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Washington, D.C.

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

Sunday, May 8, 1994

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
Washington, D. C.

**PROCEEDINGS**

(11:00 a.m.)

1  
2  
3 **MRS. CLINTON:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you all very  
4 much. Thank you very much.

5  
6 I must say I have been privileged to attend many  
7 commencements, but I have never seen a more enthusiastic in my entire  
8 life.

9  
10 (Applause.)

11 **VOICES:** Happy Mother's Day.

12 **MRS. CLINTON:** Thank you.

13 I want to thank President Trachtenberg and the trustees. I  
14 want to acknowledge the other honorary degree recipients. I want to also  
15 congratulate the award winners, and thank all of you -- faculty, alumni,  
16 family members, citizens -- who are gathered here. But, most of all, I  
17 want to thank the graduates of the Class of 1994.

18  
19 (Applause.)

20 **MRS. CLINTON:** It's a pleasure to be here on this Mother's  
21 Day, and I am sure there are many proud mothers in this audience, but  
22 there are also many grateful sons and daughters, who know they would  
not be clothed in the cap and gown today were it not for the guidance  
and support of their parents and families.

(Applause.)

1 MRS. CLINTON: It is also fitting to have this celebration in  
2 the neighborhood of our nation's greatest monuments, with all that they  
3 represent, on a day that holds great promise for your individual futures as  
4 well as the future of our nation.

5 I feel a special connection to GW for several reasons. For  
6 one, your campus served as the Clinton-Gore Inaugural press center, and  
7 was the gateway for many of the press from around the world when they  
8 came to the Inauguration.

9 (Applause.)

10 MRS. CLINTON: For another, we held one of the health care  
11 task force public hearings in the Smith Center a few months after the  
12 President took office.

13 Several of your alumni play very prominent roles in the  
14 administration, for which we are grateful.

15 On a more personal level, I lived on the GW campus when I  
16 first came to Washington as a college intern in the summer of 1968.

17 (Applause.)

18 MRS. CLINTON: I remember I used to go to Quigley's Drug  
19 Store, which was a soda fountain, at 21st and G, which I gather now is  
20 the geography department, and even occasionally I would have to go to  
21 the library, which I am told now is Lisner Hall.

22 But I enjoyed my time, as I do now, when I sneak away from

1 the White House grounds, usually accompanied by several men with  
2 things in their ears, and walk around this campus or maybe ride my bike.

3 This was a very different time than 1968. To begin with,  
4 GW didn't have Mike Jarvis as a basketball coach.

5 (Applause.)

6 MRS. CLINTON: And I don't recall in '68 hearing anyone  
7 from the campus talk about phrases like "the big dance" or "sweet 16."  
8 Back then, there were no rollerblades or MTV or even ATM cards, and if  
9 somebody said "red hot chill peppers," they were talking about food, not  
10 a rock band.

11 But perhaps the most striking difference between this time  
12 and 26 years ago is that we had very different views of our social  
13 institutions and of our individual and collective roles in society. In many  
14 ways, looking back to 1968 seems as though it is separated from us by  
15 hundreds of years as opposed to the 26.

16 It was a time of great passion and hope, and also a time of  
17 great social dislocation. Some conventions were dying out, and some  
18 were being born. And today we are sailing in the wake of that social and  
19 cultural tidal wave.

20 If you look even at our most basic institution, which we  
21 celebrate today, the American family, you can see the changes. If it ever  
22 did, it no longer does consist of two parents, two children, a dog, a house

1 with a white picket fence, and a station wagon in the driveway. Instead  
2 of families looking like the Cleavers on Leave it to Beaver, we have  
3 families that include test tube babies and surrogate moms.

4 Instead of Sunday night family dinners, we now have cross-  
5 country telephone conference calls. Instead of aunts and uncles and  
6 grandmas and grandpas, we have nannies and day care centers. Instead  
7 of a nuclear family of 4, 2, we have single-parent families, adoptive  
8 families, foster families, step-families from multiple marriages.

9 But remember, as you go forth, no matter what a family unit  
10 looks like today, the family remains the essential ingredient in shaping our  
11 later lives -- and you have no greater responsibility ahead of you.

12 (Applause.)

13 MRS. CLINTON: You know, whether a child grows up with a  
14 single mother who works two jobs or with two parents and all the material  
15 comforts our society affords, that child needs the intangible bonds of love  
16 and support that only caring parents, caring adults can provide.

17 My husband and I talk about this a lot, particularly in the last  
18 weeks since his mother is no longer with us, and the lessons that we have  
19 learned from both of our mothers. As my husband has said, family values  
20 alone cannot feed a hungry child, and material security cannot provide a  
21 moral compass. We need both. We need both within our families. We  
22 need both within our societies.

1 (Applause.)

2 MRS. CLINTON: As we think about our future, and I think  
3 particularly about your futures, as I look out and see all of you who are  
4 about to graduate, I think we all need to recognize the new challenges.  
5 Every time presents an opportunity to the generation that lives in it.  
6 Whether you are generation X, Y, or Z, you will have your time to make  
7 your mark, and you will have it by trying to construct the unique balance  
8 in your own lives between family, work, and service, and faith.

9 And how you strike that balance will change as you go  
10 through life, and how you see your obligations will change. But in line  
11 with what the President's charge was, I recall what may have been the  
12 shortest commencement speech ever given, and perhaps the most  
13 memorable, when, on a day like this, Winston Churchill walked to a  
14 podium, lifted his head, and said, "Never, never, never give up."

15 (Applause.)

16 MRS. CLINTON: And since today is Mother's Day, I think  
17 about all of the mothers who never gave up on any of us.

18 (Applause.)

19 MRS. CLINTON: And I recall what a great American novelist  
20 Alice Walker wrote when she said, "And so our mothers and  
21 grandmothers have more often than not anonymously handed on the  
22 creative spark, the seed of the flower they, themselves, never hoped to

1 see, or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read." Neither my  
2 husband's mother or my mother ever graduated from college. Both of  
3 them believed passionately in what doors education could open, but both  
4 of them also believed in the obligations that you took with you when you  
5 walked through those doors.

6 Our mothers communicated the values that we have adopted  
7 for life. All mothers are the ones who literally and figuratively call us to  
8 the dinner table, remind us to brush our teeth, monitor our progress on  
9 homework, and say the things that as you grow up you say to yourself  
10 you will never say to your own children, "Until you have your own  
11 children" -- and hear unbidden your mother's voice coming from the back  
12 of your throat.

13 (Applause.)

14 MRS. CLINTON: A friend of mine calls mothers every  
15 family's designated worrier. Or, as the old Jewish proverb reminds us,  
16 God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers.

17 (Applause.)

18 MRS. CLINTON: What we are taught, what we see, what  
19 we experience in the family, we carry with us. And what I hope all of you  
20 do is to take the lessons, the lessons of a lifetime, the lessons starting in  
21 the family, the lessons going through the schools that brought you here,  
22 the lessons you have incorporated here at this great university, and decide

1 on your own life's course.

2 There is still too much in our society that tries to put us into  
3 comfortable boxes, that stereotypes us, that expects that because we are  
4 a fill-in-the-blank we will be or we will feel or we will act a certain way.  
5 What is marvelous and wonderful about coming of age in America today  
6 despite all of the problems that we face is you do have so many more  
7 choices to craft your own life than any generation had. You have within  
8 your own power the choices to make about how you will chart this course  
9 that for all of us is through un-navigated waters.

10 When I sat as you sit and graduated from college 25 years  
11 ago, I could never have predicted my life's course. I could never have  
12 written down what I would be doing 10 years, 20 years, or 25 years later.  
13 I cannot tell you what I will be doing 10, 20, or 25 years from now. But I  
14 know, in part because of my family's teaching and the marvelous  
15 education I received, that I've felt prepared to make the choices that were  
16 presented to me day by day.

17 And just as in an individual's life, a society faces the same  
18 kind of challenge. We are now facing such challenges on our national  
19 level. I don't think it's a coincidence that the public issues that concern  
20 me most today -- health care, education, children, public safety -- all  
21 translate back to the family. And it's not hard to see why. When family  
22 members are spread across the country, when traditional family roles are

1 changing, when the traditional bonds of family are too often frayed, we all  
2 need to appreciate that in a very real sense we have become an extended  
3 family. Our community must be a family. And if we recognize that, then  
4 we will accept the larger roles we are forced into as we move out into the  
5 larger community, the community of the extended family.

6 If we find the balance in our individual lives we can then  
7 struggle to help find the balance in our larger community life. And I hope  
8 that that will be part of your struggle, to find a new spirit of community in  
9 our country. As we begin to take care of the larger extended family  
10 around us we will need all of your efforts and best thinking to succeed.  
11 The great issues of the day, the ones your generation will be entrusted to  
12 tackle, are not just about politics and policies or dollars and cents. They  
13 are about our moral obligations as individuals to protect and care for all  
14 within our larger community.

15 If we recognize that obligation, there is so much we can do.  
16 We've heard it from both the introductions that have been made and the  
17 recognitions that have been given as we've heard how individuals have  
18 given of themselves as they have attempted to reach the broader  
19 community that they are a part of. That opportunity lies ahead for you, as  
20 well. And I cannot let this moment go by without talking briefly about  
21 one of our primary obligations, and that is to extend the right for  
22 affordable quality health care to every single American.

1 (Applause.)

2 MRS. CLINTON: The President's profound commitment to  
3 fixing what's broken and preserving what's right in our health care system  
4 is not simply a matter of wanting to reduce our deficit or cut down on  
5 paperwork, although we must do both. His interest, and I hope yours,  
6 goes much deeper than that.

7 Today, nearly 10 million children do not have health  
8 insurance and millions of others are in families that are underinsured.  
9 Millions never see a doctor; nearly 40 percent of all 2-year-olds have not  
10 received immunizations against major childhood diseases; half of today's  
11 private insurance plans do not pay for basic preventive services for  
12 children, such as vaccines and well-baby exams; and all too often children  
13 with chronic illnesses cannot get coverage at all.

14 When you compound the health problems of our children  
15 with other burdens, then the problems our society face grow enormously.  
16 Think about this not just in terms of abstract statistics or the debates that  
17 you'll see over the next months. Think about it in the lives of real people,  
18 and particularly children, and let me just say quickly, two of the stories I  
19 carry around in my own head.

20 I was in the Children's Hospital in Cleveland talking to  
21 parents, as some of you now are and as many of you will be in the next  
22 few years, parents who did not know that when their children were born

1 they would face serious chronic illnesses. And I had a mother say to me  
2 that she and her husband both made a good living, they both were well  
3 educated, they'd had one healthy child and then two children, two little  
4 girls, born with serious health problems.

5 They had always paid for insurance; they had always  
6 counted on it. But all of a sudden, those two little girls were not  
7 insurable, and they went from place to place looking for insurance. They  
8 didn't want a handout, they wanted to pay their way. But no one would  
9 insure two little girls against certain and expensive medical care because  
10 they already were sick.

11 And finally, the mother told me that she realized she would  
12 never, under our current system, be able to insure her daughters when a  
13 man across a table she was begging for some way to get insurance  
14 looked at her and said, "You just don't understand. We don't insure  
15 burning houses." Think, if you will, all of us who are mothers on this  
16 Mother's Day, how we would feel if that had been said about one of you,  
17 one of our children.

18 And I think also about the man who grabbed my hand as I  
19 left a speech here in Washington and said to me, you know, I didn't really  
20 understand what you and your husband were talking about. I've always  
21 been well-insured, and thank God my family has always been pretty  
22 healthy. But I have a secretary in my office who told me what had

1 happened in her family, where two of her grandchildren, two cousins who  
2 lived together with their families in the same big old rambling house, both  
3 got sick.

4 One of those little cousins was the child of a family with  
5 insurance. She was taken to the hospital, she was diagnosed with  
6 meningitis, she was admitted, and she was cured. The other little cousin  
7 also had meningitis, but her family didn't have any insurance. They took  
8 her to one hospital; they were referred to another hospital. They sat in  
9 the emergency room and went through all of the rigmarole that we go  
10 through to try to prove that we deserve to have medical care, and finally  
11 she was looked at, given two baby aspirins, and sent home. She died on  
12 the day her cousin was discharged. The little brother of the girl who died  
13 then came down with the same illness. The hospital that had turned  
14 away his sister took him as a charity case.

15 I don't want another year to go by where we have to hear  
16 stories like this. Not one of our children deserves to have any of that  
17 happen to him.

18 (Applause.)

19 MRS. CLINTON: So, as we face all of these problems --  
20 health care, violence, reforming the welfare system, making our economy  
21 grow again -- let's put it into perspective.

22 I leave later today to go to South Africa to attend on Tuesday

1 one of the most extraordinary events of the 20th century.

2 (Applause.)

3 MRS. CLINTON: When I think of the challenges facing the  
4 brave men and women who have worked their way to this point in that  
5 country's history, I think many of our problems pale in comparison. Yet  
6 we have our own problems. In addition to wanting to help countries like  
7 South Africa realize their own potential, let's recommit ourselves to  
8 making this country, in this time, realize its own potential and give to all  
9 of you and all of our children the chance to live up to their own God-given  
10 potential.

11 Let's make America work for all of us.

12 Thank you all very much.

13 (Standing ovation.)

14 (Whereupon, at 11:21 a.m., the speech concluded.)