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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
61ST ANNUAL WHITE HOUSE
CORRESPONDENTS' ASSOCIATION DINNER

THE WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL

10:23 P.M. EDT

Madam President, members and guests of the White House Correspondents' Association:

Let me say to Danny, I am deeply grateful for a fine evening, and to Marlo as well. We will have to work a little on her, I think, Danny. (Laughter)

But let me say I do appreciate the rather gentle and kind introduction because, Helen, as all of you know, has a well-earned reputation for speaking her own mind. I can remember several years ago when I was still a Congressman, Helen and I were walking down Pennsylvania Avenue when we passed one of those scales that gives you your weight as well as your fortune, and all for a penny.

Helen said, "Well, why don't you try it. I might get a scoop." So, I got on the scale, put in a penny, and the card came out that said, "You are handsome, debonair, sophisticated, a born leader of men, a silver-tongued orator, and some day you will make your own mark in history."

Helen leaned over, looked at the card, and said, "It has your weight wrong, too." (Laughter)

Really, it is a great pleasure to be here, and without further delay let me congratulate the distinguished members of the White House Correspondents' Association on your valiant, courageous and successful struggle to achieve one of the greatest and most consequential journalistic triumphs of all times.

I am referring, of course, to your heroic efforts to keep the press plane from converting to no frills. (Laughter)

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I don't know how you spend your time on the press plane. All I know is that every time I call it I say, "This is the President calling," and a voice answers, "I will drink to that, too."
(Laughter)

I knew something was going on when I saw Dick Growald write ten pages of notes at my Tulane speech, and that is not easy with a swizzle stick.
(Laughter)

Then Aldo Beckman came over and said, "Hello," and melted my cuff links. (Laughter)

Betty and I have looked forward to this evening because the White House Correspondents' Dinner is always an adventure. First, there is the reception, followed by the dinner, followed by the private parties, followed by the private, private parties, followed by the night-cap after the private parties. (Laughter)

Through the years I have found that a White House Correspondents' dinner is a little like one of Sarah McClendon's questions. You never really know when it is finished. (Laughter)

I have been coming to these dinners for quite a few years now, and I am embarrassed to admit I don't really know a great deal about how the White House Correspondents' Association operates. But since I am always interested in the electoral process, I asked Jim Deakin, "Just how do you go about choosing your president and vice president?"

Jim said, "It is rather hard to explain in a few words, but the procedure does have the seal of approval." I said, "Of what?" He said, "Cook County."
(Laughter)

Incidentally, you may be interested to know that Ron Nessen's fame as a Press Secretary and his unparalleled skill at carrying out the duties of his office has spread far and wide. Last week at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City, 50 graduate students were asked this question: "If you had the chance to study the art of the simple, direct communication with Ron Nessen, what would you ask for first?" Ninety-six percent answered, "Another chance." (Laughter)

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Another member of our staff has also achieved considerable recognition, David Hume Kennerly.

The very first day Dave Kennerly came to the White House to be my personal photographer, he shook my hand and promised to do for me exactly what he had done for his last employer. I said, "Great." Then I remembered who he had worked for -- Life. (Laughter)

As most of you know from the schedule, this has been a very long, busy and exhausting day, as well as week at the White House. I spent the morning working on my new book, "A Week in the Life of John Hersey." (Laughter)

Then, in the afternoon, I talked to Sonny Jurgensen. (Laughter) Now that he is no longer with the Washington Redskins, I suggested to Sonny that he run for Congress. I figure if there is one thing that Congress can use, it is a little help in passing. (Laughter)

You know, we are also redecorating. I am sure you have all noticed that the White House is getting a new coat of paint. The painter says, "It is leak-proof." I sure hope so. (Laughter)

But I do have one favor to ask of all the White House correspondents sitting here tonight. Every few years we do have to paint the White House. It is done for reasons of maintenance, aesthetics and appearance. So please, would you just refer to this as a paint job, not a cover-up? (Laughter)

Now, before I do close, I would like to make a few acknowledgements, if I may. I want to thank Martin Agronsky for giving Pete Lisagor the night off. Peter, as you know, is one of Washington's foremost television personalities. It is not unusual for him to be on five or six shows a week, in addition to lectures, talks and personal appearances. And every time he appears he gets an enormous amount of fan mail. Pete was telling me just this morning he got a post card saying, "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here." It was from the Chicago Daily News. (Laughter)

This has been a wonderful evening for Betty and for me, and we thank you all for it. You know, there is a great deal written and said about the First Family. This designation usually refers to Betty, to me, one daughter and three sons. But to me, it does not have this very limited connotation.

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I see the First Family as an extended family. One that draws in and includes all of the men and women who make the White House a living, breathing and functioning body. It encompasses a handful of Fords, completely and comfortably surrounded by staff and press alike.

We are not just Gerry, Betty, Susan, Jack, Steve, and Mike, but Bob, Helen, Ron, Frank, Fran, and a few hundred others as well.

We work together. We laugh together. We exchange ideas, facts and speculations. We interact. We cannot function well without each other. This is the stuff that families are made of. And like all families, we have our disagreements. We take in and assimilate individual attitudes, concerns, information, interests. Then, we shine the spotlight of our unique perceptions on each problem, each new challenge.

Your spotlight is not mine. Mine is not yours. Sometimes we differ but the essence and the glory of the true family is this: Decisions and conclusions may be questioned but motivation and commitment are not. We speak our differences in trust. We accept that we are travelers heading towards the same destination. It is only the road that has to be determined.

This is the First Family I know we all want to be a part of. We have shared some of these feelings here tonight. We should never aspire to less.

Thank you and goodnight.

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(AT 10:34 P.M. EDT)