

The President's Radio Address *January 18, 1997*

Good morning. Today I want to talk with you about the progress we have made in response to last year's disturbing rash of arsons and other destructive acts directed at houses of worship throughout our country. But before I do, I want to condemn another act of violent terror, the recent bombing of the women's health center in Atlanta. That, too, is wrong, and we also must stop it.

Now, in the aftermath of these terrible crimes against the houses of worship, many of us ask ourselves, why? Were these fires fueled by a sudden upsurge in racial and religious hostility? Were they set for personal gain or revenge? Or were they merely random acts of violence? Whatever the causes of the crimes, they offended every citizen who cherishes America's proud heritage of religious and ethnic diversity, every citizen who remembers that religious freedom, justice, and equality are the founding principles of our great democracy. As one who was raised in the church and who continues to be guided by the enduring lessons I learned there, I joined with all Americans of conscience in demanding swift action to combat these crimes, to help the churches rebuild, and to prevent any more fires.

Seven months ago, I established the National Church Arson Task Force to coordinate the efforts of more than 200 FBI and ATF agents deployed to work with local and State law enforcement agencies, churches, and citizens to catch and prosecute those responsible for these crimes. This week, the task force released its first interim report. The report shows that we have been remarkably successful in solving the crimes. Since January 1995, 143 suspects have been arrested in connection with 107 fires at churches and other houses of worship. This rate of arrest is double the general rate of arrest for arsons, and three-quarters of these arrests occurred during the 7 months following the formation of the task force. So far, 48 defendants have been convicted on Federal and State charges in connection with 43 fires.

This work has been supported by \$3 million in Justice Department grants to help local communities intensify their enforcement and surveillance efforts. In addition, Congress authorized

the Department of Housing to administer a \$10 million loan guarantee to assist with the rebuilding of churches. And the Federal Emergency Management Agency continues to work with communities to increase awareness and help build local arson prevention coalitions. This Federal effort must continue until all those responsible are brought to justice and no more fires burn.

But even more impressive than our Government effort has been the tremendous outpouring of assistance that has flowed from every corner of our country in response to these crimes. People have crossed lines of faith and race and region to link arms in a united effort to rebuild and protect our houses of worship. And by doing so, they have shown us that America is still a country that cares about its neighbors, a country that comes together in the face of common threats to defend the common ground of our values. I am reminded of what Joseph said in Genesis when he met up with the brothers who sold him into slavery: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

I saw this up close this past August when Hillary and I, along with the Vice President and Tipper Gore, picked up paintbrushes and hammers to help rebuild Salem Baptist Church in Fruitland, Tennessee. One of the earliest supporters of the rebuilding of this tiny black church was the congregation of a white church 3 miles down the road that also had suffered a suspicious fire.

On a national level, we saw groups like the National Council of Churches, the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the NAACP come together as one to tackle this problem. And we received strong bipartisan support from Congress for our work. The insurance industry, at the urging of the Vice President, also became a partner in the rebuilding effort.

These groups, and others of good will all over America, stepped forward to live out the lesson of the man whose birthday celebration this year coincides with my second Inauguration on Monday. Thirty-four years ago in his famous speech on The Mall in Washington, Dr. Martin Luther