

5/3/94
Heming Award Ceremony

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PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
THE HAROLD C. FLEMING AWARD CEREMONY
NEW YORK CITY

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you very much, David. Thank you, Jim.

I am delighted to be here with Colin and with so many of you with whom I have served in various roles and capacities over the years.

I was sitting there listening to Jim and David talk about democracy and the forces that often try to impede democratic progress, and I certainly was reminded of the work we tried to do, and is still being done, at the New World Foundation now for 40 years.

You may remember that among the long list of attacks that have been levelled against me, my membership and chairmanship of the Board of New World Foundation took the center spotlight for a couple of months in 1992. And it was my first introduction into what David was talking about, which was the politics of personal destruction as a device for masking ideological and anti-democratic efforts.

I was frankly surprised. And maybe that said something about how naive I was just a few years ago. But it was remarkable to me that an organization which I aspired to be associated with, which had taken seriously the philosophy of our country, and had dedicated itself to improving the participation in our democracy of those who were oppressed and marginalized, and often without voice, should somehow be accused of undermining the very democracy we were trying to extend.

And I realized then, and I realize it now every day, that neither the facts nor history is any guide or shield to those kinds of attacks because they clearly are designed to try to, not only keep the status quo, but strengthen it in a way that undermines or decries the opportunities of others even to join it. So we are certainly

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but around the world.

But tonight we want to celebrate some of what we have achieved over the last 40 years. And it is only fitting that this celebration of the New World Foundation's 40th Anniversary coincides with the inauguration of the Harold C. Fleming Award which pays tribute to a man whose life was itself a history of moral courage and social action.

But who also, in my association with him, which went back beyond the days on the New World Board, back to when I did work with the press section of the Children's Defense Fund, the Washington Research Project, which was funded by the Field (phonetic) Foundation, which used to be upstairs in the New World Foundation. And I am sure I did something back then that you will read about sometime in the next several months.

The thing about Harold Fleming, that I remember, in addition to what you are honoring him for tonight, was his remarkable sense of humor and his capacity to puncture anyone's balloon with a wonderful way of just asking the question and making a statement with a look on his face that somehow put everything into perspective at the right moment. And he did that time and again in the years that I knew him.

There was an intensity and a dedication about him, but he never lost his humor or his humanity while he pursued what he believed in. And he believed in changing the course of humanity through civic participation and dialogue.

Henry Hampton believed in charting a better future by illuminating both the horrors and the glories of the past.

By honoring Henry tonight with the first Fleming award, we also honor both of these men's legacies for both have lived lives that are individual calls to conscience.

Harold Fleming committed his life to civil rights, after witnessing first-hand the demeaning treatment of Black troops he led in World War II.

Henry Hampton was moved to do his last work while marching on the (inaudible) Bridge in Solomon. Through Henry Hampton's remarkable films, which document some of the most troubling and turbulent times in American history, he uses the past to enlighten us about the present, and hopefully to

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shed light into the future.

He doesn't do it in the usual way, he doesn't saturate us with facts, he doesn't talk us to death, he doesn't proselytize. But he allows us to hear the voices, see the faces, share the joys and pain of real people who are living their lives under extraordinary circumstances.

James Baldwin once said that history is not a procession of illustrious people. It is a matter of what happens to a people. Millions of anonymous people is what history is about. Whether it's the millions standing in the hot sun in South Africa or the millions in our country who do not have health care coverage, living under a demeaning welfare system, unable to walk in their neighborhoods or on the streets with safety. These are the people who really make up what it is to live a history.

That's why Henry Hampton's films about our own history move us so equally. And it's why they inspire us to sort out our differences and to renew and reiterate the bonds that do bind us as Americans. He understands there are things about the past we can never let go of, that we should never of the enemy.

The spirits of our ancestors who survived The Great Depression, the courage of Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr., the pattern of so many others who fought the battles that Henry Hampton has illuminated for us in the Harold Fleming (inaudible) group.

American History often treats people as victims, as people buffeted by grand forces they can't do anything about. Henry told an interviewer last year, "That's not true. You find in there the power of the individuals to change their own lives." That's what brings many of us to this room to be together. I believe in that fundamental truth about human nature and about this democracy.

As we do our work in public life, or in foundations, or in advocacy, we spend a lot of time talking about how to perpetuate and strengthen American ideals. Henry Hampton has found a way to do just that. Whether it is through history, through films, through education, or through restoration of historic Black landmarks, he has shown us how to pass on whatever is good and right and just.

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It is a special pleasure for me to be able to join all of you to honor someone who is no longer with us, but who lives in the lives and minds and history of our country. We are honoring someone who is very much with us, who has made his imprint in helping to define and strengthen and deepen our democracy and the ties that bind us together.

Henry Hampton reminds us that a person can be creative, brilliant, successful, all of the things we honor in this society -- sometimes to a fault -- without ever losing their compassion and concern and burning commitment to what binds us together and should lead us into a brighter future.

Please join me in welcoming and congratulating Henry Hampton.

I think Colin wants to be sure you see this beautiful award which is presented by the New World Foundation for distinguished service for American democracy, and which, I did not know it was going to have, but which says "People pay for what they do and still more for what they have become. And they pay for it simply by a life they live."

And, in addition to the plaque, I had a check made up to Henry. And all of us want to give him our best wishes and our strength and hope for the continuing work that he is doing on behalf of American democracy.

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