

companies challenged in court. Every day 3,000 young people become regular smokers, and 1,000 will have their lives cut short as a result. I remain firmly committed to the FDA rule, which will help stop young people from smoking before they start by eliminating advertising aimed at children and curbing minors' access to tobacco products.

Remarks at a Union of American Hebrew Congregations Dinner Honoring Rabbi David Saperstein

April 26, 1999

Thank you very much. Rabbi Yoffie—or Mr. President, should I say? *[Laughter]* My good friend Barney Frank—I would like to be furnished with a copy of the jokes he told before I got here. *[Laughter]* I want to thank Richard Ben-Veniste, Marian Edelman, Senator Metzenbaum and others who organized this great dinner, and thank at least the Members of Congress I have been told are here, Senator Wellstone, Representative Shelley Berkley, and Representative Tom Udall.

And like David, I would like to say to you, Mr. Landsburg, our prayers are with your daughter, and we're pulling for her, and we're proud that she's making the progress she is.

As David said, sort of in passing, we first met, oh, about somewhere between 12 and 15 years ago at a weekend retreat, courtesy of Marian and Peter Edelman. It was one of these deals where you get really smart people, and they talk all weekend. And they solve every problem, and then they can't imagine why it doesn't happen afterward, you know? It's a fabulous thing. *[Laughter]*

And I met that guy, and I thought: Now, this guy is some talker. *[Laughter]* And then, it is true, he stayed with Hillary and me when he came to Little Rock for the 30th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School, and we did stay up half the night. And Hillary sends her love.

I know, David, that over the years you've often been willing to stand against the tide and take a minority viewpoint and be very brave. But when you said that most people think we married wives that were smarter

than we are, in this case, the majority is right. *[Laughter]*

Even by the high standards of rabbis, David can talk. I mean, he is a good talker. *[Laughter]* But he talks so fast. *[Laughter]* You know, tonight he was clipping along at a pretty good pace, and it's the slowest I ever heard him speak. *[Laughter]* One night I saw him on television debating Jerry Falwell. And he was unbelievable. He just waxed him. He leveled him, you know? *[Laughter]* But unfortunately, no one who lived below the Mason-Dixon line could understand a word he said. *[Laughter]*

I want you to know where I was tonight. While you were listening to all these people heap praise on David, I was home praying that God would forgive them for the lies they were telling. *[Laughter]* Then I decided, what the heck, I'll come tell a few, too. *[Laughter]*

Let me say, like all of you, I love this man. And whether he's speaking fast or slow, the most important thing about him is that whatever it is he says, he does his dead-level best to do. And that is really the difference between David and most of the rest of the world, including most of the rest of us, from time to time. If we are all completely honest we would have to admit that there are very few people who are as absolutely certain, day-in and day-out, year-in and year-out to say something and then follow it up by acting in a way that is completely consistent with what they say. He is such a person, and that is why he is such a great treasure.

As he says, since I've been President I've often sought his wise advice, and his energy I have tried to tap. I've done it so often it's almost to the point of abusing our friendship. And it's hard for a man in his position to be friends with the President. You know, he was so gracious tonight—so were you, Rabbi you never mentioned any of the things that I've done that you disagreed with. *[Laughter]* Barney would have, but I wasn't here to say it—just to hear it. *[Laughter]* And what all they said before amounts to, "He's not so bad for a President, but we know they're never completely perfect."

I want you to know that David talked about religious liberty. It means a lot to me. And if you look around the world today, we'd be

a lot better off if it meant a lot to other people, too. He played a major role in the guidelines we issued in 1995 to help protect the right of students in public schools to express their religious convictions within the Constitution and without a need to amend the Constitution. And I don't know if anybody has noticed, but that's one issue you don't have to fight now.

When I became President, everybody was convinced we were going to have this huge battle over this constitutional amendment, prayer in the schools and all that. And I told the Secretary of Education, I said, "I don't believe anybody has read the decisions. I think this is a bogus political battle." And so we got David and a few other people and some scholars together, and we put out a booklet. And we sent it to all the schools and said, "Look, here are your rights now. Here's what you have to do. Here's how you can avoid problems. Give this to everybody." And I mean, within 6 months the whole issue of the constitutional amendment died.

So David did two good things: He increased people's sense that they were actually free to practice their faith, whatever it is, within the Constitution, wherever they wish, and he did it; and at the same time, totally diminished the sense that it was somehow needed to amend the Constitution in a way that I'm convinced would have raised a whole lot more problems than it solved.

And it's the kind of thing that he did that he got almost no notice for. And most of the rest of us didn't either, because it wound up being a dog that doesn't bark. But in the end, that's sometimes the highest measure of our success in public life. He played a major role in the dialog we had on race. And therefore, his influence is still felt in a lot of what we are trying to do in the White House in that regard.

I do believe that, as David said better than I in his wonderful, wonderful speech, you must believe that we are not only all created in God's image but that we have a little bit of God within us, and so does everyone else. That is very important to his faith and to his action. The Talmud says whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the world and does not, is liable for the transgression of the entire world.

I think David wakes up thinking about that every morning. He's probably taken some of our transgressions away along with his because he's done way more than his share. [Laughter] But I say that because we have all been sort of sobered in these last days by what is going on in Kosovo and by this terrible tragedy in Littleton, Colorado.

And when we think about it, we think we know, too, that beneath all the prosperity our country enjoys there are still plenty of people who have not participated in it here and, in more subtle, less visible ways, are also suffering. He thinks about that.

And I would just like to take a few moments tonight to ask you, in David's honor, to think about this new millennium we're about to enter; how fortunate we are to go into it with many, if not all, but many of our social conditions improving and our economy booming and our country able to play a very privileged role to advance the cause of peace and humanity around the world but we know that this future—[inaudible]—that most people think of as dominated by technology and global information sharing and a global economy and people drawing together, that the good parts of that future are far from assured because a lot of the modern things that we think are inherently good are just like all the old things that happen in all previous times; they have a dark underside that must be struggled against.

The same explosion of technologies, for example, that fuels the prosperity of people all across the world really helps a lot of those who want to exploit today the oldest weakness of human society: fear and hatred of the other. I mean, think about it. The Internet offers scientists the way to exchange information and fight disease, offers poor children the way to access libraries. It's amazing how many kids in high school now are filing research papers, and they don't have a—every single source they got, they got off the Internet. But the Internet also offers websites that glorify death, lionize Hitler, and tell teenagers to make pipe bombs. It is not a thing in and of itself that is good.

Now, what's all that got to do with what we're talking about here? What has Littleton to do with Kosovo? I think it has a lot to do with the whole way we think about life

and the way we define ourselves and the way we use categories. None of us could function without categories. Categories help us to organize our days, to understand the outside world, to even organize our inner lives and our search for truth. Some of us are black; some of us are white. Some of us are Jewish; some of us are Muslim; some of us are Christian. Some are straight; some are gay. Some are Arab; some are Israeli. We categorize them. You've got to have them. You couldn't function without them.

The problem comes when people believe the categories are the truths, instead of helpful ways of helping us organize our search for the truth. Because when you believe that, then if you're an insecure kid in school and somebody says there's something wrong with you because you're not in the "in" crowd, you think it means something, instead of just a way of characterizing, "Here's what this group of kids thinks is important, and I'm not one of them. I'm something else, but really I'm just as good as they are." You think about it.

Somebody says, "I want to build Greater Serbia." What the heck does that mean? Nothing to you, but if you were Serb and you had a sense of historic grievance, it might mean quite a lot to you. Unless you had enough wisdom to know that the concept of being a Serb could only mean something if it were consistent with your search for the ultimate human truth and what connects you to the Albanians or the Macedonians or the Montenegrans or whatever.

Tougher for you in the Holy Land. And I applaud your search for peace, because even in the place where your faith was born you know that the exclusive occupation of a given acre of land is not as important as the ability to relate to the common humanity of others who are your neighbors.

But if you think about it—we all ought to think about this—I have been plagued by this thing in Littleton. I thought about—I've relived my life as a parent. My heart goes out to the parents who lost their children, including the parents of the two boys who did the killing. Because how many people are living in homes with people they love but are really strangers? How many times, even in our own homes, have we felt that? Maybe in non-

violent circumstances, but we all feel it. In a certain way we're all strangers on our journey through life.

And the only thing that enables us to hang together is somehow we know that there is this thing that we share, that was given to us by God, that makes us in God's image, that gives us a piece of immortality. It is our common humanity.

If a child has a sense of that, then if somebody looks down on the child, the child can say, "That's their problem, not mine. They're not better than I am." The child can almost feel sympathy for them and certainly feel sympathy for others who are far more discriminated against. But if someone believes that categories are reality, are truth, then when someone looks down on the child, the child is not only angry at that person, but the child then looks around for someone to look down on.

I saw this happen when I was a kid in the South—why were the poor whites the worst racists? Because the rich whites were looking down on them all the time. They knew they didn't have very much education. They knew they didn't have great jobs, and their lives were kind of a drag, and they felt like nobody respected them. But thank God, they had somebody they could look down on.

This is a huge problem in every society. And when you have a society like ours, where we refuse to take even the most elemental steps to control access to weapons that kids should not have access to and when we fought for the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban and the things that I'm trying to pass now—that I hope all of you support, and I know you will—they actively decide we're threatening the American way of life. Why? Because people believe that categories are realities. The gang they're in is the real gang with the whole truth and opposed to the others. It's the real difference in Mr. Saperstein and his debating partner, Mr. Falwell.

And in the end, you know, when this thing is over in Kosovo—and it will be over and they will go home, because we will not quit—but when it's over, what's going to happen? The Kosovar Albanians who were uprooted from their homes and their schools, saw their villages burned—what should they do? Go

home and see their Serbian neighbors, who turned the other way and were silent, because either they were afraid, maybe they were even secretly glad, maybe they even secretly believed in the Greater Serbia, maybe they openly believed in it—so what are they going to do, go in and get even with them?

We cannot stop when the war is over and the refugees go home. We have to give the people in the Balkans a way to be proud of their ethnic heritage, acknowledge that they all have legitimate historical grievances and then recognize that no one ever gets even. That is God's work; we don't do that. And the more we try to get even, the more we remain the prisoners of those against whom our anger is directed.

Now, somehow, we have got to drive that home to our children. And it's hard. But we ought to start here. You know, we're all raised in this old child's adage, "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It's just not true. Hardly anybody believes that anymore. There are a few people, like me, who have had more practice living with it than others. *[Laughter]* But it's a huge deal.

I can still remember when I was in second grade and I was the only kid that wasn't picked to play on a softball team. Nobody wanted me because I was too fat and slow. I can still remember it like it was yesterday. So that happens to kids. You know, our children need to know that they're still God's children, and they're just as good as anybody else. And they should feel sympathy for people who are disrespecting and enormous pain for people who really suffer far greater than they do. They shouldn't get into this thing where they want to get even with the people that dissed them, and they've got to have somebody to look down on. But this is human nature out of direction, people who believe that categories matter, that they're reality.

And I know I'm, as the Baptists say, preaching to the choir tonight. But this is a very important thing. Why are people so hung up on a lot of the issues that Barney has worked to get me to work with him on? Why are people afraid to pass the employment and nondiscrimination act? Why are they afraid of that?

I don't mean that categories don't matter. It really matters if you're Jewish or if you're Muslim, you have a different way of worshiping God, and they matter. All these things matter. But they do not define the whole truth. And that is the point that needs to be made.

Categories are things made up by imperfect people to help us organize reality so we can get through the day and try to search inside to get closer to the truth. They will never define the whole truth. We cannot do that. We cannot do that; that is not for us to do.

This sounds so basic, but after all this time I've spent as President, the most vivid memories I have—sitting in Kigali and Rwanda with a woman who woke up, having been cut by machetes, to find that her husband and six children had been slaughtered and somehow a miracle had let her survive. And instead of being full of hatred for losing everything, she was spending her life trying to figure out how to get people to live together again. And all the other examples like that I've seen. Every single time it was somebody in excruciating pain having suffered enormous abuse who somehow said, "All these things that we used to think matter so much; they don't matter as much as our common humanity."

It is that which allows people to have sufficient self-respect, to endure the normal slings and arrows of life and sometimes the extraordinary unfairness that life brings. It is that which enables people to have the empathy and the sympathy necessary to be fully alive. And with all the modern world and all the fancy gizmos we have and all the growth of the economy we have and the stock market at 10,000—when you strip it all away, if we could learn that one lesson most of the world's problems would go away. We would have peace in the Middle East in the month, if we could do that.

And so I ask you to think about that. I ask you to think about it especially in the Middle East. We said after this national election is over and the Israelis organize a new government, we'd like to bring the parties together within 6 months to pursue a final agreement. And we are committed to doing that, and I know you will support that. But

in the end, to make it work, both sides will have to remember that the categories are important, but they can't be the whole truth. Otherwise it will become a zero-sum game.

And you know, everybody has got a beef in life. You've got a beef, every one of you. But most of us get out ahead of where we would if all we got was simply justice and no mercy. And we have—somehow we have got to just bang this message home in the Middle East, in the Balkans, and in our own homes, in our communities, in our schools.

Yes, we must do more to deal with the problems of violence in the society. And I am proud of the fact that one of the legacies of this administration will be that we did contest with the NRA what kind of future we were going to have in America and whether we were going to be just totally irresponsible on the gun issue. I'm glad of that.

Yes, parents should have more control and have all these blockers and all this stuff on the Internet to keep some of the madness away from their kids. Yes, that's true, too. But in the end, most kids come out all right because most kids have the barriers and the self-respect and the guidance necessary and the humility necessary to find their humanity, instead of drifting into madness. And we have to find that for the Serbs and for the brutally injured Kosovars. We have to find that for the people who will make the hard decisions in the Israeli Government and among the Palestinians. We have to find that everywhere.

And I have found that, from the first day I met him, in the man we honor tonight. And I love him for it.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:50 p.m. in the Presidential Ballroom at the Capitol Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president, Union of American Hebrews Congregations; Richard Ben-Veniste, former Watergate prosecutor; Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president, Children's Defense Fund, and her husband, Peter, professor, Georgetown Law School; former Senator Howard M. Metzenbaum; Jerry Falwell, pastor, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA; and Gilead Landsburg, father of Rabbi Lynne Landsburg.

Remarks Announcing Proposed Gun Control Legislation

April 27, 1999

Thank you very much, Carolyn, John Conyers, Senator Chafee, Senator Feinstein, all the many Members of Congress who are here. I thank the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Treasury, and Secretary of Education. I'm glad to see our old friend Mayor Helmke, and Bob Walker, and others here. We have, I think, over 40 Members of Congress here and two Senators who went back to the floor to fight for this issue to be put on the floor today.

I would like to do two things. First, I want to tell you specifically what we are proposing, and I'll do that. But secondly, I would like to tie what we are proposing to all these culture arguments, and talk about, if you will, at least two cultures that exist in America, and say that I think this, in the end, is going to come down to what our conception of America as a community is and what our responsibilities to one another are.

I want to begin by saying a lot of people have made remarkable contributions, I think, to this effort to get us to look at the violence of our culture and how it makes the most vulnerable of our children, without regard to their income or their social status, closer to the line of taking violent action, and how it complicates family life for everyone.

I want to thank Hillary for what she's done. I also want to thank Al and Tipper Gore, who have done enormously important work on this for years, to try to help us deal with the TV issues, the ratings, the V-chips, and now, the new efforts we've been making with the Internet community to give parents some more control over that and the efforts we have to make to train the parents to figure out how to do it, since their kids all know more about it than they do.

But this is very important stuff. In June, Tipper Gore's going to host our White House Conference on Mental Health. And the Attorney General and Hillary and I were just talking about some of the things we can do to help to make sure all of our schools have the adequate mentoring and mediation and even mental health services our kids need.