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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
TO CARNEGIE COUNCIL

MRS. CLINTON: (in progress) -- I told David, that was one of the more enjoyable recitations of the last 20 years of my life -- (laughter) -- than I've heard in the last several weeks. And I was delighted to be welcomed as a member of the Carnegie clan. I have had such a deep regard for what Carnegie has done over the 22 years or so that I have known of it, and feel very fortunate that one of my earliest experiences with respect to children's needs was on the Council, that David referred to, that Ken Keneston (phonetic) chaired.

It is a particular pleasure, therefore, for me to be back with many of you. I only wish that I were able to stay and visit and get brought up to date. As I look around this room there are so many of you with whom I have worked over the last decade and whom I would love to get caught up on to what you are doing now and what you see happening in the country. But unfortunately I will have to leave after my remarks. And maybe we can arrange another reunion sometime in the future.

I'm particularly pleased that our Attorney General is here. And you will be hearing from the Attorney General in a little while. But there isn't anyone on the national scene who tries harder to integrate the many different aspects of the challenges that our children face than she. And one of the great qualities I admire about Janet Reno is that she is not afraid to be misunderstood in the cause of what she believes to be a larger truth. And I think we are very lucky to have her in the position she is in and championing the cause of children out of the Department of Justice. (Applause.)

I'm also delighted that another Cabinet member, Dick Riley, had something to do with this report, and that we took him from it. But I know that it meant a great deal to him because he has tried to take much of what he learned and integrate it into his work at the Department of Education. And so I wanted to say a special word of thanks to him and to the cochairs, Dr. Mackabee

(phonetic) and Dr. Richmond, and to the report's author, Catherine Young, and all who contributed to it and worked on it.

I told David when I arrived that I had just come from a reception that we had held at the White House for a number of not-for-profit organizations, many of whom you are associated with or know of. And the President began his remarks by holding up the report, and talking about what it represented and what it meant, and how it was a marvelous example of the kind of partnership that we need to have between government and the private sector, particularly the not-for-profit -- philanthropic charitable sector.

I wanted to say just a few words about the report itself, and perhaps to say something about putting it into context, and then to talk specifically about certain of its recommendations in the time that I have available to me.

One of the great frustrations for many of us in this room is that over the last 20 to 30 years, we have worked on, we have overseen, we have read and studied, we have tried to implement the recommendations from a number of reports about the state of children in America. And we have encountered both some success, but also a continuing deterioration in the attitudes toward our children and in the support for our families that has led to a decline in many of the indicators that we should look to determine the state of America's children.

This report certainly tries to pull together the available research and to put into a very comprehensive but understandable format what we know about children from zero to three, and then to marry that analysis with pragmatic recommendations as to what all of us should do in order to make a start, to begin to reverse the conditions that many of our children are facing.

I hope that this report will serve as a blueprint for our institutions in adult society about what our obligations are and what our challenges are, and how best we can meet them when it comes to securing the futures of our very youngest children.

I am optimistic that it can serve as a blueprint. I am optimistic that it can join the ranks of other reports that have preceded it talking about our children, and that we can, working together, begin to put into action what all of us know needs to be done to support children and families.

But my optimism is certainly tinged with some concern and even a trace of pessimism that we will have the political will and the institutional fortitude to see this through.

We have in the last 15 months in Washington worked very hard on a broad agenda, to begin to reverse what we perceive as certain of these conditions that have undermined the strength of

the American family, and by so undermining the family, placed our children in peril.

I look out and I see right at this first table Bill Galston, who has worked tirelessly with Secretary Riley on the education agenda that the President is promoting. And we have had a remarkable progress at this point in being able to point to accomplishments like Goals 2000, and soon we hope the School to Work transition -- issues that I have been associated with in various commission reports that David referred to earlier.

So we at least have legislation to show for that achievement. Now, the great task of implementing that legislation lies before us.

We were successful in beginning to reverse the onerous burden that has been placed on families that are working that are in poverty through our tax system. Probably one of the most remarkable accomplishments that very few Americans know about was the passage in the budget last year of the earned income tax credit. And throughout that debate the President kept saying over and over again, we are not going to continue to penalize working families. What kind of message do we send when we put our families at risk and actually provide disincentives for them to care for their own children through the tax system.

The earned income tax credit will mean, as of Friday, when tax returns are filed, that 17 percent of American families will pay less taxes and will have more of an opportunity to begin making decisions for themselves.

And the vast majority of Americans will not see any rise in their taxes. Many of us in this room will. But that's only fair, given what happened in the 1980s. And I think it's a small price to pay for trying to provide some way of stabilizing our financial situation and beginning to invest in our families and children again.

We have worked very hard on other programs like Head Start, our immunization efforts. We have seen some accomplishments that we have brought about through regulation and better organization. But it is still an uphill struggle. And it is in part because we are locked into a debate over false choices that is fueled by rhetoric that is too often politically determined as opposed to honestly assessing the needs that children and families have, and asking what can we do to support our most vulnerable members in this society.

All through the last several years, we have seen a debate that is framed between those who say that they believe that the family bears the entire responsibility and has to show more responsibility, and should not expect much help or assistance from any other institution. And the extreme other argument that, indeed, all that happens to children is society's responsibility,

and the family is so beleaguered and downtrodden that it cannot be expected to exercise much responsibility on its own.

That debate fills the airways of radio talk shows, fuels the rise of organizations across the political spectrum, but it is a false debate. What starting points demonstrates clearly and what is common sense is that children are raised both by a family and a community, and that every family is part of some network -- either the presence of a network that affirmatively helps or a network that is destructive to the strength of the family.

There was a wonderful line a few years ago in the Catholic bishops work on families and children when it said very clearly that we should stop the faults debate that has dominated our dialogue about family and children's policy because children are the result of the values of both their families and of the larger society.

So then how do we then break through that rhetoric and talk honestly with one another about what we can and should expect from families; how we may better prepare people for the important jobs of parenting; how we can make it absolutely clear that family responsibilities are the most sacred and precious ones that any of us will ever have; and that our children need to appreciate that and enter into their families with that sense of commitment.

We do have to talk about values and we have to talk about individual and family responsibility. But that is not where the conversation can afford to be left. We then have to go on and say what do the institutions of society owe to families so that they can fulfill their responsibilities, and what is every child entitled to have as a matter of right, to have that child's needs met.

And if you read this report, you can see that there are some things we can do within the legislative process at the federal, state or local level. There are tasks that fall to the business and private sector community, tasks which should fall to the religious community, the not-for-profit sector, tasks that belong in the province of the media. Each of us bears responsibility for the appalling statistical portrait of so many of our children that comes forth in this report.

And if we clearly delineate, as this report does, what the problem is, and then we specify what the responsibilities of the family and every other institutions are, then we have to be willing to commit ourselves to actually seeing action occur. That means that Carnegie and many of the not-for-profits represented here have to join together, leverage your resources, work to get a single series of messages out as clearly as possible to change the atmosphere and the debate about family issues.

It means that we have to understand that families have to have certain support systems in order to succeed and then begin one by one to try to implement those.

I want to talk specifically about health care, because that is mentioned here, it is a prerequisite for much that we can accomplish on behalf of our children, and it is obviously something that we are on the brink of being able to do if we exercise the will to do so.

Other speakers, I'm sure, in the next day and a half will talk about the range of other issues, the economic structure and what it currently does to families. The average American worker is working more hours today than has been worked by the American worker since World War II. And that is not just the male breadwinner, that is the single parent and the dual-parent family. We are squeezing out time for families by the kind of relentless economic pressures we are imposing upon our workers.

Violence is an issue that permeates what we can expect from our families. I have often been in rather heated conversations where someone is saying that, I'm a believer in big government and all of that, and I'm saying, you've just got it wrong, I'm a believer in big families, big government, big business, big everything -- I want it all to work well. (Laughter.)

And what they say to me over and over again is that it's the family's responsibility. And I say you tell that to a single mother working two shifts, raising her kids, and afraid to let them go outside to the park or walk on their way to school. Now, what kind of family is that, and what kind of community is that. It goes for child care. It goes across the board with every one of these recommendations.

But let's just focus on health care for a minute so you can understand what we are up against, because the debate over health care is absolutely linked to the false debate over the state of the American family and what we can do to help our children.

The same arguments against extending health care to every American were made against Social Security and made against Medicare. Those two programs took care of elderly Americans. But even they had to overcome the hurdles of being accused of undermining individual responsibility, of making people lax, of taking away the incentive that gets you up to go to work, because if you don't work, you won't have health care, or you will be destitute in your old age. Same arguments, same people, same players, 60 and 30 years later.

Now, with health care, we see clearly that there are a multitude of reasons why we should have a universal health care system with particular emphasis on children's needs. But we are engaged in a debate over whether or not we can afford to do so

and whether or not we can do so without undermining the quality of the health care we currently have.

That is in many ways a fair set of questions to ask. But it is also a set of questions that ignores the reality that affects the lives of millions and millions of American children today.

Most of the 40 million uninsured Americans work and have children in the home. Most of the 25 million underinsured Americans work and have children in the home. Most of those who are on Medicaid have children in the home. And every one of us who is insured today has no security that we will have insurance for ourselves and our children this time next year at an affordable price. There is no health security for any of us, but particularly not for our children.

And we are paying a very dear price for that. We are paying it in the statistics of infant mortality, low immunization rates for our youngest children. We are paying it in the kind of disruption that occurs in the lives of children because of the failure for them to receive ongoing health care in a timely way. And we are paying it because we are spending more on health care than most of our competitors without even covering all of our people.

What we believe we should do is to have guaranteed private insurance for every American with a comprehensive set of benefits that is aimed at prevention -- starting with prenatal care for every pregnant woman, moving through well child care, all the way through adolescence, but with particular emphasis on the youngest children.

We also believe that if we provide this health care, we will begin to see results, not just in better health outcomes for our children, but in related accomplishments as well.

You can look at any health survey of children in America, particularly poor children, and see so many correlations between poor academic accomplishments, short attention spans, other kinds of issues that on surface are not health issues but are certainly driven by health-related affects.

So when we talk about this report and when we praise it, and when you study it, think about what we are going to do to make it happen. If we do not have universal health care coverage for every American, we will not meet the goals of this report. If we do not have a secure base that makes it absolutely unthinkable that every working family will be able to provide for their children, it will be very difficult to stabilize at-risk families so that other institutions can support them in the way that this report suggests.

This quiet crisis is not so quiet. We see very loud and noisy and uncomfortable manifestations because of our collective

neglect of millions of our children. We see it in our prison statistics, we see it in our violence, we see it in our schools' achievement levels, we see it across the board. And there is no excuse for it.

But in order to be successful in building the argument about what the family should do and what the society should do, we have to be committed to seeing through the changes that are reflected here and understanding that we have to change the political and cultural atmosphere to make this country more receptive to doing what we should do for our children.

This is going to be a very tough challenge in the next couple of years. It was hard to get the budget passed. It was hard to get a lot of the legislation on the federal level passed. We live with this mythical idea that we pay more taxes than anybody in the world and it's not true. If any of you saw in one of the papers this weekend, you know that we don't even pay any more as a percentage of our income than we have for the last several decades.

But we have become convinced that we as a country can't and even shouldn't do anything to help those who are most at risk. It's a very odd conclusion to reach in a country that has stretched its hand out so many times to so many millions, and through intermediary institutions and governmental programs created the greatest, broadest middle class in the history of the world.

And what we want now is to rekindle that American dream by providing the support that families and children need today. Many of us are here as a result of both strong, loving, nurturing families and programs in the private and public sector that gave us the opportunities we needed to make the life that we have today.

That is what we want for all of our children. But it's going to be up to us. It is going to be a real test of our will and our staying power to determine whether we actually get the job done. I am optimistic, but only because I think this room is filled with people who are willing to work to make it happen.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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