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REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
TO THE MUSLIM WOMEN'S LEAGUE  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
MAY 30, 1996

MRS CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much Leila. It is such a great honor and pleasure for me to be here. I am indeed very touched by this luncheon and the kind words that both Doctor Hahut and Leila have said about me. I don't know that I deserve them but I certainly did like hearing them. It was an especially poignant moment for those of us in the White House when we were honored to host the Eid's celebration and to have so many representatives of the various aspects of the American-Muslim experience there with us. And just as then, I am also now very happy to be here with you. I want to thank the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Muslim Women's League, and all of you who are part of this luncheon.

I especially I want to thank you for the efforts that you are undertaking to reach out both individually and through such organizations as the League and Council to your fellow citizens to assist all Americans in understanding the richness of your faith, and your traditions and your heritage.

Leila and I were both very moved by our experiences in Beijing. I was particularly grateful for her contributions and her leadership there on behalf of herself and on behalf of the League. But what was especially noteworthy was that gathered together in one place were women and men from around our globe, who were joined together in seeking common ground and solutions for the problems we all confront.

Those of us in America may not face the difficulties that women and girls face in other countries in achieving education or health care or participating in the lives of their communities, but we too face difficulties that can only be met by people honestly helping one another, sharing their hearts, their minds, their experiences. And I am grateful that women everywhere are joining together in the aftermath of that conference to seek solutions on behalf of themselves, their neighbors, their daughters, their granddaughters. And we do so not alone, because just as we saw in Beijing, and we see here, there are many men who also share our vision of a world in which all people who are

equal in the sight of God are also equal in the sight of their fellow men and women.

I must say a word of thanks to Leila's husband, because he wrote an article that appeared in the Atlantic Journal Constitution when Leila was in Beijing about his experiences taking care of their two young sons and it was a funny and moving article. It reminded me often of the times my husband took care of our daughter, when I'd be gone at some event or other obligation. And, as I write in my book, she didn't always eat the way I wanted her to eat, she didn't always get to sleep exactly when I wanted her to get to sleep, but sharing the most important of all human obligations -- that of parenting our children -- with a supportive and loving husband is one of the great joys of any women's life. And so I want to thank Salaam for that.

I am very proud that not only did the delegation to Beijing, but that this country really symbolizes what we are attempting to do and have been doing for more than two hundred years. Turning America into a more perfect union, a land of opportunity and freedom and of hope for all people. We have so benefited from successive generations of immigrants who have worked hard to achieve the American dream for themselves and their families. And in turn, the traditions they have brought here have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American society.

We see the influence of people from every part of the globe, every day - in the food we eat, the music we listen to, the art we enjoy, the languages and accents we hear on our streets. And as Americans we have long relied on our diverse religious traditions for the courage and faith to meet the challenges of our times. Islam is the fastest growing religion in America. It is a guide and pillar of stability for many of our people. That is why an understanding of Islam in our country is long overdue. I was pleased when the acknowledgments were being made that there were here with us representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities in the Los Angeles area who have also worked hard to spread a greater understanding of Islam in their own congregations.

Like many Americans, I only recently have begun to gain a fuller appreciation of Islam. When I was growing up in a suburb of Chicago, there were no courses in Islamic history or religion in my school. There were no Muslim families in my neighborhood. There were very few opportunities, if any, for me even to encounter and visit with American Muslims. That has changed. I know from my own family and personal experience, it has not only changed because we now have so many more opportunities, but it has changed because those of you who are Muslim Americans have begun to reach out and share your experiences with us.

I have to admit that a good deal of what I have learned, as Leila referred to early, has come from my daughter, who took a

course last year in Islamic history taught by an American-Muslim who is on her school faculty. And on our travels to Islamic countries in Southeast Asia last year, and to Turkey this year, she provided me with a running commentary on everything we saw and visited. I was also privileged in Istanbul to meet with leaders representing all of the great religious traditions that trace their roots to that historical city. I was impressed, as I sat in the Islamic cultural center in Istanbul with Muslims, Christians of every denomination represented in the city, and Jewish representatives to hear them discussing their own efforts to increase religious tolerance and mutual understanding.

And earlier this year, when we did host our celebration at the White House, it was a joyous occasion. Americans of African, and Asian, and Arab descent gathered together to mark the end of the month long Ramadan fast. There were men in business suits and children in traditional dress. There were young babies sleeping on their mothers' shoulders. They represented, as you do, the diversity that lies within the Muslim community in America. Present there was the first Muslim chaplain to serve in the US military who offered a prayer, and a young girl of twelve, the daughter of Iraqi immigrants who spoke of the meaning of Ramadan to her.

The President and I are committed to doing everything we can to make sure that Muslim children, just like Jewish and Christian children in America, will be able to look at the White House and know that there is recognition of the importance of their religious beliefs and that they too will be able to celebrate their holiest days in the White House for years to come. Through all of these experiences and through my own reading, I have learned what you know. That the values that lie at the heart of your experience as Muslims, values of faith and of family, of community and of responsibility for the less fortunate, are values that are powerful. And they are ones that you share in common with others of us who also seek to honor and live by our values everyday.

Taking our values of our faith into the public arena is a difficult and challenging effort. To keep our own traditions alive, to share them with others, to contribute to our political and public discourse, but to do so in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect is one of the challenges that America, like many other countries around the world, now faces. How do we make sense of this rapidly changing global economy and society? How do we hold on to what we value? And how do we take those values and use them to help us meet the challenges of the future?

I believe that one of our great strengths as Americans is that we are a diverse people, that we do come from different backgrounds, and we do have different points of view. But for those of us who share the mono-theistic religions that arose from the beginning of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we have so many

values in common that together we can help to shape a more compassionate and caring society. We can help to imbue people with personal responsibility for themselves, for their children, for their communities. And as we meet our challenges, I hope we will look for ways to do just that.

You know, in his State of the Union address, my husband talked about challenges we confront as a nation, challenges to cherish our children and strengthen our families, to invest in education, to make it possible for people who work hard for a living to feel that they are making a decent living for themselves and their children, to guarantee some protection from crime and violence, and to work towards preserving the environment that we hold as stewards on behalf of future generations. Also to maintain American leadership, here and abroad. To continue the drive for peace, and freedom, and justice around the world, and to make democracy work better here at home and elsewhere. Now those are the challenges of our times, and there are many sub-challenges under each of those.

But sometimes, in moments of great change as we confront today, it is too easy to fall back on stereotypes, on negativism, on the answers that drive people apart instead of bringing them together. I know that many of you in this room have not only traveled to Bosnia, but have supported the people of Bosnia during the last terrible years. This spring my daughter and I saw first hand what can happen to a society when people forget to look at each other as human beings. When people are driven to hatred and extremism and violence because of propaganda and the stirring of emotions that are not rooted in our common experience, but are devised for someone else's political or commercial advantage. I listened to the men and women who came to meet me in Tuzla, gathered in that room and our United States military headquarters, where Muslims and Christians and Jews who had tried under the most horrific of circumstances to keep hospitals and clinics going to treat the wounded and the sick, to teach children, to gather for religious services, and I saw the pain in their eyes and I heard the bewilderment in their voices as to how this could happen.

And we look around the world and we see that it is not only Bosnia, but there are many places where those who would divide us, who would stereotype us, are sowing their evil seeds. Whether it is in central Africa or Asia or Europe, Northern Ireland or here at home. Yet I also saw, as I helicoptered to two of our American military outposts, clothes lines with clean, white sheets hanging from the windows of roofless houses. I saw families beginning to return to till their fields, and I felt, as I always do, that we had to believe that we could make a difference, a more hopeful and peaceful world, and that we could never give in to the voices of extremism and hatred and violence.

Because what I heard there were the voices of people yearning for normalcy again. They just wanted to get back to the lives that had been so brutally interrupted.

The United States through, its leadership and the NATO peacekeeping efforts, was attempting to do just that. As important to me as what had already been accomplished -- to separate the combatants and to begin to encourage people to return to their homes and take up their lives again -- was the example that our young men and women were setting for Bosnians and for others. As my helicopter landed at Camp Bedrock or Camp Alicia, places that had been carved out by our American military to house our soldiers, I saw the promise of America; I saw men and women wearing uniforms, I saw Christian, Muslim and Jewish young people in the city, the country, the suburbs joined together on behalf of our commitment to peace. As important as anything our leaders do, they exemplified what it means for people to live together who have different beliefs, who have different faiths, who come from different traditions and heritages.

Perhaps at no time in history has the American promise been more important. We have to make America work. We have to be willing to improve our own democracy, to stand up against our own voices of hatred and division. And it is especially important that we do so by celebrating each other, by respecting each other. And I know we already heard a reading from the holy Koran that was done so well by the woman who read earlier. But think back on those words, and if we remember that mankind was created from a single pair of male and female and made into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, then fundamentally we are all one. And because of our great traditions we are able to enrich the human experience and we are particularly able to enrich this great experiment known as America.

I want to thank you for being part of building and improving America, I want to thank you for educating and making more aware your fellow citizens of your particular backgrounds, experiences and the meaning of your faith.

And I want to challenge all of us to realize that in the next years ahead, much of the world will look to us to see if it is possible for Christian, Muslim and Jew to live in harmony; for black, white and brown to work together side by side; for men and women to support and love and respect each other; and for children, regardless of who their families might be, to be given the opportunity to become whoever God meant them to be. It is a wonderful time to be an American, and I thank you for helping us continue to realize the promise that America represents. Thank you very much.