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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

April 14, 1994

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
ELIE WIESEL HUMANITARIAN AWARDS,
NEW YORK CITY

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. I am overwhelmed by this entire evening, and I am feeling not only overwhelmed but quite unworthy in the face of all of the words that have been said and all of the emotions behind those words: the hopes that they carry, and the challenges they face on the way to being fulfilled.

I was very honored when I received word that the Foundation wished to bestow this award on me. And as I have thought about being here with you this evening, I have had many mixed feelings. I certainly looked forward to spending the time that I've had the opportunity to do so with Elie and Marian tonight, two people whom I admire.

I told Elie last night that as I was putting my daughter to bed she asked me if I would be home tonight, and I told her no, I would be in New York, and what I would be doing. She immediately got out of bed and found her copy of Night and gave it to me, and said, "You might want to reread it on the way to New York."

I have been very moved and grateful for the kind words that my friends Barbara Streisand and Carly Simon, two women whom I am very grateful to for their friendship and support -- and to all of you who made this dinner possible and who support the work of this foundation.

It is important to stop on occasion, like we are doing this evening, bringing together so many in this room who represent the power of intellect, the power of money, the power of politics, the power of academia, the power of volunteers, and to spend some time thinking about the words that moved us, the stories, and perhaps rekindling our own commitment to doing what we can to take whatever action is available to each of individually and through our communities

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and our countries, to help children.

I was particularly honored that the prime minister would be here. She is someone who is facing many challenges in her country. And our country, and certainly the President, are standing ready to help. But let's think for a minute about where we are and what lies ahead of us if we really expect that our children will inherit a world safer and ready for the challenges that they face.

I was struck by the kinds of parallels between the words of a young woman whose book you may have read, who has so movingly described what it is like for a child today in the world that is too often cruel and filled with war. She wrote: boredom, shooting, shelling, people being killed, despair, hunger, misery, fear, that's my life.

The life of an innocent 11-year-old girl, a schoolgirl without a school, a child without games, without friends, without the sun, without birds, without nature, without fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with just a little powdered milk, in short, a child without a childhood. That young woman, Zlota Filipovich (phonetic), wrote those words on June 29, 1992.

Fifty years earlier another child sounded the same alarm with her own words, awakening us to the folly of indifference and the terrible toll it takes on our young. She wrote: "until all mankind, without exception, undergoes a great change, everything will be destroyed and disfigured, after which mankind will have to begin all over again." Those were Anne Frank's words.

Those were the words of another child caught up in another -- following another war. But they are the words that you could hear throughout the decades, and that if we listen we can hear today.

We can hear the cries of the children in Rwanda, Burundi. We can hear the cries of the children in Brazilian slums who are hunted by vigilantes and slaughtered at night, children in Thailand who are involuntarily ensnared in rings of prostitution and slavery, children in Somalia, starved and diseased until they are as frail as match sticks, children in Sarajevo, so numbed by violence that they no longer flinch at the sounds of bombs in their streets. Unfortunately, the persecution and the resulting fears of children knows no

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boundaries.

Here in America, not far from where we are this evening, in one of the great centers of learning and education, there are children who do not flinch at the sounds of gunfire themselves. Just this week the Carnegie corporation issued an extensive report decrying the conditions of millions of infants and children in our own nation.

As unthinkable as it may seem, over the last 30 years conditions have actually worsened for American children ages zero to three. Yes, we have made progress, and we can point to it and take pride in it, but as Elie Wiesel has reminded us often, our technological and scientific progress has outpaced our progress as moral beings, and that is certainly true when it comes to the treatment of our children.

We have machines that can detect tumors in the brain for those who are able to access them, yet 60 percent of American children are not immunized by the age of two. We have the finest libraries in the world, like this magnificent one, yet we have millions of our children who leave school at an early age, or even graduate unable to read and write adequately. We have the most elaborate and expensive system of justice that has ever been invented, yet more and more American children resolve their disputes not with words or debate, but with guns.

So in the face of this it is very hard for me to feel what I know I should feel, which is the joy of this honor. I accept it, and I'm grateful for it, but it serves in some ways as a rebuke, because I and many in this room have worked for many years advocating changes that we thought were needed to promote the well-being of children, and yet we see so many unmet needs around us.

It is not enough that we sympathize with the plight of children here and around the world. Sympathy is important, but empathy is even more important, and action is essential. We may not ever be able to comprehend the pain and suffering that many children feel during their days and nights, but we know what children need.

We know, because we try to give it to those children in our families and the children that we have any

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kind of relationship with. We know what produces healthy, productive young people. We know it starts with making sure that they have decent health care and conditions for living, educational opportunities, the right combination of love and discipline, and attention. We know what children need. We lack the will to insure that every child has the opportunity for those needs to be met.

As we are looking forward to the 21st century, a century which, as was said earlier, in some ways started with Sarajevo, and unfortunately seems to be ending there, two bookends of folly and hatred, of irrationality, of spite -- ancient enmities overcoming the present and leading into the future. We must do better, and we can start here at home by resolving that in our own lives we will make more of a commitment to the children whom we can touch.

Simple acts of kindness and understanding accumulate. Those in business can ask themselves, how do I help my workers not only be good workers but also good parents? How do I provide opportunities to them to do that? How do I extend the skills of the business community into the larger community, and provide services and resources to assist?

We've made some changes in the last year that will bear fruit. Tomorrow is not a red-letter day in America. It's tax day. But it is a red-letter day for 17 million working American families whose taxes will go down because we need to be sure that the people who are raising children in their homes in America have incentives to stay off welfare, to lift themselves out of poverty, to take care of their own families.

And yes, we are pushing a crime bill that will try to restore sanity to our streets and our neighborhoods so that children will be able to walk safely to school and play in parks again. And we will do what we can to reform a welfare system that has kept enslaved in dependency millions of mothers and children. And we intend to provide a health care system that will enable every child to have the kind of basic health care that you and I take for granted and have provided to our own children.

But beyond these programs and these changes, there is something more at stake. It is not enough just to look to the kinds of legislation or regulation, or business changes

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that are needed. This is at bottom, a moral and ethical concern. Our country has an opportunity again to recommit itself to human rights around the world and here at home. To once again make very clear that we are a great country because we value the individual dignity of each person, respect that person's rights, and provide opportunities for those responsible and willing to take advantage of them.

So it is with great pleasure I come tonight, with some trepidation that I accept this award, not feeling worthy of it, but hoping it will spur my conscience and my commitment, and also hoping that all of us will look into the eyes of the children we see on the streets, those in our schools, who are very different from us, come from very different backgrounds, and know there's a spark of the immortal in each of them, and that if we help to fan it we will not only be giving life to children, we will be giving life to ourselves and to the country we love. That's what I hope all of us can commit ourselves to.

Thank you very much.

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