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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 2, 1994

REMARKS OF THE FIRST LADY  
TO HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR UNIVERSAL COVERAGE  
CAPITOL HILL

A PARTICIPANT: -- and other important person who has gotten us to this day. Our First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

I was doing pretty well throughout all of the presentations, listening to everyone make what are the most compelling arguments as to why as a nation we should do that.

And then Dick started talking about his son. And for the millionth time in the last year and a half, I saw all the faces of all the people who I have been privileged to sit with in doctors' offices, in hospital waiting rooms, and outside of ICUs, and in pharmacies, and in businesses of all kinds across this nation.

I have sat in living rooms where people have showed me their health insurance policies and the costs associated with them.

I have received over a million letters from people who want to believe that somebody will listen.

And we are now at the point of decision. And it's a decision that will really tell a lot about who we are as a people.

I feel very blessed to have been raised in a family that taught me that when you come to a hard decision, when you come to the proverbial fork that David Banyer (phonetic) mentioned, one of the best ways to think about what direction you should make, and what decision is in front of you, is to fall back on what we all learned as children:

To think about doing unto others as we would have

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them do unto us. To think about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Too often in large political debates the greater issue gets lost. We spend a lot of time arguing on abstract terms. Or as Dick says, getting caught up in the details endlessly.

I have always believed, and it's been my experience, that when people want to do something, they figure out a way to do it.

And what we now have to confront is a decision that is going to come down to a very few people holding the fate of our health care system and its futures in our hands.

I look at this list of people who are here, and I look at this crowd, both behind me and in back. And I know that we have family physicians, and pediatricians, and nurses, and public health officials. We have obstetricians and gynecologists.

We have health professionals represented from every walk of life. We have medical students. We have all kinds of people who work in home care and public hospitals and retail drug stores. We have social workers and psychologists.

We have people from our states who work with those who are in need of mental health. We have all kinds of physicians from every branch and specialty.

And I know that for all of you this is a very personal moment. I know that in this crowd there are Democrats and Republicans and Independents. I know there are people from every part of the political spectrum.

But you are here because you see on a daily basis what too often gets overlooked. You see the human faces. You know the stories.

And I am so proud that the vast majority of American health care professionals support universal coverage. Because they know it is the right thing to do for their patients, for themselves, and for their nation.

And what we have to do in the next few weeks is to

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make your stories become the nation's stories. We need you to be sure you do everything you can to reach out to your member of Congress.

Because the other day I was in a great crowd and a physician came up to me and introduced himself. He was a very distinguished-looking older man. He said he had followed this debate very closely, and in fact his attitudes had changed over the course of it.

And he said, "I sat down one night and I tried to list all of the groups that I knew who were supporting universal health care coverage." He said "The list got very long. And I shared it with some of my colleagues. And they even added some. Because we are now all recognizing that the future of the profession we love so much depends upon a stable financial basis that includes every American."

And then the doctor said to me, "But, now, on the other side of the paper I have tried to write down who is against it and what their reasons are. Because I have tried to understand their thinking so that perhaps I can influence it."

And he showed me the list. He said, "Is this basically who is against it? And he said, "See how much shorter this list is than all the people who are for it."

And he asked me a question that I found so profound. He said, "Why is it that the people on this side of the list, who are against extending health care coverage and making it secure for every American, don't know that they are undermining their own economic and personal futures?"  
(Applause)

And I looked at him, and I said, "I wish I knew the answer to that question. I have puzzled over it many nights, long into the night." Because when I speak with a small business person, who does not provide insurance, I usually am speaking to someone who wants to but doesn't think he can afford to do so. And universal coverage will change that and make health care affordable.

When I speak to a health care professional who is not sure of the direction that his own profession is taking, and wonders whether as a doctor or a nurse or a social worker or a pharmacist, whether it will get better or worse, as they

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talk about the challenges they face now, they are all challenges that will be better addressed under universal coverage.

The worst thing we can do for both our health care professionals and our patients is to perpetuate a status quo which is undermining what has always made American medicine and the American health care system the best in the world.

If we do nothing, I will right now predict to you that within a year or two more and more patients will have lost their right to choose their own doctor. More and more patients will be told by their employers and their insurance companies, "You can no longer go to the hospital that is your choice. We don't have a contract with them."

More and more doctors will spend more and more of their income on dealing with the paperwork that comes from a system that, as was said earlier, divides people up, which therefore means you have to make countless decisions that cost billions of dollars to decide who gets coverage and whether it gets paid for.

Nurses will be stopping me and asking me why this is happening to them, that the paperwork has gotten so much worse.

Neighborhood pharmacies, where so many people depend on the kind of advice they get, will be shutting their doors, unable to compete with the monopolies that will be charging whatever they can possibly get for the drugs that we need. And on and on and on.

Every problem we currently have with the way we are trying to provide health care, will get worse if we do nothing.

And as Sister said, if we only make marginal changes, that too will make our system worse.

But going back to the doctor and his list. It's a very small but powerful group that opposes what all of us are trying to achieve. They oppose us for ideological reasons. They honestly don't believe everyone in America is entitled to health care.

They believe that we should live in a Darwinian

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world in which the fit get whatever they can grab for themselves, and the rest are left to nature's mercies.

There are those who, for political reasons, oppose health care reform. Some of them in their hearts, based on the many conversations I have had over the past year and a half, know it is the right thing to do. But they are afraid that they might lose some partisan political advantage,

And then there are those who believe what they are told about the economics of health care reform, primarily in the small business community, who have been fed a steady diet of propaganda and misinformation.

We have a very small minority with very loud squeaky voices that are dominating this debate. The only way we can win is the way we have always won when faced with such issues in the past, for people like yourselves, to make sure your voices are heard.

Social Security is based on an employer mandate. You pay, and your employer pays. And we are able to guarantee a modicum of decent living for older Americans.

Medicare is based on an employer mandate. You pay, and your employer pays. And we have some believe that then our older Americans will have the health care they need in the last years of their lives.

I have yet to meet a person who opposes having employers and employees share responsibility for health care, who is ready to repeal Social Security or Medicare.  
(Applause)

Early on in my travels, again in a crowd, I had an older man grab my hand and say to me, "I was in Washington during the Roosevelt administration when Social Security was passed. I remember all the arguments against it. I remember all the vicious attacks." But he said, "I can always now look back on my life and know that I played a small part in helping to do what was right in taking care of my fellow man."

It was one of those moments that, again, made a very big impression on me. And I think that's what this comes down to. There are economic arguments, and social arguments, and political arguments. But when it is all

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stripped away, at bottom it is a moral challenge.

Will we do what most of us were taught is the right thing to do, by making sure that every child, man and woman has what most of us in this room have taken for granted, the right, the right to have decent, affordable, quality health care?

And will most of us understand, as we hear the stories, and we see the faces of people who have suffered, that there but for the grace of God go any of us?

If this debate is about that, it will be very hard for naysayers and the oppositionists to carry the day. It can be about that if you all in the next weeks will ask the hard questions and make the challenges that the people you have elected to serve the people truly do remember what is at stake. If that is the debate, health care reform with guaranteed health coverage will become a reality.

Thank you all very much.

(End of interview.)

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