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INTERFAITH IMPACT
ANNUAL AWARDS DINNER

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
at the Interfaith Impact Annual Awards Dinner

Thank you. Thank you all so much. (applause) Thank you very much, Jane. Thank you for that much too gracious introduction. Thank you for your leadership and your service. Thank you Jim for the invitation to participate in this 25th Anniversary celebration. I must say to Mr. Walters that I'm flattered that your knees are shaking. When you get to be my age that's very nice to hear. But I also have to say that those card board cut-outs you see around town, I remember walking by one shortly after we moved to Washington, and it just registered out of the corner of my eye. And I saw my head, and I saw my current hair style, and I looked and I said, "Oh, I didn't know I had those clothes." And the next time I saw it, I got a little closer and I said, "That's not anything I own, I've never worn anything that looks like that." I got a little closer and I said, "That's not my body!" It was really one of the defining moments in my introduction to Washington, things are not always what they seem and you must be very careful.

I bring you greetings from the President, who shares my deep sense of appreciation for your steadfast commitment to justice and peace. And I want to congratulate all of tonight's award winners. I was pleased to be here to hear at least some of those awards given. To read in the program about the work that is being done and to share in a small way the feeling of gratitude that swells this crowd and room, when we see, face to face, people who are living their faith. And I must say a special word about my friend, Elanie Jones. She is worthy of the award you have given her this evening. And will continue to wage the fight on behalf of civil rights and to ensure that our nation does not turn it's back on the accomplishments that we have worked so hard to achieve over the last decades.

When I hear about those who won the awards, when I look out at this audience and recognize some of you and know the work that you are doing individually in your communities, collectively through organizations like the Interfaith Impact. I know what the President means when he talks about dynamic partnerships, because we are living in a time when more than ever we need such partnerships. When we must come together to work toward our common goals, to realize the vision that we share for the kind of country and society we want to help achieve.

Justice and peace were rallying cries that brought this organization together in 1968. That was a time of conflict and chaos and tragedy following the death of Dr. King. But when many were predicting the doom and gloom of pessimism and a hopeless future, you came together. You came together out of faith that shared a vision of what we can become. And together you have kept that vision alive. You have continued to work on behalf of Dr. King's dream- of social justice and racial harmony and spiritual triumph. You have often-- again, individually and together through your collective commitment to faith and the way it lives its life with us-- to show the rest of us, from time to time, that we can build consensus, that we can make stands on behalf of peace and justice. Today, we again need your vision and leadership, as we navigate these uncharted waters of these challenging times.

America and the rest of the world is living through a great global transformation. We hope it will be a reformation, but we know that in times of change and challenge like those confronting us at the end of this millennium, that it is often difficult to see through the glass clearly. We don't know what awaits us, and the work we do as we attempt to create this future, has no guaranteed result. But we are led by our beliefs, our faith and our commitment to one another, to our world and to our future.

A few weeks ago I attended, with my friend Joan Campbell, the United Nations World Conference on Social Development in Copenhagen. I was struck again, as to how the human challenges confronting us are the same the world over. I met people from Asia and South America who have been successful at creating educational opportunities for children, particularly for girls, and have seen the lives of their countries transformed as a result. I've learned from People living in Africa about new initiatives they are attempting to create jobs, to raise the standard of living, to bring health care to those who live in remote areas.

I shared ideas with people from the Middle East who were determined to bridge ancient hostilities to build water systems and health care systems together. And in a few days I leave for South Asia, where I will be visiting people in Pakistan and India, Nepal and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, who are working together, coming together across all kinds of divisions, in order to help empower one another to meet the challenges of their lives.

Religious leadership has played a major role in these achievements. I have seen such leadership in Copenhagen, I will see it again in my journeys over the next week. It is that religious leadership, regardless of the faith it represents, that holds great promise for us- if we are able to continue to build a consensus together about what kind of country and indeed what kind of world we want our children and grandchildren to inherit.

We tend to think in America, that our problems are uniquely ours, but as citizens of a shrinking global village, it is becoming increasingly apparent that human problems respect no boundaries, and it is only through recognizing our connections, that we will understand that our future lies not just in the global competition that we read so much about in the pages of our newspapers, but rather in the global cooperation that will enable us all to build a better quality of life.

That is why I am delighted at the legislative agenda that you have chosen to pursue. It is an agenda that is both local and global, and just like the President's agenda, it puts children and families first. You share many of the same goals as the President, and all of us associated with the Administration are grateful for the support you have shown us, as we have fought some very tough battles during these past two years. You have been there with us on the front lines on behalf of health care reform, on behalf of the crime bill, and I hope you saw today the announcement of the initiative to prevent violence against women- that was one of the most thrilling events that we've had here at the White House. You have worked to create and are going to work to save Americorps, which gives young people the idea that they are part of a larger community, that they are not just out there for themselves. You have worked on the part of issues of workplace fairness, justice for women and the promotion of diversity. I am grateful to learn that just yesterday, your caucus that visited at the White House, expressed its support for Dr. Henry Foster to become the next Surgeon General. That support is most welcomed, because it is a signal that Americans of faith and good will are willing to stand up for what is right. Dr. Foster has spent his life trying to help people, and your support is very meaningful.

You come to Washington at a pivotal time. You know that we are in the throes of a great debate, and that debate is characterized on one side by the currently fashionable notion that government is the root of all evil. But 77 days into the Contract with America, or Jim's version, the "Contract on Americans," we have learned the contract is indeed a financial arrangement. One that assigns far more importance to the interests to the very wealthy and the very powerful than to the interests of the poor, the needy and the weak. We do not need that sort of contract in the United States of America. And any country that views it's relationship with it's children as contractual and not moral, is seriously off track.

We need instead, as the President has said for now 3 years, a New Covenant, a sacred trust between the government and the American people and among the American people themselves. What are our obligations toward one another? A covenant that reflects our long held belief that every citizen, rich or poor, urban or rural, young or old, of any race or ethnicity or religion, has the right and responsibility to rise as far as their God given

talents and determination can take them, and then to give something back to society in return.

That is the underlying principal of the President's New Covenant and it is the underlying principle of your own Covenant With the People- "Agenda for Justice." This principal, as you know so well, is grounded in ancient ideas- "Love thy neighbor as thy self"; The poor, the orphan, the captive, feed them to the love of God alone"; Blessed is he that considers the poor, the Lord will deliver in time of trouble." These old ideas and others like them that fill our religious faiths and nourish our personal souls, have guided us for centuries. Yet today, the foundation, which we have built in America, to try to put into action those principles, those beliefs in jeopardy.

We need to remember that govt does have a role to play, because after all, government is us. We are our government.

And although it is unfashionable today to remember, government has played a major role in the lives of every American. Whether it is driving to work on federally financed highways, whether it is drinking water and breathing air that is protected by federal laws and regulations, whether it is attending school some help from government financed loans, or whether it is nutritious lunches for low income children, or summer jobs for young people, or heating fuel for the disadvantaged, or aid for poor children with disabilities, or an Americorps program, that is giving 20,000 young Americans the opportunity to serve their communities and earn money toward their education. These and hundreds of others are examples of government working to give people the tools they need to take responsibility for their own lives.

But today these government programs are deemed by some to be unimportant and unnecessary, because they go only to those people to them to the other to the alien. My minister recently gave a sermon in which he related a story about the ancient Israelites who annually placed all of their miseries and sins on the head of a goat and sent the goat off into the wilderness. When the goat reached the wilderness, the tribe was cleansed of it's problems, it's evils, it's sins. That is an apt parable for what is happening in america today. In today's society, the scapegoat is poor children and their parents, and somehow we think we can rid ourselves of all our social and economic problems by scapegoating them to a wilderness of greater poverty and hopelessness.

Well, as a ten year old boy from a Washington middle school, said at this past sunday's children's rally on the steps of the Capitol, children have to say no to a lot of things. Food should not be one of them.

Some in Washington and around the country justify such budget cutting of these kinds of programs that invest in people by saying that we have all of these programs- we've been paying money for these kinds of services, but things are only getting worse. Well, obviously, nobody ever conceived our government programs as a panacea. We all know that services and programs will not lift a child out of poverty without responsibility and effort. We all know that a school lunch program can help a child's physical and intellectual development, but it can't provide shelter or love. We all know that a nutrition program for pregnant women can increase the likelihood of a healthy baby, but it can't pay the rent or convince the mother to give the child the kind of attention the child needs. We know that.

As you so eloquently state, welfare reform must not focus on eliminating programs, but on eliminating poverty and the damage that it inflicts on children, on their parents and on the rest of society. This is a seamless web that cannot be chopped up into little pieces. We must see children and their parents, we must see families and the poor. We must see ourselves as God sees us- as whole human beings deserving of the respect and dignity that each of us is entitled to.

To overcome poverty, children and families need the basic necessities of life and they need also the intangibles that can only come from adults caring for them, and they need a strong economy that gives opportunities to those adults, so they're able to take responsibility.

That is why we have to avoid these false debates that are currently in fashion today. We must not say on the one hand that we can have an approach that robs children of services and fails to address the broad economic and social forces that contribute to poverty in the first place. These choices are false choices- they are part of a false debate. The problems that we face are real, and many of us in this room have to be careful not to confuse the advocates of such extreme positions with the people who often follow those positions because they don't know what else to believe. It is very important as we fight on behalf of the poor, on behalf of the vulnerable, on behalf of the most needy among us, that we do understand and respect what it is that is driving so many Americans to side with these uncharitable and very mean spirited policies. We must understand that. And much of the reason lies in the way the economy and social forces are working on people today. Many Americans have been working harder and harder and not getting ahead economically. It is true that the middle class, broadly defined, is actually working longer hours with often both parents, where there are two of them in the home, in the work force, unable to maintain a standard of living that one parent working could have taken for granted in the 1950s or 60s.

There has been a great change in the opportunities available to Americans of many different kinds of backgrounds and income levels, and it is important as we search for ways to communicate effectively about the concerns that bring us together, not to forget that many people, who are now saying they favor the Contract, saying they don't think that children shouldn't get school lunches, or whatever else they are advocating, are themselves, being driven by fear and insecurity. They too need our love and attention. They too need our willingness to listen and hear them. It is one of the great ironies, that many of the economic problems that are affecting Americans and rendering them insecure, so that they are withdrawing from reaching out to others, have their roots in explaining global transformation that many of us who can take advantage of such change, are celebrating. So we must be very conscious of how difficult and complex these issues are, and try to work out approaches and use language that is also inclusive and filled with the possibility we will bring people to us, and not just draw lines between us. Because all of us will have to accept responsibility.

We know that the most important work on behalf of children will never be done in the Capitol here in Washington. It will be done in our homes and our neighborhoods and our community organizations. It will be done in our churches and our workplaces. No government can love a child and no policy can substitute for a family's care, but government can make decisions that can either support or undermine families, and for too long, our government during the 1980's made decisions that undermined the middle class of Americans, and by rendering them insecure in the face of change, is making them allies in this government's continuing effort through the Congress to undermine the social safety net. We have to understand how all of this works together. And we also, especially with a group like this, must appreciate that part of what we are confronting, is the need for a spiritual renewal.

We will fight hard for the programs that are at risk in the Capitol. We will fight the Congress over all of the efforts they are undertaking. But, at the end of the day, when we will be, I believe, more successful than some days it looks. That is not enough. We have to change people's hearts. We have to convince people of different races and religions, of different economic positions, to once again care about each other and once again be willing to risk, to help each other. Now more than ever, America needs your voices, your energy, and especially your moral leadership.

What I heard about the churches that were given the awards convinces me that by example, sometimes against great odds, you can continue to reach into people's hearts. You can continue to be instruments of faith. That moral voice and moral example will ultimately, I believe, help move us back on the track we are intended to be.

I heard a great sermon the other day by the great preacher Dr. Gardner Taylor, at Howard University's Chapel, and he said, "You know, those folks up in Congress have it all wrong- they say that they have a Contract With America, but America has a contract with history. And that contract with history has called us time and again, to be willing to sacrifice on behalf of a vision, of a dream, of a future, that could not necessarily be seen, but which we could deeply feel in our hearts and our souls. I am very hopeful that as the scripture says, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That if your light shines before men, they will give glory to the Father in Heaven. We have our work cut out for us, but what a glorious work it is."

I join you in hoping that the next 25 years see peace and justice bloom through out our land. Thank you all very much.