

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
DURING BRONFMAN GALA
THE GRAND BALLROOM
THE PIERRE HOTEL
NEW YORK, NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 11, 2000

Thank you very much. Let me say, first of all, Hillary and I are delighted to be here with all of you, and especially you, Edgar, with all of your family, including Edgar, Clarissa, and the about-to-be 22nd grandchild here. They are probably an even more important testament to your life than this important work we celebrate tonight.

I thank Israel Singer and the World Jewish Council Leadership, Elie Wiesel, my fellow award recipients, especially Senator D'Amato and Congressman Leach, without whom we could not have done our part, and Stuart Eizenstat, without whom I could have done nothing, and I thank you all.

I thank the members of the Israeli government and Cabinet who are here, and those of you who have come from around the world. But I would like to say, not only as President, but as an American, a man who studied German as a student and went to Germany as a young man in the hopes of reconciling my enormously conflicted feelings about a country that I loved which had done something I hated.

Foreign Minister Fischer, I have rarely in my life been as moved as I was by your comments tonight. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Edgar once said that, "In forcing the world to face up to an ugly past, we help shape a more honorable future." I am honored to have been part of this endeavor, and I have tried to learn its lesson.

Within our country, I have been to Native American reservations and acknowledged that the treaties we signed were neither fair nor honorably kept in many cases.

I went to Africa -- to Goree Island, the Door of No Return -- and acknowledged the responsibility of the United States in buying people into slavery. This is a hard business, struggling to find our core of humanity.

As Edgar said, we are here in an immediate sense because Edgar buttonholed Hillary back in 1996, and said I had to see him the next day. And that night, she told me I had to see him the next day, because the time for redress was running out. And I did as she said.

So I want to thank Hillary too. I can't tell you how many times she reminded me of her meetings with elderly survivors all around the world, and how many times she tried to shine a light on the quest for material and moral justice.

I would like to say again, Senator D'Amato and Representative Leach made it possible for us to do what we did together as Americans -- not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Americans. Governor Pataki and Alan Hevesi marshaled city and state governments all across America, not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Americans. People like Paul Volcker, Larry Eagleburger, and Stan Chesley, all of whom could choose to do pretty much whatever they like, chose instead to spend their time and their talents generously on this cause.

And I would like to thank Avraham Burg, Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the members of his government who have supported this cause after it had begun earlier under a different administration of a different party, not out of party reasons, but because of humanity. And again, let me say how personally grateful I am to the dedication of Stu Eizenstat, who is literally unmatched in his commitment to doing the right thing and his skill in actually finding a way to get it done.

I would like to echo what Foreign Minister Fischer said about the German Bundeskanzler, Gerhard Schroeder. He showed remarkable leadership. He showed a generosity and a courage of memory, and no little amount of political prodding, to do what his country has done. And we are grateful to him as well.

Thanks to all of you, humanity begins this new millennium standing on higher ground. Of course, we can never compensate the victims and their families for what was lost. It is beyond our power to restore life or even to rewrite history. But we have made progress towards setting history straight, and providing compensation for lost or stolen assets, and forced or slave labor.

We have an especially sacred obligation to elderly survivors, particularly the double victims who endured first the Holocaust and then a half century of communism. For their sake, there can be no denying the past or delaying the compensation.

We must also meet our obligations to the future, to seek the truth and follow where it leads. That's why it is so terribly important that your efforts have led to commissions in the United States and a dozen other nations examining their own involvement

in the handling of assets that rightfully belong to victims of the Holocaust, and why it is so important that the horror of the Holocaust never fade from our memories, and that we never lose sight of its searing lessons.

At the beginning of this new century with all of its promise, we still are beset by humanity's oldest failing: the fear of the other. The fear that, somehow, people who are different from us in the color of their skin or the way they worship are to be distrusted, disliked, hated, dehumanized, and ultimately killed. It is a very slippery slope, indeed.

This fear makes us vulnerable in two ways. It makes societies vulnerable, as ours have been, to individual crimes of hate by people who cannot come to grips with their own sense of failure or rage or inadequacy, and so, blame someone else.

Not very long ago, a poor demented person blamed a Filipino postal worker, and killed him dead in California shortly after he shot at innocent little Jewish children going to their school. A little before that, a demented person who said he belonged to a church that did not believe in God, but believed in white supremacy, killed an African American basketball coach walking in his neighborhood in Chicago, and then shot a young Korean American Christian walking out of his church.

James Byrd, dragged to death in Texas because he was black. Matthew Shepard, stretched out on the rack of a fence to die because he was gay. People still can be quickly brought into the grip of that kind of poison hatred.

And even more troubling, whole societies still can be exploited in their fears by unscrupulous leaders who seek to convince them that they should blame their problems on groups within or beyond their midst. It is still true today, even though when German and American and Russian and French troops serve together for peace in the Balkans, Israeli rescue teams travel the world to help people of every faith, Greeks and Turks help to dig out one another's dead amid the rubble of earthquakes. And the latest breakthrough in genetic science tells us that we are all genetically 99.9 percent the same, and that within any ethnic group, the genetic differences are greater than they are from group to group.

Still, we have not completely learned this lesson. And, still, when you strip it all away, at the root of the not-quite-finished peace process in Ireland, at the root of the ethnic and tribal wars of Africa, at the root of the uprooting of almost a million people in Kosovo, and at the root of the hard, unresolved questions in the Middle East, is the fear of the other.

Here in our country, we have made great strides, but we have a lot to do. One of the reasons I have so strongly supported the hate crimes legislation that is pending in the House is that it gives us another chance to say in America we are going to let go of the fear of the other. And if anybody can't let it go, we are going to take a strong and unambiguous stand against it so it will never infect us as a people again.

I just came back from Africa where I went to Arusha, Tanzania to the Peace Center with Nelson Mandela, to meet with all the parties, some 20 of them, in the Burundian peace process where, at the beginning of the last decade, somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 people were killed in the ongoing ethnic struggle between the Hutus and the Tutsis, which cost over 700,000 lives in neighboring Rwanda just a couple of years later.

The point I'm trying to make is, it is not enough for us to do everything we can to make whole the Holocaust victims, survivors and their family members. What we have to do, all of us, to merit the forgiveness of the Almighty, is to root out the cancer which gave it life wherever we find it. For it is not something that was localized in Germany. How many nations can thank God that at a particularly vulnerable point in their history, they did not produce a Hitler, or, God forbid, they might have done the same thing.

And so I say to you, we have to fight this everywhere. We can't give up on the Balkans and let them go back to slaughtering each other because some are Muslim and some are Orthodox Christian and some are Catholics. And we cannot give up on the Middle East until the whole thing is done.

Several of you have come up to me tonight and said, well, what do you think now, what's going to happen? I say, well, I'm pretty optimistic. The Speaker of the Knesset said, ah, yes, but that's your nature, everyone knows it. The truth is, we have come to a painful choice between continued confrontation and a chance to move beyond violence to build just and lasting peace. Like all life's chances, this one is fleeting. And the easy risks have all been taken already.

I think it's important to remind ourselves that the Middle East brought forth the world's three great monotheistic religions, each telling us we must recognize our common humanity, we must love our neighbor as ourselves, if we turn aside a stranger, it is as if we turn aside the most high God.

But when the past is piled high with hurt and hatred, that is a hard lesson to live by. We cannot undo past wrongs in the

Middle East, either. But we are never without the power to right them to some extent. And the struggle you have waged and won here for restitution, the struggle we honor tonight, shows that the effort is always worth making.

I thank you for supporting that good work. I salute you for what you have accomplished. But I remind you: the demon that has driven so much darkness since the dawn of human history has not yet quite been expunged from the human soul. And we all still have work to do.

Thank you and God bless you.

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