold fund-raisers and make speeches on the topic of welfare. The state's Democratic Lieutenant Governor, Gray Davis, attended the Monterey dedication as acting governor.

Asked later why the President had not criticized Mr. Wilson by name, the White House spokesman, Michael D. McCurry, said, "It's still 1995." But the day had 1996 written all over it.

Mr. Clinton's decision to visit Monterey Bay, for example, highlighted the Federal Government's role in helping to convert some of California's many shuttered military bases to profitable new uses. When Fort Ord was shut in September 1994, nearly 17,000 jobs were lost, creating a local unemployment rate of 20 percent. The new college is part of a government-private sector plan to build back the local economy.

Later in the day, at a more partisan Labor Day picnic in Alameda County, the President announced the award of a \$3.4 million Federal grant to a consortium seeking to build electric cars at the former Alameda Naval Air Station on San Francisco Bay.

And in Monterey he sought, candidate-style, to cast himself as a political outsider allied with the common folk rather than the occupant for nearly three years of the most powerful post in the nation.

"You couldn't run a family, a business, a university, a church, a civic organization; you couldn't run anything in this country the way people try to run politics in Washington, where talking is more important than doing," he said, drawing laughter and applause.

On Tuesday, the President plans to teach a history class at the Abraham Lincoln Middle School in Selma, Calif., before flying back to Washington.

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