

Remarks at a Luncheon Hosted by Chairman Arafat of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza City  
*December 14, 1998*

Chairman Arafat, Mrs. Arafat, distinguished leaders of the Palestinian community, colleagues, and friends: On behalf of my family and our entire delegation, we thank you for your warm and truly memorable welcome.

Mr. Chairman, as I promised you at Wye River, I have come to Gaza to speak about the benefits of peace based on mutual respect. I know that the circumstances you've faced since 1993 and the signing of the peace have remained difficult, but there are reasons for hope. For the first time in the history of the Palestinian movement, the Palestinian people and their elected representatives now have a chance to determine their own destiny on their own land.

I am proud to be the first American President to stand with the Palestinian people here as you shape your future. I want to emphasize that that future is possible because of the commitment you have made to live in peace and mutual respect with your neighbors, side by side.

All this would have been hard to imagine in the darkest years of struggle, when most people expected the Middle East would always be a separate set of armed camps. Sometimes it takes more courage and more strength to make peace than it does to continue war. I thank Chairman Arafat for having the strength, the courage, and the wisdom to make peace and then to persevere on the path of peace.

I thank the Chairman and, indeed, all Palestinians who embrace the idea that Palestinians and Israelis can share the land of their fathers together. I thank you for believing that the land which gave the world Islam and Judaism and Christianity can be the home of all people who love one God and respect every life our one God has created.

America wants you to succeed, and we will help you to create the society you deserve, a society based on respect for human rights, human dignity, the rule of law, a society that teaches tolerance, values education, and now, at last, has the chance to unleash the creative power of its people against the destructive pull of hopelessness and poverty.

I think of you at this hopeful moment as a family reuniting after too many years of dislocation and despair; a community of believers helping to build a Middle East in which people of all faiths can live in security and peace; a people known through the world, like the olive tree, for your attachment to this land and now to peace; a society that demands of yourselves what you rightly demand of others.

The way ahead may be hard and uncertain, but the way you have left behind is full of self-defeating violence and soul-withering hate. So we have no choice but the way ahead.

Tomorrow my family and I, along with Chairman and Mrs. Arafat, will have a chance to visit Bethlehem, to light the Christmas tree at the beginning of this season which is so important for those of us who are Christians. The next time people celebrate Christmas in Bethlehem, we will be on the edge of a new millennium, marking 2000 years since the birth of the Christ child, who became known to Christians as the Prince of Peace, who happened to be a Jew, who happens to be recognized by Islam.

Now, if all that can be true, surely we can figure out how to solve these problems and go into the future.

I close with these words of the poet Hafez Ibrahim:

People of a hopeful future, we are in need of leadership which builds and people who construct.

People of a hopeful future, we are in need of wisdom that counsels and a hand that liberates.

People of a hopeful future, we need you; fill the void, get to work.

People of a hopeful future, do not let tomorrow pass like yesterday, in dusty existence.

People of a hopeful future, your country implores you to think. God willing, we will think and feel and act as one.

Thank you. And thank you again.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. at Zahrat Al Madian. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Arafat's wife, Shua. The transcript released

by the Office of Press Secretary also included the remarks of Chairman Arafat.

## Remarks to the Palestine National Council and Other Palestinian Organizations in Gaza City *December 14, 1998*

Thank you. Mr. Speaker—Mr. Za'anoun, Chairman Arafat, Mrs. Arafat; members of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian Central Council, the Palestinian Executive Committee, Palestinian Council heads of ministries; leaders of business and religion; to all members of the Palestinian community; and to my fellow Americans who come here from many walks of life, Arab-American, Jewish-American: This is a remarkable day. Today the eyes of the world are on you.

I am profoundly honored to be the first American President to address the Palestinian people in a city governed by Palestinians.

I have listened carefully to all that has been said. I have watched carefully the reactions of all of you to what has been said. I know that the Palestinian people stand at a crossroads: behind you a history of dispossession and dispersal, before you the opportunity to shape a new Palestinian future on your own land.

I know the way is often difficult and frustrating, but you have come to this point through a commitment to peace and negotiations. You reaffirmed that commitment today. I believe it is the only way to fulfill the aspirations of your people. And I am profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Chairman Arafat for the cause of peace, to come here as a friend of peace and a friend of your future, and to witness you raising your hands, standing up tall, standing up not only against what you believe is wrong but for what you believe is right in the future.

I was sitting here thinking that this moment would have been inconceivable a decade ago: no Palestinian Authority; no elections in Gaza and the West Bank; no relations between the United States and Palestinians; no Israeli troop redeployments from the West Bank and Gaza; no Palestinians in charge in Gaza, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, Tulkarem, Jenin, Nablus,

Jericho, and so many other places; there was no Gaza International Airport.

Today I had the privilege of cutting the ribbon on the international airport. Hillary and I, along with Chairman and Mrs. Arafat, celebrated a place that will become a magnet for planes from throughout the Middle East and beyond, bringing you a future in which Palestinians can travel directly to the far corners of the world; a future in which it is easier and cheaper to bring materials, technology, and expertise in and out of Gaza; a future in which tourists and traders can flock here, to this beautiful place on the Mediterranean; a future, in short, in which the Palestinian people are connected to the world.

I am told that just a few months ago, at a time of profound pessimism in the peace process, your largest exporter of fruit and flowers was prepared to plow under a field of roses, convinced the airport would never open. But Israelis and Palestinians came to agreement at Wye River, the airport has opened, and now I am told that company plans to export roses and carnations to Europe and throughout the Gulf, a true flowering of Palestinian promise.

I come here today to talk about that promise, to ask you to rededicate yourselves to it, to ask you to think for a moment about how we can get beyond the present state of things where every step forward is like, as we say in America, pulling teeth. Where there is still, in spite of the agreement at Wye—achieved because we don't need much sleep, and we worked so hard, and Mr. Netanyahu worked with us, and we made this agreement. But I want to talk to you about how we can get beyond this moment, where there is still so much mistrust and misunderstanding and quite a few missteps.

You did a good thing today in raising your hands. You know why? It has nothing to do