

Remarks at a State Dinner Hosted by President Petar Stoyanov of Bulgaria in Sofia

November 22, 1999

President Stoyanov, Mrs. Stoyanov; Prime Minister and Mrs. Kostov; distinguished government leaders; citizens of Bulgaria; our American friends. Mr. President, let me begin by thanking you for your warm welcome. This is a day that I will remember for the rest of my life. You gave my wife a memorable day here not so long ago, and our daughter and I had a wonderful time today in so many ways, a few of which I would like to mention.

But first let me begin with the time President Stoyanov came to the White House. Hillary and I welcomed him there a couple of years ago, and I was very interested in this young President of Bulgaria, so I read up on him.

He was only a little younger than me. He looks much younger, but he's only a little. [Laughter] He studied the law. His wife studied law. He's a father who likes to jog. He likes to read. He grew up listening to rock and roll, just like me. [Laughter] The only difference I could find from our biographies is that he liked John Lennon, and I liked Elvis. [Laughter]

Earlier today on Nevsky Square I had the opportunity to speak to a vast and immensely impressive throng of Bulgarians about the new partnership we are forging for democracy, peace, and prosperity.

Mr. President, as you pointed out in your remarks, the relationships between our two countries and our mutual admiration goes back quite a long while. Perhaps the best symbol of this is the American college here, which I learned, as I prepared to come, was actually first opened in the year Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States, 1860.

During the dark days after World War II, the college was closed. The war first brought its closure and then afterward, in the communist era, its grounds were turned over to the secret police. But Americans and Bulgarians never lost faith that it would open again one day, because we never lost faith that Bulgaria would be free again one day.

A few years after the school reopened, our Ambassador at the time, Ambassador Bohlen, took a trip to the famous Rila Monastery, and right before she left, the abbot came up to her

and said, "I have a secret to show you." They walked to a basement, and there in a hidden place was the entire library of the American college, preserved for 50 years by the same monastery that helped to preserve Bulgarian language and culture for 500 years.

Just as those books were hidden deep in the heart of Bulgaria for half a century, there was an energy and creativity hidden deep in the heart of Bulgarians through all those same years. More than 100 years before the Renaissance began, Bulgarian thinkers and artists were already shaping the world.

Now the energies and creativities of the Bulgarian people have been liberated again, and from now on, you will always be masters of your destiny, neither vassals nor victims to anyone. Now you're on a road that is often hard but with a very happy destination. I believe it will lead you to prosperity, to peace, to security, to being part of a Europe that is whole and free.

Tonight I come here again to reaffirm the friendship and the partnership of the United States, our gratitude to you for being a symbol of freedom and determination. I come to offer a toast of respect and thanks.

I toast Bulgaria, its President, and its leaders for casting your lot with freedom in spite of the pain of transition, for standing strongly with humanity in reversing ethnic cleansing, in spite of the sacrifices imposed, and having the courage to follow your dreams and the vision to achieve them. May Americans and Bulgarians always be friends and partners.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:10 p.m. in the Ballroom at the Kempinski Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to President Petar Stoyanov of Bulgaria and his wife, Antonina; Prime Minister Ivan Kostov and his wife, Helena; and former U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria Avis T. Bohlen. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of President Stoyanov.