

Remarks at the Sons of Italy Foundation Dinner May 22, 1999

Thank you very much, Larry. Larry King, there's a great Italian-American for you. [*Laughter*] And congratulations on your new baby. Paul Polo—yes, let's give him a hand. That's great. [*Applause*]

I want to thank Paul Polo and Phil Piccigallo and all of you for giving me another chance to come by here. And I think Congresswoman Morella is in the audience, and Ambassador Salleso, who does a wonderful job for his country and for ours.

I want to congratulate Andy Giancamilli of Kmart and Tony Bennett for their awards tonight. We have the president of one of our great retailers and America's greatest living pop singer; that's a pretty good representation of the gifts that Italian-Americans have given to our Nation, and you should be proud of them.

I'd like to say a special word of thanks to Tony Bennett for being a good friend to me and to my wife and our family. I wanted to be here for you tonight; you've been here for our country for a long time. God bless you, and thank you, my friend. Thank you.

You know, there have been so many years when I have spoken to you or other Italian-American groups, and I've been almost embarrassed by the number of Italians in my administration. Secretary Cuomo was waiting for me tonight when I got here. You know, I've had two Italian-American Chiefs of Staff, Leon Panetta—who introduced me in Rome, in Italian—and John Podesta. And you know, ever since Podesta took over from Erskine Bowles, we've had people like Steve Richetti, Karen Tramontano, Loretta Ucelli, Ginny Apuzzo coming to work for me. I don't know what's been going on here. [*Laughter*] Maybe this is the new plot to take over America that we've been hearing about. [*Laughter*]

I saw Phil on the way in, and I thank him, too, for giving me the opportunity that I had the last time I was with you to meet with your young scholarship recipients, because those you honor tonight for their gifts—from physics to music to political science to community service—prove that people of Italian descent will continue to make enormous contributions to our country in the century just ahead.

I thank you, too, for your emphasis on education, and I ask you to remember tonight that even though we live in a time of unprecedented prosperity, for which we should thank God and the labors of our people—that we have the longest peacetime expansion in our history and the lowest unemployment in a generation, the highest homeownership ever, welfare rolls cut by more than half in the last 6 years, crime dropping to a 30-year low—we all only have to look around ourselves and our lives to know that we have a lot more to do, especially in areas that have historically been of enormous concern to Italian-Americans.

First, of course, in education: We have a great agenda before the Congress—and I hope it will be acted upon—for higher standards, for no social promotion, for after-school and summer school programs, for more and better prepared teachers, modern schools, and technology.

But tonight I want to talk just a moment about something else, and I particularly appreciated what Larry said when he introduced me. I want to talk about family in the literal sense and family in the larger sense and what it means to our future as a country.

Hillary and I, on Thursday, went to Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. We met with the families of the children and the wonderful teacher who lost their lives. We saw other children still in wheelchairs from their grievous wounds. We saw thousands of kids, just like any group of kids anywhere, still full of enthusiasm and hopes for the future. After the ceremony, we spent quite a long time there just shaking hands with them and talking to them, listening to them, and trying to answer their questions.

I say that to say what is self-evident to you, which is that the most important job of any society is not the creation of wealth but the creation of richness and wholeness in the lives of the children. There is no more important work. And in this day and age, when technology and the explosion of global commerce and culture is bringing us closer and closer and closer together, we cannot connect all of our children to a positive reality unless they are both connected to their literal families, and then they

see others who may differ from them—they may differ in race or ethnicity or religion or politics or sexual orientation or just what they like to do—but they have to be seen as part of our larger family.

There are things for all of us to do to give our children safe and wholesome childhoods and to try to support that for the children of the world. Here in Washington we actually had quite a good week, with some of the most responsible action in the history of Congress to try to keep guns out of the hands of children and criminals. And I particularly thank—[*applause*—I particularly thank the Vice President for being there to cast the tie-breaking vote on the gun show loophole issue, something I know quite a bit about; and I am thankful for that. I hope that before the House of Representatives goes home this week for the Memorial Day recess, they will follow suit and pass the same bill.

There are things to be done by those who have influence on our larger culture, who make our movies, our television programs, our video games. It is true that no movie or game could ever cause a child to take another child's life. But it is also true that in our society, the faster we move and the busier we are, and the harder and harder parents have to work outside the home, the more kids are left on their own, the more vulnerable children we have. And if you have a larger number of vulnerable children, it stands to reason that more bad things will happen if it's easier for them to get guns, especially assault weapons, and if they are subjected to a torrent of violent impulses.

You know the average 18-year-old has seen 40,000 murders already on television, in the movies, and in video games? And there are 300 studies already which show that—let me say that again: 300 serious professional studies already—that show that by the time this happens to you, for 18 years, it diminishes your sensitivity to violence and your feeling for the consequences of it.

Now, if you have more kids who are at risk than other societies, and it's easier for them to be flooded with guns—including assault weapons—and they're being subject to sort of psychological stimuli repeatedly, hours and hours and hours a day, year after year after year after year, it only stands to reason that more of them will fall over the line.

So there's something for everyone to do. But in the end, the most important thing we can do is to try to help families reconnect to their children and to try to help communities and schools organize themselves so that a connection is made to every child.

I saw a remarkable book about 3 years ago—I wish I could remember the title tonight—but it was a portrait of children who had grown up in the most unimaginable, difficult circumstances, who had done wonderfully well in life. Many of them had brothers and sisters who had already been killed or imprisoned or whatever. These kids, they all did well, and they had one thing in common, and only one thing: Each of them, by some miracle, had had a consistent, long-term, caring relationship with one responsible adult. And so I say to you, this is a challenge ready-made for the Italian-American.

My wife told me, and we have adopted as a national crusade, that she and I and the Vice President and Tipper Gore will help to organize a grassroots national campaign in the way that Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Students Against Drunk Driving did to sensitize the whole country; it worked there. We had a national campaign to get employers to hire people off welfare. People told me it would never work. They've hired hundreds of thousands of people. There's been a national grassroots campaign to reduce teen pregnancy; it's gone down 5 years in a row. The American people can give our children back their childhood, and I hope you will help us to get that done.

But there's something else that I want you to do, because you are so much a part of our larger family. Our children have to be taught to be proud of themselves and what is special about themselves without thinking people who are different are lesser than they are. One of the disturbing elements of this incident in Columbine was the imagined and real grievances that these kids had built up to a boiling point over people showing them disrespect, because they were supposed to be sort of lower class people at the school.

And they had the same reaction, I might add, that we saw—I saw—in the South when I was a kid. Because they were looked down on, they not only resented the people that looked down on them; they looked around for somebody they could look down on. And they picked out the

minority kids in this school—with one devastating consequence, as I'm sure all of you know.

That is a natural psychological reaction when it is not nipped in the bud. I grew up in a State where the per capita income was barely half the national average the year I was born, right after World War II. I grew up among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or Irish or Scottish Protestants, who were largely uneducated and made very limited livings and thought they were looked down on as rednecks by other people. And they, therefore, were disproportionately likely to have racist feelings against African-Americans. And I can tell you, that exists all over the world today.

We have to prove to our children—by the way we live, and what we say, the way we conduct ourselves—that we think every decent person has a home in America and that they're all part of our family.

No one doubts, as we conduct this very difficult operation in Kosovo, that our military is the best in the world. That's not bragging. Others could have great militaries. We've invested a lot of money and time and effort. But one of the reasons it is, is because they are so diverse.

I just got back from Germany, visiting with the young people who are working in the humanitarian operation, and the young pilots and their support crews who are flying those dangerous missions. And there they were, from every conceivable ethnic and racial group, all here.

I never will forget when I took the Pope—I didn't take him, but I escorted the Pope—to Regis College in Denver, the first time he came to America. He went out there, after I took office, and we were going up and down the line shaking hands with the students, and there was a young man in the Army of the United States of America who began speaking Polish to the Pope. And he proudly told him that he was born in Poland, but he was now in our country and proud to serve in the military. And I could give you countless examples of that.

Tonight I have been told that there are parents of one of our brave servicemen flying F-15's in Kosovo, Joe and Dorothy Simile. Thank you. [Applause] Their son is a captain flying those missions. I want you to know, Joe and

Dorothy, I'm very proud of him and all the men and women who are serving today.

I'd also like to say a special word of thanks, before I forget it, to the Government and the people of Italy, who have been indispensable to our mission in Kosovo. It is our united mission, but they have paid a much bigger price. They have had airports closed. They have had economic hardship. Their Prime Minister has been a rock of stability and concern for a quick but just outcome, and I am very grateful. And Mr. Ambassador, I thank you for what your country has done to stand up for freedom and against ethnic cleansing.

The mission of America has always been to widen the circle of opportunity and deepen the meaning of freedom by strengthening the bonds of our community. That is the story of America. You know, the people that started our country off, with the bold declaration that all people are created equal by God, were not fools; they were smart people. And they knew good and well we weren't living up to it. When we got started, slaves were counted as 60 percent of white people, and only white male property owners could vote. They knew this was not a manifestation that all people are created equal. But they knew that the ideal had to be out there, and we had to continue to push and push and push for it.

I think it is supremely ironic that on the verge of a new century and a new millennium, with our kids learning how to use computers and having pen pals on every continent, with the mysteries of the human gene about to be unlocked, with the prospect of dramatic increase in the length and quality of life, that we are bedeviled today in this great modern age by the oldest demon of human society, the fear of people who are different from us. And once you fear somebody, then you have to dislike them. Once you dislike them, it is easy to hate them. Once you hate them, it is quite easy to treat them as if they're not people at all and dehumanize them. And then it's a very short step to saying, "It's too bad, but we have to kill them, or run them out, or blow up their houses of worship, or eradicate their cultural symbols, or burn all their old books, or destroy their personal property records."

That's what this whole deal is about. We can't require people to like each other or get along. We can't even ask them to stop fighting. But when we are able to do it, we ought to stand

up and say we will not tolerate ethnic cleansing that leads to mass murder, mass rape, mass dislocation, and the destruction of everything we believe in.

I want to close with this story. It's not about Italian-Americans, but you will identify with it. And it captures everything, to me, that is special about our country and everything that you have given to America.

The other day, shortly before Hillary and I went to Colorado, I had a meeting on my schedule with 15—no, 19—Native American tribal chiefs from the northern high plains. The Senators from those States, the Dakotas and Montana, had asked me to meet with them because they are the poorest of our Indian tribes. They don't have big casinos, and there aren't a lot of people out there, so nobody's been rushing to invest big new money there. And this wonderful economy that has taken the stock market from 3,200 to 11,000 has largely left them untouched. And they wanted to come and see the President about it, and the President's Cabinet.

Secretary Cuomo came, Secretary Riley and a number of our other Cabinet members—Secretary Babbitt. So they said, "First, we would like to sit in a circle, as is our custom, so that we can all see each other." So we were in the Roosevelt Room, we got rid of the table, and we all sat in a circle. They started their meeting, and I came in, and each one in his turn stood up and talked about, "Well, here's our education needs, our health care needs," and so on.

Then at the end, the chief who was the spokesperson—who, ironically, was named Tex Hall—was a very large man, and he stood up and he said, "Before we go, Mr. President, I would like to give you this proclamation we have signed for you. And in it, we support the actions of the United States in Kosovo." He said, "You see, we know something about ethnic cleansing. And we have come a good way, and we think we should stand against it everywhere."

Then, across the room, another young man stood up who represented his tribe, one of the

Sioux tribes. And he stood very erect. He wasn't particularly tall, and he had a beautiful piece of silver Indian jewelry around his neck. And he said, "Mr. President, I have two uncles. One of them was on the beach at Normandy. The other was the first Native American ever to be a fighter pilot for the United States military. My great-great-grandfather was slaughtered by the 7th Army at Wounded Knee." He said, "I am here talking to the President." He said, "I only have one son. He's the most important thing in the world to me. But we have come a very long way from my great-great-grandfather, to my uncles, to my being in the White House. We have learned a great deal. We are living together. Though I love my son more than life, I would be proud for him to go and stand against a new version of ethnic cleansing. We have to live together."

I will never forget that moment as long as I live. We in the United States have been on a long, imperfect, and unfinished journey. You have made immeasurable contributions to it. Perhaps as much as any group of Americans, you can help us to rebuild the bonds of family here in the United States and to stand up at least for our common humanity around the world.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:35 p.m. in the Great Hall at the National Building Museum. In his remarks, he referred to Cable News Network interview show host Larry King and his son Chance; Paul S. Polo, Sr., president, and Philip R. Piccigallo, national executive director, Sons of Italy Foundation; Ambassador Ferdinando Salteo and Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema of Italy; Andrew A. Giancamilli, president and general merchandise manager, U.S. Kmart; singer/entertainer Tony Bennett; Joseph and Dorothy Simile, parents of Capt. Joseph Simile, Jr., USAF; Tex Hall, chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation (the Three Affiliated Tribes); and Gregg Bourland, chairman, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.