

Remarks at the Ecumenical Breakfast

November 20, 1997

Thank you very much and welcome to the White House. I am delighted to see you all. Let me say that we do want to talk about the obligation imposed on all of us to secure a future in which all of us are a part.

But in light of developments in the last day in Iraq, I would like to say just a word about that. The meeting of the foreign ministers last night in Geneva strongly reaffirmed our unanimous position: Saddam Hussein must comply unconditionally with the will of the international community and allow all the weapons inspectors back to Iraq so they can get on with doing their jobs without interference. After that meeting, he said he would do that. In the coming days we will wait and see whether he does, in fact, comply with the will of the international community.

I just want to reiterate that the United States must remain and will remain resolute in our determination to prevent him from threatening his neighbors of the world with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. This is an issue that I hope will become even more important to all Americans and a greater subject of discussion. We must do that. That is the duty we have to our children.

Now, let me say I look forward to these meetings every year. I have done, I think, one or two breakfasts like this every year I've been President. And even though we're discussing a kind of public issue today, I get a lot of personal solace out of this, and it always helps me sort of to put things back in perspective. And to give you an idea of how badly we in Washington need things put in perspective here, I got a cartoon out of the *New Yorker Magazine* that is a doctor talking to a patient. You might imagine that the patient is anyone who spends 60 hours a week or more working in this city. The doctor is talking to the patient and he said, "Before we try assisted suicide, Mrs. Rose, let's give the aspirin a chance." [*Laughter*] I wouldn't say that you're the aspirin—[*laughter*]—you will alleviate even that, I think.

I'd also like to thank so many of you for the work you've done with us on public is-

suues: on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and after the Supreme Court struck it down, on the Federal Executive order I issued, going as far as I could with my executive authority to apply the principles of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to Federal employees. I thank those of you who worked with Secretary Riley and the Justice Department on the very important work we did to try to clarify the lines of religious expression for students and teachers in our public schools. That, I think, did a great deal of good, and I know that Secretary Riley recently had a summit of religious and education leaders in St. Petersburg to talk about what can be done within the schools to promote racial harmony and to raise performance.

I thank you for the work that many of you have done with us to support the cause of religious freedom around the world. That has become, I think, a very significant issue for many of you in this room and many Americans. And of course, it's still a very important issue—regrettably, it's an important issue in many nations around the world and one that we have to keep working away at.

I also would like to thank you for some of your—some of you have been involved in the America Reads program. I know that the church Hillary and I attend here in Washington regularly has 45 volunteers. I got the newsletter just the other day and the pastor noted that I was not yet one of them. [*Laughter*]

Many of our religious groups are working on the Welfare to Work Partnership. We have 2,500 private companies now in that effort who have pledged to hire people from welfare to work and they're doing a marvelous job. But very often the houses of worship provide incredibly important services for families and children in transition efforts. This is working. We have 3.8 million fewer people on welfare than we did the day I became President—about almost 2 million fewer people since I signed the welfare reform bill a couple of years ago. And because of the way the system works, our States have even more money now to spend on education and child care and job placement and other supports, which makes the opportunity for people who care about the poor in our society

who today are disabled from entering the mainstream of American life that much greater, to make sure that even the people that we thought hardest to place could succeed.

Today, I do want to talk about our racial initiatives. When I started this, a lot of people said, "Why are you doing this. There's not any riot in the cities." There are some examples of racial discord; we know a fair number of the church bombings—or burnings appear to have been racially motivated. But people said, "Well, why are you doing this?" I think that it is a sign of strength if a society can examine its problems before they become a festering sore that people who are otherwise uninvolved have to face. I also believe that one of our obligations in this administration, as we bring this century to a close and begin a whole new millennium, is to think about those things which we will be dealing with for the next generation, those things which, if we respond properly, can change the whole texture of life in America for the better.

And also, just because there's not any civil discord that's apparent, doesn't mean we don't have a lot of serious problems. If you look at the fact that juvenile crime has not gone down nearly as much as crime among adults, if you look at what's happening to the exploding prison population in America and the racial implications of that, if you look at the fact that we still have disparities among our various racial groups in the credit practices of banks and the access to higher education and the earnings in the workplace and the increasing relationship of that to success as young people in education, it is clear that our attempt to keep making progress toward the American dream requires us to make progress on the issues of race and all those that are related.

And if you look back over the entire history of America, we started with a Constitution that we couldn't live up to—just like none of us live up perfectly to the holy scriptures that we profess to believe in. And our whole life as a nation has been an effort punctuated by crisis after crisis after crisis, to move our collective life closer to what we said we believed in over 200 years ago. And that kind of change always requires spiritual depth, spiritual resources, spiritual conviction. After

all, we said all men are created equal, but you can't vote unless you're a white male landowner. I mean, that's where we started. We're a long way from that today. And we saw all the efforts to move beyond all those barriers very often in spiritual terms.

So where are we today? Well, first of all, America has become markedly more diverse racially. And that means we're becoming markedly more diverse culturally and in religious terms, as well. Today, Hawaii is the only State in which no racial group is in a majority. But within a few years, our largest State, California, with 13 percent of our population, will not have—even Americans of European descent will not be in the majority there. Within probably 50 years, but perhaps sooner, there will be no single racial group in a majority in the entire United States.

Now, the scholars have said for 200 years that America was not about a race or a place, it was about an idea. We're about to find out. [Laughter] And we had best be ready. Across the river here in Fairfax County, Virginia, is one of the five school districts in America with children from over 100 different racial or ethnic or national groups—180 different national and ethnic groups in the Fairfax County School District. Their native languages number 100. We want them all to learn to speak and to read and to function in English and to be able to do very well in school and to be able to make a contribution to our American way of life.

And as I said, it has religious implications. I attended—right before I was inaugurated this last time I went to a Southern Baptist church service, early service on Sunday, where the minister was a man from Arkansas who had been a friend of mine there. And he said, "This is a little different from the church I had in Arkansas." He said, "I've got a Korean ministry here. I have so many Korean members. And I have to run an English as a second language course in the church every night." And of course, most of the people who come here from Asia are not Southern Baptists. [Laughter] I mean, some may think that's—Reverend Dunn says, thank God. [Laughter] I'm sure he's the only one of you not seeking to increase his flock. [Laughter]

But this changes things. This changes things. Things that are deeply inbred in the culture, for example, of the African-American Church. The elemental aspects of American culture that in some ways made African-Americans, even in the midst of their oppression, the most socially cohesive of Americans, thanks to the African-American Church, will be foreign to a lot of the new Americans that are coming in here, not part of that tradition, not being caught up in it.

How will they react if they're subject to systematic discrimination? How will they react if they can't get a loan at a bank, even though they're honest and have a record of honesty and success? How will we deal with all these things, and how can we avoid it? And most of all—and a lot of you are involved in these things—how we can get our children, early, to know that they can live in a different way, and in so doing, to teach their parents—which we see over and over and over again can have a very valuable impact.

Well, these are just some of the things that I wanted to mention, and we'll talk about it after breakfast. But the fundamental issue is, we know what we're going to look like; the demographers can tell us that. But they can't tell us what we're going to be like. That's a decision we have to make. And I am persuaded that we will be an infinitely better, stronger nation if that decision is informed by, driven by, embraced by, and advanced by people of faith in our country. And so that's why I asked you here today, and I thank you very much.

Now I would like to invite Dr. Thomas White Wolf Fassett to give the invocation. Then I would like for you to enjoy breakfast, and we'll have a discussion after breakfast.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:23 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House.

Remarks Announcing the Health Care "Consumer Bill of Rights and Responsibilities"

November 20, 1997

Thank you very much, first of all, Peter, for your outstanding remarks and the power of your example. And I accept your offer to play golf. [*Laughter*]

I thank all the Commission members and the members of the staff for a truly remarkable piece of work. And I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to Secretary Shalala and Secretary Herman, who cochaired the Commission and who, I believe, did a remarkable job, and I thank you very much. I thank the Vice President for his work in overseeing this effort and for his concern.

This whole health care issue is very personal to me and to our family, to the First Lady. When I was running for President, I met person after person after person who had a cost, a quality, or an accessibility issue with the health care system. But long before that, as a Governor in what my opponents used to call a small southern State, I had the great gift that representing a small population gives you, of knowing a high percentage of the people who hired me, from all walks of life and all social strata, from all different circumstances.

And I just kept—I had such ambivalent feelings. I could see in my own State that we had the finest health care system in the world. I saw miracle after miracle after miracle; I saw person after person given a chance to reconstitute his or her life, and then all these terrible problems arising from the cost or the quality or the accessibility issues.

So we've worked very hard on them. The Vice President mentioned the quality issues. I would also like to say, this has been a very good year across the board for American health care. In the balanced budget bill we have \$24 billion to provide health insurance to another 5 million children, about half of those who don't have health insurance—something that has become very important because the number of uninsured Americans has continued to rise since 1993. Ironically, even as the percentage of people in the work force eligible to purchase health insurance with the involvement of their employers has gone up, because of prices the coverage has gone down.

We had a significant step in reforming the Medicare program to add many years of life to the Trust Fund and provide more choices, including preventive care to Medicare recipients and earlier tests for mammographies for younger Medicare-eligible women. We had what the American Diabetes Association