

**PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION**

Columbine High School  
Littleton, Colorado  
20 May 1999

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary  
(Littleton, Colorado)

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For Immediate Release

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY  
TO THE COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Dakota Ridge High School  
Littleton, Colorado

4:37 P.M. MDT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you, Heather. Thank you, Dr. Hammond. Thank you, Mr. DeAngelis. And most of all, thank you, the students of Columbine.

You know, when we walked in, I saw the cheer that was going from one side to the other side, and the chant, "We are Columbine!" that went back and forth, and the enthusiasm and the energy that was behind that cheer. But to me, it was more than that. It was a real statement about who you are and, indeed, who we all are. Because in a very real way, what happened here at Columbine has so deeply affected the rest of our country, that we are all Columbine.

We have suffered and wept and prayed and hoped, and, yes, cheered, as lives have been mourned, as those who are injured have healed, as parents and citizens have come together to ask, "where do we go from here?"—and as all of you who are the students of Columbine have shown us over this last month, your courage and your grace, your kindness and your love.

We have just spent time with the families of those who lost someone they loved. It's not the first time that my husband and I have done that. We've listened to and looked into the eyes and held the hands and felt the hugs of men and women and children who have suffered the evil and the tragedy that intervenes unexpectedly—a bombing of an embassy, a shooting down of a plane or an accident that lost lives. And we've always been moved by and felt deeply the pain that others were suffering.

And no tragedy is ever like any other tragedy, because every person is unique, and everyone who is lost was a gift of God that should have been cherished and who has to be remembered.

But what happened here at Columbine a month ago has had an impact unlike any that I have ever seen or felt. It has pierced the heart of America. And what we are all looking for and what I always hope we can find from a tragedy like this, is how we move forward together, to do what we can to help prevent this ever happening again.

Now, of course, even today, yet another school was terrorized by a shooting. Thankfully, no one was killed—but it should never have happened.

So as we meet here, as we imagine, as hard as it must be, what this past month must have been for you—the losses, the questions, the glare of the world's spotlight—I think we all know that there are no words that are adequate to your experience. But I hope you know that the way you've conducted yourselves, and your story and the stories of those killed and injured have been an inspiration and a motivation for many people whom you'll never meet.

We're inspired by the strength of the students and the teachers; by your determination to return to school to finish out your year with your friends and your classmates. We're inspired by your refusal to let violence and hatred win.

We're inspired by the courage of the families, who have faced a moment that every parent prays will never happen. We're inspired by the words we heard today, as well as what we've heard in the past month as to how so many of you are looking for opportunities to reach out to make sure that here in this community and as far as the ripples can go, the messages that you feel you want to communicate to each other will be heard.

We heard those messages today, listening to parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, a wife, children. And the message had many different sounds to it, coming from different voices. But what struck me was how clearly those who have been most wounded want to turn this into something positive for others. That is what we have seen from the Columbine community.

And it has inspired reactions literally around the world. One family told us of receiving a letter from France, written completely in French—they couldn't read it, but they knew what it said. I know of the young boys and girls around the country who have been writing letters and drawing pictures to share their feelings. And I know here, in Jefferson County, the services that have been offered, and the way people have been trying to knit together more help.

Many of you will be graduating—and I congratulate you. It wasn't so long ago that our daughter graduated, and I remember the conversations around our kitchen table and listening to her friends as they were planning their summer plans, or thinking about college, or going to work. And I know you're thinking about all of that as well.

But perhaps more than others, you may also be thinking about what kind of community, and country, you want to raise your own children in someday—and how we will take what happened in Columbine, and not only never forget it, but use it to make more opportunities for others to live the kind of lives we would have wished for those who were lost.

Imagine what our country could accomplish if everyone acted as your principal described you, as a family—members of the human family, as well as the Columbine family; the American family—members of a community and a nation that was really committed to making sure that we helped each other, we cared about each other, we reached out to one another.

Imagine, as we heard from your principal, what it would mean if more parents, in this community and around our country, thought about what more they could do to spend time with their own children, to listen to your concerns, your dreams, your fears, your aspirations.

And imagine what could happen if more young people talked more openly with one another, as well as with their parents and other adults, looking for ways to heal the wounds that all of us carry just from life's everyday experiences. And imagine if every adult in America began looking at his or her personal life, professional life and public life with the view toward making sure that whatever we do is good for children.

There is no more fitting monument or tribute to those who died than to promise ourselves that we will do everything we can to prevent it from happening anywhere else—but more than just preventing something bad from happening, that we will commit ourselves to try to make positive differences in the lives of those around us.

We cannot roll back the clock and undo the tragic events of a month ago. But we can fight the bitterness and hopelessness that weaken our resolve to remain part of one community. We can reach out, where children are taught to care and not to hate. We can offer a kind word to people. We can try to bridge the differences that too often come between us. And we can look for ways at all levels of society to make the changes we know we have to make.

I hope that we'll be able to reach a better understanding of what we need to do to care for our young people. And I hope that if we all feel that we are Columbine, as the cheer goes, we won't give up until we do make it better for everyone.

I want to introduce now someone I know is resolved to do what he can, who has spoken out consistently on behalf of the needs of young people and families, who has tried to speak out against hatred and talk about how we need to reach out and help each other. And as I do, I want to just leave you with the words of a poet who means a lot to my husband and me—the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney.

In one of our favorite poems, coming out of the terrible Troubles that he's written about and experienced in Northern Ireland, where bombs and guns have been too much the experience of children, he writes: "So hope for a greater sea change on the far side of revenge. Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracle and cures and healing well."

I believe in miracles and cures and healing well. I believe that each of us has the responsibility to do what we can to reach that farther shore. And I introduce now someone who believes that with all of his heart—the President of the United States. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Do that cheer for me one more time.

STUDENTS: We are Columbine! We are Columbine! We are Columbine! We are Columbine! (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Doctor Hammond; Mr. DeAngelis; President DeStefano and the state legislators, county commissioners; Attorney General Salazar; especially Governor Owens, thank you for being here. To all the officials who are here; most especially to the students of Columbine and the students

who are here from Chatfield and Dakota Ridge. And Heather Dinkel, thank you for standing up here in front of this big crowd and making a fine talk. Weren't you proud of her? She did a good job representing you today. (Cheers and applause.)

I want to say a special word of thanks to the families who met with Hillary and me before we came over here for telling us the stories and showing us the booklets commemorating the lives of their very special children. I also want to thank the fine young people who still are hospitalized with whom I spoke by telephone yesterday—two of them, Patrick Ireland and Sean Graves, are here today. They left the hospital to be here. (Applause.)

I know there are some other people here who are also still injured who have come. I thank all of you for coming. This has been a long, hard month for all of you, and as Hillary said, it's been a hard month for America.

You heard her say that part of our job in these last six years, more than we ever could have imagined when we moved to Washington after the election in 1992, has been to be with grieving people—after the Oklahoma City building was blown up, and the embassies were blown up, and our airmen were killed in the bombing in Saudi Arabia, and so many other occasions; several times after violence in schools. But something profound has happened to your country because of this. I want you all to understand that. I'm not even sure I can explain it to you.

One of the incidents of school killing last year occurred in my home state. It's a small state. I was governor there 12 years. I knew the people involved; it was heartbreaking. One of the mothers of one of the children who was killed still works with us for safer schools and safer childhoods. And all America grieved. But I think they thought, oh, this is terrible, I wish somebody would do something about this.

But somehow, when this happened here—maybe because of the scope of it, and I think mostly because of you—how you reacted, all of you, the relief workers, the law enforcement people, the family members who were brave enough to speak—there was a different reaction. People thought, this has happened in my neighborhood; what can I do?

I say that because you have a unique chance—a chance—to make sure that the children of Columbine are never forgotten. (Applause.)

But, first, you have to deal with you and your lives. You're all left with searing memories and scars and unanswered questions. There has to be healing, there have to be answers. And for those things that will not heal or cannot be answered, you have to learn to go on with your lives.

I hope you have been comforted by the caring not only of your neighbors, but of your country and people from all around the world. All America has looked and listened with shared grief and enormous affection and admiration for you. We have been learning along with you, a lot about ourselves and our responsibilities as parents and citizens.

When America looks at Jefferson County, many of us see a community not very different from our own. We know if this can happen here, it can happen anywhere. And we see with admiration the fundamentally strong values and character of the people here, from the students to the school officials, to the community leaders, to the parents.

I think most Americans have looked at you and thought that, among other things, that, God forbid, if something like this should ever happen to us, I hope we would behave as well. I hope we would also hold on to our faith as well.

I am impressed that you are moving forward. Most of the children have returned to school, even returned to sports and other activities. I am proud of all of you who are, in your own way, going back to living your lives, looking toward the future, to commencement or college, or a summer job, or just getting back to the ordinary business of life, which takes an extraordinary effort now. But I have to say, I think what's impressed me most is the way, in the midst of this, you have held on to your faith.

One of the greatest moments of grief in my life occurred 15 years ago, when Hillary and I had to go to the memorial service for a young man who was a senior at Yale University—a Rhodes Scholar, on the football team, the editor of the newspaper, the leader of his class academically. This young man happened to come from an African American family in our hometown, and a poor family at that. His father was a minister in a very small church. And we had the service in the high school auditorium.

His father was lame and he walked with a pronounced limp. And he gave his son's eulogy, walking down in front of us with his limp, saying, his mother and I do not understand this. But we believe in a God too kind ever to be cruel, too wise ever to do wrong, so we know we will come to understand it by and by.

In the Scriptures, St. Paul says that all of us in this life see through a glass darkly. So we must walk by faith, not by sight. We cannot lean on our own wisdom. None of this can be fully, satisfactorily explained to any of you. But you cannot lose your faith.

The only other thing I really want to say to you is that throughout all your grief and mourning, and even in your cheers and your renewal and your determination to get on with your life and get this school back together and show people what you are, there is something else you can do, and something I believe that you should do—for yourselves and your friends, to make sure they will be remembered. Every special one of them.

Your tragedy, though it is unique in its magnitude, is, as you know so well, not an isolated event. Hillary mentioned there was another school shooting in Atlanta today. Thankfully, the injuries to the students don't seem to be life-threatening. But there were several last year which did claim lives.

We know somehow that what happened to you has pierced the soul of America. And it gives you a chance to be heard in a way no one else can be heard—by the President and by ordinary people in every community in this country. You can help us to build a better future for all our children, a future where hatred and distrust no longer distort the mind or harden the heart. A future where what we have in common is far more important than what divides us. A future where parents and children are more fully involved in each other's lives; in which they share hopes and dreams, love and respect, a strong sense of right and wrong. A future where students respect each other even if they all belong to different groups, or come from different faiths, or races, or backgrounds. A future where schools and houses of worship, and communities, are literally connected to all our children. A future where society guards our children better against

violent influences and weapons that can break the dam of decency and humanity in the most vulnerable of children.

One thing I would like to share with you that I personally believe very much: these dark forces that take over people and make them murder are the extreme manifestation of fear and rage with which every human being has to do combat. The older you get, the more you'll know that a great deal of life is the struggle against every person's own smallness and fear and anger—and a continuing effort not to blame other people for our own shortcomings or our fears.

We cannot do what we need to do in America unless every person is committed to doing something better and different in every walk of life, beginning with parents and students and going all the way to the White House. For the struggle to be human is something that must be a daily source of joy to you, so you can get rid of your fears and let go of your rage, and minimize the chance that something like this will happen again.

Because of what you have endured, you can help us build that kind of future, as virtually no one else can. You can reach across all the political and religious and racial and cultural lines that divide us. You have already touched our hearts. You have provoked Hillary and me and the Vice President and Mrs. Gore to reach out across America to launch a national grass-roots campaign against violence directed against young people. You can be a part of that.

You can give us a culture of values instead of a culture of violence. You can help us to keep guns out of the wrong hands. You can help us to make sure kids who are in trouble—and there will always be some—are identified early and reached and helped. You can help us do this.

Two days from now, you're going to have your commencement. It will be bittersweet. It will certainly be different for those of you who are graduating than you thought it was going to be when you were freshmen. But, as I understand it, there will be some compensations. Even your arch-rivals at Chatfield will be cheering you on. When you hear those people cheer for you, I want you to hear the voice of America, because America will be cheering you on. And remember that a commencement is not an end; it is a beginning.

You've got to help us here. Take care of yourselves and your families first. Take care of the school next. But remember, you can help America heal, and in so doing you will speed the process of healing for yourselves.

This is a very great country. It is embodied in this very great community, in this very great school, with these wonderful teachers and children and parents. But the problem which came to the awful conclusion you faced here is a demon we have to do more to fight. And what I want to tell you is, we can—together.

I close here with this story. My wife and I and our daughter have been blessed to know many magnificent people because the American people gave us a chance to serve in the White House. But I think the person who's had the biggest influence on me is the man who is about to retire as the President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela.

He is 80 years old, he served 27 years in prison. For 14 years, he never had a bed to sleep on. He spent most of his years breaking rocks every day. And he told me once about his experience. And I asked him: How did you let go of your hatred? How did you learn to influence other people? How did you embrace all the differences in, literally, the centuries of oppression and

discord in your country and let a lot of it go away? How did you get over that in prison? Didn't you really hate them?

And he said: I did hate them for quite a long while. After all, look what they took from me -- 27 years of my life. I was abused physically and emotionally. They separated me from my wife and it eventually destroyed my marriage. They took me away from my children and I could not even see them grow up. And I was full of hatred and anger.

And he said: One day I was breaking rocks and I realized they had taken so much. And they could take everything from me except my mind and my heart. Those things I would have to give away. I decided not to give them away.

I see here today that you have decided not to give your mind and your heart away. I ask you now to share it with all your fellow Americans.

We love you, and we need you.

Thank you, and God bless you. (Applause.)

END 5:08 P.M. MDT