

“LITERACY IS THE MOST BASIC CURRENCY OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY.”

sure that our access to free thought and free information was protected. Ever since we've had to worry about our own government looking over our shoulders in that library, you've been there to stand up and speak out on our privacy issues. You're full-time defenders of the most fundamental liberty that we possess. For that, you deserve our gratitude.

But you also deserve our protection. That's why I've been working with Republicans and Democrats to make sure that we have a Patriot Act that helps us track down terrorists without trampling on our civil liberties. This is an issue that Washington always tries to make into an either-or proposition. Either we protect our people from terror or we protect our most cherished principles. But I don't believe in either-or. I believe in both ends. I think we can do both. I think when we pose the choice as either-or, it is asking too little of us and it assumes too little about America. I believe we can harness new technologies and a new toughness to find terrorists before they strike, while still protecting the very freedoms we're fighting for in the first place.

I know that some librarians have been subject to FBI or other law enforcement orders, asking for reading records. I hope we can pass a provision just like the one that the House of Representatives passed overwhelmingly that would require federal agents to get these kinds of search warrants from a real judge in a real court just like everyone else does.

In the Senate, the bipartisan bill that we're working on known as the SAFE Act will prevent the federal government from freely rifling through e-mails and library records without obtaining such a warrant. Giving law enforcement the tools they need to investigate suspicious activity is one thing, but doing it without the approval of our judicial system seriously jeopardizes the rights of all Americans and the ideals Americans stand for. We're not going to stand for it.

We need to roll that provision back.

In addition to the line about federal agents poking around in our libraries, there was another line in my speech that got a lot of attention, and it's a line that I'd like to amplify this afternoon. At one point in the speech, I mentioned that the people I've met all across Illinois know that government can't solve all their problems. And I mentioned that if you go into the inner city of Chicago, parents will tell you that parents have to parent. Children can't achieve unless they raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.

To some, that was perceived as speaking solely to the black community. I'm here to suggest that I was speaking to a basic principle, a worry, a challenge, a concern that applies to all of America. Because I believe that if we want to give our children the best possible chance in life, if we want to open the doors of opportunity while they're young and teach them the skills they'll need to succeed later on, then one of our greater responsibilities as citizens, as educators and as parents is to insure that every American child can read and read well. That's because literacy is the most basic currency of the knowledge economy that we're living in today.

The need to read

Only a few generations ago it was possible to enter into the workforce with a positive attitude, a strong back, willing to work. And it didn't matter if you were a high school dropout, you could go in to that factory or work on a farm and still hope to find a job that would allow you to pay the bills and raise a family.

That economy is long gone. And it's not coming back. As revolutions in technology and communications began breaking down barriers between countries and connecting people all over the world, new jobs and industries that require more skill and knowledge have

come to dominate the economy.

Whether it's software design or computer engineering or financial analysis, corporations can locate these jobs anywhere in the world, anywhere that there's an internet connection. As countries like China and India continue to modernize their economies and educate their children longer and better, the competition American workers face will grow more intense, the necessary skills more demanding. These new jobs are not simply about working hard, they're about what you know and how fast you can learn what you don't know. They require innovative thinking, detailed comprehension, and superior communication.

But before our children can even walk into an interview for one of these jobs, before they can even fill out an application or earn the required college degree, they have to be able to pick up a book and read it and understand it. Reading is the gateway skill that makes all other learning possible, from complex word problems and the meaning of our history to scientific discovery and technological proficiency. And by the way, it's what's required to make us true citizens.

In a knowledge economy where this kind of skill is necessary for survival, how can we send our children out into the world if they're only reading at a 4th-grade level? How can we do it? I don't know. But we do. Day after day, year after year. Right now, one out of every five adults in the United States cannot read a simple story to a child. During the last 20 years or so, over 10 million Americans reached the 12th grade without having learned to read at a basic level. These literacy problems start well before high school. In 2000, only 32% of all 4th-graders tested as reading-proficient.

The story gets worse when you take race and income into consideration. Children from low-income families score 27 points below the average reading level while students from wealthy families score 15 points above the average. While only one in 12 white 17-year-olds has the ability to pick up the newspaper and understand the science section, for Hispanics, the number drops to one in 50; for African