

Inaugural address

of

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Inaugural Address

"Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Court, Members of the General Assembly, honored guests, and fellow Vermonters:

"I would like to begin by reading from a poem by Ina J. Hughes:

"We pray for children --

"who sneak popsicles before supper,

"who erase holes in math workbooks,

"who can never find their shoes.

"And we pray for those --

"who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,

"who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,

"who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead,

"who never go to the circus,

"who live in an X-rated world.

"We pray for children --

"who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,

"who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money."

"I come before you for the *sixth* time to report that the state of our State -- and the future of our children -- continue to improve.

"We have weathered the economic storms of the first half of this decade. Our economy is stronger, with 27,000 new jobs created since I took office.

"We have increased the take-home pay of working Vermonters by increasing the minimum wage. We have made significant investments in the health and safety of our children. And we have reformed our welfare system with a compassionate, Vermont solution that protects children.

"We have established a *rainy day* fund which will cushion Vermonters against the blows of the inevitable recession of the future. We have cut the income tax to better compete with other states for the jobs of the future.

"And we have set aside 51,000 acres of farmland, shorefront, and forest land --free forever from development -- to preserve what we know to be the essence of Vermont.

"Together, we have done this for our children and for their futures.

"And how are our children doing?"

"Vermont is first in the nation in childhood immunizations and second in the percentage of children under the age of 18 with health care coverage. We have cut child abuse by a staggering 30 percent over the last four years. The teen pregnancy rate is down 20 percent. And, Vermont is fourth in the nation in establishing paternity in child support collection efforts.

"Dr. Dynasaur, our health care program for children, is receiving national recognition. This is a program that needs to be embraced by the President and the Congress. Providing health care to children is dirt cheap -- and it's the right thing to do. I intend to work with the President and our Congressional delegation to spread the word about Dr. Dynasaur and give children in other states the same opportunities available to Vermont's kids.

"We continue to make progress in providing low-income, working Vermonters with access to health care. With your support, we recently expanded the Vermont Health Access Plan so that thousands more loggers, convenience store clerks, farmers and other Vermonters can have the peace of mind that comes with health care coverage.

"And I'm pleased to report that the free clinic in Randolph has gone out of business. The good work of this clinic is no longer needed because so many community members who depended on free care now have health insurance through Dr. Dynasaur and the Vermont Health Access Plan.

"I remain committed to universal health care -- for all Vermonters -- and for all Americans.

"Health care reform, Vermont style, is making health care more accessible.

"Welfare reform, Vermont style, is helping families gain independence.

"We are a national model for moving people from welfare to work. Our welfare costs are down dramatically and our caseload has dropped by 14 percent. We require welfare recipients to work and families are now earning more and relying less on public assistance.

"We have reformed welfare over the past two-and-a-half years with Vermont values in mind. We've made the up-front investments in child care, education, transportation and job training necessary for a successful -- and permanent -- transition to self sufficiency.

"Our ground work in health care and children's services will spare Vermont families and children from the painful excesses of the new federal welfare law.

"Over the next several months we will work together on a number of important issues that will affect the futures of our children and our grandchildren:

·2010·We will continue to improve our fiscal health; ·2010

·2010·We will improve the quality of education; ·2010

·2010·We will reduce property taxes; ·2010

·2010·We will help our businesses create jobs; ·2010

·2010·We will change the way we pay for political campaigns; ·2010

·2010·We will improve the way we deal with teen drug abuse; ·2010

·2010·And we will get drunk drivers off our roads. ·2010

Let me be more specific.

"I. The Budget

"I applaud the General Assembly for your leadership last year in controlling spending. That restraint will pay dividends to our children over time and prepare us to better face the next recession. To improve our business climate and provide better job opportunities, we must do *four* things:

·2010·We must continue to restrain spending; ·2010

·2010·We must continue to restrain taxation; ·2010

·2010·We must continue to build our *rainy day* fund to a total of 5 percent of the General Fund;·2010

·2010·And we must maintain the 5 percent reserve in the Transportation Fund.·2010

"Next week I will unveil a budget that will increase state spending by less than the rate of inflation. This will be the fifth budget in six years to grow by less than the rate of inflation. Yet, again we will prove that we can make social progress and build healthy families while continuing our efforts to improve our financial condition.

"II. Economic Development and Jobs

"The best way to have strong families is to help businesses create good jobs.

"Small businesses provide a vast majority of employment opportunities in Vermont. In fact, 85 percent of our businesses have fewer than 10 employees.

"Over the past few years we have established a Small Business Development Center, in which we have invested \$200,000 annually to be matched by federal and local dollars. This investment has helped business owners create 1,750 new jobs and return an additional \$1.2 million to the state in income and sales taxes in a single year. I urge you to continue supporting economic development initiatives that assist small business owners in their efforts to grow and create jobs.

"To help our businesses compete and to support our communities, we propose a legislative package that encourages development in Vermont's downtown business districts.

"Responsible growth means avoiding sprawl.

"Responsible growth means helping communities in their efforts to maintain vital downtowns.

"Incentives in our legislation include sales tax exemptions for materials used in construction, and an income tax credit of 5 percent for rehabilitation of buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. We include income tax credits of 25 percent for rehabilitation of older buildings to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and to address site contaminations, such as lead paint. The plan would offer a myriad of technical assistance and planning grants for downtown development projects, and lower many permit fees for existing buildings in a downtown district.

"One of the most important small business groups in our state is dairy farmers. Belinda Blass is a dairy farmer in Newport. Like all dairy farmers she struggles to make ends meet. She can't afford to pay her electric bills. She owes \$250 in electric bills for her house and another \$1,300 in electric bills for her barn.

"We need to help people like Belinda Blass by lowering electric rates. I am proposing we accomplish this goal by introducing competition in the electric utility industry.

"Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire have already passed legislation and a bill is pending in Massachusetts. We must be with them -- not ahead of them and not behind them.

"In order to help our businesses provide better jobs to support families we must lower electric bills in Vermont.

"I urge you to send me a bill that will reduce electric rates for residential and business customers, and improve consumer and environmental protections. The Department of Public Service and the Public Service Board, as well as members of the General Assembly, have been working on this for two years.

"We have met with residential and business consumers, as well as utilities and the low-income community to develop consensus on the best approach to restructuring this industry.

"I believe we can complete work on this issue during this session. This is our best hope for creating more jobs and helping Belinda Blass and small businesses and consumers like her all over Vermont.

"III. The Environment

"We will continue to conserve and protect farm, forest and recreation land so that our children and grandchildren will know and enjoy the same land that we know.

"This year alone we have opened one new state park and added significantly to another. The Alburg Dunes State Park in Grand Isle includes more than a half-mile of frontage on Lake Champlain and the largest deer wintering yard in northwestern Vermont. We expanded Lowell Lake State Park in Londonderry by acquiring land around one of the last unspoiled lakes in southern Vermont.

"In addition, this fall we completed a conservation project to set aside 31,000 acres in the Northeast Kingdom as working forests with public access to recreation trails.

"We are currently in the process of negotiating land swaps at two ski areas that will result in the permanent protection of important bear habitat and help to unify the northern and southern portions of the Green Mountain Forest.

"Protection of mountain tops will be a primary focus of our efforts to set a state policy on the siting of communications towers in Vermont. Members of my administration and the Environmental Board will work with members of the House and Senate to ensure sound planning in the future siting of telecommunications towers.

"This year we will also set important forestry policy for the State of Vermont. We will support a bill based on recommendations of the Forest Resources Advisory Council. It is time for the Legislature to more closely regulate forestry practices, particularly clear-cutting and herbicide spraying.

"These actions will enable us to continue our commitment to good stewardship of Vermont's natural resources.

"IV. Campaign Finance Reform

"Campaign finance reform is another area in which we can make progress this session. We have an opportunity to reform a system that touches every voter in the State of Vermont.

"Look around this chamber. In order to serve in this building, we have all gone through the same process. Each one of us must raise money to run a political campaign. We spend that money in ways that we hope will convince our constituents to vote for us.

"Over the past eight years campaign spending in Vermont has increased dramatically. In 1988, the highest spending for a state Senate candidate was \$14,500. That figure more than doubled during the 1996 election when one state Senate candidate spent \$30,600.

"Undoubtedly, it will be impossible to return to the days when George Aiken ran his 1956 U.S. Senate campaign for \$1.08. However, I believe it is important that we remove any perception of impropriety in the way money is raised and spent in political campaigns.

"As I've said before, money does buy access and we're kidding ourselves and Vermonters if we deny it. Let us do away with the current system.

"In order to accomplish this goal, I believe we need partial public financing of campaigns. We cannot afford a reformed system that prevents all but the wealthiest of individuals from competing for public office.

"I have worked closely with Representative Karen Kitzmiller to craft what we believe is an excellent campaign finance bill. I am pleased that she and Representative Marion Milne have agreed to sponsor the 1997 campaign finance reform bill.

"Our plan limits the amount of money candidates can spend in both primary and general elections. Campaign contributions -- both in-state and out-of-state -- would be limited. Candidates who do not comply with specified limits are clearly identified for voters in both their campaign advertising and on the ballot.

"This bill levels the playing field without the problems of the current system. Our proposal is ready for your consideration.

"V. Education Reform

"We have talked about some significant issues. But there is one very important issue that I want to discuss today. My principle focus this biennium will be

education. We must continue to improve the quality of education for our children. And we must change the way we pay for education.

"Two-thirds of the fourth-graders in this country are not reading at a level required for success. It is my goal -- and Commissioner Marc Hull's goal -- that every child in Vermont be a competent reader by the end of grade three. We have put money into the budget to improve early reading habits.

"Our education quality plan also uses distance learning technology to expand learning opportunities in rural communities. Thanks to the University of Vermont and others, distance learning is providing 70 students advanced placement English courses and 20 students are receiving advanced placement calculus. And even an advanced course in Russian is being offered in 18 different Vermont schools through distance learning.

"Two-hundred sixty-six schools now have access to the Internet through the state's information network, GovNet; and other schools are on-line through other access providers. However, there are 84 schools that are still not connected to this world-wide learning tool.

"We will continue to support the expansion of these services and other technologies in Vermont schools with financial help from the state.

"With careful work by the House and Senate Education Committees, I expect to focus on restructuring vocational education in the second half of the biennium. We will work to improve the relationship between higher education, vocational education and K-12 education over the rest of this decade.

"I applaud the State Board of Education and Commissioner Hull for instituting statewide testing for every student in Vermont. For the first time, we will have an accurate method of comparing our schools with each other, and with schools around the country.

"I believe the school assessment tests will show two things. First, Vermont schools are better than we think they are. And, second, there are areas in which we can improve significantly.

"Our goal is to empower parents and increase their confidence in their child's school. The single most important predictor of a child's success in school is not how many computers the school has, not how good the teachers are, and not how many books are in the library. The single most important predictor of a child's success in school is the attitude of that child's parents in supporting education.

"We need to convince all parents that our public school system can deliver a good education. And we need to prove to parents that our public education system is worth the taxes that we pay to support our children's education.

"We must reform our property tax system and we must do it in this session.

"While our income tax remains too high, our property taxes are even higher. In order to reduce the property tax burden in Vermont, we will need to raise other taxes.

"It is our charge to raise revenue in a way that will not inhibit our ability to create jobs in Vermont.

"Any new taxes must reduce the property tax.

"And our reform package will not work unless education spending is controlled at both the state and local level.

"I have worked hard with a group of House and Senate leaders on property tax reform. We have used both Democratic and Republican ideas to reach our goal. Next week I will outline the property tax reform plan. I will ask for bipartisan support as this bill works its way through the legislative process.

"This bill must pass this year.

"VI. Teen Drug Abuse

"We have accomplished much in our efforts to improve the lives of children. We will make even more progress if we are able to improve education. But in one area of education, our progress has been completely unsatisfactory. We are failing in our efforts to prevent teen drug abuse.

"Our young people continue to abuse drugs, both legal and illegal, at an alarming rate.

"A 1995 Health Department survey shows a staggering 40 percent of Vermont 8th-graders use alcohol. These are 13- and 14-year-olds. The rate of alcohol use among eighth and tenth graders is on the increase. And after a three-year decline, we are seeing an increase in binge drinking among students in grades 8, 9 and 10.

"Marijuana use is up across all grades in Vermont. This is especially true among the lower grades, where marijuana use more than doubled from 1993 to 1995.

"Drug abuse is the single most reliable predictor of teen suicide. In Vermont, our rate of teen suicide has not shown improvement in 25 years.

"We cannot pretend that we are dedicated to improving the lives of our children if we cannot convince them that abuse of cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs will destroy the quality of their lives.

"I have spent a significant amount of time discussing these issues with children and teenagers. In fact, children often provide the best advice on how we might help them avoid the perils of addiction and abuse.

"And here's what I have learned:

"First, and most importantly, as adults, we have no hope of changing our children's behavior unless we set personal examples. Children learn far more from what we do than from what we say.

"Second, the drug and alcohol abuse education programs which I supported as a member of the General Assembly are not as effective as they can be. We ought to improve drug prevention programs and expand them into high school.

"Teens respond to real life. We ought to bring more individuals who have experienced the pain of drug and alcohol abuse into the classrooms, and we ought to expand peer counseling. This means more support for institutions like the Green Mountain Teen Institute and other prevention programs that train teenagers to educate their peers.

"I will be working with the State Board of Education, the Department of Education, members of the Legislature, law enforcement officials and the Health Department to improve these programs. I welcome your advice and support.

"Third, our tobacco regulations are not sufficient. Today, the state regulates the sale of tobacco products and punishes store owners who sell them to minors. This does not go far enough. Our children are taking up smoking at an alarming rate, especially girls. This is the reason that lung cancer recently surpassed breast cancer as the leading cancer-related cause of death among women.

"We can learn from the residents of Woodridge, Illinois, who decided it was up to them to make a difference in kids' smoking habits. They decided to make children accountable for buying cigarettes in addition to punishing those who sold tobacco products to minors. A city ordinance imposed a \$25 fine for any minor caught purchasing cigarettes. Surveys demonstrated that the number of junior high school students who described themselves as regular smokers dropped from 16 percent to 5 percent in two years.

"This town's success was achieved through community leadership and involvement of dedicated local law enforcement officers. I am proposing that you

pass enabling legislation that would allow Vermont cities and towns to establish initiatives like the one that has been so successful in Woodridge, Illinois.

"VII. Drunk Driving

"Finally, we ought to make it plain that drunk drivers are not welcome on our roads.

"Vermont continues to average more than 40 highway deaths every year because of alcohol-impaired drivers of all ages. Vermont has the dubious distinction of ranking first in the Northeast in per-capita, alcohol-related highway deaths. That is not acceptable.

"During the 1980's, the General Assembly substantially increased the penalties for Driving Under the Influence. We are having some success with first-time offenders who care about the difference between right and wrong. However, we are failing miserably with repeat offenders.

"I've asked several victims of impaired drivers to join us today to underscore the human tragedies that result from our failure to address this problem. Please welcome them.

"Standing before us are -- the daughters and sons, fathers and mothers, wives and husbands, brothers and sisters -- of victims of drunk drivers. Their lives have been changed forever. Their losses cannot be recovered.

"David was one mile from home when the car he was riding in crashed into another car. The force of the crash killed him instantly. David was 17 years old.

"Andy, married and the father of two girls, was killed by an impaired driver on March 19, 1994.

"Eric, 17, was driving with twice the adult blood alcohol level when his car crashed, killing him and a passenger and critically injuring two others.

"Asa lost control of his car and left the highway. He was found dead the next morning. His blood alcohol level was more than twice the legal limit.

"On November 30, 1990, three children -- ages 13, 11 and 5 -- lost their father. And their mother lost her husband. The driver responsible for Spike's death had a blood alcohol content of .086.

"Timothy was killed when he was a passenger in a car driven by an impaired speeding driver.

"He was 20 years old.

"On April 23, 1990, Billy was struck by a drunk driver. It was the driver's 8th DWI conviction. Billy was 20 years old.

"Thank you [victims of impaired drivers] for being here today.

"I propose that we pass a new Driving Under the Influence law to add to the sanctions already in place.

"First offenders with a high blood alcohol content would have their car immobilized. Multiple offenders would face immobilization or confiscation of the car they were driving.

"Today in Vermont, refusing a breath test is often a clever legal maneuver to evade responsibility for drunk driving. Our proposal would make it a crime to refuse a breath test. You can go to jail and you can lose your car.

"There are individuals all over the state who are enabling terrible injuries on the highways by allowing people with chronic alcohol problems to use their vehicles. This is unacceptable. It must stop. And the only way to effectively stop it is by passing this bill.

"I am very grateful to the bipartisan sponsors of this bill. This is a must-pass bill for *this* Legislature *this* year. If we are not willing to support this law, then we are not willing to support these families who come here to share their private pain.

"These are the kinds of laws we need to pass -- and the kinds of policies we need to support -- to protect our children and to help them grow.

·2010·We will continue to improve our fiscal health without abandoning social progress; ·2010

·2010·We will create new jobs so our kids don't have to leave Vermont for a better life; ·2010

·2010·We will preserve and expand our open spaces so our grandchildren's children will know the Vermont that we know; ·2010

·2010·We will change education to help our kids compete for better job opportunities and help us parents pay for that education; ·2010

·2010·We will reduce teen drug abuse so children can reach their full potential; ·2010

·2010·And we will get drunk drivers off our roads to spare our families the pain these courageous families have shared with us today. ·2010

"And, when we leave this building in May, we will be able to say that these are the actions we took on behalf of our children.

"To conclude, I return to the poem by Ina Hughes.

"We pray for children

"who spend their allowance before Tuesday,

"who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,

"who like ghost stories,

"who shove dirty clothes under the bed and never rinse out the tub,

"who get visits from the tooth fairy,

"who don't like to be kissed in front of the car pool,

"who squirm in church or temple,

"whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

"We pray for those

"whose nightmares come in the daytime,

"who will eat anything,

"who have never seen a dentist,

"who aren't spoiled by anybody,

"who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,

"who live and move, but have no being.

"We pray for children

"who want to be carried . . . and for those who must,

"for those we never give up on, and

"for those who don't get a second chance,

"for those we smother, and

"for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer."*

"Please offer your hands to them so that no child is left behind because we did not act.

"Thank you."

*Adapted from a poem by Ina J. Hughes printed in Marian Wright Edelman's *Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children*.