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BSR ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT BUSINESS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY  
(BSR) ANNUAL CONFERENCE

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me to be here via satellite, and thank you, Helen, for that kind introduction, and really thanks to all of the individuals and companies large and small who have worked over the last two years to advocate and promote socially responsible business practices.

Sometimes I like to think what is the most important thing going on in the country on a particular day or at a particular hour. Very often it's not what you see on the front page of the newspaper or on the nightly news, because I really believe that this conference and what it represents and what you all are doing is one of the truly most profoundly important events that's going on anywhere in our country.

I'd like to extend my congratulations to Bob Dunn, who has been an inspiration for many years at Levi-Strauss and will continue to be in his new role as president of BSR.

I'm sorry I can't be with you today, because I would love to talk with each of you personally, especially because there are so many familiar faces in the crowd. Arnold Hiatt of Stride Rite; my friend from Arkansas, Ashley Korenblat, who is doing wonderful things at Merlyn Metalworks and many others among you who have been kind enough to share your time and energy with the President over the last 21 months. He is grateful for your ideas, and he is also grateful for your support of so many of his initiatives that really spring from a vision that is commonly shared by both you and him. That includes family and medical leave which, thanks to your help, is now a fact of life for working Americans.

When the President spoke to your conference last year, he said that Business for Social Responsibility had lived up to the rhetoric of his campaign, which was "Putting People

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First." I'm reminded of this because I recently received a copy of Joel Makower and BSR's book, "Beyond the Bottom Line." And sprinkled throughout the book are the very ideas and values that the President talks about as he pushes his agenda for social progress and change: The idea that responsibility and opportunity go hand in hand. The idea that individual health and fulfillment are key to a productive work force. The idea that what is morally right for an individual, a business or a community is often what is economically right and smart as well. The idea that restoring the foundations of our society depends on individuals and institutions working together to promote the common good.

As you well know, the President has put forth a very ambitious, very comprehensive agenda for change, one that I believe defies political labeling. It is not a partisan agenda. It's an agenda built on a simple ideal that I think most of us share: that every hard-working American deserves the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential and to be a productive and contributing member of society.

Now, we know that government can do things that will help empower people to take responsibility for their lives and move ahead. And that's why the President fought so hard to reduce the deficit, now by \$255 billion, so that more private capital could be back in the marketplace and not squeezed out; to expand trade; to create 4.2 million new jobs, more than halfway toward his goal of 8 million in his first term, and most of them good paying jobs in the private sector; to pass the most comprehensive crime bill in the history of our nation; to promote lifelong learning and to reform our college loan system, because we know that in today's economy what our people learn often determines what they can earn. And we have to continue to provide for education and training opportunities; to push for health care reform and welfare reform and policies like Family and Medical Leave and expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit that make a real difference in people's everyday lives.

But you and I know that however much good will exists in the White House or however much can be done working with Congress or even what comes out of state legislatures or city halls, government programs and policies are not a panacea. They are not the answer.

They should, hopefully, create conditions for empowering people then to take responsibility for their own lives and futures. When we look around us and see the breakdown of institutions that make up what used to be called "civil

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society": our churches and synagogues, our neighborhoods, civic organizations, even our families, we know that government alone never could and never will solve all of our problems.

We also realize that our work places are taking on more and more responsibility for fashioning and transmitting the values and ideals that guide us as Americans, trying to restore that "civil" society.

For many Americans, the contacts they make at work, the lessons they learn at work, how they are treated at work, the values that are transmitted on the job, they may be the only ones that are consistently exposed to millions of people who know what it means to work together, what teamwork is, and what responsibility really means.

That's a fairly daunting realization. But when you consider how most of us now spend our time, and where we put our energies, you appreciate the importance of the work place and the potential for social change and progress that exists in every small business and major corporation across America.

Look at what Alan Hassenfeld and Hasbro have done for children, not just through the manufacturing of toys that children love, but through extraordinary efforts to ensure that no child in the communities they serve go hungry.

Look what Timberland, Lotus, Reebok and other companies are doing with the City Year Urban Peace Corps Program, which of course has been a model for national service. These companies have not just helped finance City Year, they have lent volunteers and manpower and time.

Look at the family and child policies at Fel-Pro and Quad Graphics and so many others who have instituted flex time, job sharing, paternity and maternity leave, family savings accounts, all of which contribute to the happiness and stability of employees and thus make for a more productive work place and a more secure society.

Look at what Fetzer Vineyards is doing in the Napa Valley to promote environmental farming practices and to help migrant workers become integrated into American society.

These examples demonstrate that if business leaders have a fundamental faith in human potential and respect for their workers and are willing to translate that faith into respect for the individual, our capacity to rebuild a "civil society"

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grows exponentially. And that will continue to be the case as we move into the 21st Century with all of the challenges and complexities it will present.

I'm convinced that, more and more, we as a society, will heed the words of business leaders not just because business is the way most people make a living but because of the expanded role you will play in conveying values not only to your employees and your shareholders but also to the larger community.

Many of the great debates we are engaged in today as a democratic pluralistic society are about values. How we treat one another. How we support one another. How we hold one another responsible and accountable for our actions. How we envision ourselves as a community and as a nation.

What is so gratifying to me about BSR is that many of your companies are proving that we can make progress. We can make the changes we need to make, without adding to people's feelings of insecurity. We can move forward without abandoning the values that are the foundation of our society. In fact, we can strengthen and deepen those values and prepare our people for the future, however competitive or uncertain that future may be, the more secure our people are the more ready they will be to meet it.

One lesson we can learn from your experiences is that building a strong, socially responsible company is much the same as building a strong, socially responsible country. As a society, we have to regard our people as our greatest resource, a resource worth investing in. We have to accept that change requires time, effort and above all patience. And we have to be willing to include everyone in the march forward.

Clearly, trying to affect positive change is a learning process. As I have said several times in the last few weeks, we have learned a lot. Sometimes we stumble. I know that not every single one of the businesses represented here is pure and perfect. Sometimes you have to do things you would rather not do to ensure that your companies stay afloat. Sometimes you have to make tradeoffs that are unpleasant, even painful, but the most important thing is that you are committed to the values of individual responsibility and opportunity. You are committed to strengthening families and communities and are willing to think about new and innovative ways that businesses can help us make progress.

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In ending, I'd just like to say how pleased I am to see the coalition taking up children's issues as its next area of program development.

Too often we assume that children's issues are solely a province of government, or schools, or nonprofit organizations, or belong solely within the family. But clearly the business community has a strong role to play, be it in developing workplace policies that enable parents to care for their children more effectively, or in partnerships with community organizations that sponsor children's programs, or in influencing public policy on behalf of children.

This is perhaps where you can make your greatest contribution. After all, children are not only future consumers and workers. They are also future citizens and leaders. And anything we can do to help nourish and nurture them socially, intellectually, physically and emotionally will be a great service to this country.

I wish you all a productive conference. I know that in these very challenging times the President will look forward to hearing your ideas and working with you to ensure that social responsibility becomes an ideal shared and enjoyed not just by more and more businesses, but by all Americans.

I am grateful for your leadership. I'm grateful for your advocacy and grateful for what you're doing every single day to take a vision, a mission statement and translate it into reality in the lives of your workers, your shareholders and, through that, make those ripples move out into the larger society. Thank you all very much.

(End of speech.)

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