

Remarks on Opening the Library of Congress Exhibit on the History of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America

September 28, 1994

Thank you very much. President and Mrs. Yeltsin, Mr. Speaker, Senator Stevens, distinguished Members of Congress and other guests: I'd like to say a special word of commendation to Dr. Billington. I don't have an informed opinion about his Russian, but his English was impeccable this morning.

I'm honored to be joined by the President of the Russian Federation in opening the exhibit on the 200th anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America. We gather in a new era of cooperation between our countries, but this exhibit reminds us that the ties between our peoples are old and deep.

Two centuries ago, eight Russian priests arrived in North America to minister to Russian traders and the native peoples of Alaska. Together they forged a partnership, a new Russian and native American community that eventually would stretch down the Pacific coast. Though born on different continents, they were all resourceful, brave, and faithful people.

A century later, another Russian came to Alaska, Archbishop Tikhon. He soon presided over all the new Russian communities that had grown throughout the entire United States. He oversaw the completion of St. Nicholas Cathedral in New York City and returned to his mother country to become the first patriarch of Russia since the time of Peter the Great.

In the years since, countless Russian immigrants to America have formed churches and cultural associations in many of our great cities and farming communities. They have strengthened American industry, education, science, and most notably, the arts: literature, music, and dance. As this exhibit shows, our Nation's history

has long been enriched by the Russian people, their fortitude, their culture, and their faith.

President Yeltsin, this library is a fitting place for this exhibition, for the Library of Congress first grew out of the personal library of our third President, Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and one of our first champions of religious tolerance and freedom. Today, the spirit of respect and understanding thrives in the exchange programs offered to the brilliant minds of young people from Russia and the United States. And we are joined here today by 30 of those students who have benefited from the exchange programs that our two Governments support so strongly. I'd like to recognize especially the efforts of our USIA Director, Joe Duffey, and Senator Bill Bradley, who have worked so hard to make these exchanges a reality. Thomas Jefferson would be proud of them both.

As we remember the ties between Russia and America of two centuries ago, let us welcome our new ties and the new spirit of cooperation and a new century of partnership that lies ahead, remembering that much of it began on one of the most important principles of our entire existence in America, the principle of religious liberty. When our Founders fought for the freedom of this country, they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor for the right of every American to worship as he or she chooses.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:28 a.m. in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress. In his remarks, he referred to James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress.

The President's News Conference With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia

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President Clinton. We will begin the press conference now with opening statements, after which we will have, obviously, questions from

the press. And we will do our best to alternate between the Russian and American press corps.