

Week Ending Friday, June 14, 1996

The President's Radio Address

June 8, 1996

Good morning. This morning I want to talk with you about a recent and disturbing rash of crimes that harkens back to a dark era in our Nation's history. Just 2 days ago, when the Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, was burned to the ground, it became at least the 30th African-American church destroyed or damaged by suspicious fire in the South in the past 18 months. And over the past few months, Vice President Gore has talked with me about the pain and anguish these fires in his home State of Tennessee have caused. Tennessee, sadly, has experienced more of them than any other State in the country.

We do not now have evidence of a national conspiracy, but it is clear that racial hostility is the driving force behind a number of these incidents. This must stop.

It's hard to think of a more depraved act of violence than the destruction of a place of worship. In our country, during the fifties and sixties, black churches were burned to intimidate civil rights workers. I have vivid and painful memories of black churches being burned in my own State when I was a child. In 1963 all Americans were outraged by the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that took the lives of four precious young children. We must never allow that to happen again.

Every family has a right to expect that when they walk into a church or synagogue or mosque each week they will find a house of worship, not the charred remnants of a hateful act done by cowards in the night. We must rise up as a national community to safeguard the right of every citizen to worship in safety. That is what America stands for.

As President, I am determined to do everything in my power to get to the bottom

of these church burnings as quickly as possible. And no matter how long it takes, no matter where the leads take us, we will devote whatever resources are necessary to solve these crimes. Today, more than 200 Federal agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the FBI are working with State and local authorities to solve these cases. Fire investigators, national response teams, polygraph examiners, and forensic chemists are combing through fire sites, interviewing witnesses, and following leads. A task force chaired by our Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Deval Patrick, and our Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Enforcement, James Johnson, is coordinating these efforts. FBI Director Louis Freeh and ATF Director John Magaw are also serving on the task force. To date there have been a number of arrests. Two of those in custody are known members of the Ku Klux Klan. So we are making progress, but we must do more.

That is why today I am announcing four steps we are taking to fight back. First, I have asked the task force to report back on their progress and to let me know if there are other actions the Federal Government can take beyond those underway to stop these crimes. Second, I have instructed the ATF to inform churches of any steps they can take to protect themselves from arsonists. Churches throughout the South will be visited by ATF special agents to answer any questions church leaders and parishioners may have. We are also making this information available to national church organizations for distribution to their members. Third, I am announcing my support for the bipartisan legislation introduced by Congressmen John Conyers and Henry Hyde to make it easier to bring Federal prosecutions against those who attack houses of worship. I look forward to working with Congress to make it even stronger. And finally, I'm announcing that we are establishing a new toll-free number that

is now available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you have information about who is responsible for these churches fires, please call it. It's 1-888-ATF-FIRE. That's 1-888-ATF-F-I-R-E.

In the end, we must all face up to the responsibility to end this violence. We must say to those who would feed their neighbors what Martin Luther King called "the stale bread of hatred and spoiled meat of racism:" That is not America; that is not our way. We must come together, black and white alike, to smother the fires of hatred that fuel this violence.

I am pleased that the National Council of Churches of Christ, one of the largest inter-faith groups in the country, has spoken out against these crimes and is mobilizing to assist in the rebuilding of damaged churches. I encourage communities everywhere where churches have been burned to roll up their sleeves and help the folks there to rebuild their churches.

Religious freedom is one of the founding principles of our democracy, and the black church has historically been the center of worship, self-help, and community life for millions of families in our country. That's why it was so hard for Reverend Terrence Mackey to break the news to his daughter last June when they woke to find an ash-scarred field in the spot where only the day before stood their church home, Mount Zion AME Church in Greeleyville, South Carolina. Reverend Mackey reassured his daughter with these words: He told her, "They didn't burn down the church. They burned down the building in which we hold church. The church is still inside all of us." On June 15th, Reverend Mackey, his daughter, and his congregation will march from the site of the old church to a brand new building. And all Americans will march with them in spirit.

We must all do our part to end this rash of violence. America is a great country because for more than 200 years we have strived to honor the religious convictions, the freedom, the extraordinary religious diversity of our people. The only way we can succeed in the 21st century is if we unleash the full power of those convictions and that diversity and refuse to let anything divide or defeat us.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. from the Oval Office at the White House.

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on Juvenile Crime in Las Vegas, Nevada

June 9, 1996

The President. Thank you very much.

[*At this point, moderator Kirby Burgess, director, Youth and Family Services Center, welcomed the President and introduced roundtable participants. Gov. Bob Miller then reviewed steps taken in Nevada to deal with juvenile crime. Next, Clark County Undersheriff Richard Wingett described the juvenile violent crime problem in Las Vegas. Mr. Burgess introduced Shane Quick, Anthony Covarrubias, and Stanley Johnson, teenagers who are enrolled in alternative sentencing programs. Mr. Quick told how he was helped by a residential drug treatment program, concluding by saying he was nervous.*]

The President. You're doing great. You're doing great.

Mr. Burgess. He's an honest young man, Mr. President.

[*Next, Mr. Covarrubias described his success in being rehabilitated through the Freedom Program, an intensive supervision program.*]

The President. How does it work, this Freedom Program?

[*Mr. Covarrubias said he is under house arrest and must check in with the program twice a day. He earns privileges for good behavior.*]

The President. Why do you think it's helped you?

Mr. Covarrubias. Because now I'm going to counseling. I'm getting along with my parents. It's keeping me out of trouble, keeping me off the streets.

The President. Is that your mother out there?

Mr. Covarrubias. Yes.

The President. Give her a hand, and your family there. [Applause]