

our hearts and our prayers. On behalf of all Americans, I thank you for the greatest gift of the season, for protecting our Nation and safeguarding the freedom we all hold dear.

The First Lady. Christmas reminds us that the values we share far outweigh whatever the differences there are between us. The twinkle of a child's eye, the joy of a grandmother's laughter, the love in the hearts of mothers and fathers for their children, all these blessings should be unwrapped on Christmas morning.

The President. May the spirit of the season be with you today and throughout the year. From our family to yours, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The greeting was videotaped at approximately 11:30 a.m. on December 7 in the Diplomatic Reception Room for later broadcast. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 23.

Remarks at a Housing and Urban Development Grant Announcement in Baltimore, Maryland December 23, 1998

Thank you very much. Thank you. Well, if Christa Spangler hasn't put us in the spirit of the season, I don't know who could. Didn't she do a magnificent job? *[Applause]* Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you, Secretary Cuomo, for your remarks and your remarkable work.

I want to say at this holiday season, the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the season of Hanukkah for Jewish-Americans, and Christmas for those of us who are Christians, when we are told we should count our blessings, one of the things that has been a great blessing for me in the last 6 years as President has been my proximity to and involvement with the city of Baltimore and the State of Maryland.

I have—as you heard Mayor Schموke say, starting in 1992, I have visited the churches here; I have walked the streets here; I have seen the children here in their schools and their environmental projects and in other ways. I have loved this State. I have been to Annapolis and to Clinton, Maryland—*[laughter]*—and to Montgomery County—and Wayne—and to, obviously so many times, to Camp David and the environs there. And I feel very blessed.

But I was looking at your elected Representatives: Elijah Cummings, who is very well named; he sounds like a prophet about half the time; and I was thinking that there is no State in the country that has a pair of Senators with quite the combination of intelligence, compassion, and energy, and plain old pull that Mary-

land does. And I am so grateful for the work that Governor Glendening and Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend have done.

As all of you know, I've had also a special friendship with Mayor Schموke, and I sort of regret the fact that both of us will be retiring before you know it. *[Laughter]* But he did a remarkable job. He has done and he has some more remarkable things to do for this city, and I thank him for that.

I'd also like to thank the other State legislators, county officials, city council members who are here. I'd like to thank the AmeriCorps members who are here for the wonderful work they do and the residents of Pleasant View Gardens.

You know, there's been a lot of talk today about this project as an embodiment of the community America can become. There's been a lot of talk today about the spirit of one America, as Secretary Cuomo said. But I think it's important, if you'll forgive me just one religious reference at Christmas time, that we remember what Christa Spangler said: Anybody can become homeless. What does that mean? That means: There, but for the grace of God, go I. And it means that in our minds, we should be going there.

Most people, most Christians at the Christian season read the Christmas story in Matthew or Luke. But at the end—along toward the end of the Book of Matthew, there is a great sermon where Jesus says—and I won't go through the whole thing, but basically: “Even as you have

done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

Now, what that really means is not what most people think. It doesn't really mean go out and give a bunch of money to poor people so you can feel righteous. That's not what it means. It means—what it really means is, whether you're tall or short, whether you're fat or thin, whether you're black, brown, or white, whether you look like a movie star or a person who had one boxing match too many—[laughter]—whatever the different circumstances of your life are, inside each of us there is a core that is the same and not one person is better than another. That's what it really means. That's what it really means.

So when I talk about one America, I don't mean that it makes me feel good to help people who are the least of these. What the real Biblical message is, is that there is no least of these. It is not an accident that the birth occurred in a manger. And it wasn't because I wanted to go out and get more votes because there's more poor people than rich people. Right?

So I just think it's important we think about that in this season, because every meaningful religion is trying to tell us the same thing. We organize our lives and our minds in categories; we have to do that. We want our kids to make good grades in school, not bad grades in school, so we tell them it's better to make good grades. We'd like to have a better job that pays more money so we can take better care of our families. We say, you know, it's better. It helped me to get reelected that we had a good economy instead of a bad economy. We all know that.

So we make judgments all the time, and we have to organize our lives so we are always putting people and conduct and things into categories, and that's good. It has to be done. But in order to have any meaning at all, underneath it all we have to know the real secret of life is that we have something that is no better than but, thank God, no worse than what anyone else has. And that is the gift we get from God; whatever our religious teaching and conviction and background, that is the gift we receive.

And our political conduct should at least—we can differ on a lot of things, about what's the best way to do this, the best way to do that or the other thing. But if we ever forget that what we have in common is far more fundamental than all these things that we differentiate

among ourselves, we have forgotten the most important thing.

The reason the American idea has worked for over 220 years is it rests on the premise that what we have in common is the most fundamental thing. And it recognized in the beginning—Thomas Jefferson: “I tremble, when I think of slavery, to believe that God is just.” They knew that they were nowhere near living up to their ideals. And we accept today we are nowhere living up to our ideals. But we recognize that we have to move closer. That's really what we all came here to talk about here today. That's what we're all here to talk about today.

So we want America not only to be a rich country but one where everybody has a place at the table. That's what we come to celebrate.

I want to thank all of you and the American people for the work we have done in these last several years to make more room at the table for more people, to give people a chance to live as if they were what they in fact are: equal before the law and in the eyes of God.

Now, we have a lot to celebrate. Some of it's been mentioned: 17 million new jobs; the fastest wage growth in two decades; the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years; the smallest percentage of Americans on welfare in 29 years; the lowest African-American poverty rate ever recorded; the highest homeownership in history; crime, divorce, teen pregnancy, drug abuse rates falling. But I say, until we know that everybody has a chance to be a part of this, we have more to do. And I believe when times are good, we have a heavier responsibility to look at the long run, to meet the long-term challenges of the country, and to give everybody a chance to be a part of what it is we celebrate.

At the dawn of the 21st century, we have some big challenges. Not all our children have world-class educations, but all our children need them. You heard Elijah talking about the health care challenges. More and more people are having trouble finding health insurance. More and more people with health insurance are in managed care plans where they need a Patients' Bill of Rights. We have a huge looming challenge when all of us baby boomers retire and there will only be two people working for every one person drawing Social Security or on Medicare. And the young people of this country deserve—deserve—the right to live their lives, raise their children without their parents and

grandparents bankrupting them. And so we have to save Social Security and Medicare for the 21st century without imposing on our children an unfair burden.

There's a lot of trouble in the world economy today, and we can't continue to grow unless we help our neighbors to get over that trouble and to stabilize the system. And again I say, underneath all that is our philosophy: Do we really believe that our ability to do well is connected to our neighbors' ability, and not only our neighbors down the street and across the town and across America but all of our neighbors on this increasingly small planet of ours? I think you believe that. That's one reason I enjoy coming here and being with you.

Now, I have watched—I came here to Baltimore the first time before some of you were born. I was an 18-year-old college student, and my best friend, later my college roommate, was from Baltimore. So I have seen this place change breathtakingly since I first came here in 1964. I see it in Camden Yards and the Inner Harbor, but I also see it in the communities throughout this city. And the changes you see here are just as profound as you see in your beautiful ballpark or your beautiful harbor and may have a longer lasting positive impact on the march of life in this city. You see it in west Baltimore, east Baltimore, Sandtown-Winchester, and of course, here in Pleasant View.

This is the model—the reason I came here today, among other things, besides the fact that I like to come here and be with all of you, is that I want people to understand what you have done. And I want people to understand that, if you can do this here, this can be done anywhere in America. And I want people to understand that the National Government is committed to being a partner, but all we can be is a partner. What makes the celebration of today possible is what you have done. You needed our help. That's what Senator Mikulski said. And you need more. That's why Senator Sarbanes talked about the budget. [Laughter] But it's very important to understand that all I have done here, all Secretary Cuomo has done here is to give you the tools to build a genuine community out of chaos and to give everybody a seat at the table.

And so I want to say again, we are committed to that. We want more empowerment zones like yours. We want more community development

banks. We want more comprehensive housing reform like we see here. What did you do with your empowerment zone? Would you like to know? Baltimore's empowerment zone has produced more than 2,800 new jobs; crime down 20 percent; \$50 million in new private sector funding. It worked. So we're going to have, in the coming weeks, thanks to last year's budget, 20 new empowerment zones. Others can do it because you did it, and we want them to do it.

We have the best job market in a generation. But to really move people from welfare to work, we need more transportation, more child care, more housing vouchers to move people closer to the available jobs, and new commitments from civic, religious, business, and nonprofit groups. We will do that. We must build on the success of community policing, which prevents crime in the first place.

Already, we have helped to fund more than 92,000 of the 100,000 police officers promised by the crime bill of 1994. And here in Baltimore we're providing funding for another 100 officers, on top of the 450 you've already hired, specifically targeted to higher crime neighborhoods. If we want to build communities, our children have to feel safe on their streets.

One of the biggest things I am convinced we have to do is to do more to tap the potential of all our young people. We need more safe and more modern schools. We need desperately quality after-school programs for all the children, who otherwise will be on the street, not learning and getting in trouble. We need to give young people an opportunity to give something back to their community and to go on with their education.

I am very proud that Baltimore has one of the largest national service programs, AmeriCorps programs in the entire United States here. There are more than 300 young AmeriCorps members building new homes, removing lead paint, restoring parks. Nearly 500 more will join you in the coming year. So I want to thank the young AmeriCorps members who are here today for their service. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

And we can do more to break the cycle of homelessness. We are serving many, many thousands, tens of thousands of more people than we were when I became President. I remember, when I first took office, and I used to run out of the White House in the morning on my

morning jog, and I would go down 16th Street and 15th Street. And there were homeless people everywhere, and they would stop and talk to me. It was a great thing; the President could have a daily conversation with a homeless person. That was good for me but lousy for them because they were all spending the night on the street over the grates, waiting for the heat, even built fancy little tents so that the heat would blow up and keep their roof over their heads.

And there are fewer of them now. But we have a lot to do. The Continuum of Care strategy that Secretary Cuomo developed acknowledged that people who are homeless need more than a shelter. They are homeless for a reason. You heard that from Christa.

Today I am pleased to announce that we are awarding \$850 million to communities in all 50 States to give homeless families a chance to rebuild their lives. Maryland will receive more than \$17 million; grassroots organizations here in Baltimore more than \$8 million. These grants will help you to reach out in innovative ways to homeless adults and children, to veterans and the disabled, to people with mental illness and with AIDS. They will help with emergency shelters and permanent housing, drug treatment and medication, job training and child care. They will help to give your fellow citizens a hand up. They will help you to give them the greatest benefit of all, the gift of self-sufficiency and hope.

Now, I am also pleased to announce that my next balanced budget will include a record \$1.1 billion for homeless assistance. If enacted, if we can persuade the Congress to enact it, it will be the largest effort to combat homelessness in the history of America, and it will be done within the balanced budget.

Baltimore has always been known as the City of Neighborhoods. I want America to be known as the Country of Neighborhoods. And I want us to look at all people as our neighbors.

You know, not very long ago, Hillary and Chelsea and I took a brief trip to the Middle East to try to spur on the peace process there, to try to help the Palestinians and the Israelis become more reconciled to one another. And as a part of this trip, we were able to go to

Bethlehem, which ironically is now a predominantly Palestinian-Muslim city, where the Christians, in the birthplace of Christ, are in a minority but a respected minority. And we visited the Church of the Nativity, and we bent down and walked through that doorway that was built about 1500 years ago in that old church. And we went down into the crypt, where I'm sure some of you have been, where they believe the manger was where Jesus was born. And we were left there for a time, the three of us, by ourselves—something that almost never happens to us—to reflect on the meaning of that.

I say again, I came out of that, first of all, profoundly grateful for the opportunity to serve, for the many gifts in my life and my family's life but also determined again to remember what I think the fundamental lesson is, which is not that charity is the greatest virtue but that charity is an obligation because of our common humanity, because we are not better than those who, because of their circumstances, happen to need a hand up at any given moment in time.

So, as much as any place in our country, the State of Maryland and the city of Baltimore embodies that. You should be very proud and very grateful for what you have done and what you are. And it should make you more determined for what you can become.

I was sitting there looking at Christa Spangler, listening to her. She got a second chance, maybe a third or a fourth or a fifth chance. But here she is, sounding good, looking good, got a life, got a job, got a house, got a husband. Stand up; stand up here. This ought to be a country of neighbors, a country of equals, a country of people committed to a hand up.

God bless you, and happy holidays. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:07 p.m. in the gym at the Boys and Girls Club. In his remarks, he referred to Christa Spangler, former recipient of homeless assistance services, who introduced the President; Mayor Kurt Schmoke of Baltimore; Prince Georges County, MD, Executive Wayne K. Curry; and Gov. Parris N. Glendening of Maryland.