

FLOTUS STATEMENTS & SPEECHES

4/26/94 - 10/21/94

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES
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Scripps College

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

April 26, 1994

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT SCRIPPS COLLEGE

Thank you so much. I am very honored by this presentation and the receipt of this medal, and I feel doubly honored to have it presented to me by Ellen Ravel Eckis. It is so fitting and touching to me that a graduate of the first class would be here in a very tangible way to correct all the generations of women who have passed through Scripps College, and I want to thank you for honoring me in that way.

I am also honored and delighted to be here at Scripps with my good friend, your president, Nancy Bekavac. It is such a sweet pleasure to be with someone whom you have known for as many years as Nancy and I have known each other. We have sat for many hours amidst great discussions about all the unresolved issues of the day, and we have traded ideas about what books or poetry needs to be read to open one's mind. The last time I saw her was when she spent the night with us at the White House. My husband and I were fully immersed in watching the National Collegiate Athletic Association Basketball Tournament, and we didn't get as much of a visit in as I would have liked, except in between commercials and other such interruptions of the main business of the evening.

But I hope all of you know, and I'm sure you did based on the alumni and trustees and friends of Scripps, as well as students whom I met today, how very fortunate you are to have a woman of such vision and commitment as your president in this time of change for women's colleges. I'm very pleased for Scripps. I also want to thank Martha Hammer, the chair of the Board of Trustees.

I want to recognize Diane Bai, who is involved in

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student government, and still finds time for biophysics and other such academic endeavors, and I want, also, to acknowledge Michelle Maltais, who will speak at commencement in a few weeks. I have a special bond with Michelle because many, many years ago, before most of you were born, I was the first student speaker at a Wellesley commencement.

And it was a rather unusual event because there had never been a student speaker before. There has been every year since, and none of us, especially me, knew what to expect. But we struggled through that in 1969. And I am sure that Michelle's words will make a lasting impression on all of you since I am confident mine did not, since we were still so bewildered by the fact we were doing it, which was our major accomplishment of having convinced the administration.

You know, to be honored by a women's college and in the name of such a remarkable woman, Ellen Browning Scripps, is very important to me. I'm a big believer in women's colleges. I feel grateful that I made the choice to attend a woman's college, and especially in the last 15 or so months since my husband has been president. I have become even more interested in the lives of women who have broken the paths that many of us trod today.

We live in a time with a very short memory, and all too often we forget the sacrifices, the examples of women like Ms. Scripps, who were there long before we were. And I think it is good for us to stop and remember the kind of sacrifices and the kind of examples that they have set. And I want to talk about two such women: Ms. Scripps and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Before I left Washington, I received a letter from a woman who serves in the White House Counsel's Office and is a Scripps graduate. A woman named Beth Nolan. She wrote to me to say, "I see you are accepting the first annual Ellen Browning Scripps Medal on April 26. You will see what a special place Scripps is.

"You won't be able to see its founder, so I thought you might like to read what was said of Ellen Browning Scripps in 1952, on the 25th anniversary of Scripps College. Her manner was marked by the simplicity and directness characteristic of all people concerned with important matters with no shadow of pretense or wish to impress. She asked

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concrete questions and made forthright comments whose meaning was unmistakable.

I remember no hint of a desire to justify or explain. The world was imperfect, but one took it as it was and did the best one could. Ivory towers were not for her. She was, first of all, a worker, concerned with the things that could be done. If the task was difficult, all the more reason for getting on with it."

In her talk, there were no "if onlys." What a wonderful thing to say about anyone, but particularly a woman of her generation who broke new ground as she tried to live her life, not waving flags and banners, but making decisions that were right for her. And in doing so, attempted to live a life of integrity and completeness. You know the stories about her pioneering work, her philanthropy, and her social activism. Someone once described her as having the heart of a nurse and the courage of an astronaut.

I like that. Because in today's world, we too often fall back on stereotypes. One can either have the heart of a nurse or the courage of an astronaut. But in today's world of soundbytes and efforts to categorize people, holding in one place, the often contradictory features of a whole life becomes a real challenge.

There was another woman like that whom I admire. Eleanor Roosevelt. And in the last months I had imaginary conversations with her in my head. I have said to her, "Oh my goodness gracious, what do I do now?" And she has replied back, "Well, you just get on with it, of course." And I have read her columns and her autobiography. I have read about her. And I see the same qualities that we honor in Ms. Scripps. I see the qualities often contradictory at first glance, but which working together, made a whole life.

As I look out at this audience primarily of young women, although I'm sure there are young men somewhere in the back beyond my gaze, I know how difficult and challenging it is for young people today to make sense often of the world in which we find ourselves, as each of us as individuals seek to balance the different roles that we have, and even that we encounter as we move through our lives. There was no confusion in Ms. Scripps' mind about what constituted a meaningful life.

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She knew it was important the take care of herself and her family. To that end, she became a successful entrepreneur and businesswoman. But she also knew it was important to give to others. And to that end, she never stopped standing up for her beliefs, whether it was woman suffrage or social justice, or contributing generously to enrich the lives of her fellow citizens.

So her life was really an exceptional example of that sometimes elusive balance we strive for between "me" and "we," between our rights and expectations as individuals, and our obligations to the larger community. Too often today we forget what it means to be a member of a community. We focus so much energy on ourselves that we forget we are all interdependent and interrelated. And we forget that if we subordinate the needs of the larger community for too long, we often end up hurting or stunting ourselves as individuals.

I have seen the many challenges that young people are facing today. And I have seen particularly the concerns that many young women bring as they look ahead to the future, about how they will carve out their own lives, how they will make sense of the many demands they face. And that's why I go back and read about the lives of women who came before. Women who often made choices that required the confidence and the courage, and the hopefulness that Ms. Scripps ascribed to this college, where there were no guarantees about the choices that were made.

There is no recipe book, there is no road map for one's life. Each decision, everyday, has to be made in the best way you know how, and then that decision built on. Nancy and I were talking before we came over, about how strange it would have been if all those years ago at Yale Law School, someone had said, "Well, where do you think you will be in April of 1994?"

And she had said with any kind of confidence, "Oh, I will be the president of Scripps College." And I have said, "Oh, (laughter) this boy I just met from Arkansas will be president." (Applause.) You know, life doesn't work that way. And that's good that it doesn't.

Instead, what we talked about was how we were going to make the decisions that confronted us. What kind of jobs we were going to take; what kind of friends and relationships we would have; how we would continue to expand our mind and

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be open the world around us; how we would avoid ever being walled off by the meritocracy that has lifted up young women and men like ourselves because, through whatever combination of luck and fortune and parenting and heritage, we were able to take advantage of the great richness of fine educations and all that America has to offer.

How we would avoid becoming desensitized to the pain of others. How we would understand, as Ms. Scripps understood, as Eleanor Roosevelt understood, that we had continuing obligations to the larger world. How we knew that anywhere, anyone was diminished, in some way diminished us. Those were the things that we kept talking about.

There was not road map for life there, but there was the stuff of what makes a life. All of the individual choices and challenges that come to each of us. In today's world, we too often short circuit that process. There's too much criticism, too many easy answers, and we find ourselves often off balance as we try to find balance.

I look back now in the last 25 years, and think about the choices my women friends have made. I have friends who are living very much like my mother lived. They are full-time homemakers, full-time mothers volunteering in their communities.

And if they feel good about their choices, then they are living the lives they were meant to live, with integrity and excellence. (Applause.) And I have friends who never married. Have not yet had children, although that becomes an increasing possibility as the years go by unlike the past, and who have devoted themselves to one career or many taking joy and enthusiasm out of everywhere they've lived, everywhere they've worked, every challenge they've met and confronted. And if they are satisfied and lived their lives with integrity, then that is the right choice for them. (Applause.)

Most of us struggled to balance family and work at different points in our lives. I have friends who have had their children in their 20s. And by the time they are in their late 30s and 40s, are embarked on a whole new set of life experiences. I have friends who have had their careers in their 20s and their 30s and started having children in their 40s. All different combination of possibilities that are now open to women.

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And the only thing that is holding women back from realizing their full potential is their own insecurity about the choices they make in their own lives, and their unwillingness to listen to the silent voice inside themselves which tells them what is the right decision for them, and not the siren calls of either praise or condemnation that come from the outside.

The real (applause) -- the real opportunity that exists for all of us, and this is one of the great gifts of being a woman today in our society, is the opportunity we have to make the choices that are right for us, and to know that the choice you make at 20 may be different than the choice you make at 30, or 40, or 50, or 60, or 70, or as the woman I met in the receiving line earlier, at 90, who was talking to me and Nancy about something, yet knew she was intending to do.

You have that opportunity today. And what I hope is that, once and for all, we can break free of the stereotypes that imprison women and their potential, that tell them the choices they made are not right because they are not right in somebody else's eyes. And that we respect the choices women make, and support those choices, giving each other the nurturing and the love and the friendship that enable all of us to listen to that internal voice and to pursue the direction it gives.

I'm often asked if what I am doing in Washington creates a new role model for First Ladies. And I always say, I don't want to create any new stereotype. I want to free women to live according to their own needs and desires. I do not want to create a new category that anyone after me must somehow fit into. I want all women to be given the respect they deserve to have for the choices they may make. (Applause.)

And what I hope (applause) -- what I hope is that when you go out into this complicated, competitive world that awaits, whether it's this year or the next or the year after that, I hope your experiences here, your friendships here, will serve as a guide for your own internal voice. And I also hope that, like Miss Scripps and like Eleanor Roosevelt, you leave Scripps with an obligation not only to yourself, but to the larger community.

I've said before that the American dream is an intergenerational compact, or as someone once said, "One

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generation is supposed to leave the key under the mat for the next. We repay our parents for their love in the love we give to children. And we repay our society for the opportunities we are given by expanding opportunities granted others. We need that sense of intergenerational commitment as we face the problems confronting America.

Yes, we want to make sure that America's safer by tackling the problem of crime, that America's healthier by making sure every American is guaranteed health insurance coverage. (Applause.) We want to end welfare as we know it and instill opportunities and independence and generations of women and their children. (Applause.) We want to improve our economy so that there are jobs available for all who will work and an opportunity to advance and realize the American dream.

We want to extend educational opportunity to children no matter where they live. We want to be sure that the dream that enabled every one of us to be in this auditorium today is kept alive and enhanced for generations to come. And the surest way of doing that is by building men and women who, with the kind of confidence, courage and hope that we all need face their responsibilities as citizens, as parents, as workers, as volunteers because there is no single way to find that balance between "me" and "we".

But there are so many exciting paths out there. (Tape cut off temporarily.) And, you know, as my great mentor, Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Far better to light a candle than curse the darkness." (Applause.) And I've never had the opportunity to address anybody in the dark before. (Laughter.)

But I am sure that for all of us, this will be a memorable occasion. And I only hope that someone somewhere is trying figure out how to throw the current back on, because I don't want all of you to have to sit here in the dark for too long.

But I do want to make sure that all of you know that as you gather in settings like this in this glorious auditorium, even though I know we were originally meant to be outside, there is such a feeling that I sense from the young women I met and that I had a chance to talk briefly to, about what a special place Scripps is, and really all of the colleges here in this glorious, beautiful spot. (Applause.)

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And it would be very hard not to be grateful everyday for all that we have if you were to wake up and teach here, or work here, or go to school here, and to make gratitude almost a discipline in one's life for all that is around.

Maybe one of the roots for best nurturing that internal voice that can speak if one listens because if you think about all of the various aspects that go into making a life, family and faith, work and service, there is so much to be grateful for. And I am reminded often of the kinds of challenges that the women and men who have gone before have faced, but I am also constantly confronted by the challenges that men and woman face today. The lives of heroic courage that they live.

And any time any one of us feels beleaguered or disappointed, think about the lives of people you know who suffer setbacks and disappointments, illnesses, tragedies, and how so many of them learn ways of going through their lives with joy despite whatever has happened to them.

So keeping in mind the examples from the past, keeping in mind the faces of those whom we all know, and recognizing the courage that it does take to live any life fully and well, I wish each of you Godspeed on your own life's journey. Thank you very much.

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