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BABIES AND CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

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REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
AT BABIES AND CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL
AT THE COLUMBIA-PRESBYTERIAN MEDICAL CENTER
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. Thank you for those flowers, too. Thank you.

I am very pleased to be here and to have an opportunity to discuss the health and well-being of America's children at one of America's foremost hospitals for children. I learned just a little while ago from Dr. Speck that Columbia-Presbyterian is the oldest and the largest not-for-profit hospital center in the United States.

But certainly those of us who care about high-quality health care in America or anywhere, and those of us who care about children, know of its importance in delivering the kind of excellent health care that we have come to expect in the United States. And that's what I want to talk to you about today because I have been fortunate in my life to be involved with children's hospitals and to visit many of our children's hospitals around the country.

From my experience as a parent and as a board member of a children's hospital, I know there is something very special about these places. Mrs. Wray was describing her own personal experience and I had the privilege of speaking with a number of other parents and children about their own experiences here.

I am here today because I am worried about the future of hospitals like this one. And more generally, I am worried about the future of America's children.

Decisions are being made in Congress at this very moment that threaten to devalue and demean every aspect of our children's lives -- their health, their education, their nutrition, their housing, their safety, and the environment in which they grow up.

The facts are simple and they are stark. Children are the biggest losers in the Republican budget proposal.

Today the Clinton Administration is releasing a detailed analysis of the impact of these proposed cuts on our children. And this analysis -- which goes state by state, looking at what will be the impact on children if these proposals actually become law -- is shocking reading.

We know that any mother or father or aunt or uncle or grandparent or concerned adult would not take comfort in knowing that for all the rhetoric we hear, often coming out of the United States Congress about helping children, the Republican budget will in fact deny millions of children the basics they need to live productive lives.

They will be denied health care they now have, schooling they can count on, proper food, a safe place to live, a secure neighborhood, air and water that we can count on as being clean enough to breathe and drink.

We are not talking about only poor children. I wish that -- if that's all we were talking about -- there would be an uproar and an outcry from every person in our country, that we should not do to the most vulnerable children among us what we would not let anyone do to our own children.

But these budget cuts go much further. These budget cuts -- in the way they undermine health and food safety; the way they strip away environmental protections; the way they put at risk many of the services that all Americans and their children count on -- is an assault on every child's future -- my child, as well as any child in this room, or living within a few blocks of this hospital.

We also know that families making less than \$30,000 a year -- which are about half the taxpayers in the United States -- under the Republican budget proposals will actually see their taxes go up, so that people who make more money than that can see their taxes go down.

So it is not merely that we will be undermining the services available to all children, that we will be particularly assaulting the services needed for poor children, but under these Republican proposals, we will be taking money away from families who earn less than \$30,000 a year so that they will be further handicapped in taking care of their own children.

Now I can only believe that most Americans have not yet fully grasped the impact of these budget proposals, because we are all for balancing the budget. It was this President and Democratic Congressmembers, like Carolyn Maloney and Charles Rangel, who are here, who voted for the first time in 1993 to actually begin balancing the budget after 12 years of profligate spending that drove the deficit through the ceiling.

So there's no debate about balancing the budget. There is also no debate about being more efficient in providing services. It was again, this President and the Democratic Congress that began the process of making government more efficient.

We don't have any objection to sensible, reasonable proposals that will put our economic house in order.

But we will not stand by silently and see those who are most vulnerable among us -- those who work hard for a living, those who make less than \$30,000 a year -- pay the price for the profligate spending that went on during the 1980s in order to profit those who do not need that kind of help.

If one looks in the faces of our children, one can see the hope for the future, but we know the struggles that they are up against. We know that consistently, too many of the children in the richest nation in our hemisphere, in our world, live in poverty.

I just returned from a trip to South America. I visited many nations, much poorer and less developed than ours. Yet I talked with leaders who were doing all they could to increase spending for education, increase spending for health care -- looking for ways to invest in their children, at the very time when the United States Congress is looking to reverse our own historic commitment to the children of America.

Our nation has survived as the longest living democracy because of our historic commitment to children and families. Now is no time to step backwards and that is exactly what this Republican budget analyzed here would have us do.

Let me give you just a few examples. The Republican budget would eliminate Headstart for 180,000 American preschoolers. It would deny tens of thousands of children right here in New York the opportunity to have the kind of personal attention in school to acquire the skills that they need.

It would eliminate Goals 2000 which sets standards for teaching and learning in America.

It would eliminate summer jobs for 600,000 young people and do away with the President's national service program known as Americorps in which young men and women earn their way to college by performing community service.

We can look across the board at this budget and see that no part of our life together as a nation would be left untouched and damaged.

I want to talk though, just for a minute, about health care

because here particularly, the Republican budget cuts are cruel and unconscionable. And I can only hope that the people who are voting to put them into place do not understand the consequences of their votes.

We are seeing the dismantling of the part of the social safety net known as Medicaid. It has been dismantled in these proposals with very little discussion, except with those who think they might profit from the dismantling.

We know when we look at what Medicaid has done, that it is the primary source of health care for nearly one in four American children. The next time you see a group of children anywhere, just mentally count off, because one in four in some way -- middle class, upper class, poor -- depend on Medicaid.

And one in three children under the age of three depend on Medicaid.

More than half of the children on Medicaid live in families with working parents -- parents who are doing the best they can to earn their own livings, but cannot meet the medical needs of their children.

Medicaid is the primary source of health coverage for millions of children who are disabled or who suffer from chronic illness.

It is the primary health care coverage for nine out of 10 children with HIV and AIDS.

Medicaid is the primary source of prenatal and maternal health care for low-income, pregnant women.

Medicaid is also an important source of coverage for the health care of older Americans living in extreme poverty or with serious disabilities and is the largest insurer for over two-thirds of nursing home residents.

Medicaid is literally a lifeline for many, many millions of Americans.

The Republican budget cuts would eliminate health care coverage through Medicaid for nearly one-half million children in New York alone, and four and half million nationwide by the year 2002.

That means those children would no longer be able to get immunizations or check-ups or other preventive services now covered by Medicaid. It means that they would use the emergency room as so many uninsured families who make just a little too much money in order to qualify for Medicaid do for their health

care coverage now.

Ripping apart this safety net is not the American way.

It is not the American way to deny infants the shots they need to stay healthy.

It is not the American way to deny treatment to children who are disabled or desperately ill.

It is not the American way to punish hardworking parents whose family health care coverage vanishes with a job loss or a job change.

It is not the American way to make the oldest among us give up their possessions, sell their house, sell their car, and live a life of poverty if their spouse has to go into a nursing home.

Cutting \$182 billion from Medicaid will force families to make grim choices that you or I would not wish to make and no American family should be forced to make. Choices between health care for children or nursing home care for parents. Choices between education and vaccinations; between food and prescription drugs.

The people at this hospital know that the choices that will be forced on American families will also be forced on our hospitals -- private, not-for-profit hospitals like this one and public hospitals throughout our country.

These are the institutions that take all of our children, regardless of their income, regardless of where they come from. These doors are open. However, the doors of many of the for-profit hospitals in America are closing and the doors of the not-for-profit, community hospitals will be likely closed permanently if the combined cuts in Medicaid and Medicare go through.

For the children of America that need help, they know they can find it at children's hospitals. These hospitals cost more because taking care of sick children is more expensive than taking care of sick adults. And children's hospitals cannot shift those higher costs to adult patients the way other hospitals can. Already Medicaid pays children's hospitals, on average, less than 80 cents for every dollar spent to care for a child.

The impact of cutting Medicaid even further is obvious. Children's hospitals simply will not be able to provide the services they do today and will not be able to maintain their open-door policy.

Throughout our history, we have thought of ourselves as an

American family whose greatest priority was our children. And as Americans, we have prided ourselves on our compassion. And I think that is a pride that was well earned because we have put our children first, both in our public investments and our private ones.

We have built magnificent hospitals like this, we have provided the basis for medical research that cannot be matched anywhere in the world. We have taken care of our poor.

Anyone who, like me, has traveled in countries struggling because of their economic problems to take care of the health care needs of their people, know that when one walks through a hospital in Brazil or Bangladesh or Moscow as I have, you see literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people with nowhere else to go, with doctors struggling to provide even the most basic kind of health care.

I do not want to see that in the United States of America. There is no reason we should.

Now, any time I make a speech like this, somebody invariably either writes or says, "Well you know, you can't expect the government to take care of children -- that is the family's responsibility." Who argues with that? Of course it is the family's responsibility. Of course parents bear the primary responsibility for their children.

But let's not fool ourselves. National policies -- whether they are about education or health care or welfare or taxes or the environment -- affect every family and child. They are mirrored in the lives and experiences of our children. And government has played and must continue to play an invaluable role in safeguarding the interests of children and families.

It does so in ways that we don't often think about. When I was speaking with the parents and children a few minutes ago, I met two families with adopted children with serious health problems. They were able in part to adopt those children and give them the love we would want for every child because Medicaid helped to pay the health care costs of these special needs children.

We don't think about how the actions that are being proposed today will push more and more families closer to the brink of economic disaster.

And that is what I want every American to start considering. Think about this budget debate -- not as a Republican or an Independent or a Democrat -- think about it as a parent, as a grandparent, as an aunt, as an uncle.

Don't get so wrapped up in the statistics and the policy papers that we forget our basic obligations. We know as parents what we owe our children. We know what we try to do in order to meet those needs.

I looked into the faces just a few minutes ago of mothers and fathers who have given up everything to take care of sick children -- and who among us would not do the same?

But when it comes to legislating and making policy, parents turn into partisans and good parental instincts seem to retreat. Would we ever say as parents that only one of four of our children could go to a doctor or get a vaccination or have a hearing test? Of course not. We would demand and work for the right to make sure they were all taken care of.

Would we ever say as parents with a child that had spinal bifida or congenital heart disease or cystic fibrosis that they no longer deserved treatment and care? Of course not. We would do everything within our power to make sure our child was taken care of.

But in this time we live in today, with the kind of reckless, ideological effort to meet fixed budget targets to prove a point, we are undermining what parents try to do every single day.

We as a society are doing things we would never do as parents. How can we legislate what we would not approve of as parents? How can we vote for people who would do that? How can we permit it to happen?

I hope that as this debate goes on we will recognize, first of all, that the kind of cuts that are in this Republican budget proposal cannot be permitted to be enacted in to law.

There is an alternative: a balanced budget proposal that the President has put forth that truly does put children's needs first. It doesn't give tax cuts to the wealthiest of Americans, and for those in this atrium who would lose their tax cut, I apologize. But you don't need it. Our children need that funding in order to keep their lives going.

And more than that, these budget battles are not just about money, they are not just about who wins and who loses in Washington, they are about our values as a nation. What do we really care about? What kind of people are we, what kind of people do we intend to be?

Any family does its best to take care of its old and its young. There is an inner-generational compact that is more important than any kind of contract for legislation.

That compact says loud and clearly: "We owe each other something. We have obligations to one another and besides, we never know what might happen to us."

There, but for the grace of God, go our child, our spouse, our parent -- and we ought to be a little more humble in the face in the unpredictability that life deals all of us.

Our children are our present and our future, a test of our humanity and our faith. And our children are watching. Will we pass this test or will we fail them and ourselves?

When I was in Chile, I was reminded of their Nobel Prize-winning poet, Gabriela Mistral who said these words, that I think we ought to say to ourselves over and over again in the weeks and months ahead: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, his mind is being developed. To him, we cannot say tomorrow. His name is today."

And today each of us has an obligation to the children we know, the children around us, and the children of this country, and we will be judged on whether or not we meet those obligations.

I think we will, because when it finally comes time to make the decision, I do not believe a majority in Congress or a majority in the United States will turn their backs on our children.

Thank you all very much.

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