

Proclamation 7242—National Character Counts Week, 1999

October 16, 1999

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

The character of our citizens has enriched every aspect of our national life and has set an example of civic responsibility for people around the world. The diligence and determination that are part of our Nation's work ethic have strengthened our economy, and the firm convictions of our spiritual leaders have helped guide our communities, fostering unity, compassion, and humility.

In this dynamic time of unparalleled opportunity and possibility, our children will encounter a variety of new challenges that will test the strength of their character and convictions. As the dawn of the new millennium fast approaches, we must work together—parents, public officials, educators, entertainers, and business and religious leaders—to impart to our youth the core values they need to be good citizens.

We know that parents play a critical role in imparting moral values to their children. But in today's complex and fast-paced society, when parents must spend longer hours at work and more families are headed by a single parent, parents have less time to spend with their children—an average decrease of 22 hours a week over the past 30 years, according to a report released this spring by my Council of Economic Advisers. We must seek innovative ways to address this problem and to promote stronger families, including greater flexibility in paid work hours, more affordable child care, and increased support for low-income families.

My Administration is committed to providing families with the tools they need to fulfill their responsibilities at home and at work. Our agenda includes tripling our investment in after-school programs through the 21st Century Community Learning Center program and a historic initiative to make child care better, safer, and more affordable for working families. We are also working to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act to cover more workers and to allow leave for

more parental activities, such as parent-teacher conferences and routine doctor visits.

While Americans are striving to seize the opportunities presented by this exciting new era, we must continue to preserve the fundamental ideals and ethics that have sustained our country for more than two centuries. By sustaining these shared values and passing them on to our children, we can realize our common hope for a more just and honorable society and a brighter future for the generations to come.

Now, Therefore, I, William J. Clinton, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim October 17 through October 23, 1999, as National Character Counts Week. I call upon the people of the United States, government officials, educators, religious, community, and business leaders, and the States to commemorate this week with appropriate ceremonies, activities, and programs.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this sixteenth day of October, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-fourth.

William J. Clinton

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NOTE: This proclamation was published in the *Federal Register* on October 20.

Remarks at a National Italian American Foundation Dinner

October 16, 1999

Thank you ladies and gentlemen. First of all, let me thank you for your warm welcome to Hillary and me. Thank you, Frank Guarini, for being my friend for all these years. Thank you, President Joe Cerrell. To all the distinguished guests here and the honorees, the Members of Congress, Gerry Ferrarro, Ambassador Foglietta, Ambassador Rosapepe. To our distinguished Italian guests, Maria Bartiromo, Ambassador Salles and, especially, Foreign Minister Dini.

I would like to say a special word of appreciation at this point to the Prime Minister and the Government of Italy for standing with us and working with us for the cause of our common humanity in Kosovo and, before that, in Bosnia. We could not have done it without Italy, and I am grateful.

Justice Scalia and Cardinal Hickey and all the others here—you stole my line about 50 percent of my four Chiefs of Staff being Italian. The other two wish they were. [Laughter] I thank you for all the gifts from Campania, including the beautiful flowers for Hillary. We visited there when the 1994 conference of the G-7 nations was held in Naples. And we have been very blessed by our times there. I understand my friend Dick Grasso and the Barnes & Noble CEO, Leonard Riggio, are both from that region of Italy. I'm about to go back to Florence, and I'm only supposed to stay a day, so if I play hooky and stay an extra day I want 3,000 of you to write an excuse for me, just like I used to get when I missed a day of school.

I guess I ought to say, since this is baseball season, that I'm sure of one person who would like to be here tonight who can't be is Joe Torre. Now, I'm not taking sides in the baseball series, but the Yankees do have two Italian-Americans on their team—Joe and the catcher, Joe Girardi. And no city in America has been better to me than Boston, but the Red Sox haven't had an Italian since their pitcher Frank Viola retired. So I think we ought to get the Red Sox an Italian baseball player to balance out our equal opportunity agenda through the country.

You know, from the beginning of our country, Italian-Americans have made invaluable contributions. And I want to say a special word of thanks, not for all those which I could litanize, and you know them, but for the National Italian American Foundation's leadership for our efforts to build one America.

I'm very grateful that this is a country in better shape than it was 7 years ago when I first came here. I am very grateful for the chance that I have had to serve. I'm grateful for the Italian-Americans who have helped to ensure the success of our administration. I'm glad that we have the lowest unemployment rate in 29 years and the lowest welfare

rolls in 30 years and the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the lowest crime rates in 26 years and the first back-to-back surpluses in 42 years.

But I have to tell you that the most important thing we have to do to get ready for the 21st century, even more important than our efforts to continue to grow our economy, is to build one country out of our diversity. If we do, if the American people really can come to have that wonderful balance which enables us to celebrate our diversity and our unique ethnic and religious traditions—which makes America a very interesting place to live—and still say our common humanity is even more important, we'll figure out how to deal with all the other things.

Last year, one of only 2 years I've missed since I first came here 7 years ago, I was up for 9 days and nights at the Wye Plantation trying to keep the Middle East peace process on track. If you look around the world at how I have spent my time as your President—working for peace in the Balkans, among Muslims and Croats and Serbs, among Albanian Muslim and Serbian Orthodox Christians; for peace in the Middle East, among Arabs and Jews, Palestinians, Syrians, Jordanians, and Lebanese; for peace in Northern Ireland among Catholics and Protestants; to set up protections against the kind of tribal slaughter we've seen in Africa among people who shared the same land, in one case in Rwanda, for 500 years.

It is truly interesting that at the dawn of this new millennium, when we're exhilarated by all these technological and scientific advances that are being made—one man told me that when I have grandchildren they may be born with a life expectancy of 100 years; we know that our kids are using the Internet and talking to people all over the world and knowing things we couldn't know—isn't it interesting that in this quintessentially modern era our biggest problem is the most primitive and ancient of human failings: the fear of the other, people who are different from us?

And what a short step it is from fearing people to hating them to dehumanizing them, which legitimizes doing away with them. And isn't it interesting that at a time when the crime rate in America is at a 26-year low, we still have these vicious examples

of a man shooting children at a Jewish community school, and then going out and murdering a Filipino postman; another man saying he belonged to a church that didn't believe in God, but did believe in white supremacy, killing an Africa-American basketball coach in Illinois and then murdering a young Korean Christian as he walked out of his church?

And all these other examples—the young gay man Matthew Shepard, a year ago this week being stretched out, literally, upon a rack; James Byrd being pulled apart in Texas because he was an African-American. Not because all Americans are like that—almost all of us aren't—but because in each of us there is this fragile scale, like the scale of justice Mr. Scalia must try to balance in his work. And in this scale we wake up every morning with some curious balance of light and dark, of hope and fear. And when the scale gets badly enough out of whack, the easiest thing to do is to strike out against the other.

So I say again to you, Italian-Americans have been subject to discrimination and bigotry in times past in America. You still are subject to stereotypes that I think are unfair and unrepresentative, to be kind about it. But it is because of the values you share with other Americans that we have a prosperous economy and a healing society. And we just have to remember that overall. Yes, I hope a lot of your children make hundreds of millions of dollars by starting Internet companies; yes, I hope that my plans to take care of the aging of America and save Social Security and Medicare will prevail; I hope our plans to elevate the quality of all of our schools will prevail; I hope I can convince both parties in Congress to resist temptation and save enough of this surplus to get us out of debt for the first time since 1835 over the next 15 years. I hope all of that. But remember this: The most important thing is to build one America out of this crazy quilt of all of us who live here.

Last week Hillary and I had the eighth of her Millennial Evenings at the White House. And we had an expert in the Internet, who helped to design the architecture of the Internet; and an expert in genomics, who

and the miracles it will bring. He says one day the intersection of computers and gene studies will enable us to put digital, microscopic digital pieces in all parts of the human body to do even the repair work on shattered nerves to the spine. And we talked about all the miracles out there.

And the genomics experts said, but what I want you to understand is that of all the possible permutations among people, with all many, many parts of every gene, 99.9 percent of us is identical to that of every other human being. And the genetic differences among groups—that is, individuals among the Italian community, for example—are more significant and greater than the aggregate average genetic differences between Italians and Irish and Africans and Latins. It's important to remember. For people of faith, it reflects the wisdom of our Creator.

So I say again, I'm indebted to you for many things—your work ethic, your family ethic, your creativity, your energy, your passion—it made America a much more interesting place and it fueled this remarkable run we have had. But your commitment to see that neither Italians nor any other human beings are subject to degradation and prejudice because of who they are, that we will learn to honestly and openly express our differences and enjoy our differences, but reaffirm our common humanity, make no mistake about it—just pick up the paper any day; look at the perils of the present day. We are in a conflict between modern possibility and primitive hatred. One America is the only answer, and you're leading the way.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:37 p.m. in the ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Frank J. Guarini, chairman, Joseph R. Cerrell, president, and Geraldine Ferraro, board member, National Italian American Foundation; U.S. Ambassador to Italy Thomas M. Foglietta; U.S. Ambassador to Romania James C. Rosapepe; Italian Ambassador to the U.S. Ferdinando Salleo; Minister of Foreign Affairs Lamberto Dini and Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema of Italy; CNBC journalist Maria Bartiromo, event emcee; James Cardinal Hickey, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Washington, DC; Richard Grasso, chairman and chief executive officer, New York Stock Exchange; and Joe Torre, manager, New York Yankees.

Statement on the 1998 Uniform Crime Report

October 17, 1999

The 1998 Uniform Crime Report released by the FBI today shows that serious crime has continued to fall in every region of our Nation for the seventh straight year. The murder rate is at its lowest since 1967. The overall violent crime rate is down, and gun crimes, rapes, robberies, assaults, and juvenile crime have all dropped to their lowest levels in over a decade. This is good news for America's families, and it shows we can indeed turn the tide on crime.

My administration's strategy of 100,000 more police, fewer guns in the hands of criminals, thanks to the Brady law, and more tools for communities to combat crime is working to make our streets safer and our communities stronger. But tragedies from Littleton to Los Angeles show that we must do more to protect our communities from gun violence. Even as crime falls, we must not let down our guard. That is why we must redouble our efforts to build on what works—by fully funding our COPS program to put more police on the street and by passing commonsense gun legislation to keep guns out of the wrong hands. Together we can make America the safest big nation in the world.

NOTE: This statement was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 15 but was embargoed for release until 6 p.m., October 17.

Remarks Following a Meeting With the Economic Team and an Exchange With Reporters

October 18, 1999

Federal Budget

The President. Good morning. I have just completed a meeting with my economic team to see what we can do to reach overall budget agreement with the congressional leadership. In just 4 days, the resolution that temporarily funds the Government will expire. And yet, Congress still has not sent me a budget that maintains our fiscal discipline, pays down Social Security, reforms Medicare, and honors

the priorities of the American people, especially including education, and including 50,000 more community police for our children, for our streets, and a steadfast commitment to preserve and protect our environment.

Now, there is an overwhelming consensus across our country, and even here in Washington, that we face no challenge more critical than the education of our children. When our children graduate, they will be the largest and most diverse group of graduates in our history. They will be in a vastly more global and complex and information-dominated economy than ever before. For their sake, and the sake of our continued prosperity, we have wisely made—as a people—education our number one priority.

That means shrinking class size while increasing quality by fulfilling our commitment to put 100,000 teachers in the classroom—something the Republicans in Congress supported last year. It means making sure our children are ready for the year 2000 by ensuring that every one of them has access to computers in their classrooms. It means keeping schools open after school and during the summer. It means expanding mentoring and Head Start. It means having strategies that impose high standards and accountability, give schools funds to turn around themselves if they're failing, but shuts them down if they can't turn around. It means more funds for charter schools.

Now, if we're going to make these critical investments and maintain our fiscal discipline to keep our economy strong, we're going to have to make tough choices, and we're going to have to make them together. There are 4 days until the continuing resolution expires. Inaction is not an option. I will do everything I can to meet our priorities in a responsible way.

As I have said repeatedly in recent weeks, indeed, for years, my door is open to Members of both parties who are willing to work with us. If we're going to finish the job the American people sent us here to do—reach real results in educating our children, fighting crime, protecting our environment—then we have to put politics aside and seek common ground.