

Remarks to Soldiers and Their Families at Fort Drum, New York *March 15, 1994*

Thank you for the wonderful welcome. Thank you for this beautiful, beautifully decorated place of welcome. Thank you for letting the band play "Yakety Sax." That was an interesting little twist. And thank you for letting me sit next to a distinguished soldier who was from my hometown; our grandparents knew each other. Command Sergeant Major Johnson, stand up. You know, we were sitting back there talking, he was looking at me thinking, "I don't know about you, Mr. President, but I've come a long way." [Laughter]

I thank all of you for being here. I also want to acknowledge the presence in the audience today of the Lieutenant Governor of New York, Lieutenant Governor Stan Lundine, and Congressman John McCue from this district. Thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

I also want to thank the eight couples that are here behind me and Major Tony Smart, who was sitting up there with me. The nine of them gathered over at General and Mrs. Meade's house a few moments ago to talk to me about what it was like to be in Somalia and what it was like to be the family members left behind. They represented you wonderfully well. I loved my time with them. And it must not have been all that easy for them to do, but they were terrific. I'd like for you to acknowledge them all. [Applause]

I thank General Meade for his welcome and General Shali for his fine remarks.

You know, this is a great day, but it is March 15th and there's still a couple of feet of snow on the ground up here. I know that there are a fair number of men and women in our Armed Forces who come from the southern part of the United States. When I realized you'd had 160 inches of snow, 26 days in January below zero, one day at 43 degrees below zero—that's real temperature, not wind chill—I'm surprised we have anybody who didn't go to Somalia. [Laughter] I'm surprised anybody stayed behind. Some of the ladies who were meeting with me said that shoveling the snow was maybe a harder duty than their husbands had to endure. But I'm glad to be here. I thank you for the hat. Look at my nice tie, here. It's your tie. I will wear it with pride.

It's also a privilege for me to welcome back "Triple Deuce" today. I say on behalf of all the American people, thank you, job well done and welcome home.

Fifteen months ago, our troops went to Somalia to help stop one of the great human tragedies of our time. Already 300,000 people, many of them little children like those here in this audience, had died of starvation and disease; twice as many were in danger of dying very quickly. Relief supplies were rotting on the docks of Mogadishu, hostage to a small number of armed Somalis.

To help relieve this suffering, our Nation acted. President Bush deployed 28,000 American troops in support of a United Nations humanitarian mission. It was after the election, I was coming in, and I gave him my full support. Joining with other soldiers and relief workers from around the world, our troops helped restore hope and save hundreds of thousands from certain death. This proud division, the same division that helped the citizens of Florida rebuild after Hurricane Andrew, knows something about restoring hope. I saw some of you there, too.

Today, in Somalia, the crops are growing; food and medicine are flowing; roads, schools, and clinics have reopened. No longer are thousands of children dying every day. Leaders are sitting down today at peace talks in Nairobi. You helped make all that possible. And by March 25th, a week ahead of schedule, the last American military units in Somalia will be heading back to their loved ones and home.

There are those who will say we have not done everything that could have been done because Somalia has not yet found an enduring peace, because factions continue to fight for advantage, indifferent to the deadly chaos they threatened to recreate. But never forget, because of your efforts and the efforts of so many others, the starvation has ended and the Somali people have been given a serious chance to build their own future. That is all we or anyone else can provide. We cannot rebuild other people's societies. You have given them a chance to seize their own future. That is what we do in the United States, and that is what others must do as well. You have given them that

chance, and for that, the world should be grateful to you.

Let me say that we must honor not only those who returned hale and healthy but also those who came home wounded and those who did not return. I met in Walter Reed Hospital one of your numbers, Sergeant Chris Reid, a very brave and terribly impressive soldier who is still in the hospital nursing his wounds. And I know that our prayers, all of our prayers are with him.

Just yesterday an American AC-130 crashed off the coast of Kenya on its way to Somalia and several of the crew members perished. On behalf of all the American people, let me express our sympathy to the loved ones of those who were lost in that accident.

On Veterans Day I had the honor of meeting three other members of your great division, Specialists Michael Carroll and Duane Bevitt and Lieutenant Colonel Egon Hawrylack. They came to the White House. I thought I deserve a cheer for pronouncing his name right. *[Applause]* Let me tell you, they came to the White House, those three people, with some others who served there, with a simple message. They said, "We are proud of what we did."

When most of our troops came home last May, General Robert Johnston came to the White House, and he said this about you and your colleagues who served in Somalia: "A lot of 18- and 19-year-old men and women in uniform," he said, "demonstrated enormous discipline, good judgment, and a good deal of patience in performing a rather unique mission." That is putting it mildly. People who were not there do not know how much patience was required on how many circumstances under difficult, difficult conditions. And General Johnston said, "I don't think any other country in the world could have done what we did." I say that is true, and we are all proud of what you did.

In this new era, you all know that we may ask our military to undertake a range of missions, fighting aggression in the Gulf, helping to contain the conflict in the Balkans, working to build a democratic peace in Europe through NATO's Partnership For Peace. But whatever the setting, our people in uniform carry the same message of strength and hope and freedom. That's why our forces must always be the best trained, the best equipped, the best prepared in the world, and the people with the

best spirit, the best morale, and the deepest conviction—people like you. That is my commitment, to keep you there and keep you strong.

I want to say one other word about the mission in Somalia. General Shalikashvili just described that work as a great victory as measured in the thousands and hundreds of thousands of children and men and women who are alive today. In that sense, the mission you undertook was without precedent. American soldiers did not go to Somalia to conquer but on a mission of mercy, a mission accomplished, a mission to be proud of. Let history also record that here at Fort Drum and at other bases across our Nation that it was not just the troops who earned their stripes but the spouses, the families, the children, the civilian colleagues and the communities.

I want to say again, I am profoundly grateful to all the families and all the family support groups and all the civilians who made this possible. And these fine people behind me, who spent about an hour talking to me today, taught me things and made me see things and understand things from your point of view that I could never have learned otherwise. I am in your debt, and I believe I will be a better President and a better Commander in Chief because of the time they spent to share your lives, your experiences, and your hopes with me. I thank them for that, and I thank you for that.

Finally, let me say, if there are any debates still to be had about our mission in Somalia, let people have those debates with me, but let there be no debate about how you carried out the mission. You answered the call. You did your job. You served your country wonderfully well. More than that no one can ask. So to all the American men and women who have served with honor in this difficult and dangerous mission, I say you have shown the world what Americans are made of. Your Nation is grateful, and your President is terribly, terribly proud of you.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:02 p.m. in the soldiers' gym.