

Remarks to Operation Allied Force Troops at Aviano Air Base in Italy

June 22, 1999

Thank you very much. Well, Captain Davis, you are a pretty tough act to follow—[laughter]—and not short of self-confidence, either. That's good. [Laughter] I'd like to begin by saying that Hillary and I are delighted to be back in Aviano. We have been here several times to thank you, but never on an occasion more important than this.

I thank the Italian Minister of Defense, Mr. Scognamiglio, and his government and his Prime Minister, for their leadership, their strength, and their support for NATO during this operation. They have been terrific, and I thank them.

I would like to also say a special word of appreciation to our NATO Commander, our SACEUR, General Wes Clark, who led this conflict to a successful conclusion. Thank you, General Clark.

I want to thank Colonel Durigon, the Italian Base Commander; Ambassador Tom Foglietta, our Ambassador to Italy; Ambassador Lindy Boggs, our Ambassador to the Holy See. And, General Leaf, I want to thank you for your leadership and your remarkable statement here today.

We have been on a long trip to Europe. I have been, at various times, with not only Hillary and Chelsea but with Secretary of State Albright and National Security Adviser Berger, a large number of other people, on a long, long week very important to America. But I did not want to leave without having the chance to thank those of you who protect our freedom every single day, who fought for human dignity and won its cause in Kosovo. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Since the beginning of Operation Allied Force, I have actually traveled to six other bases involved in this effort: in the United States—Norfolk, Barksdale, and Whiteman in America; Spangdahlem, Ramstein, Ingleheim in Germany. But I wanted to come here to say a special word of thanks to the 16th Air Force, the 31st Air Expeditionary Wing, because of what you have done in Kosovo, because of the role this base played in Bosnia. You have repeatedly put your lives on the line to save the lives of inno-

cent civilians and turn back the tide of ethnic cleansing. Thank you again for this noble endeavor.

In 79 days, you did prove that a sustained air campaign under the right conditions can stop an army on the ground. The Serb forces have withdrawn from Kosovo; 20,000 allied KFOR troops are already in. You also stopped a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing and made it possible for us to reverse it. Protected by a peacekeeping force that includes NATO, Russia, and many other nations, the refugees are going back home. They have given new meaning, and you have given new meaning, to the motto of the 31st Fighter Wing. Thanks to you, they "Return With Honor."

Now that the conflict has been won, it is imperative that we and our NATO Allies and the others working with us win the peace. No one thinks it will take hold without difficulty. As more and more light is shed on those burned villages and even more mass graves than we dared to imagine, we become more and more appalled by the dark vision of Mr. Milosevic, and more and more certain we were right to stop it.

We have to win the peace with the same qualities with which you won the conflict—with determination and patience, with discipline and precision. We learned yesterday, again, that this, too, is a dangerous mission as we mourn the loss of two British soldiers who gave their lives trying to clear mines out of a house where they were placed solely to kill the returning refugees.

But thanks to you, the worst is already over in Kosovo. And tomorrow's dictators in other places will have to now take a harder look before they try to destroy or expel an entire people simply because of their race or religion.

General Leaf called you a championship team. Those are words well chosen. As he said, over 30,000 sorties flown, about 9,000 from here at Aviano, with zero combat fatalities; two planes down, both from here. In each case, the pilot recovered, first in 6 hours, the second in an hour and a half. That is a truly astonishing record.

And of course, we remember our two Army airmen who died in a training exercise

in Albania. But I know, and I want the American people to know, that we could have had many more losses but for your skill and courage. Because I know that there were many occasions when our pilots avoided firing back at those who were firing on them because they were firing from heavily populated civilian areas. And I am grateful for that, as well.

So many of you deserve acknowledgement. I wish I could name you all. I probably will miss someone, but I'm going to do this anyway, because I love to hear you cheer when your names are called. *[Laughter]* It does me a lot of good—you know, we've been up for a week and we're a little tired and you get my adrenaline flowing.

So thank you to the Buzzards of the 510th Fighter Squadron—*[applause]*—the Bushmasters of the 78th—*[applause]*—the Black Panthers of the 494th—*[applause]*—the Triple Nickle—*[applause]*—the Star Warriors and Patriots and Yellowjackets from the Navy—*[applause]*—Playboys and Seahawks from the Marines—*[applause]*—the men and women deployed to Aviano from about 90 bases around America and Europe—*[applause]*—and the crews here from Spain, Canada, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. *[Applause]* You have to teach them to scream with the same fervor with which you scream. *[Laughter]*

I want to thank the people on the ground, the maintenance personnel, the weaponeers, the air traffic controllers, and the Italian citizens who work on this base and make its success possible.

I do want the American press to note that some of you have demonstrated abilities that will serve you well when you return to civilian life. The 31st Civil Engineers—*[applause]*—built a tent city here in just 4 days. And it is the envy of all the urban planners back home in America. There's no crime—*[laughter]*—decent sanitation, and extremely low unemployment—congratulations. *[Laughter]* Thank you.

I want to again, in front of all of you, express my profound gratitude for our remarkable NATO Alliance of 19 nations. This was a difficult, difficult struggle for many of our countries. It is a tribute to their people and to their leaders. When I visited Spangdahlem in Germany in May, I spoke with pilots who

told me how good it felt to look out of their cockpits and see aircraft from the other NATO nations lying beside them.

Now, under the leadership of General Jackson, with all 19 NATO nations working with the Russians and with many other countries, we are there in Kosovo to guarantee security, self-government, and a chance for all the people to rebuild.

Again, I want to say I am particularly grateful to Prime Minister D'Alema and the Italian people for giving us the chance to call Aviano home and for their solidarity throughout this operation. All of you know that Kosovo was not a distant crisis for the people of Italy; it was an immediate threat and a difficult one, indeed. The threat is now receding before a new vision of southeastern Europe, one in which the pull of our common humanity and the promise of shared prosperity are more powerful than the old forces of hatred and division.

I want to say a special word of appreciation to all of you in our Armed Forces for just being here. If you think about—I want you to really think about it—you think about what Kosovo was all about. People were taught to hate people who were from a different ethnic group than they were, who worshiped God in a different way. They started out by being afraid of them and misunderstanding them. Then, they came to hate them. And then after hating them for a good while, they came to dehumanize them. And once you decide that someone you're looking at is no longer a human being, it's not so hard to justify killing them, or burning them out of house and home, or torturing their children, or doing all the other things you have heard. It all starts—it all starts with the inability to recognize the inherent dignity and equality of someone who is different from ourselves.

The composition of our Armed Forces, with people from every race, every ethnic group, every religious persuasion, from all walks of life, that make up American society—the fact that our military has all of you in it is the most stunning rebuke to the claims of ethnic cleansing.

Now, we're going home. *[Applause]* I hope it's home you're cheering for and not the fact that I'm about to quit speaking. *[Laughter]*