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Bechune Du Bois Fund Dinner

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE BETHUNE DUBOIS FUND DINNER

Sheraton Washington Hotel
Washington, D.C.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much, C. Delores, for that kind introduction and for the times we have spent together in the past. Thank you, also, Mr. Hill, for your chairing with C. Delores this evening and this fund. And I want to express my great honor at being here this evening with so many distinguished members of Congress, so many leaders of business and of other parts of the American economy, and especially with the honorees. As C. Delores said, this is not a big day for anybody else but the Clinton family. But when somebody graduates from 8th grade who you still think is not yet-ready for kindergarten, it's a traumatic day. (Laughter.)

And we've been celebrating it, it seems, ever since about 9:00 a.m., and it's not over yet. And so I regret that I've not been able to be here for the whole evening and that I will have to excuse myself after my part of the program. But, apparently, when you're celebrating an 8th grade graduation, you just have to keep going until you drop, and that's what we're about to continue to do in my house.

This is an important occasion, in addition to honoring the honorees who are here. Their work obviously speaks for itself -- the kind of leadership that they have given over the years to the NAACP, to the UAW, to Illinois and now the United States. But it is also symbolic because these are three of the many people in this room who have stayed the course, who have remained committed to the possibility of change in this country.

It has not been an easy journey. There have been many obstacles along the way. The change that we seek now is not going to be easy. It is not going to be, as C. Delores said, always free of controversy. But if we remain committed to the vision about where we are going together, and if we recognize that there are those in this land who do not want any progress for anybody, anywhere, anytime, and that we have to understand what we are up against when we talk about

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change, when we have to recognize that the kind of change we want to see that takes us far beyond where we find ourselves today, that really does provide true economic opportunity to people and not just lip service, that restores the dignity of work to workers, that gives people the opportunity again to have the kind of future that we talk about, then we know we have our work cut out for us.

But I would not be here tonight, and nor would you, and the three people we honor tonight would not be sitting on this dais -- and I see Dorothy Height, who has been at this longer than I can even dream, shaking her head up and down -- we wouldn't be here if we didn't believe change was possible and we were not committed to bringing it about together. (Applause.)

You know, for the first time in a dozen years, we have a chance to do some things together that will really touch people's lives where they live every single day. The members of Congress who are here tonight have voted courageously in the House to lift people out of poverty, not just to talk about it, but to do it. (Applause.)

The earned income tax credit is the greatest step for liberation that we have had in a generation, because it will say to people who are out there working, people who are serving us dinner in this great hall tonight, people who will clean up after we leave and go home and get up tomorrow and start again -- it will say, you are a worthy, dignified person, and we're not going to let you live in poverty in this country any longer. (Applause.) And they have voted for that.

They have also voted to end what I think is one of the disgraces of our time. That this country, of all countries in this hemisphere has the third worst rate of immunizing our children of any country. And why? Because we just haven't put our mind to it and our resources to it. We have let children die of measles in Los Angeles, in Philadelphia, in Houston, because we just haven't valued them.

The members of Congress who are here tonight in the House have voted to put an end to that kind of human waste and neglect. (Applause.) And they have also said that it's not going to be business as usual. We cannot make the kinds of investments we need to make in jobs, in education, and in changing the way this country does business if we don't change our spending priorities and get our house in order.

So there is a lot that we have already done together. We have opened the franchise, and many of you worked on that for a long time to finally pass the Motor Voter Act. Do you know how long that took us? (Applause.) I could remember years ago thinking that

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if we just amended the Constitution to let 18-year-olds vote, we'd have a new world. And then I realized it didn't mean a thing on a piece of paper if you had county clerks all over the country who could figure out a million ways to prevent you from ever registering to get to vote. And so we've had to change that, and it's taken a long time.

And we have finally passed the Family and Medical Leave Act. I don't know if you've met anyone, but I have, who's been fired from their job because they chose to sit at the hospital bed of a child who was sick, or to take care of an older relative who needed some help. That won't happen in this country anymore, and it should not. And that is another tribute to the members of Congress who are here tonight. (Applause.)

So is it going to be easy? No. Is it going to be free of controversy? No. Are we always going to agree, even those in the same tent trying to move in the same direction? No. But, you know, there are hopes that bind us together, common causes that link our hearts and our hands. And I'm in it for the long haul. I want to live in a country again where I don't have to feel ashamed because anybody is left out or overlooked, or in any way rejected because of who they are by birth or status. I want to live in a country again where I can go to any park at anytime with my daughter and watch children playing without fear and watch older people sitting in the sun because they're glad to be alive. And I want to live in a country again where everybody who wants to be able to seize the American Dream has a chance to do it. There's a job there, there's opportunity, there's education. That's what I want for my daughter. That's what I think we all want. And that's where I think we're going to end up if we can stay committed to the course ahead of us. That is why I am so honored to be here to make this presentation. Because I've had the opportunity to watch and get to know and get to call a friend the next person whom we honor.

You know, when the voters of Illinois, which I have to brag is my home state, sent their new Senator to the United States Senate, they may not consciously have had in mind the prayer I want to share with you, but it was in the air.

There are a few lines from a prayer written by W.E.B. DuBois, but I think we all, who care about public life and certainly are in a position to serve, need to remember. Because, in this prayer, W.E.B. DuBois said that, "Remember, public office is not for private gain, but for the greater good of all. Give to those who choose officials equal realization of the great responsibility that rests on them, knowing that a land is, after all, what its voters make it."

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And the voters in Illinois responded to that prayer. It was not just for Illinois, but it was for the greater good of this country that they voted for a talented attorney, an advocate, a coalition builder, a peacemaker, a distinguished legislator, a hell-raiser and a woman. (Laughter and applause.)

I don't know how many of you had the chance I had to campaign with this new senator of ours, because Illinois can't just claim her on its own, but I did. I watched her put on that million-watt smile and walk into any room, no matter who was in it, and just captivate the whole crowd. I watched her get up on automobile hoods, bus stop steps, podiums and daises all over the state and talk about why she wanted to be the United States Senator.

And what she talked about is what we all care about: public service, making a difference, positive change. She knows what that means because she's been a public servant for her entire adult life. She's been a prosecutor, she's been a legislator, and she used to win all the time in Illinois independent awards for being the best legislator. Not the best woman legislator, not the best black legislator, the best legislator in Illinois. (Applause.)

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