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Remarks at the Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast

January 6, 1997

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President and Tipper and ladies and gentlemen. Hillary and I are delighted to welcome you to the White House. We look forward to these breakfasts. As Al said, we have been doing them on a regular basis now, normally around—just after Labor Day as we sort of rededicate ourselves to the labor of the new year. But this year, we are doing it now for two reasons: one is, obviously, this is on the brink of the inauguration and a new 4-year term for the President and for our country; the other is, we were otherwise occupied last Labor Day. [*Laughter*]

This is a wonderful day to be here. We asked Father Stephanopoulos to pray today because, as all of you know, this is the celebration of Epiphany in the Christian faith, a time of recognizing Christmas in the Orthodox tradition. I also wanted you to pray so that I could say that we were all very impressed with the size of the book contract that—[*laughter*]—that your son got, and we know we can depend upon you to make sure the church gets its 10 percent of that contract. We are very proud of him and very grateful to have him here.

This is the day in the Christian tradition when the wise men came bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. And we have much to be thankful for and much to pray for, but I think what I would say today is that I asked you to come here to share with me your thoughts and to share with you some of ours in the hope that we might all become wiser.

I am very grateful for the progress that our country has made in the last 4 years, grateful that we have been given a chance to play a role in that progress, and mindful that whatever has been done which is good has been done by us together.

One of my college roommates, who I think is a really smart guy, said to me the other day when we were together and joking about our lost youth, he said, ''Oh, and one other thing,'' as he was leaving, he said, ''Don't ever forget that great Presidents do not do great things. Great Presidents get a lot of other people to do great things. And there is over 250 million of us now, so that's a lot of greatness if you can get us all to do the right thing,'' which I thought was an interesting way of saying in part what the magic and genius of democracy is all about.

So we're thinking a lot now about how we're going to build our bridge to the 21st century, what we're going to do in this next term. I've listened to all of these experts talk about how hard it is for Presidents to be effective in the second term because, after all, they just got reelected because things went well in their first term, not because they had actually thought through what they were going to do in their second term. But we've tried to overcome that disability.

There are a lot of particulars that we could discuss today, but what I'd like for you to think about a little bit, from your perspective and what you can do—two things: what are we going to do; and secondly, and more importantly I think, how are we going to do it? In what spirit shall we proceed?

In any great democracy there are always differences about what are we going to do. There always have been, there always will be, and these are altogether healthy. It would be—America wouldn't last very long, I think, if 100 percent of the people agreed 100 percent of the time on 100 percent of the issues. What keeps us going—we all know that none of us has perfect and infinite understanding of these complex matters facing our country and facing the world. But we have devised a system—we have nurtured and maintained it now for over 200 years—in which people can reconcile their differences and come to a consensus and an agreement which will push the country forward. So we are enlarged when we come to agreement after honest debate in the right way; we are diminished if, in the way we treat each other, we preclude the possibility of resolution and going forward.

And at times like this, when things are changing so much, we need the right spirit more because we have more to decide, more to deal with. And yet, at times like this, we are in some ways put at risk by the absence of that spirit of reconciliation and respect.

There are several specific things I hope we can talk about later that I think we could reach broad agreement on. For example, some of you think I made a mistake when

I signed the welfare reform bill, and I don't. But one thing that we all ought to be able to agree on is, the bill will not succeed if the bill does nothing, it just changes the rules. It doesn't put anybody to work. In 4 years we have reduced by 2.1 million the number of people on welfare, the biggest reduction in history, by doing the kinds of things that now this bill requires every State to do. We just went out and worked with the States and came up with innovative ways to get around old rules and regulations and do them anyway. Now every State has got to try to do that for every person.

My objective here is, once and for all, to take the politics out of poverty and to treat all able-bodied people the same at the community level. What I long for is a system of community-based support for people who are out of work through no fault of their own but a system of community-based norms that require people who can work to work when there is work. Now, if you say that everybody who is able-bodied can only stay on welfare 2 years continuously unless the State decides to continue to support them for some other reason—and we did give a fund so that hardship cases could be treated in that way—then every community has to have a system for putting those people to work.

Now, let me pause at this; you can all think about this. This new law gives every State the right to give the welfare check to any employer, including a church, as an employment and training subsidy, who will hire someone from welfare. If every church in America just hired one family, the welfare problem would go way down. If every church in America challenged every member of that church who had 25 or more employees to hire another family, the problem would go away, and we would really have a system in which in times of recession we'd have more people unemployed at the community level, in good times we'd have fewer people, but we would always have a community-based commitment that crossed party lines and religious lines and every other line to give able-bodied people the dignity of work and support them in the most important work they do, which is raising their children.

The second thing I wanted to talk about a little bit is this whole business of immigration. The things I don't like about the welfare law have nothing to do with welfare and everything to do with the way we tried to save money, I thought unfairly, on legal immigrants.

Our administration has done a lot to cut down on illegal immigration, but we believe that legal immigration has served our country well. It has, however, made us more diverse. And so immigration is really the touchstone where we deal with not only what are we going to do but how are we going to do it. I believe that we have learned a lot in 220 years—really more than 300 years—about how hard it is for people of different races to get along. We know that that is difficult in all societies and all times, and it's something you just have to keep working at.

But now America is not a white and black America. America is a country with scores, hundreds of different racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Our biggest county, Los Angeles County, now has over 160 different racial and ethnic groups within one county. But it's all over America. Wayne County, where Detroit, Michigan, is, has now over 140 different racial and ethnic groups. Detroit was a place where we used to think of where you basically had white ethnics who immigrated from Central and Eastern Europe and African-Americans and white Southerners who immigrated out of the South because they couldn't make a living in places like my home State in the Depression and later—now, 140 different racial and ethnic groups.

How are we going to deal with that? Against the background of what you see in Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, all of these things, these destructive impulses people have, how can we prove in America that we can all get along, not without giving up our basic beliefs but in finding a ground of mutual respect? It seems to me that that may be the single most significant decision facing the United States. We have a lot of other things we have to deal with in the next 4 years, the whole question of the entitlements burden when the baby boomers retire and education initiatives that I intend to push and finishing the work of balancing the budget and all that. That's fine, but if we can all find a way to hold up to the world not only the example of our free-

dom but the example of our freedom in the 21st century global interdependent world in which anybody from anywhere can live here, and if you show up for work or you show up for school and you do what you're supposed to do and you're a good citizen, you can be part of our country, and we'll respect your faith, we'll respect your differences, and we'll find a way to work together, then I believe the preeminence of the United States will be assured throughout the next century. And I think you have to think about it in long terms like that.

What causes a society to rise and fall? We, clearly, are proving that we're getting back to our basic values. The crime rate is going down. You saw the—has gone down for several years in a row for the first time in 25 years. We have inequality among working people going down—and I'm very proud of that—for the first time in 20 years. We have a lot of our other social problems being ameliorated, the teen pregnancy rate dropping substantially for the first time in a good while—that drugs, alcohol, tobacco are still a problem for very young people. Drug use is going down in society as a whole but still going up among young people.

So we're on the cusp here, maybe, of turning a lot of our social problems around. We know what we ought to do. Can we do it in the right way, in a spirit of reconciliation? And can we recognize that in this exciting new world there's no way in the world for us to know the answer to all these questions that are out there before us?

And that's the last point I'd like to make. If we do things in the right way, we'll get enough of the right answers to keep moving our country forward and to keep doing the right thing for the rest of the world. And we won't be right all the time, but that's just because we're human. So that's the last thought I would like to leave with you.

The beginning of wisdom, I think, is humility and respect for what you may not know. Now, we were talking around the table here about the last speech Cardinal Bernardin gave in which he said that the precious gift of time should not be wasted on acrimony and division. And he said that knowing he just had a little bit of time left. The truth is, all of us just have a little bit of time left. He just knew it, and we don't. And 3 weeks or 30 years, it's a little bit of time in the life of a country, the life of the world.

So I say to you—I ask for your guidance, for your prayers for our country, for the efforts that all of us are making. I ask for your specific involvement, particularly in the two issues I've mentioned, on the welfare and immigration issues. But most important of all, I ask for your help in creating a sense of reconciliation, the right sort of spirit in which we can deal with these issues. As people of faith on this Epiphany, I think we should all ask that that be made evident to us.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:59 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Rev. Robert G. Stephanopoulos, Holy Trinity Cathedral, New York, NY, who gave the invocation, and the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, former Archbishop of Chicago.

Remarks on Receiving the Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses and an Exchange With Reporters

January 7, 1997

The President. Thank you very much to Dr. Lashof and the members of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Illnesses, Secretary White, Secretary Brown, Secretary Shalala, Deputy Director Tenet. I'd like to say a special word of thanks to Dr. Jack Gibbons for the work that he did on this. I thank Senator Rockefeller, Senator Specter, Congressman Lane Evans for their interest and their pursuit of this issue, and all the representatives of the military and veterans organizations who are here.

I am pleased to accept this report. I thank Dr. Lashof and the committee for their extremely thorough and dedicated work over 18 months now. I pledge to you and to all the veterans of this country, we will now match your efforts with our action.

Six years ago hundreds of thousands of Americans defended our vital interest in the Persian Gulf. They faced a dangerous enemy, harsh conditions, lengthy isolation from their