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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOUNDATION
BICENTENNIAL TRIBUTE DINNER

WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL

8:00 P.M. EDT

Thank you very, very much, Jenò.

Senator John Pastore, Congressman Pete Rodino, Congressman Dominick Daniels, Judge Sirica, Reverend Clergy, distinguished platform guests, ladies and gentlemen:

First, let me thank the members of the Italian-American Foundation and your national chairman, Jenò Paulucci, for inviting me to be a part of this very special evening. In many ways, my good friend, Jenò Paulucci symbolizes the magic of America. His first great success was a company called Chun King. What could be more American than a business built on a good Italian recipe for chop suey. (Laughter)

This Bicentennial dinner pays tribute to the extraordinary contribution Italian-Americans have made to our country. The men you are honoring tonight are the distinguished offspring of a culture that was once transplanted, but is now deeply rooted in American soil, to the benefit of all Americans.

Long before we were a nation, Italians began making new lives for themselves in America as teachers, merchants, craftsmen, artists, musicians and writers. From our first honorary Italian-American, Christopher Columbus, to contemporary figures as diverse as Enrico Fermi and Vince Lombardi, the Italian fiber is woven very deeply into the fabric of the United States of America.

Italian-Americans have made their marks in many different areas, but they have all shared at least one common quality, uncommon pride; pride in their country, pride in themselves, pride in the roles they played in making America what it is.

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In every century and in every field of endeavor, Italian-Americans have given their country their energy, their talents and their devotion and their blood.

When the earthquake struck Italy earlier this year, the American response, was swift and bipartisan. Just this morning, Jeno Paulucci and Ambassador John Volpe reported to me on the way our \$25 million of disaster relief assistance is being spent to relieve suffering in the country which has given America so much. I congratulate Jeno for his observations and recommendations which included not only his views as to how our program was being administered, but his very constructive recommendation that you needed something more than Government to just do the job; his proposal that Italian industry contribute in this situation -- as it has through his leadership in Minnesota -- in alleviating some of the problems and making some progress in that State.

I hope and trust, Jeno, that the proper authorities in Italy will follow your recommendations, and not only have the Italian Government and our aid through our Government agencies do the job, but do the same with the help and assistance of the private sector in Italy, itself.

I remember also, if I might, something Vice President Rockefeller told me after he visited the earthquake site at my request in May. He was struck by the fact that in the midst of destruction and personal tragedy one of the first concerns of the people was to protect their monuments, their churches and their cultural heritage. There is a lesson in that for the United States, for we also risk seeing some of our cultural heritage destroyed not by a sudden shock of an earthquake, but by a gradual erosion.

We must be aware of the growing danger of conformity of American thought and American behavior. We need to encourage and protect individuality.

Our national wealth of culture, ethnic and religious traditions, is a valuable counterbalance to the overwhelming sameness and subordination of totalitarian societies. Let me add, if I might, a comment or two on that subject.

Italy and the United States share a firm dedication to democratic government and the principles of freedom and liberty. We, in America, value the role of Italy in the world itself, Italy's contribution to the Atlantic Alliance and Italy's contribution to a stronger and more cohesive Europe, working with the United States.

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We have been hearing a lot recently about the new character of some Communist parties in Western Europe, that they believe in democratic multi-party government, that they are independent nationalist parties with no loyalties or affiliations beyond national borders.

Lest we succumb to this beguiling message, I remind you that we were hearing these same reassuring messages from the heads of Communist parties in Eastern Europe right after World War II. We all know what happened when these parties actually came into power in the late 1940s. It is a history lesson we should not forget.

The history of our own country teaches us another important lesson, the value of diversity as well as unity among our people. At a meeting in the White House last month, Italian-American leaders spoke to me of our need to encourage culturalism without diminishing Americanism. I agree completely.

Our neighborhoods are the place to start. On the first of this year, I had the privilege of signing into law a bill passed by the Congress called the Mortgage Disclosure Act, to prevent red lining. Last May, I met with a group of ethnic leaders to see what more could be done. As a result of that meeting, I created the President's Committee on Urban Development and Neighborhood Revitalization. I charged that Committee with developing a sound Federal policy to help preserve our neighborhoods and to prevent urban decay.

Our policy will be based upon local initiative and local control. I was very pleased and very encouraged the other day when I read in the New York Times about major new efforts, including proposed new zoning rules to revitalize New York City's Little Italy. As I read from that article, the City Planning Commission and a neighborhood group spent some two years coming up with this plan. I wish them every success. I hope other groups and other communities will follow their example.

But let me say with emphasis and reemphasis: I am committed to maintaining the strength and vitality and the unique contributions of America's communities. In my search for Americans to help us with this very major task, now and in the next four years, I will continue to look for Americans of high caliber from all cultural backgrounds. I will continue to look for Americans with the talents of John Pastore, Peter Rodino, Dominick Daniels and Judge John Sirica.

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May I say to all four of them: It has been a very special pleasure for me to join with you in honoring these outstanding Americans.

As enjoyable as this evening is for all of us present, we might take just a moment to remember certain people who can only be here' in spirit -- people who would have gotten an even bigger thrill on this occasion than you or me -- the parents of John Sirica, Dominick Daniels, John Pastore and Peter Rodino.

When you stop for a minute and think about those parents, about the sacrifices they made, about the hardships they endured, about the dreams they had for their children, and then you see those dreams come true in the careers of these fine men, that is when you know exactly what America is all about and you know if these parents could only be here with us tonight they could be very proud, and deservedly proud indeed.

By your contributions and those of all Italian-Americans to our arts and sciences and Government, to business life and family life, America will continue to grow, to prosper, and become an even better place in which to live.

Thank you very, very much.

END (AT 8:14 P.M. EDT)