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Women's Legal Defense Fund

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
TO WOMEN'S LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

Washington, DC

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much, Judy. Thank you mostly for your 20 years of commitment and service and the manner in which you have done it, because you have done it with joy and grace and fun. And many of us who have watched you over the years have marveled at your capacity to keep going and to do it more often than not with a smile. And we are very grateful for that example to all of the rest of us. (Applause.)

I want to add my thanks to Kathleen Black and Tim Boggs for their work on behalf of this lunch, which will benefit the fund and will enable the fund to not only continue it's efforts but we hope expand them.

I want personally to thank my friend, Ellen Malcolm, for not only the work she has done over the years on behalf of women and particularly her marvelous brainchild, Emily's List, but for showing us again grace under pressure as she kept going through the false alarms -- (laughter) -- knowing full well that there was probably some disgruntled opponent pulling the signal over and over again -- (laughter) -- hoping to deter her and us. (Applause.)

And I am very honored to be on the same program with Pauline Schneider, who has a remarkable career already and is embarking on yet another chapter of firsts. And those of us who have followed her and watched her accomplishments are very proud that the DC Bar has recognized you in the way that it has, and looking forward to your leadership. Congratulations, Pauline. (Applause.)

I feel like starting by saying to all of my friends and colleagues who are out there, none of whom I can see because of the lights in my eyes, but I know you are there, and Judy and Pauline and I tried to locate you in any way we could during the lunch. I feel like saying thank you, because many of you in this room have not only worked hard over the years to do exactly what Judy was explaining -- to live lives of integrity, to fulfill all of your various roles, but to include in those lives

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a commitment to service and a particular concern about women and children. And many of you are truly role models. And I know that word is used often these days, but it is something that I think we ought to celebrate, because so many of you, in ways you may not even know, serve to bolster and support the rest of us, and serve as examples for many young women who are watching you, working with you, trying to understand how you navigate your own lives.

Lives don't come with any set of directions or any guidebooks. We wish sometimes that they would. It would make everything so much simpler. And every generation faces new challenges. But I think it is fair to say that women in America at this point in our collective history truly are charting new roots to personal fulfillment, to social responsibility, to caring and nurturing, to achievement, in ways that could only be dimly perceived and dreamt about by earlier generations.

And so in a very real way, this room is filled with role models. And I want to celebrate and thank every one of you for the contributions you are making, and also to ask each of us who is here today to remember the countless women who are still struggling to define their own lives, often against great personal and social odds.

That is particularly true in our country today where the differences between women of education, of confidence, of a future-oriented perspective, stand so starkly in contrast to the other women in our country who do not yet have the real opportunities to make their own lives, to find their own voices, to forge their own identities.

And one of the great marks of the Women's Legal Defense Fund and of so many of the other related organizations that have fought on behalf of women and children and families, is their continuing recognition that until every woman in America does have the opportunity to take advantage of equal educational, equal employment, equal social chances, then none of us can be fully satisfied with our own personal achievements. (Applause.)

I have felt that particularly strongly again during this past year, as I have traveled around our country talking about health care. And I appreciated greatly Judy's discussion of it, because, yes, this is a national issue. Yes, it will affect men and women. But in a very real way, it is at core a woman's issue. It is, for better or worse, women who are often the health care decision-makers. It is women who look after their children themselves and usually their husbands. It is women who care for aging older relatives.

This health care debate is in many respects a debate about women's security and women's future opportunities. And I wish I could just lift all of you up and take you with me

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on a journey to all of the places I've been and all of the voices I've heard, to look into the eyes of the women and men and children who have shared their stories with me.

I have rarely heard a story in a griping, bitter tone. I have mostly heard stories that come deep from inside -- often some pain, but more often bewilderment and confusion. I think about the woman in New Orleans who had worked for the same company for more than 15 years, who never made very much money as a bookkeeper, but enough to raise her child after her divorce, get him safely into the world, to feel as though she were a contributing, effective member of society. And how she tried every year to take care of herself, so that she would at her own expense go to a physician to have a physical exam.

And I remember sitting with her as she told me how it felt to have gone to her doctor, who then referred her to a surgeon because he found a lump in her breast, and to have the surgeon tell her that if she had insurance, he would biopsy it; but since she did not, he would watch it. She sat there telling me this story with a sense of confusion about how this could have happened to her since she had tried always to do what she thought was right.

I think about the couple I met in Las Vegas in a hospital and how they told me that the husband, who worked full-time, had a choice to make when it came time to sign up for insurance. And he carefully with his wife sat down and looked at their finances, and they decided very rationally to insure the husband, who was the primary breadwinner and their four children, but to leave the wife uninsured. And after making that decision, which was strictly on the basis of what they could afford, the wife became pregnant.

When I met them she was about a month away from delivery. And she and he talked to me about the choices they were still making, driven by financial considerations, such that as she looked forward to delivering her fifth child, she thought she would have to forego having any anesthesia. She would not have the epidural because the cost of the epidural was for them the cost of their monthly mortgage payment. And she could not in her own mind justify paying that money.

I remember telling that story at a large meeting in New York. And after it was over a woman in the audience who was an investment banker, well educated, well compensated, also pregnant, came up and said, I want to pay for that woman's medical expenses. I put her in touch with the couple. That is what happened. So it was one of those good news, bad news stories. Yes, if we find out about people's needs on a personal, individual basis, we take care of them. But those stories are countless around the country. I can't possibly tell everyone to somebody who will pay on their own to take care of an unmet medical cost.

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I think of all of these faces, and particularly the faces of women -- women who worry about their children because they have some preexisting condition, and their insurance policy has a lifetime limit, which will soon be met. And then they don't know where they will find the financial means to continue the treatment for their child.

I think about the women who are taking care of husbands with Alzheimer's or strokes and how they are watching their incomes and their energy be depleted because of their commitment borne out of years of love that they want to take care of their husband, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to be able to afford emotionally or financially to do so.

I see all these faces and I hear all these stories, and that is to me what this whole health care debate is about. Just as the child care debate, just as pregnancy discrimination and all that it meant, just as equal employment and civil rights, they are not just about abstract concepts, they are about real people and their lives. They are ultimately about you and me. Because certainly in this health care debate, it is absolutely clear that there but for the grace of God go any of us, no matter how well insured today, no matter how well off or supposedly secure in a job, none of us in this room can predict

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at the same cost that we do today.

The only way for all of us to be secure, and particularly for those among us who already are vulnerable or are more likely to become vulnerable -- women and their children -- to be taken care of is to absolutely commit ourselves to giving health care coverage to every single American.
(Applause.)

That is what this debate is really all about. There are many dimensions to it. There are economic considerations. Because if you look at the figures and you do the analysis, we will save money if we engage in comprehensive health care reform that contains costs within our system and reallocates money away from useless paperwork and bureaucracy toward actual care. We will save money in businesses, we will save money in households, we will save money in local, state and the federal government.

It also has a social justice dimension. I left a large gathering like this in Washington a few months ago, and a man grabbed my hand, introduced himself and said, I never really knew what you and your husband were talking about before. I do now. And he told me about a woman who worked in his office, a secretary. And this woman had two grandchildren. They lived

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together, even though they were in separate families because her children had moved in together to share expenses.

One grandchild, a little girl, the age of seven, came down with a very high fever, was taken to the hospital, diagnosed with meningitis, admitted, given appropriate treatment. Her parents had health insurance. The little girl's cousin came down with a high fever. She went first to one hospital, where the fact that she had a mother who'd been divorced, who had a minimum wage job that didn't pay health insurance, meant that she was sent to another hospital.

She went to the second hospital's emergency room, sat there for hours. Upon finding there was no insurance, the mother was given baby Tylenol, the child was sent home -- from the same hospital where her cousin was recovering from the same thing -- meningitis.

On the day that the older child was discharged from the hospital, her cousin died. And when I called and we verified these facts, I learned that the sibling, the brother of the child who died, also then came down with meningitis. And this time the hospital said, oh, we will take him as a charity case.

So there's a social justice dimension to this. I want to live in a country where the care of children is not determined on whether or not their parents have health insurance. (Applause.)

And there is also a political dimension, because this is a real problem that affects every one of us. It certainly affects the 40 million without insurance more acutely, but there are 81 million Americans with preexisting conditions, any one of whom could lose insurance at any time or have it priced so high that you can't afford it.

The political system needs to respond. This is an issue that should go beyond partisan politics. This is an issue that the Congress should act on, because it is the right thing to do for the American people. (Applause.)

And finally, this is an issue that has an ethical dimension, a moral dimension. It says a lot about what kind of people we are, what our values are, what we care about. It says a lot about what kind of country we are going to have.

I don't think any of us would deny that as we move toward the dawn of the 21st century, our country is going through a transition. There are always transitions as we end and move toward new eras; and really the post-World War II era, with the end of the Cold War, is ending, and a new world order, a new set of challenges is confronting us, both domestically and abroad.

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It will take some time to sort our way through it. These are complex issues that demand careful and prudent responses. But one of the obvious challenges is whether we as a nation, the longest surviving democracy, will find strength in our diversity, will meld together the different ethnic, racial, religious, experienced backgrounds that make America so great in ways that enable us to move with confidence and hope into the future. And what our values will be that will guide that journey.

I am confident that we will make the right decisions. But I also know it will not be an easy process, because if we are, as my husband often says, to make change our friend, we have to be willing to change. And we have to be willing to reach out and work with others who are not like us. That is always threatening. And it is always difficult to achieve.

But this health care debate gives us an historic opportunity to stake a claim for the future by saying that, yes, we will solve this problem, but we will do it because we want, again, for America to be a caring, compassionate country that understands our strength is in our communities and is willing to help make it possible for children from every corner to realize their own God-given potentials.

One of the reasons I have always admired and supported the Fund is because it has always stood for the fundamental value that every human being has worth and deserves respect. We want now for that fundamental value to be reestablished in our country. And one of the ways to do it is to make sure every American has the security of knowing she and her children will be taken care of so that they then can look toward the future with confidence and become responsible, contributing members of a new -- new and hopeful future for this great country.

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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