

Remarks at the Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast January 6, 1997

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President and Tipper and ladies and gentlemen. Hillary and I are delighted to welcome you to the White House. We look forward to these breakfasts. As Al said, we have been doing them on a regular basis now, normally around—just after Labor Day as we sort of rededicate ourselves to the labor of the new year. But this year, we are doing it now for two reasons: One is, obviously, this is on the brink of the Inauguration and a new 4-year term for the President and for our country; the other is, we were otherwise occupied last Labor Day. [Laughter]

This is a wonderful day to be here. We asked Father Stephanopoulos to pray today because, as all of you know, this is the celebration of Epiphany in the Christian faith, a time of recognizing Christmas in the Orthodox tradition. I also wanted you to pray so that I could say that we were all very impressed with the size of the book contract that—[laughter]—that your son got, and we know we can depend upon you to make sure the church gets its 10 percent of that contract. We are very proud of him and very grateful to have him here.

This is the day in the Christian tradition when the wise men came bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. And we have much to be thankful for and much to pray for, but I think what I would say today is that I asked you to come here to share with me your thoughts and to share with you some of ours in the hope that we might all become wiser.

I am very grateful for the progress that our country has made in the last 4 years, grateful that we have been given a chance to play a role in that progress, and mindful that whatever has been done which is good has been done by us together.

One of my college roommates, who I think is a really smart guy, said to me the other day when we were together and joking about our lost youth, he said, "Oh, and one other thing," as he was leaving. He said, "Don't ever forget that great Presidents do not do great things. Great Presidents get a lot of other people to do great things. And there is over 250 million of us now, so that's a lot of greatness if you can get us all to do the right thing," which

I thought was an interesting way of saying in part what the magic and genius of democracy is all about.

So we're thinking a lot now about how we're going to build our bridge to the 21st century, what we're going to do in this next term. I've listened to all of these experts talk about how hard it is for Presidents to be effective in the second term because, after all, they just got reelected because things went well in their first term, not because they had actually thought through what they were going to do in their second term. But we've tried to overcome that disability.

There are a lot of particulars that we could discuss today, but what I'd like for you to think about a little bit, from your perspective and what you can do—two things: What are we going to do; and secondly, and more importantly I think, how are we going to do it? In what spirit shall we proceed?

In any great democracy there are always differences about what are we going to do. There always have been, there always will be, and these are altogether healthy. It would be—America wouldn't last very long, I think, if 100 percent of the people agreed 100 percent of the time on 100 percent of the issues. What keeps us going—we all know that none of us has perfect and infinite understanding of these complex matters facing our country and facing the world. But we have devised a system—we have nurtured and maintained it now for over 200 years—in which people can reconcile their differences and come to a consensus and an agreement which will push the country forward. So we are enlarged when we come to agreement after honest debate in the right way; we are diminished if, in the way we treat each other, we preclude the possibility of resolution and going forward. And at times like this, when things are changing so much, we need the right spirit more because we have more to decide, more to deal with. And yet, at times like this, we are in some ways put at risk by the absence of that spirit of reconciliation and respect.

There are several specific things I hope we can talk about later that I think we could reach broad agreement on. For example, some of you