

Remarks to the National Italian-American Foundation

October 25, 1997

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the warm welcome. Thank you for singing “Happy Birthday” to Hillary. I think the reason she—[*applause*—I think the reason she wanted to come here is she wanted to make sure she got an Italian birthday cake, and she did. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, Frank Guarini, for your warm words and your friendship and for your service on behalf of our country at the United Nations. Thank you, Frank Stella, and I’m glad to see all the Members of Congress here. We have some members of the administration here. We have Jack Valenti here, who lets me watch movies at the White House. [*Laughter*] The best perk of being President is the movie theater, plus knowing Jack Valenti. [*Laughter*]

I’m also very glad that the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, Walter Veltroni, is here, and I thank him for his leadership. You know, I’ve been spoiled coming to these dinners. A couple of years ago I came and Danny DeVito was here, and he jumped in my lap. [*Laughter*] I was afraid Al Pacino would jump in my lap tonight—[*laughter*—but I had other choices.

I want to thank you for the people you’re honoring tonight for their service and for their representation of the values of the National American-Italian Foundation. Especially, I want to thank you for honoring my friend Leon Panetta. You heard Frank Guarini mention some, but I must say not all, of the Italian-Americans who have prominent positions in our administration. I’m sad to tell you that the complaint has been filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission claiming that I have overrepresented Italians in my administration—[*laughter*—and I plead guilty.

I can’t say enough about Leon Panetta. We went to Rome together, and I spoke, and Leon translated my speech. Most people thought he was giving the speech. [*Laughter*] I felt like that old joke about the Pope, you know, everybody said, “Who is that guy up there with Leon Panetta?” [*Laughter*] I miss him and Sylvia terribly, but I know they’re

having a good time in California. And I can tell you that if this country had a few more citizens like him, we would have a lot fewer problems, and I’m glad you’re honoring him tonight. I would also like to congratulate and thank Congressman Tom Foglietta for his service, about-to-be service as our new Ambassador to Italy.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a night of joy and a night for the honorees, and I don’t want to take a lot of your time. But I would like to say that, in a very real sense, what I have tried to do as President is to pursue a course that would reflect the values that are held so deeply by Italian-American families who have come to our shores and who have enjoyed such great success.

When I came here, I thought that Washington was, frankly, too divided, not just politically between Democrats and Republicans but almost intellectually divided. Everything was either/or. Should the Government do everything, or should it do nothing? The answer is, it should do neither. It should focus on giving people the tools to succeed and helping other people to climb the ladder that so many of you have climbed.

With so many people having to work and having children, should they have to choose? Of course not. Sometimes I still believe that our greatest challenge is to enable Americans to succeed at work and at home at their most important job, raising their children. Should we be able to grow our economy and preserve our natural heritage? I think we should. I think that is a false choice.

So I ask you all, whether you’re Republicans or Democrats or wherever you are on the political spectrum, to always, always say that the United States should pursue a course that is consistent with our values and not be fooled into thinking that we have to sacrifice things that are fundamental to move ahead. The truth is, when we find a way to move ahead consistent with our values, we do better more quickly.

I’m very grateful for the success that the United States is enjoying today, and I’m grateful for the role that Italian-Americans have played in it, and I hope we can continue to do more.

Finally, let me say I’m very grateful to this organization for the support you’ve given to

our administration in this great national conversation we're having about our racial and ethnic diversity. It's going to be quite a challenge, you know, sometime in the next century the United States will have no single majority ethnic group—even Americans of European origin. I know you hate being lumped with we Irish and the Germans and all the rest of us—[laughter]—but even the Europeans won't be a majority in America anymore.

And somehow, we have to find a way to celebrate our differences, just as you come here to celebrate your heritage and still be bound together by fundamental values that are more important, into one America. If we do that—and I believe we will—it will be in no small measure because of the accomplishments, the achievements, the attitudes of people like you, people who are proud to have succeeded and want other people to have the same chance.

Sometimes, I think late at night about if I could say in one sentence what it is that I want, I'd like for every single child in this country to have that chance at the brass ring. And so many of you have enjoyed it, so many of you have been helped by your parents to do so. I hope that when we're done here—it won't be much longer, just a little over 3 years—virtually every child will be able to feel that he or she has that chance. If so, we will have fulfilled the mission that so many of you have been on.

So, once again, my congratulations to all the honorees. I thank you for giving Leon a chance to come back to Washington. He tries to stay away from here as much as he can now. [Laughter] I thank you for bringing all these wonderful Italian-American artists here so that I can see people I usually only watch on the screen or listen to with my CD's. But most of all, I thank you for all you've done to make America a much, much greater country than it would have been without you.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:35 p.m. in the International Ballroom at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Frank J. Guarini, vice chairman, Frank D. Stella, chairman, National Italian-American Foundation; Jack Valenti, president, Motion Picture Association of

America; actors Danny DeVito and Al Pacino; and former Chief of Staff to the President Leon Panetta and his wife, Sylvia.

Remarks Honoring the 1997 NCAA Men's and Women's National Basketball Champions

October 27, 1997

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. You see my voice is a little weak. You'll be happy it will be a shorter speech.

But we're celebrating two other athletic events here today. I think I would be remiss if I did not congratulate the Florida Marlins and the Cleveland Indians on a magnificent World Series, and the Vice President on finishing his first marathon yesterday. [Laughter]

I'd also like to welcome the Lady Vols back. It's tough to win those back-to-back championships. Al Gore and I know something about that. [Laughter] And there are many benefits about having Pat Summit come back here year-in and year-out. I'm getting to watch her son grow up—[laughter]—and I enjoy it very much.

I want to say a special word of appreciation, since the Vice President got to talk about his native team—you know, a lot of you know that I am a fanatic basketball fan, and I got hurt last year right before the tournament. The only good thing about my agonizing injury incurred under humiliating circumstances—I fell 6 inches and tore my leg off—[laughter]—was that I got to see every game in the tournament that was on any channel on television. And I must say I was astonished by the performance of the Arizona Wildcats. They were young, they were energetic, they never quit. And I think that it will be a long time before we see another team so young, so full of energy, so full of depth, beat three number one seeds, which had never happened before, and produce the kind of record they did in that tournament.

I want to congratulate Miles Simon, who was named the MVP of the tournament; Michael Dickerson, a First Team All Pac 10; Michael Bibby, who was the All Tournament Team and the Pac 10 Freshman of the Year. He didn't look like a freshman on the court,