

# Remarks at a White House Luncheon for Black Clergymen

**March 26, 1982**

The President. I'm going to keep you from eating for a few minutes just here, before we serve. I've been an after-lunch and after-dinner speaker so many times that I thought for a change I might be a before-lunch speaker.

But, good afternoon and welcome to the White House. It's a great pleasure, and I'm happy to have this opportunity to speak together with you. In Mark, chapter three, there's a verse that's associated with Abraham Lincoln -- that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Divisions among the American people have been a concern of many Presidents, not just President Lincoln. Understanding there's some concern in the black community about this administration, I thought it would be helpful to break bread and talk about it.

If I believed some of the things that I've heard and read about this administration's program, I'd be concerned, too. [Laughter] We've been accused of just about everything. But the accusation, seriously, that bothers me the most is the charge that we don't care about the poor and the disadvantaged. And it bothers me because it isn't true.

When I was elected, our country was facing a major economic crisis. Inflation, running at 14 percent, was destroying people's savings and brutally attacking the elderly and others on fixed incomes. At the same time, unemployment had reached just about 8 million. The prime interest rate was 21 percent, destroying the dream of home ownership for everyone but a very select few. We couldn't permit this to go on. If inflation had kept running at the rate it was before the 1980 election rather than the rate that we've achieved in the last 6 months, a family of four on a fixed income of \$15,000 would be \$994 poorer in purchasing power than they are today. I don't have to tell you what an extra \$994 means to people of that income, or anyone else for that matter.

And contrary to popular perception, we've brought down interest rates five points already and more progress is expected. Unemployment remains too high; there is no question about that. It was too high when I entered office. But I can assure you we're doing our level best to create a revived economy that will mean more jobs and more opportunity for all Americans.

I don't think anyone in this room quarrels with the goal of a healthy economy. Yet some would have you believe that we've attacked the poor in order to accomplish our goals. This administration has been criticized, for example, for reducing a job-training program in this time of great unemployment from \$3.2 billion to -- in the budget we've requested for '83 -- \$1.8 billion. Well, yes, we did that. But did we reduce needed job-training in this time of unemployment? Out of that \$3.2 billion program, only \$592 million went for actual job training. Out of our \$1.8 billion program, \$1\1/3\ billion will actually go for job training. It seems that in the previous program, there was a certain amount of administrative overhead. [Laughter]

But many of you are aware that we've proposed a 14-percent increase in direct spending for traditionally black colleges in the 1983 budget over what was spent in 1982. Similarly, we've

budgeted increases for Head Start, social security, Medicaid, Medicare, and other safety net programs.

When people complain about budget cuts, what they're often referring to is a cut in the rate of increase that had been planned for some social programs. The fact is that overall social spending is higher this year than it has ever been, and it will be higher next year than it is this year.

But let's admit one thing: It's necessary to get control of the cost of some of these spending programs, because some of them were too top heavy with bureaucracy. Some well-meaning programs robbed recipients of their dignity, trapped them into a dependency that left them with idle time, less in self-respect, and little prospect of a better future.

Now, this is not a white or a black issue; it's a basic human issue of how a free government should treat its citizens of all races. And even with the best of intentions, many of the old programs failed millions of our citizens. You know that and I know that. And the time has come to try something new.

Just a few days ago, I sent the Congress enterprise zone legislation which provides powerful incentives for job-producing businesses to locate in the economically blighted areas. We want to make it profitable for business to provide opportunity to some of this country's most deprived citizens. If this experiment works, it can provide a blueprint for future projects all across America.

Yes, we're trying new methods, and when that happens people sometimes get nervous. But there was much more to fear from standing still, as overgrown government collapsed under its own weight in runaway taxes.

Inflation and interest rates undermine the national economy. I honestly believe it's better to create jobs by restoring the economy than to provide handouts. And I believe a majority of Americans of all races agree. Nothing will be better for our people and for a healthy economy than that.

Now, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't be concerned about the desperate condition of the less fortunate. I'm aware that as members of the black clergy, you are in the frontline providing help for those who need it most. You represent a noble heritage. Black churches started colleges when the doors of learning in other colleges were closed. And black churches provided a place for the elderly, care for the sick, and counseling for the troubled when there was just no other way.

I know this, and I say it sincerely: Praise God for all that you've done and all that you continue to do. And today, whatever the government does, we must build upon the spirit that you represent.

I believe that America's churches, white and black, have an important role to play in the life of this nation. Our Savior said, "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me." Well, too many churches are Sunday morning churches and not seven-day-a-week churches.

Guests. Amen!

The President. I believe the black clergy can lead the way. You've already shown, with faith and hard work, how much can be accomplished. And I hope your example will teach other churches about their potential.

Now, this isn't to suggest that charity can replace all government programs. But wouldn't it be better for the human spirit and for the soul of this nation to encourage people to accept more responsibility to care for one another, rather than leaving those tasks to paid bureaucrats?

Guests. Amen!

The President. I am confident the American people are capable of great things. Private citizens may not solve all the problems, but each one of us can do something. You know the joy of service to others or you wouldn't be here. There's an old hymn that says it all: "If I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word of song, if I can show somebody where he's traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain."

I hope that this visit will help us understand each other a little better. I've long subscribed to a belief that a lot of the ills of the world will disappear when we talk to each other instead of about each other.

And so, I'm happy that you're here. I need your help. We're going to eat now, and then I'm going to come back and we'll have a dialog instead of more monolog from me.

Note: The President spoke at 12:05 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. Following the luncheon, the President held a question-and-answer session with the clergymen.