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Death of American Journalist in Sierra Leone

Q. Mr. President, Kurt Schork, the American journalist killed in Sierra Leone yesterday—do you have any thoughts on that and ideas on its significance?

The President. First of all, I knew that journalist over 30 years ago; we were in Oxford together. And I'm very sad today. He was a good man, and if you look at all the many posts that he occupied, he was a brave man. He went to a lot of places, a lot of the troubled and dangerous places of the world, to bring the news to people. And I am very sad about it.

But let me say, in a larger sense, I think it shows how important it is for the United Nations missions to succeed. I appreciate very much the willingness of the Nigerians to go back in there, and we are aggressively committed to providing the support necessary to take the Nigerians and other troops into Sierra Leone and to support the United Nations mission in other ways and to contribute our share and maybe a little over that to try to stabilize the situation.

I think that it's obvious that the RUF have—these are just the last in a long line of their victims, many of whom are innocent children who had their limbs chopped off. And they had a chance to participate in a peace process which was more than generous to them in terms of giving them an opportunity to walk away from what they had done, and they didn't take it. And I think the United Nations mission has to prevail. I will do everything I can to support it.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:52 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Medicare recipients Ronald and Eunice Lachnit; and Peruvian Presidential candidate Alejandro Toledo. The President also referred to RUF, the Revolutionary United Front. A reporter referred to OAS, the Organization of American States.

Remarks on Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month

May 25, 2000

The President. Thank you. Thank you very much, and good afternoon.

I want to welcome all of you here. And a special word of welcome to a former Congressman, and now our chair of the Commission, Norm Mineta. Daphne Kwok, Jin Sook Lee, Karen Narasaki, Senator Akaka, Senator Thomas, Representative Becerra, Representative Eni Faleomavaega, Representative Underwood, to Bill Lann Lee and all the members of the administration who are Asian-Pacific Americans. We just had a picture of over 60 of us, about—not quite—90 percent of the total.

I want to thank those of you who work in the White House and to say a special word of appreciation to Laura Efurd, who worked very hard on this event. And to our Director of Public Liaison, Mary Beth Cahill, for her work and support. And I want to say a special word of appreciation to the Asian-Pacific American whom I have known the longest in this group, Maria Haley, who helped me put the Commission together. I thank her for her work.

I am very proud that I've had the opportunity to appoint more Asian-Pacific Americans than any President in history. I am proud of the difference you make every day, whether you're enforcing our civil rights laws, administering our Medicare program, representing America overseas, or in many other countless ways, you make a profound difference.

This month we celebrate the accomplishments of more than 10 million Asian-Pacific Americans in every aspect of our Nation's life from engineering to education, science to sports, public service to the performing arts. You might be interested to know that one of the performing arts is speechmaking, and the speechwriter who prepared this was Samir Afridi, one of the Asian-Pacific Americans in our administration.

You may be fifth-generation Americans or newcomers to our shores, but you have all enriched our country and reinforced our values of family, work, and community. We should recognize that, not just in one month but every day. Thanks to the inventiveness of people like Vinod Dham, we celebrate it whenever we use a computer with a Pentium chip. We celebrate when we read the works of writers like Amy Tan; when we visit the haunting Vietnam Memorial, designed by Maya Lin; when we benefit from the pathbreaking medical research of Dr. David Ho; and from countless other Asian-Pacific Americans who are leading us to new frontiers of science and technology.

And I also want to say that just as we are enhanced when we tap the strengths of all Americans, we are diminished when any American is targeted unfairly because of his or her heritage. Stereotyping, discrimination, racism have no place. And if we can overcome it, America has no limit to what we can achieve.

I am proud of the progress that we have made together over the last 7½ years, both here and around the world. This spring I was the first President in over 20 years to visit South Asia. Just yesterday we took an historic step toward normalizing trade with China and continuing our prosperity at home, and I think most important of all, giving us the chance to have a very different 50 years with the Asian-Pacific region in the future than the 50 years we have all just lived through.

I am very proud of the contributions of Asian-Pacific Americans to the longest economic expansion in history, to the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years. I am proud that we have worked hard to spread these benefits more equally across our society—poverty at a 20-year low and poverty among Asian-Pacific Americans declining by more than 10 percent since I took office.

Last year the SBA approved loans to Asian-Pacific Americans entrepreneurs totaling over $2.1 billion, more than 3½ times the number of loans guaranteed in 1992, the year before we took office.

We beefed up our commitment to the enforcement of civil rights laws. And we know that, in spite of all the successes, we still face challenges to building the one America of our dreams. So today I'd like to touch on just a few of those, if I might.

First, we face the challenge of ensuring that every American is part of our prosperity. The Asian-Pacific American community is the fastest growing racial group in our country—also among the most diverse, with more than 30 different ethnic groups, with roots that stretch from Pakistan to Polynesia, Thailand to Tonga, Hong Kong to Hawaii. Some have referred to your community as a so-called model minority. But that label, like any one, while it has its truths and strengths, masks the rich diversity and the diversity of challenges and disparities we find within the Asian-Pacific American community.

For example, cervical cancer rates among Vietnamese women are nearly 5 times higher than those for white women. Why is that, and what can we do about it? Over half of South-Asian-Americans have earned a bachelor's degree, but less than 6 percent of Cambodian- and Laotian-Americans have completed college. Why is that, and what can we do about it? Despite the strong economy, almost half of all Cambodian-Americans and two out of three Hmong-Americans live in poverty. Why is that, and what are we going to do about it?

Let me say just sort of parenthetically, I was very, very grateful that amidst an otherwise very busy week dominated by the news about our discussions on China, we announced an historic bipartisan accord, thanks to the good work and good faith of the Speaker of the House, between Republicans and Democrats to launch an initiative to develop new markets in America—to give people the same incentives to invest in poor neighborhoods and people and places that have been left behind here, as we give them to invest around the world. And I hope the Asian-Pacific American community will, number one, help us pass this legislation as soon as possible; and number two, close the disparities in educational and economic performance within all the groups that make up your richly diverse community.

I signed an Executive order last year establishing the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and an Advisory Commission headed by Norm Mineta. One particular focus is going to be on how

we can improve our data collection to better identify the specific needs of discreet populations. In a larger sense, the work of this commission is an extension of the new markets approach.

We do not have a person to waste in America. We all do better when we help each other, and that's what the White House initiative and this Commission's work is all about. I want to thank Norm and all the Commissioners here and those throughout our Government for being a part of it. But a special thanks to those of you who have agreed to serve on this Commission. We wish you well, and we're all committed to helping you succeed.

A second challenge we face in building one America is making sure that our Government reflects our growing diversity. I am proud to have nominated Bill Lann Lee as our Nation's top civil rights enforcer, the first Asian-Pacific American in that post. I still hope the Senate will do the right thing and confirm him.

Yesterday I nominated Norman Bay as U.S. Attorney for the District of New Mexico. And I also want to say a word about judges. I have appointed the most diverse group of Federal judges in history. They have garnered the highest percentages of top ratings the ABA has given in 40 years. We have shattered the myth that diversity somehow diminishes quality.

Today I want to thank the Senate for the progress made yesterday in confirming 16 judges. But we still have too many nominees who have waited too long. One of them is a woman named Dolly Gee. I met with her yesterday. I'm going to embarrass her a little bit now. I nominated her for the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California.

She has some good news in her life—she got married last weekend. The bad news is she's supposed to be on her honeymoon. [*Laughter*] The worst news is her husband is on her honeymoon—[*laughter*]—in London. But because she wanted to be here with you, she sent him there without her. [*Laughter*] And I think every one of you should take it as a personal responsibility to try to persuade the Senate to confirm her.

Dolly, stand up there. [*Applause*]

Before I took office, it had been 14 years since the last Asian-Pacific American had been appointed to the bench. I've had the honor to appoint five, and Dolly would be six. Six is a nice round number, and she ought to be part of it.

I thank her for her service in Los Angeles, serving with great distinction on the Federal Service Impasse Board helping to mediate labor disputes. And again I say, in addition to that, in her distinguished career as a civil litigator, she has, nonetheless, languished with her nomination for more than a year in the Senate. The quality of justice suffers when people like Dolly are denied a hearing and a vote. So I hope we will get it.

Third, building one America means rooting out discrimination in all its forms. Part of that means healing the wounds of the past. Our budget includes almost $5 million to preserve a number of World War II internment camps. Part of what I know about this stems from the fact that one of those camps was in my home State. We must never forget that sad chapter in our history or let fear and prejudice jeopardize our rights and our liberties.

I'll never forget when I went to Hawaii to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in the Pacific; I played golf with a number of World War II veterans. And one of them told me that—he said that he was the only good example of what happened in an internment camp. He was sent to our internment camp in Arkansas, and there was—the only place that he could find anyone who made his native food was across the river in Mississippi. So he went over there and met a young woman who became his wife. They let him out of the internment camp, and he joined the military and served with distinction in our armed services. I have never forgotten that. And I still can't believe it happened. And that may be the only good story that ever came out of one of those things.

So I would say that we need to do our best to preserve those camps so that there will never be any new ones in America, and our children don't forget what happened—and the cautionary tale of how quickly good people can do bad things.

I am also really looking forward next month to awarding the Medal of Honor to 21 Asian-Pacific American veterans of World War II, including Senator Inouye. It is long overdue.

Finally, let me say, we have to do more to combat hate crimes in our society. We see case after case across our land: a man dragged to death in Texas because he was black; a young man beaten and left to die in Wyoming because he was gay; children shot in Los Angeles because of their Jewish faith; a postal worker gunned down in California because of his Filipino heritage. Hate crimes target people not because of what they do but because of who they are. And because of that, they strike at the heart of who we are as Americans. I hope we can pass the hate crimes legislation, and I hope you'll help us to do it.

I recently received a remarkable book called, "Asian American Dreams." In the book, the author, Helen Zia, notes that Asian-Pacific Americans, and I quote, "are a people in constant motion, a great work in progress, each stage more faceted and complex than before. As we overcome adversity and take on new challenges, we have evolved. Our special dynamism is our gift to America."

Thank you for sharing that gift and renewing our Nation. Thank you for moving us closer to the America of our Founders' dreams, where we don't just tolerate but celebrate our differences, share our rich heritage in history with others, always reaffirming our common humanity.

Now, I would like to ask the next speaker to the podium, a World War II internment survivor, the first Asian-American to be a committee chairman in Congress, the founder of the Asian Pacific Institute for Congressional Studies, the chair of my Advisory Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and my friend, Norm Mineta.

Norm, come up.

[*At this point, Mr. Mineta and Daphne Kwok, chair, National Council for Asian Pacific Islanders, made brief remarks. Ms. Kwok then presented the President with an award.*]

The President. Thank you. I want to thank again the Members of Congress for coming; give them a chance to make their exit. We're adjourned. Let's just stand up and have a good time.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:05 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jin Sook Lee, secretary, and Karen Narasaki, treasurer, National Council for Asian Pacific Islanders; Special Assistant to the President and Presidential Speechwriter Samir (Sam) Afridi; and Albert Wong, husband of judicial nominee Dolly M. Gee.

Remarks at a Memorial Service for Casey Shearer in Providence, Rhode Island

May 25, 2000

The President. Derek, Ruth, Anthony, Julia, Marva, Allyson, all of the family and friends, I want you to know why we're here today. Over 30 years ago, I lived with Casey's Uncle Strobe, and through him I met Casey's Aunt Brooke. And they were in love, and so I then had to meet Derek and Cody and Marva and Skip. And then I introduced them to Hillary. And then Derek introduced all of us to Ruth. And the rest is history.

What I want to say to all of you is, when we were young, we were to each other what Casey has been to you. And I think I can say for all of us, listening to you today has been overwhelming and wonderful. And all I can hope is that you will hold on to it for the rest of your lives.

But we have a few memories, too.

[*At this point, the First Lady made brief remarks.*]

The President. His classmates might be interested to know that when I ran for President first in 1992, Casey actually tried to tutor me in rap music. [*Laughter*] You know, I would do this whole shtick. I played on Arsenio Hall's show, and I was trying to show that I was in tune with younger voters. I knew nothing about rap music. [*Laughter*] I knew nothing about the music of the eighties. I went to work and missed it all. Casey was horrified that I was going to embarrass myself on national television and blow the election. [*Laughter*]