

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. at Zahrat Al Madian. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Arafat's wife, Shua. The transcript released

by the Office of Press Secretary also included the remarks of Chairman Arafat.

Remarks to the Palestine National Council and Other Palestinian Organizations in Gaza City *December 14, 1998*

Thank you. Mr. Speaker—Mr. Za'anoun, Chairman Arafat, Mrs. Arafat; members of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian Central Council, the Palestinian Executive Committee, Palestinian Council heads of ministries; leaders of business and religion; to all members of the Palestinian community; and to my fellow Americans who come here from many walks of life, Arab-American, Jewish-American: This is a remarkable day. Today the eyes of the world are on you.

I am profoundly honored to be the first American President to address the Palestinian people in a city governed by Palestinians.

I have listened carefully to all that has been said. I have watched carefully the reactions of all of you to what has been said. I know that the Palestinian people stand at a crossroads: behind you a history of dispossession and dispersal, before you the opportunity to shape a new Palestinian future on your own land.

I know the way is often difficult and frustrating, but you have come to this point through a commitment to peace and negotiations. You reaffirmed that commitment today. I believe it is the only way to fulfill the aspirations of your people. And I am profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Chairman Arafat for the cause of peace, to come here as a friend of peace and a friend of your future, and to witness you raising your hands, standing up tall, standing up not only against what you believe is wrong but for what you believe is right in the future.

I was sitting here thinking that this moment would have been inconceivable a decade ago: no Palestinian Authority; no elections in Gaza and the West Bank; no relations between the United States and Palestinians; no Israeli troop redeployments from the West Bank and Gaza; no Palestinians in charge in Gaza, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hebron, Tulkarem, Jenin, Nablus,

Jericho, and so many other places; there was no Gaza International Airport.

Today I had the privilege of cutting the ribbon on the international airport. Hillary and I, along with Chairman and Mrs. Arafat, celebrated a place that will become a magnet for planes from throughout the Middle East and beyond, bringing you a future in which Palestinians can travel directly to the far corners of the world; a future in which it is easier and cheaper to bring materials, technology, and expertise in and out of Gaza; a future in which tourists and traders can flock here, to this beautiful place on the Mediterranean; a future, in short, in which the Palestinian people are connected to the world.

I am told that just a few months ago, at a time of profound pessimism in the peace process, your largest exporter of fruit and flowers was prepared to plow under a field of roses, convinced the airport would never open. But Israelis and Palestinians came to agreement at Wye River, the airport has opened, and now I am told that company plans to export roses and carnations to Europe and throughout the Gulf, a true flowering of Palestinian promise.

I come here today to talk about that promise, to ask you to rededicate yourselves to it, to ask you to think for a moment about how we can get beyond the present state of things where every step forward is like, as we say in America, pulling teeth. Where there is still, in spite of the agreement at Wye—achieved because we don't need much sleep, and we worked so hard, and Mr. Netanyahu worked with us, and we made this agreement. But I want to talk to you about how we can get beyond this moment, where there is still so much mistrust and misunderstanding and quite a few missteps.

You did a good thing today in raising your hands. You know why? It has nothing to do

with the government in Israel. You will touch the people of Israel.

I want the people of Israel to know that for many Palestinians, 5 years after Oslo, the benefits of this process remain remote; that for too many Palestinians lives are hard, jobs are scarce, prospects are uncertain, and personal grief is great. I know that tremendous pain remains as a result of losses suffered from violence, the separation of families, the restrictions on the movement of people and goods. I understand your concerns about settlement activity, land confiscation, and home demolitions. I understand your concerns and theirs about unilateral statements that could prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations. I understand, in short, that there's still a good deal of misunderstanding 5 years after the beginning of this remarkable process.

It takes time to change things and still more time for change to benefit everyone. It takes determination and courage to make peace and sometimes even more to persevere for peace. But slowly but surely, the peace agreements are turning into concrete progress: the transfer of territories, the Gaza industrial estate, and the airport. These changes will make a difference in many Palestinian lives.

I thank you—I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership for peace and your perseverance, for enduring all the criticism from all sides, for being willing to change course, and for being strong enough to stay with what is right. You have done a remarkable thing for your people.

America is determined to do what we can to bring tangible benefits of peace. I am proud that the roads we traveled on to get here were paved, in part, with our assistance, as were hundreds of miles of roads that knit together towns and villages throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Two weeks ago in Washington, we joined with other nations to pledge hundreds of millions of dollars toward your development, including health care and clean water, education for your children, rule of law projects that nurture democracy. Today I am pleased to announce we will also fund the training of Palestinian health care providers and airport administrators, increase our support to Palestinian refugees. And next year I will ask the Congress for another several hundred million dollars to support the development of the Palestinian people.

But make no mistake about it, all this was made possible because of what you did, because 5 years ago you made a choice for peace, and because through all the tough times since, when in your own mind you had a hundred good reasons to walk away, you didn't. Because you still harbor the wisdom that led to the Oslo accords, that led to the signing in Washington in September of '93, you still can raise your hand and stand and lift your voice for peace.

Mr. Chairman, you said some profound words today in embracing the idea that Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace as neighbors. Again I say, you have led the way, and we would not be here without you.

I say to all of you, I can come here and work; I can bring you to America, and we can work; but in the end, this is up to you—you and the Israelis—for you have to live with the consequences of what you do. I can help because I believe it is my job to do so; I believe it is my duty to do so; because America has Palestinian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, other Arab-Americans who desperately want us to be helpful. But in the end, you have to decide what the understanding will be, and you have to decide whether we can get beyond the present moment where there is still, for all the progress we have made, so much mistrust. And the people who are listening to us today in Israel, they have to make the same decisions.

Peace must mean many things: legitimate rights for Palestinians—[*applause*]*—thank you—*legitimate rights for Palestinians, real security for Israel. But it must begin with something even more basic: mutual recognition, seeing people who are different, with whom there have been profound differences, as people.

I've had two profoundly emotional experiences in the last less than 24 hours. I was with Chairman Arafat, and four little children came to see me whose fathers are in Israeli prisons. Last night, I met some little children whose fathers had been killed in conflict with Palestinians, at the dinner that Prime Minister Netanyahu had for me. Those children brought tears to my eyes. We have to find a way for both sets of children to get their lives back and to go forward.

Palestinians must recognize the right of Israel and its people to live safe and secure lives today, tomorrow, and forever. Israel must recognize the right of Palestinians to aspire to live free today, tomorrow, and forever.

And I ask you to remember these experiences I had with these two groups of children. If I had met them in reverse order, I would not have known which ones were Israeli and which Palestinian. If they had all been lined up in a row and I had seen their tears, I could not tell whose father was dead and whose father was in prison or what the story of their lives were, making up the grief that they bore. We must acknowledge that neither side has a monopoly on pain or virtue.

At the end of America's Civil War, in my home State, a man was elected Governor who had fought with President Lincoln's forces, even though most of the people in my home State fought with the secessionist forces. And he made his inaugural speech after 4 years of unbelievable bloodshed in America, in which he had been on the winning side but in the minority in our home. And everyone wondered what kind of leader he would be. His first sentence was, "We have all done wrong." I say that because I think the beginning of mutual respect, after so much pain, is to recognize not only the positive characteristics of people on both sides but the fact that there has been a lot—a lot—of hurt and harm.

The fulfillment of one side's aspirations must not come at the expense of the other. We must believe that everyone can win in the new Middle East. It does not hurt Israelis to hear Palestinians peacefully and proudly asserting their identity, as we saw today. That is not a bad thing. And it does not hurt Palestinians to acknowledge the profound desire of Israelis to live without fear. It is in this spirit that I ask you to consider where we go from here.

I thank you for your rejection fully, finally, and forever of the passages in the Palestinian Charter calling for the destruction of Israel, for they were the ideological underpinnings of a struggle renounced at Oslo. By revoking them once and for all, you have sent, I say again, a powerful message not to the Government but to the people of Israel. You will touch people on the street there. You will reach their hearts there.

I know how profoundly important this is to Israelis. I have been there four times as President. I have spent a lot of time with people other than the political leaders, Israeli schoolchildren who heard about you only as someone who thought they should be driven into the sea. They did not know what their parents or grand-

parents did that you thought was so bad; they were just children, too. Is it surprising that all this has led to the hardening of hearts on both sides, that they refused to acknowledge your existence as a people and that led to a terrible reaction by you?

By turning this page on the past, you are taking the lead in writing a new story for the future. And you have issued a challenge to the Government and the leaders of Israel to walk down that path with you. I thank you for doing that. The children of all the Middle East thank you.

But declaring a change of heart still won't be enough. Let's be realistic here. First of all, there are real differences. And secondly, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge, as we used to say at home. An American poet has written, "Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart." Palestinians and Israelis in their pasts both share a history of oppression and dispossession; both have felt their hearts turn to stone for living too long in fear and seeing loved ones die too young. You are two great people of strong talent and soaring ambition, sharing such a small piece of sacred land.

The time has come to sanctify your holy ground with genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. Every influential Palestinian, from teacher to journalist, from politician to community leader, must make this a mission to banish from the minds of children glorifying suicide bombers, to end the practice of speaking peace in one place and preaching hatred in another, to teach schoolchildren the value of peace and the waste of war, to break the cycle of violence. Our great American prophet Martin Luther King once said, "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind."

I believe you have gained more in 5 years of peace than in 45 years of war. I believe that what we are doing today, working together for security, will lead to further gains and changes in the heart. I believe that our work against terrorism, if you stand strong, will be rewarded, for that must become a fact of the past. It must never be a part of your future.

Let me say this as clearly as I can: No matter how sharp a grievance or how deep a hurt, there is no justification for killing innocents.

Mr. Chairman, you said at the White House that no Israeli mother should have to worry if her son or daughter is late coming home. Your words touched many people. You said

much the same thing today. We must invest those words with the weight of reality in the minds of every person in Israel and every Palestinian.

I feel this all the more strongly because the act of a few can falsify the image of the many. How many times have we seen it? How many times has it happened to us? We both know it is profoundly wrong to equate Palestinians, in particular, and Islam, in general, with terrorism or to see a fundamental conflict between Islam and the West. For the vast majority of the more than one billion Muslims in the world, tolerance is an article of faith and terrorism a travesty of faith.

I know that in my own country, where Islam is one of the fastest growing religions, we share the same devotion to family and hard work and community. When it comes to relations between the United States and Palestinians, we have come far to overcome our misperceptions of each other. Americans have come to appreciate the strength of your identity and the depth of your aspirations. And we have learned to listen to your grievances as well.

I hope you have begun to see America as your friend. I have tried to speak plainly to you about the need to reach out to the people of Israel, to understand the pain of their children, to understand the history of their fear and mistrust, their yearning, gnawing desire for security, because that is the only way friends can speak and the only way we can move forward.

I took the same liberty yesterday in Israel. I talked there about the need to see one's own mistakes, not just those of others; to recognize the steps others have taken for peace, not just one's own; to break out of the politics of absolutes; to treat one's neighbors with respect and dignity. I talked about the profound courage of both peoples and their leaders which must continue in order for a secure, just, and lasting peace to occur: the courage of Israelis to continue turning over territory for peace and security; the courage of Palestinians to take action against all those who resort to and support violence and terrorism; the courage of Israelis to guarantee safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza and allow for greater trade and development; the courage of Palestinians to confiscate illegal weapons of war and terror; the courage of Israelis to curtail closures and curfews that remain a daily hardship; the courage of Palestin-

ians to resolve all differences at the negotiating table; the courage of both peoples to abandon the rhetoric of hate that still poisons public discourse and limits the vision of your children; and the courage to move ahead to final status negotiations together, without either side taking unilateral steps or making unilateral statements that could prejudice the outcome, whether governing refugee settlements, borders, Jerusalem, or any other issues encompassed by the Oslo accord.

Now, it will take good faith, mutual respect, and compromise to forge a final agreement. I think there will be more breakdowns, frankly, but I think there will be more breakthroughs, as well. There will be more challenges to peace from its enemies. And so I ask you today never to lose sight of how far you have come. With Chairman Arafat's leadership, already you have accomplished what many said was impossible. The seemingly intractable problems of the past can clearly find practical solutions in the future. But it requires a consistent commitment and a genuine willingness to change heart.

As we approach this new century, think of this, think of all the conflicts in the 20th century that many people thought were permanent that have been healed or are healing: two great World Wars between the French and the Germans—they're best friends; the Americans and the Russians, the whole cold war—now we have a constructive partnership; the Irish Catholics and Protestants; the Chinese and the Japanese; the black and white South Africans; the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims in Bosnia—all have turned from conflict to cooperation. Yes, there is still some distrust; yes, there's still some difficulty; but they are walking down the right road together. And when they see each other's children, increasingly they only see children, together. When they see the children crying, they realize the pain is real, whatever the child's story. In each case there was a vision of greater peace and prosperity and security.

In Biblical times, Jews and Arabs lived side by side. They contributed to the flowering of Alexandria. During the Golden Age of Spain, Jews, Muslims, and Christians came together in an era of remarkable tolerance and learning. A third of the population laid down its tools on Friday, a third on Saturday, a third on Sunday. They were scholars and scientists, poets, musicians, merchants, and statesmen setting an example of peaceful coexistence that we can

make a model for the future. There is no guarantee of success or failure today, but the challenge of this generation of Palestinians is to wage an historic and heroic struggle for peace.

Again I say this is an historic day. I thank you for coming. I thank you for raising your hands. I thank you for standing up. I thank you for your voices. I thank you for clapping every time I said what you were really doing was reaching deep into the heart of the people of Israel.

Chairman Arafat said he and Mrs. Arafat are taking Hillary and Chelsea and me—we're going to Bethlehem tomorrow. For a Christian family to light the Christmas tree in Bethlehem is a great honor. It is an interesting thing to contemplate that in this small place, the home of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the embodiment of my faith was born a Jew and is still recognized by Muslims as a prophet. He said a lot of very interesting things, but in the end, He was known as the Prince of Peace. And we celebrate at Christmastime the birth of the Prince of Peace. One reason He is known as the Prince of Peace is He knew something about what it takes to make peace. And one of the wisest things He ever said was, "We will be judged by the same standard by which we judge, but mercy triumphs over judgment."

In this Christmas season, in this Hanukkah season, on the edge of Ramadan, this is a time for mercy and vision and looking at all of our children together. You have reaffirmed the fact that you now intend to share this piece of land, without war, with your neighbors, forever. They have heard you. They have heard you.

Now, you and they must now determine what kind of peace you will have. Will it be grudging and mean-spirited and confining, or will it be generous and open? Will you begin to judge each other in the way you would like to be judged? Will you begin to see each other's children in the way you see your own? Will they feel your pain, and will you understand theirs?

Surely to goodness, after 5 years of this peace process and decades of suffering and after you have come here today and done what you have done, we can say, "Enough of this gnashing of teeth. Let us join hands and proudly go forward together."

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:30 p.m. in the Main Hall at the Shawwa Center. In his remarks, he referred to Speaker Salim Za'anoun of the Palestine National Council; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority, and his wife Shua; and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu of Israel.

Statement on the Puerto Rico Status Referendum *December 14, 1998*

I have advocated enabling the people of Puerto Rico to determine their future status among all the options—continuing the current governing arrangement, known as Commonwealth; nationhood, either independent from or in an association with the U.S.; and statehood. This year the House passed a bipartisan bill for this purpose, with my support, but the Senate majority leadership blocked it. In the end, the leadership simply recognized Puerto Ricans' right to choose and promised to review the results.

Yesterday Puerto Ricans voted on these issues under local law. A majority of the vote was not for any of the options. Among the rest, the overwhelming majority supported statehood.

I will, therefore, work with Members of Congress and the people of Puerto Rico and their leaders to enable Puerto Ricans to clarify their choice among the options. I remain committed to implementing a majority choice for Puerto Rico's future status.