

Remarks at the Funeral Service for Justice William J. Brennan, Jr.  
*July 29, 1997*

Mrs. Brennan, members of the Brennan family, Justices of the Supreme Court, Members of Congress, the administration, Father Jordan, Father O'Hara, Monsignor: Throughout our history, a few powerful ideals have transformed the lives of our people. And throughout our history, there have been a few individuals so devoted to those ideals they could hammer them on the anvil of history to reshape our land and our future.

Often, when our Nation could have fractured, a few have stepped into the breach, bringing us together and moving us forward. Justice Brennan found the ideals in the Constitution time and time again. And time and time again, he stepped into the breach to hammer them on the anvil of our history, saving us from our darker impulses and always pulling us together and pushing us forward. We thank God for his life and work, for Justice Brennan's America is America at its best.

Today we recall his decency and grace which made out of his philosophical foes some close, personal friends. We recall his humor and humility, we recall his pride in his own heritage and the stunning, almost inexplicable empathy that enabled him to walk in the shoes of those whose lives were so very different from his own. We recall him as a legal giant, the balance wheel who molded the Supreme Court into an instrument of liberty and equality during tumultuous times.

For Justice Brennan, the phrases of our Constitution were not archaic abstractions but living, vibrant guarantees of the freedom and equality God has given us. Because of him, those old words came alive in our lives as well. Think of it: Today, the votes of all Americans have equal weight because of Justice Brennan. The press can freely and robustly debate the great issues of the day because of Justice Brennan. Mr. Justice, you'll have to forgive the elected officials here if we have, time to time, doubted the wisdom of that decision—[laughter]—which probably proves its correctness. Women can break down the barriers of discrimination in the workplace because of Justice Brennan. The basic freedoms of the Bill of Rights apply to every State in America, giving ordinary citizens redress

when their rights have been violated by government, because of Justice Brennan. Lives were lifted up and Americans summoned to live to our highest ideals because of Justice Brennan.

As a young man growing up in the South, I lived through the shame of segregation. I know what it meant when the Supreme Court spoke unanimously and said Little Rock Central High School must open its doors to all. Then, I knew things would never be the same. Now, I know that this transformation was written into our law by Justice Brennan. He became a hero to me, a model for law and service, a real belief to me that if law could serve justice and equality then, 25 years ago, young people like Hillary and me could go into the law, because we thought, like him, we could make a difference by upholding the Constitution's dignity and meaning and working to make it more real in the lives of all Americans.

One of the greatest honors of my Presidency was to bestow on him, and posthumously his friend Justice Marshall, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Tonight the Sun will set over the hills of Arlington National Cemetery on the first night of Justice Brennan's residence there. But the life he lived will never be extinguished, and the life he breathed into our most cherished ideals will never die. He loved his country fiercely. He gave himself to it fully. He strengthened it profoundly, and we are all better for it. We thank God for his life and commend his soul to the Almighty.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:23 a.m. at St. Matthew's Cathedral. In his remarks, he referred to Justice Brennan's widow, Mary; Father Milton E. Jordan, pastor, Mother Seton Parish, Germantown, MD; Father John O'Hara, priest, Diocese of Arlington; and Monsignor Ronald Jameson, rector, St. Matthew's Cathedral. The proclamation of July 24 on the death of Justice Brennan is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.