

5/15/94
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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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May 15, 1994

Release

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much, Chancellor Aiken and President Eikenberry, the trustees and other honorary degree recipients, and members of this University's administration, faculty, alumni.

I want to add my welcome and congratulations to family members who are here. But mostly I want to thank the graduates of the Class of 1994 for inviting me to join your celebration today. I am so pleased to be part of it.

I also want to say a special word of thanks to the choruses and to the symphonic band, particularly the trombone section, which left me a note, which I greatly appreciated.

And I want to say how good it is to be back in Illinois. I have had the experience of living my life largely in two states, whose names end with "s". So I have had the experience of finding the states that I lived in mispronounced wherever I went.

I'll never forget the first time I left Illinois. When I would tell people I was from near Chicago, they'd say, oh, Illinois. And then I would move to Arkansas, and they'd say, oh, Ar-kansas, or Arkansasaws.

So it's just great to be back with people who have no accent and know how to pronounce the name of the State of Ill-i-nois.

I must confess, though, that after I accepted the invitation, I learned that this campus has two ceremonies, both of which take place here in this arena; one, this one; one, later in the afternoon.

And we have a number of graduates of the University in Washington and at the White House. And I began to ask them, I said, "Well, you know, I was at Pennsylvania and Michigan last year, both very fine schools" -- I know, I know -- "but they had their large commencement in the football

stadium, and everybody came, and it was one huge event. Why is it that here at Champaign-Urbana we have two ceremonies?

And I got the same answer from every graduate. And that was, "We have happier memories in the basketball arena than in the football stadium."

So let's remember all of the good times and go forward into the future with all of you. I have been to this campus twice. Once when I was growing up, and came for a football game. The second time during the presidential campaign of 1992.

I have many friends who are graduates and alumni. And, unfortunately, as will happen even to those graduating from undergraduate school today, I have today the children of friends of mine who are graduating, whom I am looking forward to seeing and congratulating.

But there is something wondrous about the continuity of a university life. And you are now part of it in a very real way because you have spent these years here honing your skills, increasing your education, preparing yourselves for the future.

And every commencement speech feels compelled to talk about the future because it is a commencement. It is a beginning for you. And in a sense it is a beginning for all who have supported you as they watch you leave this phase of your life hoping that what they have done to prepare you will stand you in good stead.

Here at the University you have the opportunity not only to learn in your chosen field, but to come into contact with people from other walks of life, other parts of the country, even the world; to exchange ideas and to try to get a better sense of who you are, what you believe, what your convictions will be that will carry you through the next decades.

It is particularly fitting on a day like today, which holds promise for your future, to also think about the future of this state and this nation which have nurtured you, and to think about what it means to be a member of a community and of a free society.

A few days ago I was honored to be part of the

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American delegation that attended the inaugural of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. I wish everyone of you in this arena could have been there with me. It was both an incredibly moving historical experience. But also one that confronted those of us who were there with profound questions about our own commitment and conviction to freedom and democracy.

I sat and watched a man take the oath of office, and two other men; one, his comrade over many years, the Deputy President Embekki; the other, his foe over many years, Deputy President DeClerk. Three men, who despite enormous differences in a far away land, torn by racial strife and hatred and violence that we cannot even imagine, join together in a vision of a new South Africa.

The inaugural ceremony was especially moving because of the speech that President Mandela gave, because of the platform which consisted of Black and White and Colored citizens of South Africa, because of the presence of the military and security forces both on the platform, in their uniforms, and in a display of a 21 gun salute and a fly-over of the most advanced military equipment committing itself to the new South Africa.

But the highlight of the entire inaugural came for me later at a lunch where President Mandela stood and talked about how he had invited to his inaugural ceremony three of his former jailers. This is a man who was in prison for 27 years -- longer than many of you have yet lived -- in the constant confinement and under the watchful supervision of jailers.

And yet because he was a man who understood that real change must come from within, who understood and incorporated the message of love and forgiveness that too many of us only give lip service to, he learned to love his jailers. And they in turn learned to love him. They no longer saw each other as stereotypes, as people who came from different racial backgrounds. But they broke through the barriers, that divide us even in this country, to see each other in their full humanity.

When he stood there and he said that, I thought of several things. I thought of what my husband has said repeatedly since he started his campaign for the presidency; that real change must come from the inside out; that government can only do so much. That institutions, even ones of excellence, like this University, can only lead so far.

That fundamental change must come from the hearts and minds and souls of individuals.

And I thought what an example the world now has of what that truly means. A new president who invites his jailers to his inaugural. And I have to confess that I sat there listening, wondering whether I would have the depth of forgiveness and love to reach out to those who oppose and attack me or my husband, or anyone whom I love and care for.

No, I have not spent 27 years in jail. Neither have any of you. But all of us live with the confinement of not caring about each other, of not reaching out to one another, of not seeing each other through the stereotypes over the divides and grasping hands, literally and figuratively, to create a new future for our country as well.

So I brought back with me a renewed conviction that, yes, real change must start from within. And all of us, everyone of us, have to change our hearts and minds before we can change the conditions around us. Yet we know, we know that we can make a difference.

We know in a gesture like President Mandela's, and we know in the countless gestures that many of you have been part of over these years at this campus, that new understanding can be created, forgiveness can be extended and received, love can be nourished.

The triumph of democracy in South Africa is rooted, not only in the hopeful spirit of the people who live there, and their example, but also in the democratic example our nation has lent the world for two centuries. It is America which has stood for freedom, for diversity, for the ideal that people of different backgrounds and skin colors and religious beliefs can live in harmony.

It is America that is quoted when others around the world from Eastern Europe to the former Soviet Union to the emerging nations of Asia to South Africa, when they begin their own march toward democracy, it is to us, our history, our experience, and our ideals that people look.

That is why the future of those countries, like South Africa, is inextricably bound to the future of our nation. Yes, we can applaud the freedom we see breaking out around the world. But it should also be a reminder and a

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You will find that your own freedom, as you leave this campus, will depend on finding the proper balance in your own lives, a balance between work and faith and service and family. But also a balance between your rights as individuals and your responsibilities to your community, your country, and the world.

And that balance may change as you go through life. And your obligations change with it. Defining who you are will depend not only on the personal milestones you reach, but on the firmness of your beliefs, the courage of your convictions, and the depth of your civic spirit.

The most important contribution you can make is not to give up. Not to give up on yourself, your ideals, your community, your country.

My favorite commencement speech of all times is probably the one that Winston Churchill gave to students at his prep school in 1941, a dark year for England during World War II. He said, "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never."

That is good advice to those of us in this country who often give in too easily: Give in to being told we can't solve our problems, give in to being told we can't get along with one another, give in to believing that America's best days are behind because somehow the conditions of life today are not what they used to be.

In the midst of a war, in the midst of bombing, Winston Churchill reminded the people of England never to give in. What greater opportunity do we have now to reshape our own future and to see it clearly. And yet too many around give in too easily.

We have to find a new spirit of community, we have to be willing to tackle the tough issues, and we have to be willing to work until we get a consensus to solve those issues. Because we are not just arguing about policies and politics or dollars and cents, we are arguing about our moral obligations as individuals to protect and care for the larger community.

That's why our nation has to work so hard to get our economy in shape again, to strengthen families, to improve education, to eradicate poverty and hunger, to get

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rid of the violence and crime that stalks our streets. And that is why we have to -- we have no choice -- but we have to reform a health care system that does not provide health security to the American citizen.

There is not one person in this great arena, no matter how well insured, that can be secure in knowing that he or she will have the same health insurance benefits at the same cost this time next year. We are not free if we have to live in terror of disease and accident stalking ourselves or our families.

This debate about health care is much bigger than about the deficit, although it is about that. It's much bigger than about cutting down on paperwork and bureaucracy, although we must do that. It's about something much deeper. Today ten million children do not have health insurance, and millions more do not ever see a doctor.

Nearly 40 percent of all two-year-olds have not received the immunizations they need against the major childhood diseases. And we find ourselves in the anomalous condition here in the richest, strongest country in the world having measles epidemics that maim and kill hundreds of children because we cannot figure out how other countries, much poorer than we, provide better health benefits to their children.

Half of today's private health insurance plans don't pay for basic preventive services for children, such as vaccines and well-baby exams. We don't pay for prenatal care for the pregnant women who end up often in our emergency rooms where we then pay extravagantly to take care of problems that could have been prevented. And too often children with chronic illnesses cannot get coverage at all.

I want to just tell you two quick stories about children because I have had the privilege of travelling our country and meeting literally hundreds, now thousands of people, who have shared their stories with me. And I have received a million letters from people just like you and your families who sat down and took the time to tell me what happened in their lives.

The first story concerns two cousins who lived together with their parents in a very big old house, and played together in the backyard, and they both got sick. One of the cousins was the child of a family that had insurance. That child was taken to the hospital, admitted, diagnosed

with meningitis, kept in the hospital, treated and discharged to come home a healthy child.

Her cousin was the child of a family without insurance. She also got sick, she also was running a very high fever. She was taken to the hospital, and referred to another hospital where she sat in the emergency room with her mother until she was finally seen. When they learned she had no insurance, they gave her two baby Tylenol, told her to go home, and to let them know what happened.

On the day that her cousin was discharged from the hospital, this child died. Shortly after that, the child who died, younger sibling also got sick. This time the hospital, which knew what it had done, said, "Oh, we will take care of this baby for free."

No child in America, no child of a working American, should ever again be turned away from any hospital because that child's mother and father do not have health insurance. This country should provide health care for every one of its children.

And the other story is the story that I hear all the time when a family, without any warning, has a child with a chronic illness or a child who has an accident. Very often these are well-insured families. But most insurance has a lifetime limit. And a child born with a congenital problem, or a serious accident that requires much acute care and rehabilitative care, quickly exhausts the lifetime limit of most insurance policies.

I have had these stories described to me from one end of this country to the other. I can barely stand to hear them. But I will keep listening because I feel that all of us owe these parents the right to have their stories heard.

But I was sitting in a children's hospital, talking with a number of families, whose children have chronic diseases, thinking there but for the grace of God go any of us, when a mother described to me what it is like to care for a very sick child day in and day out, and her husband works and can provide insurance for himself and her and their healthy child, but not the sick child because nobody will insure a sick child.

And she said, "I finally understood what I was up

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against when I went from place to place looking for insurance because my husband and I do not want a handout from anybody. And I had someone look at me and say, 'What you don't understand is we do not insure burning houses.'

And I thought to myself, what if someone had described my sick daughter as a burning house? How would I feel? And yet none of us can predict what might happen to any of our children.

Those two stories illustrate dramatically what our challenge is. But health care also symbolizes what our opportunity is. Some people say, "Oh, but my goodness, insuring everybody will cost so much." We are already in our country spending 15 cents out of every dollar spent in the entire country on health care. And we don't even take care of all of our people.

Countries in Europe and Asia, they don't spend nine cents on the dollar, and they cover everybody. In fact, we are being penny wise and very pound foolish as the old saying goes. Because until we cover everybody we cannot control costs.

So this health care debate, yes, is about money. It is about the economy. It is about saying to farmers like the ones I have sat with, who still can get insurance, despite enormous discrimination, that they don't understand why in the last five years it's gone from 200 bushels a week to buy their insurance, to over 3,000.

Yes, it is about money. But it is about something more. It is about social justice. It is about making sure that no child, no adult is turned away from necessary medical care. And it is also about our political system. Can we make this system work for every citizen? Or will we get mired down in gridlock and partisan wrangling instead of solving problems.

But it also has a moral dimension as well. Will we be able to look into the eyes of one another, as citizens of the greatest country in the world, and say we are caring for each other again, we are reaching out to each other again?

Government alone cannot solve our problems. But government, as a partner with all of us, can move us a very far way down the road of beginning to deal honestly with our problems and being able to make progress together.

If for an instant you doubt our ability to change, to make progress, to build a more economically productive, socially just, politically productive, and morally right society, think about places like South Africa and hear what Nelson Mandela said last week:

"We understand still that there is no easy road to freedom. We know well that none of us, acting alone, can achieve success. We must therefore act together as a united people for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world."

Those words apply to us here. Those words are a challenge to all of you to join us in this great country as we build a new future of which you will not only be a part, but the architects. There will never be a more glorious opportunity than to be part of making sure America is all that it should be. God speed to each of you, and God bless America.

(End tape 1, side 1.)

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you very much Chancellor Aiken. It's really the third time around because I had the privilege of addressing the graduates earlier today, and I am delighted to have the same opportunity to address those of you who are graduating this afternoon.

I want to thank President Eikenberry and the trustees, the honorary degree recipients, the members of the administration, the faculty, and alumni.

Particularly I want to congratulate the family members of all who are graduating today and receiving their degrees for their years of support, hard work, and often sacrifice.

But most of all, I want to thank the graduates of the Class of 1994 for inviting me to join your celebration at this important milestone of your lives.

It's always nice to be back in Illinois. And I am especially pleased to have a chance to be here now that this campus has been immortalized by Hollywood, I understand. Nothing will ever be the same.

But I am also pleased because this campus has such

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a wonderful reputation around the world as one of the leading research institutions on the cutting edge of so much work that needs to be done, as exemplified by the number of Nobel prize winners, Pulitzer prize winners, and so many other distinguished alumni and faculty members.

When I was growing up in Park Bridge, I came here for a football game. In the fall of 1992, during the presidential campaign, I spoke to students and faculty and others on the quad here. Both times the team I was rooting for, won.

So I hope there is a correlation between my visiting the University of Illinois and teams winning, and that each of you will leave here today knowing that you too have a chance to win whatever game you decide to play in the life ahead of you.

There is no cookbook, there is no road map. It is up to each of us to be able to make our own way. Life is different and perhaps more challenging in some ways than it was when previous generations graduated. But there is always the opportunity, and for many in this audience, a much greater opportunity than your parents or grandparents had to chart your own future.

My mother and my husband's mother, who is no longer with us, never graduated from college. But they both believed with all their hearts how important it was that their children graduate from college. They were able to convey to us a belief in education on its own merits as well as a way to open doors that might otherwise be closed.

So today you are doing honor to all who believed in you and all who stood behind you. Coming with that honor comes responsibility. And part of that responsibility is not only to your own life as you strike the balance, that you must, between the proper amount of time and effort you give to work, and family, to service, but also to what kind of community you want to be part of, what kind of country you want to help build.

Because for many people we are at a transition phase in American history. There are those who believe only in nostalgia, who want to turn the clock back, who say whether it's implicit or explicit in their remarks, in critiques of America today, that our best years are behind us. I reject that approach. I reject the cynicism, I reject the surrender, I reject the hopelessness that that attitude

represents.

A few days ago I was in South Africa watching a miracle happen. In that faraway land, divided for three centuries by unspeakable racial hatreds, Blacks and Whites and Coloreds all together forgot what their skin color and their heritage and their ethnic background was. They came together as the citizens of a new South Africa and peacefully participated in free elections that culminated in Nelson Mandela's inauguration as President last week.

I wish every one of you in this arena could have been there. It was not only a unique moment in history, it was a profoundly moving personal experience for those of us who were, and I am told, for many of you who watched the coverage, to sit there and watch President Mandela be sworn in; to watch his two deputy presidents, one, a long-time friend and comrade, Deputy President Embekki, take the oath of office; the other, a man who had been an opponent, Deputy President DeClerk, take the oath of office; to see the entire South African military and security force on the platform

leading the 21 gun salute, flying the formations overhead, was to know that a transition of power had peacefully occurred in a land that there had been no reason to hope for such a future only a few years ago.

These extraordinary events were only possible because of the power of human hope. As my husband has said many times, real change must start from within. We have to change our hearts and minds before we can change the conditions around us.

I left the inaugural ceremony filled with overwhelming emotions, and then attended a luncheon at which President Mandela spoke. And that for me became the highlight of my experience because he talked of inviting three of his former jailers to his inaugural ceremony.

This is a man who served 27 years in jail, longer than some of the graduates here today have been alive. This is a man who entered jail as a pariah in the eyes of the South African government, who was confined under the watchful supervision of white jailers.

But who learned, because of his own understanding of what we must do to change, he learned through forgiving,

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he learned through loving, to see his jailers not as the instruments of oppression, not as the stereotypes of the white oppressors, but as human beings.

His jailers in turn began to see him not as a stereotype, not as an alleged agitator, but as a human being. Once that connection was made, there is nothing more powerful in the world. When the divisions that separate us, one from the other, the false divisions based on race and ethnic background and religious belief are torn down so that we see each other clearly as fellow human beings in God's eyes, anything is possible.

And that is the real miracle of what we saw in South Africa. A miracle, not only for the people who live there, but with that movement toward an understanding of what we are all capable of doing together, really a gesture of forgiveness to move us beyond bitterness and bigotry that encompasses everyone in the world.

The triumph of democracy there is rooted not only in the hopeful spirit of the people who live there, who struggled courageously together to overcome the obstacles in their path, but it also is rooted in the experience of America, the democratic example that our nation has lent the world for over two centuries.

We Americans have always stood for freedom, for diversity, for the ideal that people of different backgrounds and skin colors and religious beliefs can live in harmony. That is why we can celebrate what happens across the seas in South Africa or as we watch other countries struggle toward democracy.

But it is also a reminder that the potential for change in our own country must spring from the hearts, the minds, and the souls of Americans. Never has this been more true than it is today.

We have always faced obstacles and challenges and adversaries in America's great history. But this time our adversary is not a country, not an evil empire. It's the combined scourges of violence, intolerance and incivility, all of which stem from a lack of faith in the future and in abdication of responsibility on the part of too many Americans.

We are responsible not only for our own lives. We are responsible, not only for our families, but we are

responsible in a real sense for the communities in which we live and form those families.

We must renew our trust in each other. We must reconcile our differences, we must refurbish our own ideals of freedom and democracy. But we can do that only by recognizing what real freedom means.

We need to recognize that we are not truly free if we have to worry about our physical safety walking down Green Street or across the quad at night. We are not truly free if we have to live in houses with bars on the windows and dead-bolt locks on the doors. We are not truly free if we are afraid to express a controversial point of view. We are not truly free if we choose to hate our neighbor rather than to love.

The writer and journalist, William Alan White, wrote that liberty is the only thing you cannot have unless you are willing to give it to others. And I would add, unless you are willing to exercise the responsibilities that go with it.

That will be your challenge, how to live a responsible life that gives you fulfillment and moves the ideals and values of this country forward. You will find your own freedom depends on finding the proper balance in your own lives. But also finding the proper balance between your rights as individuals and your responsibilities to your community, your country, and the world.

And that balance may change as you go through life, and as your obligations change. Defining who you are will depend, not only on the personal milestones you reach, but on the firmness of your beliefs, the courage of your convictions, and the depth of your civic spirit.

And much of what you make with your life will be shaped by how you deal with adversity in your life. It will come to all of you, it will take many different forms. But the most important contribution you can make is not to give up. Not to give up on yourself, your family, your ideals, your country.

My favorite commencement speech is the one Winston Churchill delivered to students in England in 1941 during a very dark time for the British people because of the constant

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bombardment during the worst days of that war.

He stood there, when for many there was no reason to hope, when people were seeing their friends and families die in bombings or in attempts to regain military advantage, and he said, "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never. In nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense."

Each of you will be tested. It may come sooner, it may come later. But the test will not only tell us much about you, but also about the mettle of our citizens. We will have to rely on you, as we move forward into the future, to help us succeed as a nation, to tackle the tough issues that for too long we have ignored or hoped would go away.

These are issues not just about politics and policies, or even dollars and cents. But they are about our moral obligations as individuals to protect and care for the larger community, the larger American family that whether you claim it or not, that we all belong to.

That is why our nation must work so hard to re-instill individual responsibility, to get our economy in shape, to strengthen families, to improve education, to eradicate poverty and hunger, to get rid of crime and violence on our streets.

We know that all of those are goals that we can't possibly achieve in a short period of time. And maybe for some they are goals that will always remain goals. But the journey that an individual or a nation makes, in trying to define and then achieve goals, tells us much about the kind of people we are.

And that is why we must do all that we can to fix our health care system. We face economic challenges, challenges having to do with our political system, social justice, and morality as we take on that particular issue.

But it is hard to explain how in the greatest, richest country that we have ever seen in the history of the world, we cannot immunize all of our children, we cannot provide prenatal care to all of our pregnant women, we cannot provide well-child care to our babies. And often the care a person receives is more dependent on their pocketbook than on their medical diagnosis.

We cannot continue to have a country divided the

way this one is over the haves and the have-nots when it comes to health care. In part because as I look around this arena and see people of all ages and walks of life, except for our older Americans, who have been guaranteed Medicare, a government program, paid for by all of us, there is not a single person in this audience who is currently insured, who can say with any certainty that you will have the same insurance covering the same services for the same cost this time next year.

In fact, if you are like most Americans, you are finding your insurance more and more expensive to you personally, you are finding that you are paying more and more out of pocket, you are finding you are being imposed on with more and more conditions, and often having your choice of doctor and health plan removed from you.

And yet here we are spending more money on health care than any country. Fifteen cents out of every dollar spent in the United States is spent on health care. And we have 40 million uninsured people, 85 percent of whom get up every day and go to work and pay taxes to provide health benefits to people on welfare, that they are not entitled to have themselves.

We have 10 million uninsured children and millions more who do not see doctors. And we have literally millions and millions of underinsured Americans because their policies are so poorly written that they either run out of coverage when they need it most, or they have to pay so much before their coverage kicks in.

This is the kind of situation we are faced with today that is crying out for reform. And, yes, reform will save money for the vast majority of American businesses. And, yes, reform will give you something you do not have now, which is the security of knowing you will always be taken care of.

And, yes, reform will end the social injustice that exists between those who show up at our hospital doors and have no insurance, and are therefore three times more likely to die from the same disease or ailment as a person who shows up with insurance.

But we will also be making a moral statement about the kind of country we are and our willingness to confront

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the problems and challenges that we have. We cannot expect government alone to solve our problems, but we can expect government to be a partner in solving our problems.

So when we talk about all of these issues, let's not get isolated into little boxes or categories that makes for a sterile debate. Let's break out of the brain-dead politics of the past, and instead of arguing with one another and yelling at each other across ideological or partisan divides, let's get down to the business of solving the problems and putting our best minds in this country to that end. That is the American tradition.

A historian has written that America deals with its problems in 30-year cycles. Sixty years ago we did something about our older Americans when we finally passed Social Security. Thirty years later we provided the health security that Medicare provides as a basic benefit.

It is now 30 years from that time, and time for us to give the same level of security to all of our citizens under the age of 65. If, for instance, you doubt our ability to change, to make progress, I hope you will suspend your disbelief. I hope you will take that cynicism or skepticism and just shelve it for a while, and think about a place like South Africa, and find inspiration in the experience of the people there.

You only need to hear again what Nelson Mandela said at his inaugural: "We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom. We know it well that none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must therefore act together as a united people for national reconciliation for nation building for the birth of a new world."

That is an attitude borrowed directly from the American experience. Those words are a challenge to us that we once again, with hope, that needs to be in all of us in order to deal with the problems that we face, knowing full well there has never been a country or an experience like the American one. And that if we put our minds to it, your lives and your country's life will be the richer, more productive, more hopeful for it.

That is the challenge that I hope each of you in your own way will address. And I also wish each of you God speed in your own personal endeavors, and God bless America. Thank you.