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National Education Association

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SPEECH OF THE FIRST LADY  
AT NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION CONVENTION  
New Orleans, Louisiana

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for that warm welcome. Thank you for all that you have done and are doing every single day across this country for our children. Thank you for your leadership at the local, state and national level on behalf of education and other issues that affect our children and our nation's future. Thank you, Keith Geiger, for your leadership and for your commitment to making this country be what it should be for our children. And thank you all for honoring me with the Mary Hatwood-Futrell\* Award that Keith delivered.

I was honored to receive it and very pleased to have a chance to visit with Keith recently when he came to the White House to deliver it on behalf of the NEA. I am also delighted to be here with all of your officers and your wonderful staff in Washington. And I'm pleased that I could bring with me one of your former staff members, Debra Delee\*, who is now doing an excellent job at the Democratic National Committee.

I was fortunate enough to view the video that you just saw, and it was a little difficult for me seeing again the faces of the people whom I have met, particularly the children who read their letters about health care. And I was very pleased that you had a chance also to see their faces and to hear their words and to know how deep their concerns are.

But you know that because you see children on a daily basis. You understand that our nation's obligation to improve the health and education of our people is not simply an economic or political imperative. It is a moral imperative. It speaks to our basic humanity and who we are as a people.

And that is why, with your help, this President has proposed a comprehensive agenda to safeguard the future of America's children. And I want for a minute just to focus on what you and the President and supportive members of Congress have already accomplished, particularly in the field of education.

If we think back to two years ago when my husband was running for president, and when he came and spoke to many of you, we did not believe then that we would have 3 million new jobs as we do

MORE

today, 18 months into a new administration. We did not believe then that we would begin to get our fiscal house in order and see the kind of decline in the deficits that is real and absolutely putting us on the right track. We did not believe then we would see the list of legislative accomplishments that were listed on the video ranging from beginning to get some control over handguns in this country through the Brady bill and the ban on assault weapons.

We did not think we would have the kind of legislative achievements that someone who told you, as my husband did, that he wanted to be the education president, could achieve in a relatively short period of time. But the record speaks for itself, and despite often people's attempts to deny or distort what you and this administration are accomplishing.

Finally, if you are, as I am, a believer that the truth wins out, then the truth is winning in America and will continue to win on behalf of the people of this country.

The President promised a lifelong learning system. And with only a few months to go in the 103rd Congress, look at what has already been achieved to realize that vision. The Corporation for National and Community Service will be placing 20,000 young people in our communities and our neighborhoods to do national service starting this fall, thanks to you and your support for national and community service.

We have reformed the Head Start program and reauthorized it. And because of that, we will, if we see our reauthorization through and achieve the appropriations we require, many thousands more young children having a chance for a real head start for their educational experience.

We have with your help and guidance achieved a landmark piece of educational legislation with the Goals 2000 education legislation to educate America. It is a piece of legislation that does not tell you from the top of Washington what you should be doing in your classrooms and in your schools. It sets goals and standards, but then, because of this President's belief that the best solutions for education reside in the interactions between children and their teachers and among teachers working together, it says you figure out how to achieve these standards. You are the real experts in education in America.

But let me warn you -- there are forces at work in this country who do not believe in you and do not believe in our children and do not believe this country should have goals for our education system that you and our children achieve together. Those forces want to undo the work that is represented in Goals 2000. I ask you to

MORE

stand firm for the President's vision that this country can achieve goals because we have dedicated educators, concerned parents, and students who want to learn and can do so if given the encouragement.

This President's vision has already resulted in the School to Work Opportunities Act. What a great piece of legislation, that again, you helped achieve. For too long, the children who do not go on to college, the forgotten half who do not share the kind of final educational experience that most of us in this hall do, carrying our four-year degrees out of our colleges, for too long those young people have been ignored by our education and social systems. And it is finally time, and this President understands it, when we hold out a hand to young people who want the additional skills and training, not every person has to go to college to be a success. Let's give success to these young people who can serve their country and their families.

And for all who do want to go on to college, one of the most important pieces of legislation that has been passed in 50 years was passed in this Congress again, thanks to the President's vision and to your help. We finally now have cut through the red tape, the bureaucracy, the extra administrative costs, to create a system that will permit direct lending for college loans to the young people who need them in order to go on to college to realize their own personal dreams.

That is what has been achieved, and I do not know any president or any secretary of education or any group of people who are concerned about education as you are, who have more to be proud of because of what has been achieved. But we face two more legislative challenges before Congress adjourns.

First, we have to complete work on the reform and reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It has passed the House of Representatives; it awaits action in the full Senate.

And we also have to work to create support for the Reemployment Act of 1994 which will give workers an alternative to what we now call the unemployment system. We don't need an unemployment system in America. We need a reemployment system in America.

And finally, we face the challenge of funding adequately the education and training reforms such as Head Start and Goals 2000 that has already been passed in the Congress. We understand, and my husband understands, because he was the first president in many years to present a responsible budget with trustworthy numbers. He was the

MORE

first president to present three budgets in a row with declining deficits for the first time since Harry Truman was president.

So he understands what it means to be fiscally responsible, but he also understands that within those fiscal restraints, there is no better investment than to invest in the education and training of all of our children from preschool all the way through their working lives. And we need your help to make that happen.

So much has been accomplished despite the naysayers, despite the pessimists, despite those who deny reality. But we still have a long way to go before we can honestly say we have created an environment where no child will be left behind, where every child will be given the kind of security and education and health care that that child needs. But we are beginning to put together not only the vision but the structure to make that happen so that our children will be better educated, they will be safer, they will be able, if we pass the crime bill once and for all after seven years of trying to, walk to school in safety again, to play in parks in safety again.

But as part of that vision that the President has talked about, we know that too many of our children come to school every day without adequate health care. Too many of our children face problems because of health in their families where the families are not secure or able to provide for their children. Health care should be, must be, can be a right for every American if we act and we act now.

All of you know, because you see the children of our country, why we are struggling so hard to achieve what is called universal coverage, what the President calls guaranteed insurance for every American. You see the stories. Every one of you, whether you're a teacher, administrator, a cafeteria worker, a school bus driver, or anyone else who works to keep our schools going every day, you have a story that you could tell.

I have more stories than I wish I had. I have been privileged for more than 25 years to work on behalf of children's needs. I have been in and out of schools and hospitals, in and out of homes and community centers. I have looked into the eyes of far too many children whose health needs are not being met. I have listened to far too many parents who tell me how they cannot manage to meet their own children's health needs.

I don't want to have to keep hearing these stories. I don't want to have to keep receiving the now more than 1 million letters from children and mothers and fathers that I have read. And yet, I know that the struggle to insure every American is far from over, despite how much progress we have made toward that goal. In

MORE

many respects, it is now just beginning as we move to the House and Senate floors with bills that will guarantee health care coverage and have to fight through the opposition to that goal.

I want to speak for just a few minutes about what we should be trying to achieve. You understand it. The NEA and many of you in your local and state affiliates have supported health care reform, and I am very grateful. It has made a difference. But now we must redouble our efforts. Because, as with any significant piece of social legislation, you will face very strong and organized opposition.

I heard Keith say, as in so many ways, Eleanor Roosevelt was here before I. She was here before most of us. In her persistent articulation of what needs to be fixed in America, she pricked our consciences. It has been said that what she did was to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

And that is what makes her live in our memories and why she is such an example to millions of people all over the world today. Because she used her position of privilege, her position to speak out on behalf of those who had no voice. You must do the same. You must join with the President, me, all of us in Washington who are trying to give voice to the literally millions and millions of Americans for whom this debate over health care reform is not apolitical issue, not an abstract, academic discussion, but literally a matter of life or death.

Who are these Americans? How do we think about them? I suggest you look to your right, your left, in front of you and behind you. Because the Americans of whom I speak are all of us. There is not one of us who has the security in this, the greatest of all countries and economies, that we will have health insurance at an affordable price when we need it at any time in our lives now and into the future. For too many Americans, they are one job away from not having health security. They are one divorce away from not having it. They are one illness or accident away. No one in America except the very rich are secure. And that is wrong. Every American deserves health security.

This debate will come down to whether or not the Congress of the United States is able to hear and see the problems in front of their eyes and extend health insurance coverage to every American or whether they will hear the well-organized voices of opposition. But that is the way it has always been. Think back. At every point when we were attempting to provide security for every American, we heard the same arguments against doing that. Social security was an issue in the eyes of the opposition that would bankrupt America, would make people lazy, give them no incentive to

MORE

work to save for their old age. Every argument you hear today was heard then 60 years ago. Thankfully, we had members of Congress who heard and acted on what they saw in front of their eyes -- namely, that older people in American deserve to have their retirements secure.

And then 30 years later, we face the same opposition with Medicare. Medicare was going to absolutely destroy our American way of life, destroy American medicine and our health care system. Thankfully, we had leadership that saw what was happening with older Americans and acted to provide them with health security. We've heard the same arguments when it comes to the minimum wage. Oh, my goodness, if you raise the minimum wage, no businesses will be able to continue. Small business will be bankrupted. There will be no opportunities for economic expansion.

Again, the opposition was wrong and the people who care about what happens to ordinary, average working, middle-class Americans were right. And what we have to do is to build on social legislation like social security, Medicare, the minimum wage, all of which made America stronger to make sure we give universal health care coverage to every American because that will make America stronger as well.

Now during the next weeks, people will say, well, we don't really need universal coverage. We can get by without it. Well you know that that is just not the case. Universal coverage is essential to help control and contain health care costs. Without it, those of you in this hall who have health insurance will continue to subsidize people who do not. You will continue to pay for those whose employers and those employees do not pay for themselves. That is not fair.

If you have everyone in the system, you can begin to make sure that costs do not get shifted from the uninsured and the underinsured to those of us with insurance. That is the kind of system that will make it possible for us to take care of more people, to emphasize primary and preventive health care, to make sure that we retain choice because we will have a system in which individuals will get to choose who their doctor is, to make sure that what we do will put us on a firm financial footing for the future.

And yet there will be those who say, no, we cannot do this. It will not work. Let me suggest to you there's a very simple set of questions to ask. Those who say universal coverage will not work, ask them if they want to repeal social security or Medicare. Ask them if they're willing to give up on what those two programs have done to make Americans secure. If you hear from members of Congress that they do not believe that hard-working, middle-class

MORE

Americans should have health insurance coverage, ask them then why they have figured out a way to give members of Congress guaranteed, affordable health care coverage.

Some members of Congress do not like it when I say that. They do not like it when I suggest that you ask your member of Congress, especially those who are not in favor of universal coverage, why they can do it for themselves and not for your neighbors, friends and relatives. But for those members of Congress who are fighting hard to give Americans what they have which is guaranteed, affordable health care coverage, make sure they know that you will recognize their commitment and help support them in the battles to come.

If you strip away all of the rhetoric, what you have basically are several camps of opponents. You have opponents who ideologically do not believe that we should extend health care coverage to every American. I respect that position, but I think they are dead wrong, and they are not living in the real world that you and I see every single day.

There are opponents of health care reform who are concerned that health care reform, especially building on our employer-employee system, will cost jobs. Remind them that that was the same argument used against social security, Medicare, and the minimum wage, and it never, ever was proved to have any effect. What we are asking for is health security for everyone in a private system where the employers and the employees bear their fair share. That is an American solution to the health care system problem that we confront in our country.

And finally, there are opponents, who for their own political purposes, do not want this president to continue the success he has enjoyed for the last 18 months. They want to turn back the clock to a time when the rich were taken care of, the poor were subsidized, but everybody in the middle was basically left out. This president ran for the presidency because he was sick and tired of everybody in this country who works hard for a living, plays by the rules, makes a contribution, being forgotten in Washington. And that is why he has worked so hard to change this national agenda.

But unless Americans understand what is at stake in this health care debate and how many issues are wrapped up in it, then the opponents will think they have a free ride, that they can continue to be negative, they can continue to say no, they can continue to feed gridlock and partisanship when what this country needs is to move beyond politics as usual, to move beyond partisan rhetoric. Health care is not a political issue. When you look in the eyes of a sick

MORE

child, you are not looking at a Republican or a Democrat, you are looking at an American who deserves to be taken care of.

And so as we leave this hall, as you finish your assembly in a few days, please take home to every corner of this great country why you personally and why the NEA and why a majority of Americans favor universal coverage. In every single poll that has been done, more than 70 percent of Americans know what is right -- that is, universal coverage built on employer-employee system that contains costs.

And explain to your friends and neighbors that this is not just an economic issue -- although it is that -- it is because we are spending more money than we need to on our health care system. We can do better. We can actually extend care to more people if we are more efficient and careful and if we emphasize primary and preventive health care and begin to convince people that the emergency room is not their family doctor. We can save money and do a better job.

And tell your friends and neighbors that it's also a social issue. You know sometimes people say, and I know they write about me, they say, you know, I get so intense, I get so serious, you know, all of that. I really do have a sense of humor. I promise. But it's hard for me to be humorous about the problems I see in the health care system. I don't know how to make a joke out of the stories that I've heard. I don't know how anyone can ignore what all of us see. This is a social problem that needs to be resolved. It is not fair -- (Tape ends.)

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