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Conference on Youth Violence

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REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
TO THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON YOUTH VIOLENCE
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you so much, and thank you Secretary Riley, we have been friends and allies for many years and I am so grateful for his leadership on behalf of education for our entire country. I want to thank my friend Deborah Prothrow-Stith who years ago first taught me that violence is a public health epidemic. She made it very clear that if we had a disease in our country that was killing 65 people a day, this country would be mobilized. We would not rest until we had figured out how to stamp out that epidemic. Particularly when it was including in its death 7 young people a day. And now we know there is an epidemic of violence and yet there are still some among us who either refuse to accept the ravages of that epidemic or have other agendas besides the saving of lives and the reforming of people's futures. And it is imperative that conferences like this including people like all youth around this country speak out loudly and clearly to what your elected representatives know that on this issue as with many others, when it comes to violence enough is enough and America wants action now.

I want to especially thank all the cities that sent teens here to this conference. Because each of you have made a step as Secretary says starting with the first conference last year, of recognizing the problem that violence particularly youth violence poses to our society. We know we have to form partnerships among all different kinds of people in every community and we have to have partnerships at the local, state, and federal level in order to combat the ravages of violence. But I particularly want to thank the young people who are here and I want to thank Lucretia for that welcome when I came and sat down. I love that enthusiasm, I love the sound of young voices speaking out on what they care about. Truly your being here and your being willing to commit yourselves to finding solutions is very significant. And I am grateful for your accepting this responsibility.

This conference as those of you who are participants know, is about possibility and also about success. And is about never, never, giving up. I often give commencement speeches and I've heard many and I'm sure all of you in this room have. But the

favorite I've ever heard about was the one Winston Churchill gave at his prep school when he strode to the podium and with very few introductory words said, "Never, never, never give up." That is the way I feel about many of the issues facing our country today. And it is also the way I feel about every single young person in our country today. Every young man or woman, every boy or girl, has a God given potential that we at our herald give up on. And it is incumbent upon us, as representatives of the adult community of this society, to recommit ourselves to youth. The young people who are here are pledging to you, "If you don't give up on yourself, we will not give up on you."

We also have to admit it is a lot harder in many ways growing up today than it was when most of us of a certain age in this room were coming up. It is much harder. I can remember times when kids in my neighborhood would take on kids from another neighborhood. I probably shouldn't say this you'll hear more stories about my life. But I can remember and since I was kind of a tomboy I was often involved in some of those discussions that would occur. But that's what they mostly were they were discussions when we thought up the worst things we could call each other. Occasionally there be fists thrown and people rolling on the ground. Not me I was standing there trying to say, "Now, boys, now boys." For most of us of a certain age we can remember it happening. But you know, the occasional black eye, the occasional hurtful word, the occasional pushing and shoving that went on, I just thank God that given the strong emotions that accompany growing up no matter who you are or where you grow up we did not have guns, we did not have assault weapons, so when tempers got hot the most we could do to one another is yell and scream and push and shove and occasionally throw a punch.

Think of what it is like today where the young people in this room and the millions others like them are immersed in a culture of violence. A culture that in so many ways glorifies violence. We see it everyday on television, we see it in our movies, but worst of all we see it every single day on the streets and neighborhoods where children are trying to grow up. Where many, too many in effect are raising themselves. In too many neighborhoods gunfire is a daily ritual of life, and uzi is a badge of honor, instead of a mark of cowardice, which it truly is. A bullet wound is an emblem of adulthood. As I've traveled from hospital to hospital in the last year and a half, and I've gone into emergency rooms, what I heard over and over again is that the epidemic Deborah warned us about is now raging in so many of our communities. It is different when you see thirteen and fourteen year-olds brought in with bullet wounds. It is different still when they are brought in not with one bullet, but multiple bullets from assault weapon. It is different still when the techniques of medicine cannot even keep up with the carnage that is daily brought through the doors of your emergency rooms.

You go to any emergency room in a medium size city, let alone a large city in our country, and you talk to the doctors and the nurses there as I have. If you do not believe violence is an epidemic, you will become quickly convinced as they tell you the stories of struggling to save thirteen and fourteen year old lives. Sometimes saving those lives only to send those young men out on the street knowing they are likely to be back in that emergency room in a relatively short period of time.

We see it everyday as we pick up our newspapers. I picked up a newspaper here in Washington today and read about another thirteen year old gunned down on the street corner. In Washington last summer, gun shots were fired at a public swimming pool packed with children trying to escape the 90 degree heat. A few months ago, a four-year old girl was fatally shot in the head when groups of youngsters opened fire on an elementary school playground. And during the past week a one year-old was grazed by a bullet from a gunfight. That thirteen year-old who died, it appears his killer is also thirteen years-old. What does it say about a society that has graduated from taunts and yells and thrown punches and raised fists--, that all of us remember from school yard fights, neighborhood fights in the past. To thirteen year-olds being gunned down on street corners, a four year olds being killed on playgrounds, and one year olds being grazed by bullets.

Over and over we see that children are not only the victims of violence but all too frequently the perpetrators. In the 1980's more than 11,000 people died as a result of homicide committed by high school age young people. Gunfire and drive by shootings and violence have become so common place that many people don't even notice it or talk about it anymore. In matter of fact ways children tell you they're not sure they will live to finish high school. It is not only the academic challenges they confront, it's the challenges to their physical safety. There is as you know, no simple answer to this epidemic of youth violence. That's why we brought federal agencies together to try to fulfill the President's pledge to begin at least to address this problem. That's why we need a comprehensive strategy that emphasizes responsibility and opportunity and community. It's why we need all the other pieces of security that the President is working on. It is important to do things like health reform, so that every young person has a good healthy start in life. It is important to do welfare reform so that we once again reward independence and self-sufficiency. It's important to have job training programs and life-long learning and the legislation that Secretary Riley shepherded through to the Congress that will make an enormous difference in how young people learn and what they learn and what they're prepared to do once they finish school.

It is also right, it is absolutely critical, that this country not walk away again from dealing with crime, as it has so

many times in the past and did again last week. You know, the crime bill has been around for 6 years. The average criminal serves four years in jail. There's been a lot of tough talk about crime going back a lot of years. All kinds of rhetoric. Mostly hot air not connected to doing anything positive, to reaching out a helping hand, to make stricter and surer, neither smart nor tough, but boy a lot of talk. We're seeing it again because some people unfortunately would rather practice their own brand of partisan politics or personal advantage than to deal with the problems that are right before their eyes. Those who voted against the crime bill were willing to sacrifice all the achievements represented at this conference. Those who voted against the bill weren't listening to the voices of young people who are with us today or were with us last year. They can testify the importance of recreational facilities, education programs, family support services, and other preventive measures that nurture hope and possibility in our young people. Those who voted against that bill last week don't seem to care that our children cannot feel safe at school. A recent survey showed that fifteen percent of school children believe there are gangs in their school. Almost one in ten of students in high school reported that in the previous month they had been in at least one serious physical fight. Those who voted against the bill don't seem to care that this pattern goes on and on just as it has for the past six years, when time after time, Congress caved in to the pressures of special interest, instead of making this legislation law.

The crime bill is not perfect; no piece of legislation is. I bet every one of us would have written it slightly differently, we would have added or taken out according to what we thought was best. It is a critical, important, and necessary start. And it is for the first time a piece of legislation that lays down the twin principles of fighting crime, punishment and prevention. It is clear that we face a choice, the President and I were in church yesterday we heard a great sermon, and one of the lines from it that I will always remember is when the preacher said, "You know you can make a choice in your life, but you can't pick the consequences." I think about that a lot because every day we make choices, but we cannot be told the consequences that swell from those choices. So what are the consequences of turning down the crime bill? Well, the consequences are that once again we would have turned our backs on the problems you are hearing discussed. Once again we will have substituted rhetoric for reality. Once again we will have seen in-action triumph over action. Now we can focus on all the things we want to change, or we can say, this is a mission we are on and this is where it starts to try to begin to deal with the epidemic of violence.

Let's look at some of these pieces of this crime bill that are so important. Things like YES, Y-E-S, Youth Employment Skills program. I think it's important to focus on young people

in high unemployment areas to give them the skills they need to be able to find jobs. I think that's a goal for society and I know it will help to prevent crime. I wish the folks on Capitol Hill would agree. Things like the Community Schools Program, that will give grants to community groups to keep schools open after hours and on weekends and during the summer so that kids can have a place to go and stay out of trouble. Safe places where they can engage in learning and recreation, where there can be adult mentors and coaches. We know from the examples of such schools around our country that if schools are transformed into safe havens for youngsters, children will be safer. I'm not sure what the folks in Congress who were voting against the crime bill think we can do with our children after school when it takes both parents in a home working or when it takes a single parent working and they then live in fear about what happens to their children on the streets between the time school is over and the time they get home for dinner. I want children to have safe havens and the crime bill would be a good start to that. Programs like the Gang Resistance Education And Training Program called, G.R.E.A.T., already a proven success. I've been in a lot of neighborhoods, places where many of you come from and you know you fight a losing battle year in and year out to try to convince young people not to join gangs. Why? Because the gangs provide a, "haven", not safe but a haven. It provides a family if you will. It provides a network of people who say they will look out for each other. It fills a vacuum in the lives of thousands and thousands of youngsters. Now wouldn't it be better if we had a positive alternative a program like GREAT where youngsters can be safe in coming together and working together and learn how to resist the faults and in many ways dangerous, seductive pleasures that the gang propose in the short run which leads to death and misery for so many children. I think we should vote for gang resistance programs instead of letting more and more children end up in the gangs.

Look how programs like Police Partnerships for Children, programs where police officers will take their time to work with young people, coupling that with community policing where we again get police officers on the street. Somebody that a young person can hopefully find some support from, but if we turn our back on these partnerships that police are offering, we lose an opportunity to transform our police officers not only into instruments of punishment but also instruments of prevention. And if we also turn our back on this crime bill we walk away from one of the most important advances on behalf of women, the Violence Against Women Act. It is time we stood up and said women should not be victimized, whether it is in the home, or on the street and we need to give our law enforcement officials the tools to protect women. It has gone on long enough, ignoring and denying the depth of the problem of violence against women this crime bill begins to turn that around. And that's another reason.

Now if you've heard all of this prevention, and I've only touched the tip of the old prevention iceberg that is in that crime bill, with the other elements: a hundred thousand more police on the streets, a ban on handgun ownership for minors. A ban on assault weapons that only lead to death and injury. A three strikes and you're out bill so that violent offenders can be taken off the street. And I see these young men clapping wildly because they know what happens in their neighborhoods. You take all of that and it adds up to a well-balanced reasonable approach that mixes both prevention and punishment. An approach that has been worked out and struggled over with lots of input from people from the grassroots level.

Those of you participating in this conference know first hand what it will take in your own hometowns to combat violence. You also know that even though a crime bill is a critical step in putting this society on the right track for combating violence it alone can't do the job either. It's not a panacea. If the President signs that crime bill it's not going to solve all of our problems. It's not going to keep families together, it's not going to get adults to give children the type of supervision, love, discipline, and attention little children need. It's not going to instill a sense of faith and responsibility in the souls of young people who have been damaged and alienated, it's not going to do those things. It is going to begin to put into place people and institutions and programs that can help lead to those outcomes. It can give people a chance once again to feel they are a part of something bigger than themselves. And to lay a line very clearly that despite all the tough talk about crime in the last decade has become obscure, and that line is, you have to know the difference between right and wrong and we're going to hold you responsible for the choices and the consequences of those choices. It begins to once again fight the violence in society. This whole crime debate, the whole issue of youth violence, is an indication of something much deeper and more profound. It is an indication of literally millions of Americans walking away from their responsibilities. And that is what we're ultimately trying to reverse. We are trying again, against tremendous odds to say the individual is responsible for his or her actions. But society is also responsible for individuals. It is not an either or, it's not a liberal and conservative, that old stuff is so out of date. That is like beyond talking about. Some people think they can answer every problem by saying, "Oh that's liberal. Oh, that's conservative." Or maybe they step further on down the road of meaningless analysis and say, "Oh, that's republican. Oh, that's democrat." An assault weapon doesn't care what political party you are. An assault weapon in a drive by shooting doesn't even care if you're a member of the National Rifle Association.

Let's just stop for a minute and ask ourselves, "Haven't we wasted enough lives, haven't we lost enough young men and women,

to prison instead of college? Haven't we turned our back too many times on the God given potential of every one of our young people?" I don't care what race they are, I don't care where they live, every single young person in this country, has a spark about them that we have for too long allowed to be extinguished by a level of violence, hatred, and divisiveness that still stalks this country. We can do much better than that, all you have to do is look at the faces of the young people around you today. We know we can do better. But we cannot unless we stand up and are willing to be counted. I hope you will not only attend this conference, I hope you will not only work on what needs to be done back in your own hometowns, I hope you will take the time to let your member of Congress know why you are here, what you stand for. And I hope you will say it may not be perfect, but this crime bill represents a huge first step in staking out new territories in this country. Once and for all we're going to be both smart and tough. We're going to begin to save a generation of young people from this epidemic of violence. Thank you all.

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