

July 9 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 1996

mitment to enriching the American spirit, the Corporation is preparing all of us for the 21st century.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,

July 9, 1996.

Remarks on Signing the Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996

July 10, 1996

Thank you very much and good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I want to join first with the Vice President in thanking Senator Kennedy, Senator Faircloth, Congressman Hyde, and Congressman Conyers and all the Members of Congress for supporting this legislation in such a vigorous and such a prompt way.

I think all of you know that we are here today to emphasize publicly our solidarity with this cause and with this piece of legislation. Ordinarily we would be here at a signing ceremony, and I want to say a special word of appreciation to the Members of Congress, especially to the sponsors, because this bill came down to the White House while the Congress was out of session, and every Member we discussed this issue with said, "Go on and sign the bill, Mr. President, because we don't want to lose a single day when this bill will not be a law of the land." And I thought it was important for you to come down here so that America could see the breadth and depth of support in the Congress, among religious leaders who are here, and community leaders for this legislation and for this cause.

This act makes destructive hate crimes against houses of worship a Federal crime. It doubles the maximum sentence for these crimes that cause injury to people. It increases the statute of limitations from 5 to 7 years. It passed unanimously, and that is a great tribute to the depth of conviction in the Congress about this issue.

We all know that burning churches is an outrage. Since January of '95—listen to this—more than 190 incidents of fire or desecration of houses of worship have been reported in the United States. While many have been targeted at black churches in the South, there have also been attacks on synagogues, mosques, and white churches in all parts of this country. When these attacks are motivated by hate, they are an affront to our basic commitment to religious lib-

erty and racial tolerance, and in so doing they pose a challenge not just to those whose houses of worship are desecrated or burned but to the entire Nation and to our future as a common community.

These attacks, as the Vice President said, may be intended to divide Americans, but they have just the opposite effect. We all know when someone burns a house of worship it must mean that the person committing the crime views the people who worship in that house as somehow fundamentally less human. And that is wrong. We know it's wrong, and we know it violates everything that this country was founded upon. We see a spirit today with Republicans and Democrats here that rejects that and says America is better than that.

The National Church Arson Task Force which we have created is mobilizing the forces of the Departments of Justice and Treasury, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and other Federal agencies, working with communities all over our country to catch and to prosecute arsonists, to prevent further burnings, and to help communities to rebuild. I have directed FEMA to coordinate a prevention effort, and we have taken steps to provide \$6 million through the Bureau of Justice Assistance to law enforcement and other community efforts in 13 targeted States.

It's also important to know that arrests are being made. In the last 3 weeks, arrests have been made in connection with fires in North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Missouri. Tomorrow Vice President Gore is meeting with leaders of the insurance industry here at the White House to build on their pledge to work in partnership with all of us to prevent these crimes.

And while, I say again, not all these crimes are racially motivated, a significant number of them are. We have to continue our struggle

against racism and religious bigotry. I want to compliment all the religious organizations and other groups in this country that have agreed to come together to help to rebuild these churches, showing that we can reach across lines of race and religion and region to bring all law-abiding Americans together in this rebuilding effort.

Recently I declared this month of July National Month of Unity, calling on religious leaders of all faiths and citizens from all walks of life to reach out to one another to strengthen the ideals that light our way as Americans and keep us strong. In recent days, here on the lawn of the White House, we have seen another sort of flame in America, the Olympic flame, which symbolizes the best of the human spirit. The other flames of these awful church burnings symbolize the worst instincts of those who would

take us back to a time of terrible division and hatred. But it's the Olympic flame, carried by American citizen heroes all over our country, which is now burning throughout the South, making its way to its final destination in Atlanta.

As the world looks to our Nation as the host country of the 100th Olympic games, let us resolve anew to extinguish the flames of bigotry and intolerance and keep the flame of religious freedom and ethnic diversity and respect for all Americans burning brightly in this Olympic season.

Thank you all for your contribution to that effort, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:20 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. H.R. 3525, approved July 3, was assigned Public Law No. 104-155.

Remarks to the NAACP Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina July 10, 1996

Thank you. Thank you very much. President Mfume, I hope you do get your 4 more years. [Laughter] And I hope I get to hang around to work with you.

Madam Chair, Bishop Graves, Hazel and other distinguished members—[laughter]. Hey, she met me outside and kissed me. [Laughter] Brother Williams, thank you for singing for us. Reverend Hooks, you're looking young and handsome, I'm glad to see.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year I know the First Lady came to visit with you, and she had a wonderful time. And she is completing a trip that she made on behalf of our country after the meeting of the G-7 industrial countries in France. She went to a lot of the nations that used to be part of the Soviet empire, that were once Communist and are now free. And she's had a wonderful trip. Last night I talked to her. She was in Finland, and so far north the Sun never really goes down at this time of year. So I knew she wouldn't be mad when I woke her up at 2 o'clock in the morning to talk. [Laughter] And she asked me to give you her best.

I also want you to know what I did. The last thing I did before I got on the helicopter

at the White House to come here today was to meet with Mickey Kantor, our Secretary of Commerce, and Michael Brown, Ron Brown's son, and the delegation who are leaving today to finish the mission Ron Brown started in Bosnia and Croatia. And I was especially proud that almost all the companies who lost executives on that terrible day sent replacements to go on this mission to finish the work of advancing the cause of peace. And I want to thank you, Mr. President, and all of you, for the tribute that you gave to Secretary Brown yesterday.

I am honored to be here today because of what the NAACP has meant to America. As a young boy growing up in the segregated South, it was the NAACP that gave all of us hope that there could be a better day. I told Myrlie—I don't think she quite believed it—that in early 1974, when I started my political career, I actually purchased a membership at the Mallalieu A.M.E. Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. I came to a meeting one Sunday afternoon and bought myself a membership card. I hate to say that because I'll get a letter from Kweisi next week pointing out that I have not kept up my renewals over the last 20 years. [Laughter]