

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

HRC AT NAACP - Minneapolis.
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July 13, 1995

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT NAACP ANNUAL ANNIVERSARY CONVENTION

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you, thank you. I was privileged in the past to attend an NAACP convention. I was privileged to attend regional and state meetings, and I see some of my friends from Arkansas and from that region here. And I have always told everyone that the organ at an NAACP convention makes it better than any gathering you'll find anywhere in the country. (Applause.)

Because, in a sense, it is a revival, isn't it? And it needs to be a revival, doesn't it? You've already heard from two exceptional leaders. I want to thank my friend, my doctor, the nation's doctor -- (applause) -- and to say to Dr. Foster that we saw, in the last few months, a real profile in courage. (Applause.) And we saw an extreme minority defeat the will of the majority.

But you didn't lose, and as you go forth with your message and continue to prescribe for all of us, more and more Americans will realize what they lost because of your defeat. (Applause.) But I know you will not desert this patient. America needs your healing hands and mind, and we are grateful for your involvement. I want to thank Merilee (phonetic) not only for that gracious introduction -- I don't know what you would have said if you hadn't been winging it; that was incredible -- (laughter) -- but I also want to congratulate all of you; congratulate your board and the membership of this organization for your wise selection of Merilee as your board chairman. (Applause.)

She is, as you know so well, a woman of extraordinary talent and integrity. As a young black woman who works in the White House said to me, she is a real shero. (Applause.) And we need, today more than ever, sheroes and heroes for all of us. And I am grateful for your leadership. I was thinking, as I listened to Dr. Foster and to Merilee, that wonderful line from Dr. Howard Thurman, who many of you know of: this is our season to reclaim our hopes.

And it is our season. It is often when night looks

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darkest, it is often before the fever breaks that one senses the gathering momentum for change; when one feels that resurrection of hope in the midst of despair and apathy. But it can only come to light if we nurture it; if we claim it as our own. This organization, for 86 years, has stood for hope in a lot tougher times than we live in now. (Applause.)

Yet sometimes it takes adversaries and opposition to bring out the best in us, doesn't it? Sometimes we all get a little tired. We all just kind of want to go tend our own gardens. We all just want to turn our backs on all those problems that we've worked our way out of and been able to get beyond. But then all of a sudden we realize that we are all part of this country together. There is no "them" in America, there is only us, and we have to be part of solving our problems. (Applause.)

I want to express the regrets of my husband, the President. He has, as you may have read in the paper, been dealing with the budget on a minute-by-minute basis, trying to determine what is going to come out of these deliberations; and sending very strong signals as he did the day before yesterday -- that what was done to the budget with respect to human services and employment and education was unacceptable and would be vetoed if it came to his desk. (Applause.)

He also took on the enormous responsibility, which he believed was right, to bring to an end, once and for all, with the hope that God's blessings will rain down upon all who suffered the Viet Nam War, and put it behind us as a nation, so that we can move forward. (Applause.) And then yesterday, he gave a speech that he has been giving in bits and pieces, but put altogether -- the religious freedom speech.

It is one of the most important statements of his presidency, because we have to prevent the kind of extremist, alarmist rhetoric that is too often used to inflame people, rather than inform them. (Applause.) And we have to, as the President said yesterday, recognize the legitimate right of people to exercise religion both privately and publicly in America. And we have to instruct those in authority, particularly in our schools, what is appropriate and what is not.

The President was tired of being pulled aside by

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people at church or when he went to visit somewhere, saying, you know what happened in my school -- some children were trying to say grace at lunch and they were told they couldn't; or do you know what happened in a school that a friend of mine teaches in -- a young man who was reading the Bible in the cafeteria or in the library was told he couldn't. What nonsense. That is not what the First Amendment is about.

And what the President said loudly and clearly yesterday is, we don't need a Constitutional amendment; we just need to reinject some good common sense so that we let our people practice their religion. (Applause.) And today the President is in Washington, holding a long-scheduled meeting with President Soglo of Benin, West Africa. Benin, as many of you who follow events in Africa know, is making a successful transition to democracy.

And this meeting highlights American support of this leader and his efforts to move toward democracy; and underscores the relationship between our two countries in trying to promote peace in Liberia and democracy in Nigeria. Africa is an important part of the President's concerns in the world. He hosted the first ever White House Conference on Africa. And he and the Vice President actively participated.

It is very important for the United States to remain engaged in that great continent. And the President is in the White House today, working on that. (Applause.) So although he was not able to attend, I am delighted that I got to. (Applause.) I never consider myself a replacement for my husband, but I do know that there isn't anyone who can replace me, with respect to my admiration for this organization and what it has stood for. So it is I who feel privileged to be part of this anniversary annual convention. (Applause.)

You know, as Dr. Foster said, when one re-reads modern American history, the role that the NAACP will stand right up there at the top of the important efforts that made America freer and more just. You have been America's vigilant, peaceful warrior for racial justice. Even though we still have a long way to go, I shudder to think where we would be today without the brilliant legal and political and moral leadership of the NAACP. (Applause.)

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I am delighted to see with us today Dr. Benjamin Hooks and Mrs. Hooks. (Applause.) The leadership of this organization has made it possible for this nation continually to face its problems. You have been steadfast in holding our feet to the fire, the fire of reality, the fire of truth. You have made it possible for this nation to advance, with respect to racial relations. And for that, whether they know it or not, every American owes a debt of gratitude to the NAACP. (Applause.)

But now we have to go forward, don't we? Now we have to think through, what is the strategy as we move toward a new century. We meet here at a time of unprecedented challenge. When historians look back on this era, they will see a time of great change and transition. Whether one calls it the end of the post-World War II era, the end of the post-Industrial Age, we know that we are going through rather significant changes here at home and around the world.

We see the effects of the new global economy, in which jobs and capital and technology and ideas move across borders at lightening speeds. Yes, that holds out extraordinary promise. But it also holds out great question, and for many, threats and anxiety. Because this new economy puts tremendous pressures on our families, our communities, our values. People worry that they will not be able to give the same opportunities they enjoyed to their children.

They worry because they see it every day, that they will lose a job and not find one that pays anywhere near what they were making before. They know that families every day are being downsized out of the middle class. They know that families every day are losing benefits to health care, to pensions, to other necessities of life. And at the same time, they worry about their schools; about their streets.

Now, there is a great debate raging in Washington about the proper role of government as we approach this millennium. There are those who argue strongly that all of our problems in America are personal and cultural. Now, at a level, that is true, isn't it? I mean, if every person in America woke up tomorrow and did absolutely nothing wrong, we would be living in the afterlife, but it would make a big difference in how people behaved, wouldn't it? (Laughter.)

You hear it all the time. You know if you turn on C-SPAN, you hear it, don't you? These pointed fingers, these

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admonitions that people just have to act right and that's all that we need to change America. And because those people who promote that point of view think it is only a personal issue, they don't believe government has any role to play. In fact, as my husband often says, these are the people who believe government would mess up a one-car parade. (Laughter.) And anything you can do, just move it out of the way.

Now, on the other hand, there are still the voices of those who say that government is the only answer to our problems -- you know, that the government has to solve everything. If you don't study in school and you barely graduate, the government should still give you a job. If you don't show up to work on time, you don't put in a full day's work, the government should prevent you from being fired. The government should do everything for you.

Now, that view absolves us of personal responsibility. And the people in this auditorium did not get here today believing somebody else was going to take care of all your problems, did you? (Applause.) So as is with most debates that are emotionally charged and filled with more heat than light, this debate is not very helpful. But it's what we hear all the time; it's what the news covers. If you're not into a confrontation, if you're not calling somebody a name, if you're not defaming people's character, well, then you don't get on the news.

If you don't have an extremist answer that you can give in eight or 10 seconds, nobody wants you. So that's what the American people have been fed over and over again. And everybody has a bad experience with government. I mean, you've gone and gotten your driver's license renewed, haven't you? (Laughter.) I mean, we know that it doesn't work perfectly. There's no human institution that does. And yet those of us who have lived long enough and seen what happens to people in their lives, no matter how hard they're trying and how good a life they're leading know that personal and cultural is not all there is, either.

So how do we bring that together? How do we create a third way, a third leg to this debate, that really is where most people live their lives? It's how they make decisions. Well, that's what the President has been trying to do, and it is not easy. It's complicated. I mean, when you have a problem and you say to everybody, this answer and this answer, on both sides are inadequate; we need to come up with

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something different. Well, then you get accused of not being able to take a strong stand and stick with it, don't you?

Because you're looking for both common ground, but also common sense. And so when you look at some of the policies that the President has been following, what he's been looking for is a way to use government -- not to give people a hand out, but to give them a helping hand; to give them the chance to have opportunities in their own lives; but in return, to ask for responsibility. That is the way we lead our own personal lives. That's the way you try to raise your children. That's the way you try to manage your business or your family.

So the President has, on many fronts, moved to try to create that new consensus, what he calls a New Covenant. His economic policies, for example, have both allowed us to reward working families and maintain investments that will help working Americans. The biggest difference between the President's approach to a balanced budget and the alternative is not that he will take 10 years and they will take seven -- although that's significant. It is that he is trying to use government as a way of helping and supporting people.

So what does he want to invest in? He wants to invest in education and training so that people get good jobs and are able to compete in the global economy. (Applause.) He wants to create opportunities for people who don't start off on a level playing field. That's why he wants to increase Head Start and childhood immunizations and programs that will help a lot of our poorest children. (Applause.) That's why he created empowerment zones to revitalize the inner city and create jobs.

Because we know that if we don't rebuild our cities, we're going to leave too many people behind in this global economy, as we move toward the next century. It's also why, as a Democrat, he said these Republicans have been talking about crime; they talk it to death -- let's pass a bill, let's get more police on the street, let's get the guns off the street. That was a very tough effort that is finally beginning to take effect.

We've been watching these crime statistics. It makes a difference if there are 100,000 more police on the streets, especially if they are community police officers, working with the community to try to prevent crime before it

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happens in a neighborhood. (Applause.) And I've got to say, anybody who says that this President won't stand up to anybody, where have they been? What is the NRA doing to us if it isn't because he has stood up to them not once, but twice?

No sitting President has ever taken them on. Why? Because they are so powerful. Why did the Democrats lose the House of Representatives, in addition to what Dr. Foster said? Because not enough people with a stake in the future voted, but also because a lot of those who voted, voted for the Brady Bill, they voted for the assault weapons ban and they were punished. And the people who should have been there standing shoulder to shoulder to get the Uzis out of our high schools and the Tech-9s out of our housing projects, they stayed home. (Applause.)

We can win on these issues. A majority of Americans believe as we do. They want to invest in education and training for better jobs. They want to invest in our children. They want safer streets that doesn't come by letting people run amuck, but instead keeping them under authority properly. And they don't want to spend billions of dollars sending every third young man to prison. They want to spend it on things like drug treatment and recreation, to give young people something to say yes to.

But the majority will not be heard, just as the majority was beaten when it voted for Dr. Foster. The majority that does not vote will lose every single time to an organized minority. (Applause.) Now, what's at stake? You know better than I. Much of what we believe as a nation is at stake. The President's policies are working. They have resulted in an additional 7 million new jobs, just since he was inaugurated.

The unemployment rate for African Americans is below 10 percent, in single digits, for the first time since the Viet Nam War. We are finally putting young men and women back to work. And he's done this not by just talking about making government more efficient, but actually doing it. So we thank the NAACP because you have stood shoulder and shoulder during a lot of these tough fights. I know Merilee was elected chair by only one vote. That's the margin for this President. That's what passes things like deficit reduction and tax relief and crime control. (Applause.)

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So please, know that you have already made a difference, but we have so much more to do. As we move forward, it is imperative that the NAACP stay strong. It is imperative that you stand with those who, as Dr. Foster said, stand with you; but that you also inform yourselves and your neighbors and your friends about what it is that this administration is trying to do, because it is a different way. Let me give you just one more example, and it's from foreign policy.

Now, there are many -- in fact, the majority of Americans at the time -- who thought that the President should do nothing about Haiti. Haiti was just down there somewhere, lots of poor people -- let them just stew in their own juices. And if the President had chosen to ignore Haiti, the majority of Americans who don't understand how important it is to restore democracy everywhere, including in our own backyard -- those folks would have been happy because they wouldn't have had to worry about Haiti.

Or if the President had invaded, you know, with all the flags flying, raising the excitement, having the people on t.v., you know, whispering into the microphone as the planes flew over and the missiles landed, and hundreds and maybe thousands of Haitians, and certainly some Americans, were killed, people could have understood that. That fit into one of the old categories.

So what did the President do? He basically invaded without firing a shot. He restored democracy. He gave people's dignity back to them. And nobody can say that we have not fulfilled our responsibilities. But it doesn't fit into the easy eight-second sound bite on t.v. It takes too long to explain coercive diplomacy. It takes too long to explain that this was the first military operation in American history under a single command, and it went off without a hitch. (Applause.)

Nobody understands when things happen differently that break old categories. But that's what you're going to have to do, isn't it? You're going to have to build on the past, take the strength and the values that have made you an absolutely imperative part of American history, but think differently; move differently; be strategic; get back in those streets, knock on those doors, pull people out of their houses, talk to them about what's at stake. (Applause.)

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And you have a President who will stand with you, whose commitment to affirmative action and equal opportunity is strong and unwavering. (Applause.) When you look at what is at stake in this debate over affirmative action, it is clear, as the President has said, affirmative action is still needed to remedy discrimination and to create a more inclusive society that truly provides equal opportunity; and that to be effective, affirmative action must be done the right way.

So we have to move forward, but we have to move forward knowing what has happened in the past, thinking new, thinking creatively, in order to reach the same objective. The President recognizes that the Supreme Court raised the hurdle, but they did not make it insurmountable, in setting a new legal standard for judging affirmative action. And he has wisely cautioned people on both sides of the affirmative action debate not to use the court's ruling as a reason to abandon our national commitment to inclusion and opportunity.

While the Constitutional test is now tougher than it was, it does not mean the end of affirmative action. We know that from the experience of state and local governments, which have operated under tougher standards for some years now, it can still be done. And for those who say we want a color blind society, if they are using the term to mean that we want opportunity, where we have a level playing field, where everyone has the chance to compete fairly, then I guess that's what we want.

But do we have it now? No, we don't. Do we want to work for it? Yes, we do. And is affirmative action still part of the work and strategy we must follow? Yes, it is. So if we look at what has happened so far with affirmative action, we need to not only carefully describe what we will do and can do, we have to enlist people in understanding that and implementing it from the grass roots level to the federal government.

But you know, affirmative action starts with affirmative thinking. (Applause.) And that means that every one of us has to think harder and express our thoughts about what we will do to end the scourge of racism, not turn a blind eye, not claim to have a color blind eye, but to actively think through and express what we will personally do. Now, I believe that if, starting tomorrow, every single adult in America counted to 10 or bit their tongue before

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they said something stereotypical, before they made a racial slur, before they made a disparaging comment, we would change the atmosphere in which this country now operates.

Now, is that simple? Yes, it is. Is it self-evident? Yes, it is. But until we all start thinking and being more committed to a truly open society where we do judge people by the content of their character, then all the programs in the world will not guarantee that level playing field. So we have a double burden. We have to explain, defend, and institute affirmative action that will continue to work. But we also individually have to start engaging in affirmative thinking.

You can pick up the paper any day, and you can see people, particularly young people, who have already been poisoned by racism, who are already being religiously or ethnically biased. That is one of the great tragedies, and we have to do all that we can to try to eliminate it. Recently, the President also expressed his disappointment at the Supreme Court decision in the Georgia congressional redistricting case.

He described that decision as a setback in the struggle to ensure that all Americans participate fully in the electoral process, one that threatens to undermine the promise of the Voting Rights Act. This President and this administration remain firmly committed to the full enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. (Applause.) But you have to be our partners.

You know, before we came out here, Merilee and Alexis Herman, the assistant to the President who is here with me, were talking about how they remember when they first got their NAACP membership cards as young girls. Alexis said that in order to get her membership card, she also had to get a library card. But as a young girl, she got to carry both around; she felt really important. And she knew, as Merilee did, because Merilee said she carried that card plus her first receipt from the poll tax, until they yellowed with age.

They knew what the struggle was about. And they were able to articulate it based on personal experience. As Merilee poignantly told this convention, now is the time to go forward, not backward; to remember our martyrs and take strength from their (GAP IN TAPE)

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If we don't raise our children right, nothing else we do counts for very much. And we need to intensify our efforts on behalf of our children. We need a reaffirmation among all Americans of our long-held belief that every single child has the right and responsibility to rise as far as his or her God-given talents and determination can take them. (Applause.) That is the principle we should be inculcating in our children.

My minister recently gave a sermon in which he related the story of Leviticus, you remember, about the ancient Israelites who annually, ever year, placed all their sins and miseries on the head of a goat, and then sent that goat out into the wilderness, thinking that that would purge them of all that had happened that previous year. When the goat reached the wilderness, the tribe felt cleansed of all problems, all evils, all sins.

That is an apt parable for what is happening in America today, because in today's society, the goat, or the scapegoat, is poor children and their parents. Somehow we think we can rid ourselves of all our social problems by scapegoating children and exiling them to a wilderness of greater poverty and hopelessness. Well, you know that that won't work. You know that every child in this country is linked to every other one. My husband and I can do all we can, and we do, to make sure our daughter has every opportunity.

We'll give her the best education she can get. We'll take care of her. But I know that she could walk down the street some day, on the way to or from school, and be a victim of a drive-by shooting because of other children who were neglected and denied their God-given rights to feel like a full and decent human being. (Applause.) But you know, just like Dr. Foster, some of what we have to say about this is not easy to hear.

Parents and families are the primary responsibility. They have to take the lead. (Applause.) Parents, every one of us, have to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to create conditions within families that enable children to flourish. Young boys and girls need to postpone having sex, and certainly having children, until they are mature and responsible enough to understand their decisions. (Applause.)

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Parents with children should think a lot longer and harder about divorce, and put their children's needs and interests first. (Applause.) And child support, as the President has made clear, has to be part of what it means to be a responsible parent. But you know, child support is not only financial. Child support is emotional; child support is intellectual; child support is spiritual. And I want to say a special word of thanks to my old friend, C. Delores Tucker, for speaking truth to power when it comes to what is being fed and sold to our children. (Applause.)

So I come back to where I started. Yes, we have personal responsibility. Yes, we have to clean up our culture. Yes, we should be talking about and transmitting the values that we were raised with. Most of us in this room were raised differently than we are raising our children and our grandchildren. (Applause.) We wouldn't have allowed a person to walk in the door and say some of the things we let the t.v. say for hours and hours every single day. (Applause.)

Fight for this veedship* that the President is championing. Make every parent have the right and responsibility to use that remote control, not to turn over their children to it as a babysitter, but to block out the violence and sex that destroys and desensitizes the minds of our children. (Applause.) But just as we can list all that parents and families and individuals must do, all that personally, and culturally and morally we are called upon to do, there are also political and economic problems that we must address together.

You can work, as many of you have, from dawn to midnight every single day. You can work those fingers to the bone. You can do the very best job you know how to do, and then be afraid to let your child walk outside the door because of what waits out there. You can show up for work on time, do a full day's work for 35 years and be given a pink slip and not even a thank you. (Applause.) You know that you can go to school and do the best you can.

I'll never forget, Reverend Gaylord may remember this, because it's the kind of thing that used to happen to me all the time in Arkansas. I'll never forget standing in the living room of the Arkansas governor's mansion when the President and I had invited every young person who was the valedictorian or salutatorian of every high school to come

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with their parents to be honored. Because we wanted to honor academics as well as athletics. (Applause.) And we stood there for six hours, we shook every hand.

And there was one handsome young black man who came through, and his mother was so proud. And I said to him, I said, well, now, what are you going to do next year? He said, well, I want to be a doctor. And I said, that's wonderful; I said, so where are you going to go to college. And he looked a little embarrassed and he said, well, ma'am, he said, I finished high school, I took every course my high school offered; I did well, I was on the honor roll, made valedictorian; and then I started applying for college and they said the school I went to wasn't good enough for me to be able to compete with the kids from Central High and the big high schools in Arkansas.

Now there was a young man and his family who had played by the rules. It was society that had failed them. (Applause.) And so part of what we have to do is quite blame-placing, quit finger-pointing. There is enough accountability to go around for what's wrong with our children in this country. (Applause.) And you know, you can't roll up your sleeves if you're wringing your hands. (Laughter.) And it's time we roll up our sleeves and we get to work to solve the problems in our communities, our families, and our nation. (Applause.)

And finally, let me just be a bit more personal and return to the subject of faith. Because we can't do any of this alone, can we? We have to work with each other, and we have to know that we're working on behalf of a higher power and eternal values that will guide us if we stray from the path. There's a book that I keep in my office that many of the people who work for me consult from time to time, written by Susan Taylor, the editor of Essence magazine. (Applause.)

It's called, "In the Spirit." And this is a young woman, young by my standards. They get younger every year. (Laughter.) I just can't tell -- if you ever want to make my day, if you ever have a chance to introduce me, just introduce me as a young woman. (Laughter and applause.) So this young woman, this extraordinary young woman, Susan Taylor, she writes, "The most revolutionary thing we can do is to have faith, to hold a positive vision of what we want for ourselves and for our children, and to put energy behind that vision to make it a reality."

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Let us keep our expectations and our vision high. If the NAACP does that; if you work through all of the difficult issues you're confronting internally, to emerge even stronger; if you take your message to people who really need to hear it, because you know, this is like preaching to the choir, us talking to each other. But if you have a vision and you have high expectations, people will respond. They will know that you speak the truth.

And if we do that, then together, we will once again inspire that season of hope that will lead to the kind of country we deserve to have and to leave to the children we love. Thank you for what you've done. Thank you for what you're doing. And thank you and God bless you for what you will do for the United States of America. (Applause.)

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