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VASSAR COLLEGE

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PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

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**REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON AT  
VASSAR COLLEGE**

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, President Fergusson. Thank you very much Tolga for that introduction.

I am delighted to be here this afternoon. I have looked forward to this occasion because I have known a number of Vassar graduates and faculty members. As President Fergusson has already mentioned, Molly Shanley is a particular friend of mine and during the years that I have known her, she has spoken so warmly about the Vassar experience and about this institution's commitment to the best of a liberal arts education.

She has stayed with me in the White House and on more than one occasion in the last two and a half years, has in a very expressive way that those of you who know Professor Shanley will recognize, kind of cocked her head and said, "Well, when will you be at Vassar?"

So here I am Molly and I'm delighted to be here because I respect so greatly what this college stands for.

I've also brought with me one of your distinguished alumna, a woman whose name, whether you know it or not, is a household word -- the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, Peggy Richardson. And she was recently here and spoke with many of you and particularly the alumni who were gathered for an alumni reunion. Vassar has many, many graduates for whom you rightly take great pride in because of their achievements in every field that is open and because of what this college has always stood for.

Despite the disability of my being a Wellesley graduate, I am greatly impressed by what I know of Vassar and am just stunned by the glory of this day and the beauty of this campus. And I hope that all of you who are here recognize as those of us who are visiting, including many of the parents who are here today, what an extraordinary blessing it is for you to be in this particular place for these four years of your life.

I just came from another place that is filled with blessings and challenge. I was at Mrs. Roosevelt's cottage, called Val-Kill, just a few minutes down the road from here. That was a particularly important occasion for me also because I have always been an admirer of Mrs. Roosevelt's. But now I find myself often

turning to her and turning to the words she spoke and wrote and to what has been written and said about her -- looking for inspiration, sometimes solace, knowing that someone was there before.

The things Eleanor Roosevelt stood for and fought for throughout her lifetime -- human rights, equality of opportunity, the potential of each individual to have a life of promise and productivity, peace among us and between us throughout the world -- all of those issues are not out of date. If anything they are more important today than ever. She believed that the best investment any country could make was in its people, particularly its young people. And that message too has added weight for the world in which we find ourselves.

You who are students are here because families and others have invested in you. They believed in you, they were committed to your futures. They made sacrifices so that you could attend a college of this distinction, so that you could pursue your own abilities. That's what Mrs. Roosevelt believed all of us should be doing for one another.

Today we are debating many of the issues that Mrs. Roosevelt cared about. We might use different terminology, but the ideas are the same. The decisions that will be made in the next few months in our own country may be about something called the budget but they are really about values -- they are about charting the course for our country for the next years. They will tell us a lot about what kind of people we are and what we truly believe in.

One of the decisions that will be debated is the role that education should play in today's world. It is almost hard to believe that there are those who do not believe that one of the principal values that made America the strongest democracy in the history of the world is the one that we placed on the role of education.

We are in the midst of rapid change. We know that the industrial society is a fading memory and the Information Age is upon us. How best can we deal with these new challenges that confront us, but to turn once again to education to help prepare ourselves to take whatever role we can in society.

These changes are exciting, but they are also threatening to many people. The people who have educations in this country are the ones who will benefit from the changes going on around us.

Just think about what has happened in the years that my own daughter has been alive. In 1980, a worker with a college education earned 36 percent more during a lifetime than a worker without one. Today that difference has grown to 74 percent, more



than doubling. But more than a percentage has doubled. The differences between those who have educations and those who do not are increasingly between those who will be able to chart their own futures and those who will fall prey to the many forces at work beyond their control.

Much of what we have to do as we confront these challenges has to do with whether or not we insure that as many citizens as possible are educated well enough to make a living, to provide for a family, and to be productive citizens.

That's why this debate about balancing the budget is important to the future of education. Issues like college loans, their availability, and the rate of repayment are not just some abstract rhetorical battle waged by people who have staked out ideological positions. They will determine largely who will be able to access much of what's available in private schools and public schools for years to come in the future.

These reforms that are being suggested about eliminating the number of people who are eligible for college loans -- making them more expensive, eliminating people who are eligible for Pell Grants and scholarships, cutting the aid to education at all levels -- are ones that go right to the heart of what we believe is worth investing in. Funding for education and training is not about giving people something for nothing. It is about helping ourselves. It is not altruism. It is enlightened self-interest. The American dream's continuance depends upon a critical mass of Americans feeling connected and committed to the daily life that we share together.

When you think about how important education is for all of you -- or else you would not be here -- then just think a little more broadly about how important it is for those you know back home. Think about the many students that maybe started college but couldn't afford to go on. Think about those who never dreamed it was possible for them at all. Think about those who still hold to the hope that they ought to be able to make a decent living without any more education than what is provided in high school.

And you begin to get an idea of how many people will be affected by any retreat from our historic commitment -- not only to opening the doors of college to people -- but urging them through those doors, encouraging them, providing incentives for them to find their way. Education is not only important here at home, it is one of the critical issues that stands in the way of development throughout the world.

I recently returned, as I met some of your faculty members who also had, from Beijing and the Women's Conference there. The issues that were discussed there, such as education, brought a

very practical focus to this conference. People gathered together to talk about how can we promote education for girls and women, for boys and men throughout the world. How can we convince families that investing in a girl is as important as investing in a boy? How can we convince societies that they don't have a person to waste? How do we make the case as we move toward the twenty-first century that investing in health and education, ensuring equal opportunity, legal protections -- those are important building blocks for prosperity and democracy. These are not idle or abstract issues because these kinds of investments in people make as big a difference for the future of free markets as any particular technological investment might.

We know that if women and girls are allowed to flourish, then societies do as well. There are some basic, basic building blocks that every society must look toward. And luckily we live in a country that has historically recognized those. When I spoke at Beijing, I spoke on behalf of American values. When I said that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, I spoke on behalf of American values and history. And yet much of what we see happening in Washington today has the potential of undermining our own historic commitment to our own American values.

If we pull up the ladder of opportunity after those of us in this great crowd have climbed its top ring so that others are struggling down below, are we doing any better than many societies that we stand in judgement of, that have a two tier society? Some are educated but most are not.

If we permit our great academic health centers to suffer the kinds of damaging cuts that will come from the proposed changes in Medicare and Medicaid, so that their missions of research and training physicians and providing charity care are dramatically undermined so that we see emergency rooms teeming with people who are uninsured or underinsured or have no where else to go, will we be so different than societies that provide two-tier health care systems? Those with enough money receive what they need, others wait and sometimes never get what they require.

These are not just hypotheticals for us to discuss in political science classes. The numbers are not encouraging. Because in addition to that gap that I described between the earning power of those who graduate from college and those who don't, the kinds of jobs available in our society are no longer offering incomes sufficient to support many families. We have a real difficult challenge in front of us -- how do we grow our economy, how do we stimulate the kind of jobs that will permit families to have a decent American standard of living, and how do we maintain a safety net for the many people who themselves may not be able to make it on their own?

These were the kinds of issues that Eleanor Roosevelt struggled with in her time. But in her time, particularly during the Great Depression and then the Second World War, despite the political challenges her husband faced -- there was a sense in America that we were all in this together. We all knew people who had lost their jobs, who had suffered. We knew people who were at the very end of their own rope because they had tried to do all they could to be self-sufficient and were unable to provide.

Today there's a dangerous division that goes on between us. We think of those who have not made it, who are not here at places like Vassar or any other place like it, as somehow less worthy, less deserving. They didn't work hard enough, they didn't sacrifice enough. Now that is certainly true, I'm sure, in some cases. But in the majority of cases, people felled by accident and injury and disease. People who bad luck seems to visit and never leave. People who struggle just to keep their children safe and not permit them to go out and play because the streets are too dangerous. People who work as hard as they know how -- sometimes double shifts, sometimes more than one or two part-time jobs -- who just feel that they can't ever get anywhere.

The American dream was kept alive during the Great Depression because no matter how bad things got, people believed that life would be better for their children. We now live with millions of our fellow Americans who no longer believe that -- who believe that others have given up on them and they're about ready to give up on themselves.

And you know when I do travel, when I'm privileged to visit other countries, I see people struggling every day to become what we have and often take for granted. When I go to the countries of South Asia and shake hands with people whose husbands and fathers and sons and mothers have been assassinated, who have been exiled and imprisoned and tortured because they believe in democracy, because they read our great political leaders words and believe them, who are trying to start businesses to employ people to lift them out of abject poverty, and who look to America and America's free enterprise system for the example that will work for them; I am overwhelmed and I am humbled.

But I also know that there are many Americans today who don't look at our own country and its history through those same eyes. Who don't count the blessings we have because they're so busy blaming somebody for something that hasn't worked out right. Who are too quick to ring their hands instead of rolling up their sleeves. There are too many of us who need to stop and take stock of how blessed and fortunate we are.

But then we also need to take the next step. There are very few of us who have gotten here or anywhere else without help from someone. I've never met a six-year-old who was a rugged individualist. I've been in an out of nursing homes where people have lived their whole lives trying so hard to be as independent as possible but the bottom fell out. I have walked the streets of our cities and our towns and looked into the eyes of people who have lost their jobs after twenty, thirty years of working as diligently as they knew how, but no longer have a future where they thought they would retire.

The world has changed and we know that with that change has come some great opportunities, but let's be honest and admit that change can also be dislocating -- can be threatening, can be very scary to all of us. In a time of change, perhaps more than ever, we need to turn back, not only to our values, but the ways we have implemented those values in the past.

It is not the American way to retreat from education. It is not the American way to cut back programs like Medicare and Medicaid so that the most vulnerable among us are left even more vulnerable. It is not the American way so that when a spouse goes into the nursing home the remaining spouse has to sell everything, only to end up in the poorhouse. It is not the American way to retreat from trying as hard as we can to provide opportunities for all Americans.

Now certainly we know that we have to change and experiment with new ways of doing things. We have to try new approaches to funding college loans, or providing for the homeless, or providing health care to people. We know that. That's what makes America such an exciting place always because we're always trying to improve. But improving means just that. It means being honest about our shortcomings and coming to grips with them and reaching consensus about how we can do things better. It does not mean turning our backs on literally millions and millions of our fellow citizens.

One of the things I like about Vassar, as I also like it about my own alma mater, is that in an age of technocracy and specialization, places like Vassar and Wellesley care about the liberal arts. They care about trying to teach all of us what a good life means.

They ask us to go back to the classics. They ask us to explore the humanities and the sciences -- not because we're going to make a living doing any of that, but because we will learn what it is to make a life. Some may make a living.

But the larger issues that the liberal arts represents that affect all of our lives are ones that have too often been forgotten in recent times. Eleanor Roosevelt never forgot and

she kept on learning. She always knew that a life well-lived was not a life in isolation, not a life of individual achievement to the exclusion of community commitment -- but a life of connection, a life of service. And that is one of the reasons why a place like Vassar is more important today than it may have even been at many times in its past.

I hope that for each of you this educational experience gives you not only the opportunity to explore new areas, to learn about yourself, to make great friends -- but to think seriously about what kind of society you want to help build.

The issues that are most difficult in all of our lives are the ones of relationships, the ones of love, the ones of caring, the ones of commitment. We don't find the answers to them in either legislation or even in textbooks. But they are the stuff of what makes for a life and what makes for a decent society.

We all have a lot to think about these days and when I think about the weeks and months ahead, when we will be arguing over fundamental principles about what it means to be an American, what our obligations to one another are, how we will prepare ourselves for this next century -- I will be thinking a lot about Eleanor Roosevelt because she loved to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable and a lot of us need both of that today.

We need to recognize that as we chart our individual futures -- literally the millions and millions of decisions that are made everyday -- we will chart our nation's. It is not only what is voted on in Congress that will matter; it is how we live our own lives.

Eleanor Roosevelt said that service was love in work clothes. I've also heard it said that service is the rent we pay for living. In America all of us need to remember we are blessed to be able to pay that rent. And if each of us does what we can in our own families, neighborhoods, and workplaces to reach out to one another, to lend that helping hand -- we will begin to build the connections that will carry us into this next century as not only the strongest nation on earth, but one that deserves the love and respect because we have lived up to our basic values.

That is my hope for our country and for each of you. Thank you very much.

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