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INTERACTION CONFERENCE

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

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**REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
INTERACTION CONFERENCE
BETHESDA, MD**

MRS. CLINTON:...Thank you for your introduction and for your longtime commitment to these issues. I want to thank Julia Taft for the excellent job she does every day, representing the causes and the interests that Interaction stands for.

And so many of you, who are members of the Board and officers of this organization, as well as the ones that you represent, I'm especially grateful because you have carried a message that is a difficult one for Americans to hear at any time, but has been especially difficult to be heard in these days. And I do think you are being heard. And I want to not only commend you for what you have done so far, but obviously to ask that you continue what you are doing.

I wanted to be part of this forum because I believe very strongly in the substance of your work and in the necessity to build even a stronger constituency, here in our country, and around the world for the kinds of activities that each of you knows so well makes a difference in the lives of people around the world.

As Bill said, I recently returned from a trip to South Asia, that for me, has run out of superlatives. I realized after the nine hundredth person asked me what I thought, and I had said, "Fabulous. Wonderful. Unbelievable. Incredible," that I sounded like a valley-girl. (Laughter.)

So I've tried to be more precise in my language, and not quite so carried away. But that is exactly how I felt. It was a superlative experience for my daughter and me. One that we are still digesting, and will continue to learn from for many years to come.

One of my most enduring memories is of the men and women affiliated with volunteer organizations who are devoting their lives to helping those in their community and throughout their societies. And I want to thank all of you, some of you, who are affiliated with some of the very groups that I have visited, not only during this recent trip to South Asia, but as well in

Indonesia and other places I've been privileged to visit with NGOs and voluntary groups.

We live in, as you know so well, a historic time. We are on the eve of a new century, a new millennium and on the frontier of a new world. It is a world undergoing profound changes. Dictatorships and controlled economies and ancient patriots have given way, all over the world, to democracy, free markets and handshakes. Yet at the same time, as we applaud these new opportunities for prosperity and growth, we see that change has generated new challenges and intensified old ones.

Today we confront the challenge of shrinking resources and greater global competition, the challenge of how to coexist peacefully in the face of ethnic, religious, cultural and political tensions. And most of all, the challenge of putting people's interests and needs first, of making sure that men and women, rich and poor, people of all races and creeds are included as full participants in our society.

The theme of your forum this year, "Rethinking Development in Partnerships for a New Century," speaks directly to both these new opportunities and these challenges. And I hope that as you rethink how you go about the work that you have undertaken, you will help to influence comparable conversations that are taking place in governments, and businesses and NGOs and voluntary organizations all over the world.

In those conversations we face many difficult questions. We are rethinking what we mean by "human rights" and how best to implement human rights. We are thinking about how to create conditions that encourage individual initiative and a vibrant civic life.

Certainly one of the great lessons for me that I bring back from my recent trip is that social development and economic development go hand-in-hand. This is not an either/or proposal. This is a both/and and much more formulation.

You cannot have sustainable markets and trade without investing in people. You cannot have a strong democracy without investing in people. You cannot have a thriving global community without investing in people.

And I was particularly concentrated during my trip on what many of you in this room have discovered long ago, and that is that investing in women and girls and their education, their health and their economic potential, is one of the best investments any nation can make. I have said previously, and I will continue to say it, until someone else says it, (Laughter.) and that is issues such as the health and education of women are often derided as "soft," as traditional "women's issues" that are

marginal to economic growth, that are in some way not really as important as all of the "big" issues that are talked about as being central in the social and economic challenges we face in the 21st century.

But I know, and you know, that in every country I've visited, and in every country in the world, women who are struggling to overcome poverty, and illiteracy, and inadequate health care and long standing forms of discrimination, our epicenter of the vibrancy and excitement of the possibility of building new opportunities for all people. These women are not only transforming their own lives but the lives of their families and communities.

Women represent more than half the world's population, yet they comprise a disproportionate number of the world's poor and illiterate. And that goes for every country, including our own. Yet country after country, they are denied access to education, health care, credit and political and legal rights. It is a set of issues that will not go away if we just 'wait' for nature to take its course or economic development to trickle-down. It is a set of issues that have to be addressed.

There are more than humanitarian reasons for investing in women. Where women remain illiterate, we find that democratic institutions are more fragile and the environment less well-managed. We know that investing in education goes hand-in-hand with economic opportunity. We know that that kind of investment, in the education of girls and women in parts of Asia and South America have lifted whole regions out of poverty.

I remember very well sitting in a village outside Lahore, Pakistan, at a girls school that had been started in this village, talking to the teachers and mothers of the girls who attended there.

And one woman told me that she was the mother of ten children, five boys and five girls. And she was very worried, because she believed, strongly, in educating her daughters and had sent her two older girls to the school in the village. But when they finished that school there was no further opportunity for education because the nearest school was too far from their home for the family to feel comfortable letting the girls go off on their own.

And this woman said to me, "I want my girls to be as well-educated as my boys, because if I were growing up now, that's what I would want for my own life." And focusing on those kinds of aspirations that mothers and fathers have for their daughters, gives us all an opportunity to think clearly about what we want for our own daughters and to provide as much help and assistance as we can for women around the world who feel the same way.

Progress has been made. I saw it with my own eyes. You see it every day as you serve on the frontlines making these kinds of advances possible.

I was very pleased, during my visit, to see the results of American assistance in South Asia. I saw how investment over the years by the United States and family planning services, have helped to lower the population rates in Bangladesh.

I saw the fruits of our aid at a health clinic in Nepal which has helped to produce a safe home delivery kit that will be given to midwives and others who help deliver babies. A simple kit, on the order of ORT kits, the kind that Jim Grant would hand out to anyone who talked to him for more than thirty seconds.
(Laughter.)

A simple kit, consisting of a plastic sheet, a bar of soap, a piece of twine, a razor blade and a wax disk that can literally save hundreds and hundreds of lives in a country where far too many women die during their child-bearing years.

I saw how American aid had helped support a private organization in Colombo, Sri Lanka, that offers shelter and financial and educational counseling to abused women and helps to educate children.

I saw how American aid had supported the top management university in Pakistan, in its building and in its efforts to educate both men and women to assume positions of management and responsibility in both the public and private sectors.

One of the most impressive places I visited, was the International Diarrheal Disease Control Center in Bangladesh. Not only has the Center been instrumental in family planning efforts and treatment and control of diseases like cholera, it has pioneered the use of oral rehydration therapy in treating often fatal cases of diarrhea.

I was surprised to see upon my visit, a doctor from Louisiana who was there doing a rotation because he had determined that in our country where we have 300,000 children admitted to the hospital, for diarrhea that there may be a more cost-effective and efficient way of treating these children, than the literally, half of billion dollars we now spend on intravenous fluids and hospital stays. So he had traveled from Louisiana to Dakar to learn how to do that.

All of these good investments not only help the nations and people receiving the aid, but our country as well.

I know you have already heard from Brian Atwood and Tony Lake, and you know, better than I can express, that we are at a

watershed moment in the United States as we re-assess the needs for assistance abroad and our willingness to respond to those needs.

The President is committed to addressing those needs through bilateral and multi-lateral assistance programs. He is also committed to a responsible reduction of the federal deficit. It was his budget that began the downward slope of the federal deficit. It was his budget that has given us three years of a declining deficit, which has not happened since Harry Truman was President.

But it is this President who knows that commitment to reducing the deficit should not and does not need to mean deep cuts in government programs that will cripple our ability to help our friends and allies around the world or to address the needs of those that who least advantaged here at home. Deep cuts in foreign aid will not solve the deficit problem. (Applause.)

Foreign aid only accounts for about one percent, as the button says, of the total federal budget. In fact, we spend less on foreign assistance than any of the other twenty industrialized nations.

Now you know well that that is not the impression conveyed to the American people, who believe that the combined expenditures of foreign aid and welfare run anywhere between thirty and fifty percent, depending upon the particular survey results that you read. Much of the challenge we face is one of getting accurate information out to people. Letting them know what the facts are and demonstrating the successes that have come because of our commitment to assisting people around the world.

At a time of economic anxiety here at home, I know, that many Americans wonder why we should invest in people living in far off places. It is in our national interest to maintain our support for the governments abroad. (Applause.)

It is not only a reflection of the moral values we espouse, it is a practical way to help prevent the spread of crises like those we have seen, much to our distress and horror, in Rwanda, Somalia and elsewhere that are so costly in human lives.

If we support education and literacy and health care around the world, we expand the markets available to Americans. Now some of the development world think that that is a crass argument to make. They would prefer that the discussion stay on the much loftier and moral plane of human rights and humanitarian objectives.

That is a very important part of any discussion, but it is also very important to tell those who are paying the bill for foreign assistance what they are getting in return for that.

And I urge all of you to be willing to make practical arguments using your own experiences in discussing the need to continue our commitment to development assistance with Americans at every opportunity you can. I urge every one of you to book yourself for every civic club speeches you can manage to make in the next three months. And in doing so, bring forth the information, make the world and humanitarian case but make the practical economic case.

It is not wrong to say that stable democracies with better educated people create more consumers for American goods. That is a fact. And we ought to be willing to make that argument on behalf of development. If we strengthen families and children, we help build more stable societies which benefit all of us with respect to the challenges of peace that we confront.

During my trip, I met men and women who remain committed to democracy, human rights and market economies. Often at a great risk to themselves. I met women who have been tortured and imprisoned, or who had watched family members be assassinated for speaking out for the freedoms we take for granted here at home.

Especially now, when our own country is undergoing some soul-searching, we ought to be speaking out on behalf of democracy and freedom and we ought to be pointing out to our citizens what a dear price others have paid all throughout the world to try to obtain the level of freedom we take for granted here in this country.

And that kind of link maybe more dramatically than anything right now, will demonstrate that our investments in people abroad reflect back on our values here at home. They go hand-in-hand. We support people and institutions and systems of governments and ideals that men and women are dying for around the world.

At a time when we are seeing democracy spread, and markets open, we should not permit our success to be turned back. We need to build on the achievements of the past and give all of us to go even further. If we do that, then we are not only maintaining a commitment to development assistance, we are maintaining a commitment to the ideals and what is best about this country.

We are helping, slowly by slowly, step by step, creating a new vision for a world we hope our children will come of age. That vision, which is still not quite clear to many of us, as we struggle with the affects of a post-Cold War world is not a vision that is not the province of any particular group or government.

Instead, it is up to all of us. It is up to every government to do more to invest in the basic rights and opportunities of its people. It is up to every business and corporation to practice socially responsible business practices, so that they too can be part of building a better world for themselves.

It is up to volunteer organizations to search hard for their own past practices, to think about how to be creative and effective in the future. It is up to each of us as individuals - all of us must work together as partners to achieve social change. You have been strong and wise partners.

I know you will continue to speak out and give voice to the aspirations of the voiceless around the world. You are their advocates but you are also messengers to the rest of us about what are the lessons we can learn that can be applied here at home. As the global community strives for a better vision of a world in which all of us have the opportunity to live up to our God-given potential.

Thank you very much.

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