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THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
TO AMERICAN NEWSWOMEN'S CLUB
THE WHITE HOUSE

MRS. CLINTON: Good afternoon. Please be seated. I am so delighted to welcome all of you to the White House. This is a great occasion and opportunity for me. I am very appreciative of the fact that I am an honorary member of this club, and I know that in this room is a real brain trust of women who have been and continue to be part of what makes our country and our democracy work. Many of you have been in this house for professional reasons before; others of you have been here for social occasions. And I am delighted that you could be here again.

Many of the women in this club know how important it is that their perspective and their point of view be heard and appreciated because there is a special feature that women in the tradition of American journalism have brought to our common life together. Many of you have covered the White House or the Capitol or politics or the economy or other matters in our country and have brought your own particular concerns and observations to the attention of all the rest of us.

There are some of you, I know, who have been features here in this room for many years. I see some of you here who are better known than most presidents who have press conferences here. (Laughter.) I was kidding Sarah McClendon the other day when we all celebrated her birthday and told her that, unlike some people, she never had to land a plane or hop a fence to get a president's attention. (Laughter.) In fact, she could just walk right in here. And a lot of us look forward -- and held our breath on occasion -- as to what would happen once she did.

Many of you are also pioneers in journalism and the publishing worlds. And I remember so well reading a piece that was written by Martha Gellhorn, a great friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's and the first woman war correspondent to cover the

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Spanish Civil War, who spent decades covering virtually every major conflict from the 1930's through Vietnam. She once explained her journalistic motivation by saying, "I have always had an interest in and a sympathy for, to use Dostoevsky's phrase, the 'injured and insulted.'" And I have always liked that because it is that brand of sensitivity and compassion that has marked the best of the work of American journalists and, particularly, of our American women journalists.

I have thought a lot about the work that you do and the work that many of us try to do. And I want to take the opportunity to spend just a few minutes sharing with you some of my experiences here at the White House, starting with one that we had earlier today.

I was given the rare honor of entertaining Big Bird this morning -- (laughter) -- and lest you think that that doesn't rank up there with some of the crowned heads of state who have been here, let me assure you that in many parts of the world, Big Bird is better known and far more important than some of the people who come here on visits. And that is because he's doing work that relates particularly to children.

And it may seem trivial to some, but it is not. It is, as we heard this morning, work that has a direct impact on the academic success and the socialization of children. A researcher from the Robert Dole Human Development Center at the University of Kansas told us this morning -- (laughter) -- that children who watch about 25 minutes of public broadcasting, namely, the programming aimed at children every day, do have, after their two to five years of exposure, more success, better readiness for school than children who watch 25 minutes of commercial television.

We add that information to the more general knowledge we are now learning about the impact of television on our children, and it underscored for me how important it is that we as adults recognize the differences between children and adults. And those differences are particularly marked in the way children respond to and learn from television.

There is no getting around the fact that television is a pervasive influence. And it can either be an influence for the good or for the ill. That is up to us to determine. It is not out of our control.

And I was delighted to host people like Professor Wright from the University of Kansas and Peggy Charren, whom some

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of you know was the motivating force behind Action for Children's Television, to try to bring attention in the midst of this debate we are having in Washington about the positive role that educational television plays in the lives of all children, but particularly in the lives of those children in 40 percent of our families that do not receive cable, who are solely dependent upon the three major networks and public broadcasting, and who, in larger numbers than the rest of the population, often do not have the resources to fill their homes with books and videocassettes and rent movies every week so that their children can have the same kind of opportunities that we try to provide to our own.

So I think it's important that the kind of discussion we had today that tries to get to the evidence, that relies on research, begin to replace the sort of ideological battles that we see too often in our nation's capital where people stake out positions regardless of the evidence because they fit an already-existing world view that one or the other side hopes to promote.

And certainly, there is no more important group in the country than journalists at this time in our nation's history to try to analyze and make sense of the blizzard of information that people are receiving today.

Through my involvement in events such as the one we did here in this room earlier today, I have learned that there are many opportunities for all of us to highlight issues and concerns that we care about. And it's especially important today because I do believe that people are overwhelmed by what is going on around them.

I know that in my own life, just the breadth of activities that come with the position that I'm in today is certainly more than I can often keep up with, and I am constantly surprised by the things that I never expected people would find interesting about me. I wish, for example, that I had even a nickel for every story written about my hair. (Laughter.) And no telling how many more there will be. (Laughter.) But it is part of living here and enjoying the opportunities that are provided.

And I have given more and more thought recently to all of the exciting experiences that I've been privileged to enjoy since moving in in January of 1993. I think often about the people that I meet in the course of a day or a week. There are so many people who are leading, in my opinion, truly heroic lives, who are waking up every day doing the best they can, whose

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names will never make the evening news, but who are contributing to their communities and their families in ways that will make a greater difference in the lives of the people around them and in the strength of our society than many people whose names do regularly make the evening news.

There are also many who are laboring under challenges that I find almost hard to imagine. Some of you know that I have spent about six months trying to focus attention on the need for women over 65 to have mammograms. And as a result of that, I have traveled quite a bit around our country talking with women who are on Medicare about why they do not choose to have mammograms.

And in every setting in which I have been, I have met women who have told their stories with great depth of feeling. And I have also met women who, time and again, tell me that they cannot afford the mammogram. They cannot afford the surgery. It is an incredible experience to sit, as I recently did, in a group of women in San Diego talking about why we need to encourage women to have mammograms and have a woman stand up and say, what can I do? I did have a mammogram, and they found something wrong. But I have no insurance and I can't go any further.

Or to meet a woman, as I did in New Orleans, who had no insurance, although she worked every single day and always tried to take care of her own health, and so, saved up every year for an annual exam, and was told at the most recent one, near the time when I met her, that she had a suspicious lump in her breast and was sent to a surgeon who told her that because she had no insurance, he would just watch the lump but would not do a biopsy. These are the kinds of stories that I see and hear day after day, week after week.

I also meet people who are inspirations to me. After reading both their books, I wrote to the Delaney sisters -- those remarkable women who are even older than Sarah -- (laughter) -- at 105 and 103, and are now not only bestselling authors, but whose lives are the subject of a smash Broadway play. I wanted to meet them. I wanted to see face to face the kind of energy and serenity that just emanated from the words on the written page. So I asked if I could come calling. And they invited me to do so.

So I went to visit them in the house they have lived in for about 50 years. And it was an extraordinary meeting for me. They are, as you may know, children of a freed slave who,

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thanks to a strong family and strong religious faith, overcame every conceivable racial and gender stereotype. They each succeeded in their respective careers of dentistry and teaching.

Now, when I went to see them, they had had their manicures, they were sitting up straight in their chairs. They told me proudly that, except for a bad fall they'd each had in the last several months, they still did their yoga every morning. And they hadn't even started until they were 62 -- which gives those of us who are exercise laggards some hope. (Laughter.) They made their own soap because you just can't get good soap in the store. (Laughter.) And they continue to take care of each other and their neighbors.

Those are the kind of people who, in any encounter than any one of us might have -- I just wish I could xerox and send around the country -- to sit and talk particularly with young people about what difficulties were overcome more than a hundred years ago, but how so much of what we can make of our lives comes from within and should not be proscribed by any circumstances that we encounter.

I've also been privileged to witness history in the making. And of the many events that I have been part of, one particularly stands out. And that was the extraordinary experience I had going with the Vice President and Tipper to South Africa to attend Nelson Mandela's swearing-in as President. There was much about that entire inaugural event that was beyond words, that moved me to tears and laughter, and made me believe that, in spite of the 20th century, progress is, after all, possible.

But probably the most extraordinary aspect of that visit for me took place at a luncheon after the actual inaugural ceremony. President Mandela had invited many of the representatives from the various countries who were there to come to the President's house where he was then residing and have a luncheon in a very large and beautiful tent on the grounds.

So there we were with people representing nearly every single country of the world, strategically placed so that those who were fighting with one another and those who wouldn't talk to each other, and those who had severed diplomatic relations with each other were far enough away that no international incident would occur.

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When President Mandela began to speak, and in his speaking he referred to the fact that he had invited three of his former jailers to attend the inaugural -- men who had watched over him, kept him imprisoned, who had been the symbols and reality of the oppressive regime against which he had fought and spoken out against for so many years -- I was dumbstruck. I thought to myself, how could anyone even understand the depth of compassion and forgiveness that must reside inside that man for him to be able to do that. And how much better off we would all be were we able to replicate even a small part of that.

We argue about so many things that don't amount to a hill of beans in our own country. We draw lines against each other. We demonize each other. We accuse each other and attack each other. And here we are living in the greatest country in the world without any of the kinds of true obstacles to democracy and freedom that people like Nelson Mandela lived with for 27 long years.

I thought about that again during my recent trip to South Asia where I was extremely privileged to travel with my daughter to five countries that are working very hard to try to build their own democracies and create more prosperous economies for their people. Any of you who have traveled through Pakistan or India, Nepal or Bangladesh or Sri Lanka know how complex their difficulties are. You know how riven those countries are by ethnic and religious and racial conflicts.

And yet, time and time again, what I was impressed by as I shook the hands of men and women who've had brothers and sons and husbands and mothers and fathers assassinated for democracy's sake, who themselves had been imprisoned or exiled or tortured, is how these people were doing what they did in large measure because of what America means to the rest of the world. How devoted they were to democracy and a better life for their people was in direct relationship to what they expected to be able to realize because they looked at the model we are for the rest of the world.

And I wished again that I could have had every American, or at least every American teenager, like my daughter, with me to point out what was happening around the world, and to remind all of us again of the blessings that we have that we too often take for granted, and to try to get all of us to focus on what is best about our country, what is positive and how we can work together.

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After thinking about a lot of these issues and mulling them over in my own head, I've decided to take up an offer that was first made to me two years ago, right after the inauguration, when I was approached about writing a column that would deal with my experiences and observations.

Now, as some of you may know, Eleanor Roosevelt was there before me, but she has always been there before me. (Laughter.) Not only did she visit the Delaney sisters in 1950 -- (laughter) -- but everywhere I go, I find Eleanor has been there. There are pictures of Eleanor visiting the children's welfare society as I walk through the hallways. There are columns attacking Eleanor for things I'm attacked for. Nothing is original when it comes to this position because of the extraordinary woman that she was.

And so I thought to myself, you know, I get so many letters -- actually hundreds and hundreds of thousands, more than a million now -- asking me about everything from, you know, Socks' feeding schedule -- (laughter) -- to what it's like to plan Christmas in July which, for me, as someone who usually, as a matter of principle, didn't start until after Thanksgiving, has been a very hard adjustment, to all the kinds of questions people have about their social security benefits, about how Medicare works, about how much is paid for out of Medicare for a mammogram, to what my impressions were of the countries I visited. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of questions every single day. And I keep them all in not only the files that are established for that purpose, but in my own mental file cabinet. And it grows thicker and thicker.

And as I respond to people by making a speech or answering a letter or sometimes picking up the phone to try to help somebody with a problem, I realize that that person represents thousands and maybe millions of other people with the same question or the same concern.

So I've decided to take up the offer that was made to me by Creators Syndicate and to write a column once a week about my experiences and observations as First Lady, which I hope means that I will become more than an honorary member of the club. (Laughter and applause.) Like Eleanor Roosevelt -- I do like to feel that I have earned whatever membership I am given. (Laughter.) And unlike all of you, I am not a professional writer or editor. But I do have a lot of ideas and already a lot of information that has been compiled over the last years.

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Now, Mrs. Roosevelt did a daily column. I don't know how she did a daily column. But I am going to do a weekly column, and I think that, in itself, is a rather big stretch for me on some weeks. But I think it's going to be, for me, interesting to try to, as I have recently with some of the columns that I've done, talk about issues that I know are on people's minds and also share with people some of what does go on here, some of the funny stories, some of the rather momentous events, some of the human stories, the kinds of stories about the people who come here that nobody would ever know otherwise.

And I hope that it will in some small way help to bridge some of the gaps that have grown up in America today, help bring people a little bit closer, help them feel that their government is not some entity that is totally apart from them and all of us who have anything to do with it are really aliens who landed here in some former life; but instead, the government in a democracy is us. We are our government. And in a democracy, especially the longest-lasting and greatest democracy in the history of the world, the more we can feel like we are part of one great enterprise.

And we don't have a Great Depression to rally us. We don't have the second world war. We don't even have the Cold War anymore to bring us together and to really reinforce what it is about us as Americans that is so important and so outstanding that there aren't any others like us anywhere in the world.

And part of what we're going through, it seems to me, in our country, as we approach the end of this rather confusing century we have lived through, is the need to recreate some sense of American identity, to renew our common goals as a nation, to reinvigorate our sense of citizenship, to listen to one another and not just yell and shout, to work for problem-solving ends, not just stake out ideological positions. And like you, I believe information is key to that.

So I hope to make some small contribution. And I hope that in some way I can be able to try to help all of us, including myself, think a little bit more about the human factor involved in our life together, to see one another not as stereotypes and caricatures, but as fellow human beings, each with our own God-given potential, each with our own experiences, all of which contribute richly to the great and various country that we call our own.

You, each, as women, have brought your own experiences and special perspectives to your careers. That

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perspective has helped to elevate your profession, and, I believe, to help all of us better understand this rather difficult world we find ourselves in the midst of today.

So I thank you for what you have done and for what you are still doing. And I hope, together, we are all able to make better sense out of the challenges we face, pull ourselves together, roll up our sleeves, and solve our problems so that we can move with confidence and excitement and joy into the 21st century.

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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