

**Skills USA
Kansas City, Missouri
June 26, 2008**

**Youth Development Foundation Awards & Recognition Luncheon
Luncheon Remarks/10 minutes**

Good afternoon. I am very glad to have this opportunity to visit with you today. Last year I was already committed the week of your conference so my very good friend and colleague, Al Johnson, attended in my stead. Thanks for having us back again this year.

I am often accused of being an incurable optimist ... and I am usually quick to plead guilty to the charge. But the fact is, no one can come to an event like this ... and not walk away without renewed faith, hope, and confidence in the future.

I wish the negativists and the prophets of doom would take the time to visit this conference ... to see what your students are doing ... and to appreciate what YOU are doing ... before passing judgment.

Very often, I think, the real difference between optimists and pessimists is simply that the optimists have their eyes open.

We live in an era of extraordinary change and opportunity. When confronted with change, there are three kinds of people.

There are those who refuse to adapt, and who are overwhelmed.

There are those who bump along for the ride, do what they need to do to get by, and probably end up ok at the end. That's the majority.

But then there are those who get out ahead of the game, identify the opportunities, and acquire the skills they need to compete successfully.

These are the leaders, the achievers, and the creators.

You help put thousands of kids every year on that road to success.

Thank you. The importance of what you are doing can't be overstated.

For the students, it's life-changing. But it's critically important for the nation as well. I know you already know that, but it bears repeating.

I was involved last week as part of the USDA delegation in something called SED IV, which is the 4th round of the U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue. This is a series of discussion covering a wide range

of issues of mutual interest to our two nations. There are many lessons to be learned, but overall one can't help but come away with one great, overriding realization. The United States is going to have to compete.

There are still a great many people in this country who want to stick their heads in the sand, pretend that change can be ignored, and hope against hope that somehow we can find a way to keep on with business as usual, indulge our bad habits for a few more years, and depend on government for a free ride when things get tough.

But that is not going to work. We're going to have to compete. China understands that. India understands that. Japan and Korea and Brazil understand that. We need to understand that as well.

When the conversation turns in this direction, some people are immediately overwhelmed by the challenge. But again, I'm an incurable optimist.

It is important to remember that the changes we see today in the world economy are, in fact, a tremendous success story. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, almost 3 billion people have joined the world market

system. This is the greatest explosion of economic freedom in world history. This is a big part of what we waged the Cold War to achieve. This is what victory looks like.

It is true that many of those 3 billion people have turned out to be formidable competitors. Good for them. They will also, over time, turn out to be great customers. Good for us.

We are seeing this already in agriculture, which is one of the reasons USDA is involved with the SED talks. One of the first things people do when they begin to climb the economic ladder is to eat better. Then they buy refrigerators, televisions, washing machines, and eventually automobiles ... but first they improve their diets.

As India, China, and other emerging nations achieve high rates of growth ... and as growth continues in the U.S., Europe, and Japan as well ... commodities are being revalued across the board.

Nowhere is this clearer than in agriculture, where global food prices have risen substantially. Other factors are in play as well, but underlying everything else is growing demand. This is a good thing.

At the same time, we are seeing an explosion of demand for energy. I don't have to tell you about oil prices ... China is now the world's second largest automobile market and oil importer ... and the world's fastest growing automobile market ... so the fundamentals have changed.

But these things are opportunities as well as challenges. For agriculture ... farm income, farm equity, and farm exports are at record highs.

In energy, the renewables revolution is already underway. The United States now leads the world in biofuels. We lead the world in bringing cellulosic ethanol to market. We have led the world the last three years running in new installed wind capacity. We lead the world in solar thermal, waste-to-energy, and geothermal energy.

These things are happening right now. Whole new industries are emerging, many of them in rural America because renewable energy is largely rural energy. It adds up, in fact, to a Rural Renaissance.

Most of the young people at this conference are probably from urban areas. Most of them probably think they will make their lives in the

city. I hope you will join with me in suggesting they broaden their sights. The future is bright for those who are prepared ... and for rural America; the opportunities are greater than they have been for many decades ... probably greater than they have ever been in our lifetimes.

Yes, there are challenges. But in the final analysis, I am a great believer in what the late Julian Simon once called “the greatest resource.” The greatest resource is human ingenuity empowered by free markets and entrepreneurial spirit. You are helping to cultivate that resource, in each and every one of the young people who participates in this program.

The future is bright, provided we are ready to compete. So let me conclude as I began. The pessimists, the critics and the naysayers, need to come here. Those who think the United States can’t compete need to meet the young people you teach and guide. The future of America is right here, in these young people, and that future is bright. Thank you.