

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO THE 87TH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE NAACP
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Thank you. Thank you very much. President Mfume, I hope you do get your four more years. And I hope I get to hang around to work with you.

Madam Chair, Bishop Graves, Hazel and other distinguished members. Hey, she met me outside and kissed me. Brother Williams, thank you for singing for us. Reverend Hooks, you're looking young and handsome, I'm glad to see.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year I know the First Lady came to visit with you, and she had a wonderful time. And she is completing a trip that she made on behalf of our country after the meeting of the G-7 industrial countries in France. She went to a lot of the nations that used to be part of the Soviet Empire that were once communist and are now free. And she's had a wonderful trip. Last night I talked to her; she was in Finland, and so far north the sun never really goes down at this time of year. So I knew she wouldn't be mad when I woke her up at two o'clock in the morning to talk. And she asked me to give you her best.

I also want you to know what I did -- the last thing I did before I got on the helicopter at the White House to come here today was to meet with Mickey Kantor, our Secretary of Commerce, and Michael Brown, Ron Brown's son, and the delegation who are leaving today to finish the mission Ron Brown started in Bosnia and Croatia.

And I was especially proud that almost all the companies who lost executives on that terrible day sent replacements to go on this mission to finish the work of advancing the cause of peace. And I want to thank you, Mr. President, and all of you, for the tribute that you gave to Secretary Brown yesterday.

I am honored to be here today because of what the NAACP has meant to America. As a young boy growing up in the segregated South, it was the NAACP that gave all of us hope that there could be a better day. I told Myrlie -- I don't think she quite believed it -- that in early 1974, when I started my political career, I actually purchased a membership at the Malaloo (phonetic) AME Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. I came to a meeting one Sunday afternoon and bought myself a membership card. I hate to say that because I'll get a letter from Kweisi next week pointing out that I have not kept up my renewals over the last 20 years.

What a difference a year makes. Last year you announced your new leadership, a new sense of partnership, a new spirit of commitment to go into the 21st century. You elected Myrlie Evers as your chairman -- you elected this great former member of Congress -- that's right, give her a hand. You elected this great member of Congress as your new president and CEO, Kweisi Mfume. As you might imagine, given the way things are around here in Washington, I miss him more than ever. I was riding in with Congressman Mel Watt, from Charlotte today, from the airport and we were talking about -- where's Mel? He's here somewhere I think, Congressman Watt. And we were talking about what a great voice Kweisi was in the Congress. But I think we gained a greater leader in the struggle for equality and progress in America when he changed jobs.

I want to thank you for making your voice heard again, for economic justice, for the empowerment of all voters, for educational excellence for our children. And I want to thank you especially for your effort to bring young people back into this organization and into the spirit of citizenship in America. We need these young people -- after all, they have more tomorrows than yesterdays. There are some days when I resent that, but it's true.

And we can't remake our yesterdays, we can only make tomorrows. And we can't afford to have young people saying, well, oh, this doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether I am involved in the NAACP. It doesn't matter whether I vote. It doesn't matter whether I'm in a community group to try to help save my peers from drugs and gangs and give them a bright future and a better life. It does matter. It matters.

And because of the dedication of Mr. Mfume to the young people of his congressional district and to the young men in his own family, he brought that conviction that he could inspire young people to his work here. And in a way, it may be the lasting legacy of this period of reform of the NAACP that you brought the young blood of America back into this organization, fighting for the future and working together. And I hope he will stay with us. I'm glad that us gray-haired people still have a role in it, however.

My fellow Americans, our nation, as you all know, is at a crossroads. We are only four years away now from a new century in a new millennium. Anytime you change the calendar in that way, people start to think in bigger ways. They start to imagine the great significance of the moment. But it happens to be true now, for we are undergoing a sweeping change in the way we work, the way we live, the way we relate to the rest of the world.

We are leaving the Cold War that dominated most of our lives behind and moving into a new global village, if I can use my wife's term, with lots of opportunity and a lot of troubles -- some of them new and some of them very old. We are moving away from the Industrial Age into a new era dominated by information and technology, where more people will have more opportunities ever before, but unless they have the capacity to seize those opportunities, they'll be left behind faster than ever before.

So, when I sought this office, I did so because I wanted to get our country ready for the 21st century, because I thought there were three simple things that we had to do. One is to make sure we enter the next century with the American Dream alive for everybody who is willing to work for it, without regard to their race, their gender, their region or where they start out in life -- high, low or somewhere in the middle.

Secondly, I thought we had to find a way to resist these destructive winds that are blowing in so many other countries to divide people by race and religion and ethnicity and, instead, come together in a greater sense of community -- to bridge our divisions, respect our diversity, extol our shared values and make America stronger because of our diversity, not weaker because of it.

And the third thing I wanted to do is to make sure that in this new world our country continues to be the world's strongest force for peace and freedom and prosperity. It matters in Haiti. It matters in South Africa. It matters in Northern Ireland. It matters in the Middle East. It matters in all these countries, but it matters to us here at home, when we can work with the Russians to reduce our nuclear arsenals; when we can work with other countries to stop the proliferation of dangerous weapons; when we can cooperate with other countries to prevent terrorist incidents before they occur -- it matters that America is a force for peace and freedom and prosperity. It matters to every single one of you.

My strategy to achieve that vision was remarkably simple. I thought we had to reassert the basic bargain in American citizenship -- more opportunity for everyone, and responsibility from all. And the understanding that that responsibility includes our common responsibility not just to make the most of our own lives and our family's lives, but to be good citizens for our communities and for our country.

At this time of decision, that's what I hope the discussion will be about in this election year. We've come a long way in the last four years, but we've got a long way to go. When I -- four years ago, when I became President, the economy was stagnant, we had the slowest job growth since the Great Depression, the deficit was spiraling, we had quadrupled our national debt in only 12 years from what we'd done in the previous 200.

We put in place an economic plan designed to cut the deficit, expand trade for American products on free and fair terms, and invest more in the people of this country, wherever they lived and wherever they were starting out in life. And four years later, it's made a difference.

I said four years ago that if the Congress would adopt my plan I thought it would cut the deficit in half and produce 8 million jobs. Well, in three and a half years, we know it's cut the deficit by more than half and produced over 10 million jobs. That is a good beginning for the American people.

For much of the last four years the African American unemployment rate has been in single digits for the first time in 20 years. There are 100,000 new African American-owned businesses. After falling by \$2,000 in the previous four years, median income for African American families has increased by \$2,400, or 11 percent, in just the first two years of this administration. Average wages are going up now for the first time in a decade. Home ownership is the highest in 15 years -- there are 3.7 million new American home owners. The growth of home ownership among African Americans is higher than the national average. And one reason is we have a Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in Henry Cisneros that has worked to cut the closing costs on those homes by \$1,000 for first-time home buyers.

So we're moving in the right direction. But we have to keep working until all of our people can reap the rewards of this time for change, including those that have not been reached by the recovery, those that have been downsized in competition, those that are stuck in place because they don't have the education and the skills to move up. So we have to keep working on balancing this budget because that keeps the interest rates down, the investments coming, and takes the burden off these young people you're trying to get interested in their own future.

But we have to do it in a way that recognizes our obligations to each other, that keeps the community together. Yes, reform Medicare, but don't create a two-class system and make the oldest, the poorest and the sickest seniors more vulnerable. Yes, slow the inflation rate in Medicaid, but don't give up the guarantee that we have a national responsibility to take care of poor pregnant women, poor infant children, people with disabilities in families all over this country, and elderly people who have to go into nursing homes. I think that's our common responsibility. We don't have to give that up.

Neither should we reduce our commitment to excellence in education and to the environment in the name of balancing the budget, because that's not necessary to be done. We have to go on with the cause of health care reform. There's still too many people in this country that don't have health insurance or that lose it. That's what the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill is all about. It simply says you don't lose your health insurance if you lose your job, you're moving from job to job, or if someone in your family has been sick. A simple little guarantee that could immediately benefit over 8 million Americans who are working in this country trying to support their kids and hold their families together. And I hope the Congress will pass it without delay.

I was very happy that yesterday the Senate voted to pass a 90-cent increase in the minimum wage, something we need very much. Ten million of our hardest-pressed workers will get a raise. And I urge Congress to go on and pass it now. It's passed the House and passed the Senate. Let's go on and pass it just as soon as possible. Get it on up here so I can sign that bill and we can give people a raise.

In addition to the minimum wage, there's some other provisions in that bill that I'm very proud of that have, to be fair, bipartisan support. One is -- and for all of you in small businesses, it will matter a lot -- we're going to increase the expensing provision of small businesses, their write-off capacity from \$17,500 to \$25,000 a year. That's important for a lot of you here in this room. It was only \$10,000 when I took office, and the small business community said it ought to be \$25,000. If that bill gets to my desk, it will be \$25,000.

The other thing that I think is very important is that this bill contains a package of pension reforms which will make it easier for people who work for small businesses and people who are self-employed, and especially for people who have to change jobs a lot -- people who are out there selling computer software or otherwise have to move from job to job -- to take out a pension, to keep it when they're unemployed and to keep it when they move from job to job without being interrupted. People ought to be able to save for their family and save for their own retirement even if they're working in little businesses, even if they're self-employed, even if they have to move across the country, even if they have to change jobs. That is in there with the minimum wage bill, too.

Four years ago we had a lot of rhetoric on crime, but not a lot of action, and the crime rate was at unbelievably high levels. But there was a quiet change going on in many of our communities, who recognized that we had to have more police on the street, trying to prevent crime, not just catch criminals;

relating to people in the communities, working with the parents, working with the children. They recognized that in addition to tougher punishment for serious offenders, we needed more prevention programs for community activists who wanted to help save these kids.

And when I became President I asked the Congress to pass that kind of crime bill, and they did. And now we're putting 100,000 police back on the street. We're taking guns off the street with the assault weapons ban and the Brady Bill. We're increasing penalties for people who should be punished more, but also giving our young people something to say yes to.

Under the direction of General McCaffrey, who this week is chairing a conference in El Paso, Texas, on how to stop drugs at the border, we are targeting a drug strategy to help young people. We cannot let another generation of our young people fall into the trap of drugs and gangs and crime.

We're working with communities all over this country with innovative strategies -- not telling people what to do, but saying, if you want to do this, we'll help you. School uniform policies in places like Long Beach, California, or Las Cruces, New Mexico. We're working on enforcing the truancy laws. Kids ought to be in school, not on the street during school hours, I think. And helping people do that. We're working on community-based curfews. And I'm holding up to this country especially the example of New Orleans, where they had a huge drop in juvenile crime not only because they imposed a curfew system, but because when they caught a young person out after curfew, instead of just punishing the person, they took these young people to a curfew center and said, tell me about your life, what's going on in your life, what are your problems, what can we do to help? It was a positive as well as a disciplinary move. And the juvenile crime rate is going down dramatically.

These things are working all across America. We set up a framework in Washington, but all we're really trying to do is help people at the community level come together and take responsibility for their own kids and their own future. And we are now seeing the fourth year in a row where the crime rate is going down. And that's something to be proud of.

Now, having said that, you'd be cheering from the rafters but for two things. Instead of polite applause, we'd get a roaring cheer, but there's two things that keep you from giving a roaring cheer. What are they? Number one, the crime rate's still too high. So what if it's lower, it's still way too high. And that means it's important. We dare not turn back on a strategy that's working. We've got to keep strengthening our community efforts -- putting more of these people out on the street who can be community police officers.

I won't be satisfied with this crime problem until we can meet this test -- we will never purge the country completely of crime because you can't -- at least the President doesn't have the power to alter human nature. The preachers here can call on a higher power, but I can't. So we'll always have some crime. What will be the test for you -- when you know that the crime rate is at a manageable, acceptable level in a civilized country? When you go home at night after a long day at work and you flip on the evening news, and the lead story is not a crime story, or if it is, you're surprised instead of deadened by it. You're really surprised. Then you will know that we got the crime rate going in the right direction for good.

The other thing that bothers people is that even though the crime rate's going down in the country as a whole, the rate of crime and violence by people under 18 is going up. We've still got too many innocent kids being killed in crossfires by drive-by shootings. We still have too many kids that are out there raising themselves in the streets, so they wind up in gangs, because everybody wants to be part of something. Most people can't just live wandering around as hermits all alone. So if you put people out there on the street and they have to raise themselves, they wind up in gangs because people don't want to be alone. There's not another compelling alternative. We have to fill that gap. And we have to the things that are responsible, those of us who are responsible for the future. We cannot lose another generation to gangs and guns and drugs. We cannot waiver on it.

We cannot show weakness, and we dare not cater to special interest groups on this. We are determined to stand by the ban on 19 deadly assault weapons. It was the right thing to do. We are determined to stand by the Brady Bill's requirement of waiting periods.

Let me just tell you, I know when we passed the Brady Bill and when we passed the assault weapons ban in 1994 -- and Mr. Mfume will tell you this -- we lost some members of Congress who actually lost their seats in Congress because they voted for these bills. People went into their districts, called voters on the telephone, sent them letters, ran ads saying these people are trying to take your guns away from you; they're trying to end your ability to go out in the country and hunt. That's what they said. And, you know, most people who work hard don't have time to keep up with what's going on every day. A lot of people didn't know, and they went right in and dutifully voted against these members of Congress. And some of them gave up their seats.

But you know what? It's been two years now -- two deer seasons -- two ducks seasons, two turkey seasons, two quail seasons, two squirrel seasons -- and everybody in this whole

country that likes to do that is still shooting at those animals with the same gun they had before we passed the Brady Bill and the assault weapons ban. Every single soul. So they didn't tell the truth.

But I'll tell you who doesn't have guns. Because of that Brady Bill, 60,000 felons, fugitives and stalkers have not been able to get handguns and pull the trigger on innocent American citizens. We were right and they were wrong about that, and we've got to stand tough on it.

Now, this year, we've gone through a great debate about whether or not to repeal the assault weapons ban. I couldn't believe it. Just four months ago the House of Representatives actually voted to repeal the assault weapons ban. They want to take Uzis out there and shoot at the deer. Wild turkey fly fast; you need lots of bullets -- I'm kind of laughing to keep from crying about this.

And let me say, there's now a lot of talk about you know where the major candidates will stand on this repeal of the assault weapons ban, who will push for it, and won't, and whatever. But I will say one thing that the Republican candidate for president has not said, and probably will not and cannot say. I will veto any attempt to repeal the assault weapons ban or the Brady Bill. I will veto it.

We should stand with law enforcement; we should stand with the victims of crime. You can't tell me it doesn't make any difference. I'll never forget a handsome young businessman from northern California I met a couple of years ago when we were fighting this battle. He had a beautiful young daughter, but his beautiful young daughter no longer had her beautiful young mother, because the beautiful young mother just happened to be in a high-risk one day when a madman happened to walk in and cut loose with an assault weapon.

Now, people go crazy; these things happen. But if he'd had a revolver instead of an assault weapon, there wouldn't be so many people dead in that building. And this is important. This is an important issue.

So I ask you all to think about this and talk about this. And let me just tell you something that makes, again, Kweisi's attempt to bring all the young people in here so important. Just starting in grade school now, we have the largest group of young

Americans more diverse than ever before in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds -- the largest group of young Americans entering our school system since the baby boomers entered right after World War II.

It was thought for a long time we would never have a group of youngsters that large again. This group is larger. They are more likely to be people of color. They are quite likely to come from families with difficult situations, or at least difficult economic situations. We must turn this problem of juvenile violence and gangs around before they reach their adolescent years if we don't want to reap the whirlwind of this.

One way we have to do it is with the right kind of welfare reform. Three-quarters of the people in America on welfare are already under welfare reform experiments because of the action our government has taken to encourage strategies to move people from welfare to work.

My criteria is simple. I don't mind being tough on requiring people to work, but we ought to want for people on welfare what we want for ourselves. What do we want? We want to succeed at home and at work. We want to be good parents and we want to be good from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We want to feel good about ourselves when we come home from work, but we want to feel good about ourselves when we leave home with our kids behind. That is the simple test. So I say, tough on work, yes; tough on kids, no way. Be good to the kids. Invest in child care.

And we've had time enough now to see who is right. We have 1.3 million people less on the welfare rolls today than the day I took the oath of office as President of the United States. That's the way to move people from welfare to work -- support them with child care and then require those work requirements.

And the most important thing we can do is make a wholesale commitment to educational excellence and educational opportunity in this country. We have got to do more. People say we've done a lot on that in the last 15 years. Not nearly enough. We've expanded Head Start, but not enough. We've worked to shrink class sizes and help teachers be retrained. We've worked to encourage states to set high standards and to give them the flexibility they need to meet the standards. We've worked to open the doors of college wider than ever, increasing the Pell grants, changing the student loan program so that people could borrow the money at lower costs with less hassle and then have the option to pay it back as a percentage of their income, so that no young person should ever drop out of school because of the burden of a student loan.

But we have to do more. I am determined to see every classroom and every library in every school in the United States of America hooked up to the Internet by the year 2000 so the poorest kids can get the richest education and have access to all the information that any student anywhere in the world had.

I believe that the best tax cut we could give the American people is a tax deduction for the cost of college tuition up to \$10,000 a year. I believe that we ought to make at least two years of college after high school just as universal as a high school education is today.

I think everybody out to have access to it. That's why I have proposed a \$1,500 refundable tax credit -- enough to pay the entire tuition cost at the typical community college in the United States, so that everybody of any age can at least go back and get two years of college, so they can do well in the world toward which we're going.

If you want to inspire young people of the future, you at least ought to be able to tell them -- you at least ought to be able to tell them -- you ought to be able to look them right in the eye and say, you will go to college if you do this. That's the least that we can do in Washington to help those of you who are out there in our neighborhoods help to rescue this generation of young people and give them something to say yes to and a bright future to embrace.

So these are the things that I think we ought to be focusing on. Things that help people make the most of their own lives -- not a guarantee, but an opportunity. Things that help build strong families. Things that help build strong communities. They'll build a strong country. And it's one thing to preach to people that they ought to be responsible -- and I'm for that -- but if they are responsible, they ought to be rewarded with opportunity. The two things should go together as a bargain.

Let me say one other thing. Now that the Cold War is over, we have, unfortunately, not a world free of danger, we've got a lot of security problems. You know it as well as I do. We just dealt with it with a terrible, terrible loss of our Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia.

What is leading to all this terrorism around the world? What does it have in common, when the Hutus and the Tutsis just slaughter each other in Rwanda or Burundi? What does that have to do with people rioting in Northern Ireland? What does it have to do with the Bosnians, the Muslims, the Croats and the Serbs and what they did to each other for four years after living together in peace for decades? What does it have to do with the continuing tensions in the Middle East?

Well, I think it has to do with human nature being vulnerable every day to taking the easy way of defining ourselves in terms of who we're not, instead of who we are; defining ourselves in terms of who we can look down on, instead of what we can look up to. What leads to an Oklahoma City bombing? What were those people thinking in that group in Arizona where our federal officials broke it up the other day before -- when they had that massive weapons cash and all those -- at least they have been charged with plans to blow up all kinds of federal facilities? What are they thinking about when they burn all those churches and synagogues -- or, in a few cases, mosques and Islamic centers? What are they thinking about?

I'm telling you, it's something endemic to human nature, something you have to teach your kids about all the time -- something we all have to fight. It's almost like, every day you wake up and the scales are going inside you -- you know, hope and fear, hatred and reconciliation. But there are people all over the world that look like they just can't exist unless they go out and kill somebody who is different from them -- or at least keep them at arm's length.

And nobody has ever perfectly solved this problem. There are no perfect answers because, again, it deals with the human spirit and the things that are endemic to human nature. But that's why I know that even though we desegregated our schools and threw racism out of public facilities and elected African Americans and Hispanics and Asian Americans to Congress, passed civil rights laws, this job is a never-ending job -- here and around the world. It's a never-ending job.

That's why, notwithstanding the political movement of the moment, after I studied it for several months, I thought we could and should make some changes in the affirmative action laws, but that we should mend them and not end them. I thought it would be a mistake to end them and walk away.

I think it's a mistake not to try to keep working for voting rights and greater impact of voting rights. And, notwithstanding the recent Supreme Court decisions which, of course, we will all honor, we still have to be on a mission of making sure that the Congress of the United States represents the American people in a fair way.

And it's why we have to keep standing against this rash of church burnings. You know, it's hard to think of anything an American could do that didn't kill a lot of people that would offend our sense of decency more than burning a house of worship. This whole country got started in part by people coming here so they could build their own churches and worship God in any way they pleased, and they wouldn't be oppressed here. That's how we got started.

In the darkest hours of our country, when we lived with the awful curse of slavery, and then later with the problems associated with the attempt to escape it, if it had not been for the African American church -- if it had not been for the African American church what would have happened? We might have plunged this country into an orgy of violence and killing, and lost tens of thousands more people, and hardened our hearts against one another in ways that it would have taken a century or more to overcome.

An attack on a house of worship, whether it's a big old Southern Baptist church, or a big old black Baptist church, or a tiny synagogue, or a Muslim mosque that only a few people ever frequent, is an attack on the whole idea of America. And it represents our problem in dealing with this curse of hatred based on race and religion and ethnicity that is sweeping the world and fueling so much of this terrorism.

I want to thank you for what you have done. The NAACP has worked with law enforcement and government and business and religious leaders to help us catch and prosecute people, and to help us rebuild, and to help us prevent these burnings. You know that my administration stands behind you. We created a national task force on these church burnings, headed, I might add, very ably by two of the finest African Americans in our administration -- Deval Patrick, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil rights; and Jim Johnson, the Assistant Secretary of Treasury for enforcement.

We've got over 200 FBI and ATF agents working to solve these crimes, going through the evidence, doing the investigations. And we're making arrests. In just the last three weeks, arrests have been made in connection with fires in Missouri, North and South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and Washington. And just this past Monday, while you were here, two members of the KKK were charged with the burning of the Mt. Zion AME church in Greeleyville, South Carolina, where I visited just last month.

This morning before I left the White House, I met with a bipartisan group of congressional leaders to thank them for quickly and unanimously passing bipartisan legislation to make it easier to prosecute arson attacks against houses of worship. Also, that legislation authorizes a \$10-million Department of Housing and Urban Development loan guarantee program to be used for church rebuilding -- to work with the money that's been raised by the National Council of Churches, the guarantees of volunteers that have been given by Habitat for Humanity and others.

But we must do more. Two weeks ago, I began to convene religious leaders and governors and others in the White House to talk about what else we can do. I asked the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, James Lee Witt, who's used to working with local community groups when we have natural disasters, to work with the Justice and Treasury Departments, with the governors to frame a national prevention initiative. One of the big problems here in preventing these crimes is that you've got so many of these little churches that are out on country roads, and they're old wooden structures, and they don't even have a full-time staff, so they can't afford to have full-time people there as night watchmen.

Keep in mind, so far there's no evidence of a national conspiracy. Most of these people are not armed when they sneak in in the middle of the night to do this. If you just had bright lights and somebody hanging around most of the time it wouldn't happen.

Last week I transferred \$6 million to local communities in 13 states across the South -- that's enough to pay for one new police officer in a county to drive around on these back roads to patrol the churches at night, or for lighting, or for whatever else they want to use it for to try to prevent, prevent the fires from occurring in the first place.

And tomorrow the Vice President is meeting with leaders of the insurance industry at the White House to build on their pledge to work in partnership with all of us to prevent these crimes, and to make sure that we can still get insurance for these churches. I've heard a lot about that from people, and it's important.

So we're going to do everything we can to stop these fires, to catch who is doing it, to rebuild. But I say again, this work we're doing here is dealing with a flaw in the human spirit that all of us have to fight always. We cannot -- we cannot -- let significant numbers of the American people turn into cowards, acting in the dark of night, on racial, ethnic or religious bigotry. We cannot do that. We cannot let people in this country develop terrorists cells to manifest their hatred of their own government in the greatest experiment in self-government in human history.

If we are going to continue to be a force against terrorism and against hatred in the rest of the world, we have to continue to purge ourselves of it. That's why earlier this month I signed a proclamation designating July as the national month of unity for Americans. I asked religious leaders of all faiths and citizens from all walks of life to reach out to one another, to strengthen the ideals that light our way and keep this country strong.

We have not always lived up to our promise. We're people, we're human, we make mistakes, we're imperfect. But we have never stopped trying. And we have never stopped moving. And as we enter this great new century, we have got to say that we're going to stamp out the fires of hatred and bigotry. We have got to say we are going to find a way to reject intolerance and heal our divisions. We have got to find a way to say, as your president has said, this is the new day begun.

I just want to leave you with this thought. A couple of nights ago I met with a group of businesspeople to talk about a number of issues, and one of them said to me -- he said, Mr. President, I've been in business for over 30 years, I've built facilities in more than 25 nations; I have seen this world changed a lot. He said, there is no country in the world today in better shape for the next century than the United States. And he said, our diversity, the fact that we are all so different is an enormous asset in a global economy where information and ideas have to be exchanged at a rapid rate and people have to understand each other and deal with each other. He said, that's why it's so important that we learn how to work together and be together, because if we do, there is no stopping this country.

I've said several times in the last few weeks -- I'll just close with this -- it seems like my life as your President has been dominated by fires in the last couple of weeks -- arguably, for longer than that. But, I mean, literally. On the one hand there's the church fires, which are the symbol of everything that is wrong, that we want to reject when it occurs in our country. And on the other hand, there is the fire that burns in the Olympic flame that's making it's way to Atlanta.

And I'm sure every one of you has read as this flame has moved through your states of all these community heroes who are picked to carry the torch for a kilometer. Some of them were in wheelchairs and had to roll along. Some of them were very old and had to walk along. Some of them were great athletes and could fly along so fast the flame almost went out. But every one of them had one thing in common -- they were picked to carry that torch because they were, first and foremost, great citizens.

There was a 74-year-old woman in Nevada that had taken 100 kids in who had been abandoned, so she took them in. There was a man who came in in Washington, one of the torchbearers at the White House, probably about 60, African American man, who had devoted his life to rescuing the lives of children. And he walked up with 12 of his kids, and they were white, black, brown, and Asian Americans. He had given his life to them.

There was a Catholic nun who had devoted her whole life to fulfilling the Catholic social ministry in her community. There was the deaf president of Galludet University, our nation's deaf

university, who is in his late 50s. And when he left what he was doing with us, he was going that week to run a 100-mile race. There was a young woman who played basketball at the University of Tennessee whose body was crushed in an accident and she thought her whole -- her life was nearly over, her athletic career was certainly over. But by sheer force of will, she got herself back into shape, resumed her basketball career, helped them win a national championship, and is one of the leaders on our basketball team.

All of these people shared one thing in common -- they're all different races, all different religions, all different backgrounds -- they lived their citizenship. They bridged the differences between us. They were looking for the future. They saw themselves in terms of who they were, not in terms of what they weren't. In terms of what they could become, not who they were supposed to hate. In terms of what kind of partnerships and teamwork they could build, not how they could be divided.

That is the mission that the NAACP will carry, with great success and energy and commitment and conviction, to the hearts and minds of these young people into the 21st century. That is the mission we must be on. And that is what I hope and pray we will be discussing in this election season: How can we give to our children the kind of America they deserve to have.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO THE 87TH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE NAACP
Charlotte Convention Center
Charlotte, North Carolina
July 10, 1996

Thank you. Thank you very much. President Mfume, I hope you do get your four more years. And I hope I get to hang around to work with you.

Madam Chair, Bishop Graves, Hazel and other distinguished members. Hey, she met me outside and kissed me. Brother Williams, thank you for singing for us. Reverend Hooks, you're looking young and handsome, I'm glad to see.

Ladies and gentlemen, last year I know the First Lady came to visit with you, and she had a wonderful time. And she is completing a trip that she made on behalf of our country after the meeting of the G-7 industrial countries in France. She went to a lot of the nations that used to be part of the Soviet Empire that were once communist and are now free. And she's had a wonderful trip. Last night I talked to her; she was in Finland, and so far north the sun never really goes down at this time of year. So I knew she wouldn't be mad when I woke her up at two o'clock in the morning to talk. And she asked me to give you her best.

I also want you to know what I did -- the last thing I did before I got on the helicopter at the White House to come here today was to meet with Mickey Kantor, our Secretary of Commerce, and Michael Brown, Ron Brown's son, and the delegation who are leaving today to finish the mission Ron Brown started in Bosnia and Croatia.

And I was especially proud that almost all the companies who lost executives on that terrible day sent replacements to go on this mission to finish the work of advancing the cause of peace. And I want to thank you, Mr. President, and all of you, for the tribute that you gave to Secretary Brown yesterday.

I am honored to be here today because of what the NAACP has meant to America. As a young boy growing up in the segregated South, it was the NAACP that gave all of us hope that there could be a better day. I told Myrlie -- I don't think she quite believed it -- that in early 1974, when I started my political career, I actually purchased a membership at the Malaloo (phonetic) AME Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. I came to a meeting one Sunday afternoon and bought myself a membership card. I hate to say that because I'll get a letter from Kweisi next week pointing out that I have not kept up my renewals over the last 20 years.

What a difference a year makes. Last year you announced your new leadership, a new sense of partnership, a new spirit of commitment to go into the 21st century. You elected Myrlie Evers as your chairman -- you elected this great former member of Congress -- that's right, give her a hand. You elected this great member of Congress as your new president and CEO, Kweisi Mfume. As you might imagine, given the way things are around here in Washington, I miss him more than ever. I was riding in with Congressman Mel Watt, from Charlotte today, from the airport and we were talking about -- where's Mel? He's here somewhere I think, Congressman Watt. And we were talking about what a great voice Kweisi was in the Congress. But I think we gained a greater leader in the struggle for equality and progress in America when he changed jobs.

I want to thank you for making your voice heard again, for economic justice, for the empowerment of all voters, for educational excellence for our children. And I want to thank you especially for your effort to bring young people back into this organization and into the spirit of citizenship in America. We need these young people -- after all, they have more tomorrows than yesterdays. There are some days when I resent that, but it's true.

And we can't remake our yesterdays, we can only make tomorrows. And we can't afford to have young people saying, well, oh, this doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether I am involved in the NAACP. It doesn't matter whether I vote. It doesn't matter whether I'm in a community group to try to help save my peers from drugs and gangs and give them a bright future and a better life. It does matter. It matters.

And because of the dedication of Mr. Mfume to the young people of his congressional district and to the young men in his own family, he brought that conviction that he could inspire young people to his work here. And in a way, it may be the lasting legacy of this period of reform of the NAACP that you brought the young blood of America back into this organization, fighting for the future and working together. And I hope he will stay with us. I'm glad that us gray-haired people still have a role in it, however.

My fellow Americans, our nation, as you all know, is at a crossroads. We are only four years away now from a new century in a new millennium. Anytime you change the calendar in that way, people start to think in bigger ways. They start to imagine the great significance of the moment. But it happens to be true now, for we are undergoing a sweeping change in the way we work, the way we live, the way we relate to the rest of the world.

We are leaving the Cold War that dominated most of our lives behind and moving into a new global village, if I can use my wife's term, with lots of opportunity and a lot of troubles -- some of them new and some of them very old. We are moving away from the Industrial Age into a new era dominated by information and technology, where more people will have more opportunities ever before, but unless they have the capacity to seize those opportunities, they'll be left behind faster than ever before.

So, when I sought this office, I did so because I wanted to get our country ready for the 21st century, because I thought there were three simple things that we had to do. One is to make sure we enter the next century with the American Dream alive for everybody who is willing to work for it, without regard to their race, their gender, their region or where they start out in life -- high, low or somewhere in the middle.

Secondly, I thought we had to find a way to resist these destructive winds that are blowing in so many other countries to divide people by race and religion and ethnicity and, instead, come together in a greater sense of community -- to bridge our divisions, respect our diversity, extol our shared values and make America stronger because of our diversity, not weaker because of it.

And the third thing I wanted to do is to make sure that in this new world our country continues to be the world's strongest force for peace and freedom and prosperity. It matters in Haiti. It matters in South Africa. It matters in Northern Ireland. It matters in the Middle East. It matters in all these countries, but it matters to us here at home, when we can work with the Russians to reduce our nuclear arsenals; when we can work with other countries to stop the proliferation of dangerous weapons; when we can cooperate with other countries to prevent terrorist incidents before they occur -- it matters that America is a force for peace and freedom and prosperity. It matters to every single one of you.

My strategy to achieve that vision was remarkably simple. I thought we had to reassert the basic bargain in American citizenship -- more opportunity for everyone, and responsibility from all. And the understanding that that responsibility includes our common responsibility not just to make the most of our own lives and our family's lives, but to be good citizens for our communities and for our country.

At this time of decision, that's what I hope the discussion will be about in this election year. We've come a long way in the last four years, but we've got a long way to go. When I -- four years ago, when I became President, the economy was stagnant, we had the slowest job growth since the Great Depression, the deficit was spiraling, we had quadrupled our

national debt in only 12 years from what we'd done in the previous 200.

We put in place an economic plan designed to cut the deficit, expand trade for American products on free and fair terms, and invest more in the people of this country, wherever they lived and wherever they were starting out in life. And four years later, it's made a difference.

I said four years ago that if the Congress would adopt my plan I thought it would cut the deficit in half and produce 8 million jobs. Well, in three and a half years, we know it's cut the deficit by more than half and produced over 10 million jobs. That is a good beginning for the American people.

For much of the last four years the African American unemployment rate has been in single digits for the first time in 20 years. There are 100,000 new African American-owned businesses. After falling by \$2,000 in the previous four years, median income for African American families has increased by \$2,400, or 11 percent, in just the first two years of this administration. Average wages are going up now for the first time in a decade. Home ownership is the highest in 15 years -- there are 3.7 million new American home owners. The growth of home ownership among African Americans is higher than the national average. And one reason is we have a Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in Henry Cisneros that has worked to cut the closing costs on those homes by \$1,000 for first-time home buyers.

So we're moving in the right direction. But we have to keep working until all of our people can reap the rewards of this time for change, including those that have not been reached by the recovery, those that have been downsized in competition, those that are stuck in place because they don't have the education and the skills to move up. So we have to keep working on balancing this budget because that keeps the interest rates down, the investments coming, and takes the burden off these young people you're trying to get interested in their own future.

But we have to do it in a way that recognizes our obligations to each other, that keeps the community together. Yes, reform Medicare, but don't create a two-class system and make the oldest, the poorest and the sickest seniors more vulnerable. Yes, slow the inflation rate in Medicaid, but don't give up the guarantee that we have a national responsibility to take care of poor pregnant women, poor infant children, people with disabilities in families all over this country, and elderly people who have to go into nursing homes. I think that's our common responsibility. We don't have to give that up.

Neither should we reduce our commitment to excellence in education and to the environment in the name of balancing the budget, because that's not necessary to be done. We have to go on with the cause of health care reform. There's still too many people in this country that don't have health insurance or that lose it. That's what the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill is all about. It simply says you don't lose your health insurance if you lose your job, you're moving from job to job, or if someone in your family has been sick. A simple little guarantee that could immediately benefit over 8 million Americans who are working in this country trying to support their kids and hold their families together. And I hope the Congress will pass it without delay.

I was very happy that yesterday the Senate voted to pass a 90-cent increase in the minimum wage, something we need very much. Ten million of our hardest-pressed workers will get a raise. And I urge Congress to go on and pass it now. It's passed the House and passed the Senate. Let's go on and pass it just as soon as possible. Get it on up here so I can sign that bill and we can give people a raise.

In addition to the minimum wage, there's some other provisions in that bill that I'm very proud of that have, to be fair, bipartisan support. One is -- and for all of you in small businesses, it will matter a lot -- we're going to increase the expensing provision of small businesses, their write-off capacity from \$17,500 to \$25,000 a year. That's important for a lot of you here in this room. It was only \$10,000 when I took office, and the small business community said it ought to be \$25,000. If that bill gets to my desk, it will be \$25,000.

The other thing that I think is very important is that this bill contains a package of pension reforms which will make it easier for people who work for small businesses and people who are self-employed, and especially for people who have to change jobs a lot -- people who are out there selling computer software or otherwise have to move from job to job -- to take out a pension, to keep it when they're unemployed and to keep it when they move from job to job without being interrupted. People ought to be able to save for their family and save for their own retirement even if they're working in little businesses, even if they're self-employed, even if they have to move across the country, even if they have to change jobs. That is in there with the minimum wage bill, too.

Four years ago we had a lot of rhetoric on crime, but not a lot of action, and the crime rate was at unbelievably high levels. But there was a quiet change going on in many of our communities, who recognized that we had to have more police on the street, trying to prevent crime, not just catch criminals;

relating to people in the communities, working with the parents, working with the children. They recognized that in addition to tougher punishment for serious offenders, we needed more prevention programs for community activists who wanted to help save these kids.

And when I became President I asked the Congress to pass that kind of crime bill, and they did. And now we're putting 100,000 police back on the street. We're taking guns off the street with the assault weapons ban and the Brady Bill. We're increasing penalties for people who should be punished more, but also giving our young people something to say yes to.

Under the direction of General McCaffrey, who this week is chairing a conference in El Paso, Texas, on how to stop drugs at the border, we are targeting a drug strategy to help young people. We cannot let another generation of our young people fall into the trap of drugs and gangs and crime.

We're working with communities all over this country with innovative strategies -- not telling people what to do, but saying, if you want to do this, we'll help you. School uniform policies in places like Long Beach, California, or Las Cruces, New Mexico. We're working on enforcing the truancy laws. Kids ought to be in school, not on the street during school hours, I think. And helping people do that. We're working on community-based curfews. And I'm holding up to this country especially the example of New Orleans, where they had a huge drop in juvenile crime not only because they imposed a curfew system, but because when they caught a young person out after curfew, instead of just punishing the person, they took these young people to a curfew center and said, tell me about your life, what's going on in your life, what are your problems, what can we do to help? It was a positive as well as a disciplinary move. And the juvenile crime rate is going down dramatically.

These things are working all across America. We set up a framework in Washington, but all we're really trying to do is help people at the community level come together and take responsibility for their own kids and their own future. And we are now seeing the fourth year in a row where the crime rate is going down. And that's something to be proud of.

Now, having said that, you'd be cheering from the rafters but for two things. Instead of polite applause, we'd get a roaring cheer, but there's two things that keep you from giving a roaring cheer. What are they? Number one, the crime rate's still too high. So what if it's lower, it's still way too high. And that means it's important. We dare not turn back on a strategy that's working. We've got to keep strengthening our community efforts -- putting more of these people out on the street who can be community police officers.

I won't be satisfied with this crime problem until we can meet this test -- we will never purge the country completely of crime because you can't -- at least the President doesn't have the power to alter human nature. The preachers here can call on a higher power, but I can't. So we'll always have some crime. What will be the test for you -- when you know that the crime rate is at a manageable, acceptable level in a civilized country? When you go home at night after a long day at work and you flip on the evening news, and the lead story is not a crime story, or if it is, you're surprised instead of deadened by it. You're really surprised. Then you will know that we got the crime rate going in the right direction for good.

The other thing that bothers people is that even though the crime rate's going down in the country as a whole, the rate of crime and violence by people under 18 is going up. We've still got too many innocent kids being killed in crossfires by drive-by shootings. We still have too many kids that are out there raising themselves in the streets, so they wind up in gangs, because everybody wants to be part of something. Most people can't just live wandering around as hermits all alone. So if you put people out there on the street and they have to raise themselves, they wind up in gangs because people don't want to be alone. There's not another compelling alternative. We have to fill that gap. And we have to do the things that are responsible, those of us who are responsible for the future. We cannot lose another generation to gangs and guns and drugs. We cannot waiver on it.

We cannot show weakness, and we dare not cater to special interest groups on this. We are determined to stand by the ban on 19 deadly assault weapons. It was the right thing to do. We are determined to stand by the Brady Bill's requirement of waiting periods.

Let me just tell you, I know when we passed the Brady Bill and when we passed the assault weapons ban in 1994 --and Mr. Mfume will tell you this -- we lost some members of Congress who actually lost their seats in Congress because they voted for these bills. People went into their districts, called voters on the telephone, sent them letters, ran ads saying these people are trying to take your guns away from you; they're trying to end your ability to go out in the country and hunt. That's what they said. And, you know, most people who work hard don't have time to keep up with what's going on every day. A lot of people didn't know, and they went right in and dutifully voted against these members of Congress. And some of them gave up their seats.

But you know what? It's been two years now -- two deer seasons -- two ducks seasons, two turkey seasons, two quail seasons, two squirrel seasons -- and everybody in this whole

country that likes to do that is still shooting at those animals with the same gun they had before we passed the Brady Bill and the assault weapons ban. Every single soul. So they didn't tell the truth.

But I'll tell you who doesn't have guns. Because of that Brady Bill, 60,000 felons, fugitives and stalkers have not been able to get handguns and pull the trigger on innocent American citizens. We were right and they were wrong about that, and we've got to stand tough on it.

Now, this year, we've gone through a great debate about whether or not to repeal the assault weapons ban. I couldn't believe it. Just four months ago the House of Representatives actually voted to repeal the assault weapons ban. They want to take Uzis out there and shoot at the deer. Wild turkey fly fast; you need lots of bullets -- I'm kind of laughing to keep from crying about this.

And let me say, there's now a lot of talk about you know where the major candidates will stand on this repeal of the assault weapons ban, who will push for it, and won't, and whatever. But I will say one thing that the Republican candidate for president has not said, and probably will not and cannot say. I will veto any attempt to repeal the assault weapons ban or the Brady Bill. I will veto it.

We should stand with law enforcement; we should stand with the victims of crime. You can't tell me it doesn't make any difference. I'll never forget a handsome young businessman from northern California I met a couple of years ago when we were fighting this battle. He had a beautiful young daughter, but his beautiful young daughter no longer had her beautiful young mother, because the beautiful young mother just happened to be in a high-risk one day when a madman happened to walk in and cut loose with an assault weapon.

Now, people go crazy; these things happen. But if he'd had a revolver instead of an assault weapon, there wouldn't be so many people dead in that building. And this is important. This is an important issue.

So I ask you all to think about this and talk about this. And let me just tell you something that makes, again, Kweisi's attempt to bring all the young people in here so important. Just starting in grade school now, we have the largest group of young

Americans more diverse than ever before in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds -- the largest group of young Americans entering our school system since the baby boomers entered right after World War II.

It was thought for a long time we would never have a group of youngsters that large again. This group is larger. They are more likely to be people of color. They are quite likely to come from families with difficult situations, or at least difficult economic situations. We must turn this problem of juvenile violence and gangs around before they reach their adolescent years if we don't want to reap the whirlwind of this.

One way we have to do it is with the right kind of welfare reform. Three-quarters of the people in America on welfare are already under welfare reform experiments because of the action our government has taken to encourage strategies to move people from welfare to work.

My criteria is simple. I don't mind being tough on requiring people to work, but we ought to want for people on welfare what we want for ourselves. What do we want? We want to succeed at home and at work. We want to be good parents and we want to be good from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We want to feel good about ourselves when we come home from work, but we want to feel good about ourselves when we leave home with our kids behind. That is the simple test. So I say, tough on work, yes; tough on kids, no way. Be good to the kids. Invest in child care.

And we've had time enough now to see who is right. We have 1.3 million people less on the welfare rolls today than the day I took the oath of office as President of the United States. That's the way to move people from welfare to work -- support them with child care and then require those work requirements.

And the most important thing we can do is make a wholesale commitment to educational excellence and educational opportunity in this country. We have got to do more. People say we've done a lot on that in the last 15 years. Not nearly enough. We've expanded Head Start, but not enough. We've worked to shrink class sizes and help teachers be retrained. We've worked to encourage states to set high standards and to give them the flexibility they need to meet the standards. We've worked to open the doors of college wider than ever, increasing the Pell grants, changing the student loan program so that people could borrow the money at lower costs with less hassle and then have the option to pay it back as a percentage of their income, so that no young person should ever drop out of school because of the burden of a student loan.

But we have to do more. I am determined to see every classroom and every library in every school in the United States of America hooked up to the Internet by the year 2000 so the poorest kids can get the richest education and have access to all the information that any student anywhere in the world had.

I believe that the best tax cut we could give the American people is a tax deduction for the cost of college tuition up to \$10,000 a year. I believe that we ought to make at least two years of college after high school just as universal as a high school education is today.

I think everybody out to have access to it. That's why I have proposed a \$1,500 refundable tax credit -- enough to pay the entire tuition cost at the typical community college in the United States, so that everybody of any age can at least go back and get two years of college, so they can do well in the world toward which we're going.

If you want to inspire young people of the future, you at least ought to be able to tell them -- you at least ought to be able to tell them -- you ought to be able to look them right in the eye and say, you will go to college if you do this. That's the least that we can do in Washington to help those of you who are out there in our neighborhoods help to rescue this generation of young people and give them something to say yes to and a bright future to embrace.

So these are the things that I think we ought to be focusing on. Things that help people make the most of their own lives -- not a guarantee, but an opportunity. Things that help build strong families. Things that help build strong communities. They'll build a strong country. And it's one thing to preach to people that they ought to be responsible -- and I'm for that -- but if they are responsible, they ought to be rewarded with opportunity. The two things should go together as a bargain.

Let me say one other thing. Now that the Cold War is over, we have, unfortunately, not a world free of danger, we've got a lot of security problems. You know it as well as I do. We just dealt with it with a terrible, terrible loss of our Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia.

What is leading to all this terrorism around the world? What does it have in common, when the Hutus and the Tutsis just slaughter each other in Rwanda or Burundi? What does that have to do with people rioting in Northern Ireland? What does it have to do with the Bosnians, the Muslims, the Croats and the Serbs and what they did to each other for four years after living together in peace for decades? What does it have to do with the continuing tensions in the Middle East?

Well, I think it has to do with human nature being vulnerable every day to taking the easy way of defining ourselves in terms of who we're not, instead of who we are; defining ourselves in terms of who we can look down on, instead of what we can look up to. What leads to an Oklahoma City bombing? What were those people thinking in that group in Arizona where our federal officials broke it up the other day before -- when they had that massive weapons cash and all those -- at least they have been charged with plans to blow up all kinds of federal facilities? What are they thinking about when they burn all those churches and synagogues -- or, in a few cases, mosques and Islamic centers? What are they thinking about?

I'm telling you, it's something endemic to human nature, something you have to teach your kids about all the time -- something we all have to fight. It's almost like, every day you wake up and the scales are going inside you -- you know, hope and fear, hatred and reconciliation. But there are people all over the world that look like they just can't exist unless they go out and kill somebody who is different from them -- or at least keep them at arm's length.

And nobody has ever perfectly solved this problem. There are no perfect answers because, again, it deals with the human spirit and the things that are endemic to human nature. But that's why I know that even though we desegregated our schools and threw racism out of public facilities and elected African Americans and Hispanics and Asian Americans to Congress, passed civil rights laws, this job is a never-ending job -- here and around the world. It's a never-ending job.

That's why, notwithstanding the political movement of the moment, after I studied it for several months, I thought we could and should make some changes in the affirmative action laws, but that we should mend them and not end them. I thought it would be a mistake to end them and walk away.

I think it's a mistake not to try to keep working for voting rights and greater impact of voting rights. And, notwithstanding the recent Supreme Court decisions which, of course, we will all honor, we still have to be on a mission of making sure that the Congress of the United States represents the American people in a fair way.

And it's why we have to keep standing against this rash of church burnings. You know, it's hard to think of anything an American could do that didn't kill a lot of people that would offend our sense of decency more than burning a house of worship. This whole country got started in part by people coming here so they could build their own churches and worship God in any way they pleased, and they wouldn't be oppressed here. That's how we got started.

In the darkest hours of our country, when we lived with the awful curse of slavery, and then later with the problems associated with the attempt to escape it, if it had not been for the African American church -- if it had not been for the African American church what would have happened? We might have plunged this country into an orgy of violence and killing, and lost tens of thousands more people, and hardened our hearts against one another in ways that it would have taken a century or more to overcome.

An attack on a house of worship, whether it's a big old Southern Baptist church, or a big old black Baptist church, or a tiny synagogue, or a Muslim mosque that only a few people ever frequent, is an attack on the whole idea of America. And it represents our problem in dealing with this curse of hatred based on race and religion and ethnicity that is sweeping the world and fueling so much of this terrorism.

I want to thank you for what you have done. The NAACP has worked with law enforcement and government and business and religious leaders to help us catch and prosecute people, and to help us rebuild, and to help us prevent these burnings. You know that my administration stands behind you. We created a national task force on these church burnings, headed, I might add, very ably by two of the finest African Americans in our administration -- Deval Patrick, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil rights; and Jim Johnson, the Assistant Secretary of Treasury for enforcement.

We've got over 200 FBI and ATF agents working to solve these crimes, going through the evidence, doing the investigations. And we're making arrests. In just the last three weeks, arrests have been made in connection with fires in Missouri, North and South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and Washington. And just this past Monday, while you were here, two members of the KKK were charged with the burning of the Mt. Zion AME church in Greeleyville, South Carolina, where I visited just last month.

This morning before I left the White House, I met with a bipartisan group of congressional leaders to thank them for quickly and unanimously passing bipartisan legislation to make it easier to prosecute arson attacks against houses of worship. Also, that legislation authorizes a \$10-million Department of Housing and Urban Development loan guarantee program to be used for church rebuilding -- to work with the money that's been raised by the National Council of Churches, the guarantees of volunteers that have been given by Habitat for Humanity and others.

But we must do more. Two weeks ago, I began to convene religious leaders and governors and others in the White House to talk about what else we can do. I asked the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, James Lee Witt, who's used to working with local community groups when we have natural disasters, to work with the Justice and Treasury Departments, with the governors to frame a national prevention initiative. One of the big problems here in preventing these crimes is that you've got so many of these little churches that are out on country roads, and they're old wooden structures, and they don't even have a full-time staff, so they can't afford to have full-time people there as night watchmen.

Keep in mind, so far there's no evidence of a national conspiracy. Most of these people are not armed when they sneak in in the middle of the night to do this. If you just had bright lights and somebody hanging around most of the time it wouldn't happen.

Last week I transferred \$6 million to local communities in 13 states across the South -- that's enough to pay for one new police officer in a county to drive around on these back roads to patrol the churches at night, or for lighting, or for whatever else they want to use it for to try to prevent, prevent the fires from occurring in the first place.

And tomorrow the Vice President is meeting with leaders of the insurance industry at the White House to build on their pledge to work in partnership with all of us to prevent these crimes, and to make sure that we can still get insurance for these churches. I've heard a lot about that from people, and it's important.

So we're going to do everything we can to stop these fires, to catch who is doing it, to rebuild. But I say again, this work we're doing here is dealing with a flaw in the human spirit that all of us have to fight always. We cannot -- we cannot -- let significant numbers of the American people turn into cowards, acting in the dark of night, on racial, ethnic or religious bigotry. We cannot do that. We cannot let people in this country develop terrorists cells to manifest their hatred of their own government in the greatest experiment in self-government in human history.

If we are going to continue to be a force against terrorism and against hatred in the rest of the world, we have to continue to purge ourselves of it. That's why earlier this month I signed a proclamation designating July as the national month of unity for Americans. I asked religious leaders of all faiths and citizens from all walks of life to reach out to one another, to strengthen the ideals that light our way and keep this country strong.

We have not always lived up to our promise. We're people, we're human, we make mistakes, we're imperfect. But we have never stopped trying. And we have never stopped moving. And as we enter this great new century, we have got to say that we're going to stamp out the fires of hatred and bigotry. We have got to say we are going to find a way to reject intolerance and heal our divisions. We have got to find a way to say, as your president has said, this is the new day begun.

I just want to leave you with this thought. A couple of nights ago I met with a group of businesspeople to talk about a number of issues, and one of them said to me -- he said, Mr. President, I've been in business for over 30 years, I've built facilities in more than 25 nations; I have seen this world changed a lot. He said, there is no country in the world today in better shape for the next century than the United States. And he said, our diversity, the fact that we are all so different is an enormous asset in a global economy where information and ideas have to be exchanged at a rapid rate and people have to understand each other and deal with each other. He said, that's why it's so important that we learn how to work together and be together, because if we do, there is no stopping this country.

I've said several times in the last few weeks -- I'll just close with this -- it seems like my life as your President has been dominated by fires in the last couple of weeks -- arguably, for longer than that. But, I mean, literally. On the one hand there's the church fires, which are the symbol of everything that is wrong, that we want to reject when it occurs in our country. And on the other hand, there is the fire that burns in the Olympic flame that's making it's way to Atlanta.

And I'm sure every one of you has read as this flame has moved through your states of all these community heroes who are picked to carry the torch for a kilometer. Some of them were in wheelchairs and had to roll along. Some of them were very old and had to walk along. Some of them were great athletes and could fly along so fast the flame almost went out. But every one of them had one thing in common -- they were picked to carry that torch because they were, first and foremost, great citizens.

There was a 74-year-old woman in Nevada that had taken 100 kids in who had been abandoned, so she took them in. There was a man who came in in Washington, one of the torchbearers at the White House, probably about 60, African American man, who had devoted his life to rescuing the lives of children. And he walked up with 12 of his kids, and they were white, black, brown, and Asian Americans. He had given his life to them.

There was a Catholic nun who had devoted her whole life to fulfilling the Catholic social ministry in her community. There was the deaf president of Galludet University, our nation's deaf

university, who is in his late 50s. And when he left what he was doing with us, he was going that week to run a 100-mile race. There was a young woman who played basketball at the University of Tennessee whose body was crushed in an accident and she thought her whole -- her life was nearly over, her athletic career was certainly over. But by sheer force of will, she got herself back into shape, resumed her basketball career, helped them win a national championship, and is one of the leaders on our basketball team.

All of these people shared one thing in common -- they're all different races, all different religions, all different backgrounds -- they lived their citizenship. They bridged the differences between us. They were looking for the future. They saw themselves in terms of who they were, not in terms of what they weren't. In terms of what they could become, not who they were supposed to hate. In terms of what kind of partnerships and teamwork they could build, not how they could be divided.

That is the mission that the NAACP will carry, with great success and energy and commitment and conviction, to the hearts and minds of these young people into the 21st century. That is the mission we must be on. And that is what I hope and pray we will be discussing in this election season: How can we give to our children the kind of America they deserve to have.

Thank you, and God bless you all.