

ational Senior Service Corps
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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
to the National Senior Service Corps Conference
"Renewing America Through Senior Service"

Mrs Clinton: Thank you very much. I do feel ready, don't you? The passion that Harris Wofford brings to National Service makes all of us feel maybe even more ready than we thought we can be. And for that I am grateful. I also want to thank Jim, for his leadership and his inspiration, and Dr. King for your extraordinary leadership in the National Service Corporation.

I am delighted to be here, with a group of people who understand that what we give to one other is not only a great gift to those to whom we reach out, but an even greater gift to ourselves and the community of which we are a part. You know that I think it takes a village; it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to give all of us some sense of belonging so that we can become more than we could alone, by working with others.

And when I was invited to be here today I knew that I would have an opportunity to thank you. To thank you for the work you do every day. Building villages for all of our people. Not in a geographic way, not by actually going out and clearing land and putting up houses, but in a way that is appropriate to our time. And even more important, by re-creating, and for some for the first time creating the bonds of relationships, the values, and the feelings that do bind us together.

I travel around our country all the time, and what I see and what I feel when I do, is that despite our problems, which we can't overlook and we have to be ready to address, we have so much that is positive happening every single day in America. It may not make headlines when an older person through RSVP is there to help a small not-for-profit group get started or working with some community agency to expand its outreach. It may not make the evening news when a foster grandparent takes the hand of a child who has never had anyone raise a hand to her, except in violence. It may not be what people write about, when seniors understand that they too have something to continue to give, but I see it every single week.

I want thank you for making the Senior Service Corps, and all the projects with which you work, part of what it means to be building a better America. I think about all of the half million senior volunteers you work with every day, and I know that we can grow that number. We can, as Harris is fond of saying, "Crack the atom," and make it possible for even more of our fellow countrymen and women to find their place in service.

I know how important that is because that is the way I was raised. That is the kind of community I came from, that it is what was emphasized in my church, that is what I have spent more than 25 years working for. The concept of citizenship, the idea that each of us has a role to play. That you don't have to be in elected politics to be really setting a direction for our country. In fact I am often amused when someone says to me, as they often do -- "How can you stand being in politics"? -- And I always asked in response, "Well, are you married, or do you belong to a church, do you have any civic organizations in which you are a part" -- because I have always thought of politics primarily with a small "p" -- as the process by which we make decisions together.

When we come together, often with strongly held views, but because we are acting in good faith to help solve a problem or make a decision, we are willing to compromise and we then reach a decision, implement it, and go on.

I was reminded of how important politics with a small "p" is fueled by volunteerism, which is fueled by people understanding the power of citizenship, on my recent trip to Central Europe. I visited countries that are emerging from decades of authoritarianism and communism. And are in the process of making the difficult transition to democracy and to free market economy.

In each of the seven countries I visited, there were many hopeful signs of democracy at work. Fair and free elections were becoming the rule, the economy was being privatized to entrepreneurs and small businesses were springing up everywhere. And with few exceptions, citizens felt free to voice their beliefs without fear of government retribution.

I was encouraged by all of these developments but I also know, because as an American I understand this in my bones, that democracy is not just about institutions, it is also about democratic values becoming part of people's hearts, minds, and everyday lives. And as I said when I spoke in Prague, at the headquarters for Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty, which for decades was the only voice that promoted the truth and democracy into so much of Central and Eastern Europe, that what we now face in all free societies is the challenge of joining together in an alliance of values, that fuels and sustains civil society.

The government and the private economy are two parts of the essential triangle for democracy. The third part is what is

called, "Civil Society", a phrase that social scientists and philosophers use to describe the associations that we in America take for granted, and have been a hallmark of our democracy since de Tocqueville came in the early 19th century and saw us in action. And I began to see the seeds of that also, not only being planted, but beginning to make brave new efforts to shoot through the hard soil of cynicism and fear that had been bred in these countries.

I met with citizens in each country who are working to solve problems and to shape their own destinies. To take responsibility for their own futures, not to rely on the government as the answer to everything as they had been taught, not to leave everything to the free market economy, and knowing that there were going to be certain human tasks, such as holding that little girl's hand, that weren't profitable in a financial sense.

Now we have seen in America how important these kind of democratic values are. And when I visited a country like Romania, which in many ways suffered more than any country, because they were not only under communism, but also authoritarian rule that dominated their lives and was tinged with madness. And now they are finally beginning to lift themselves up and ask, "What can we do for ourselves?" And I sat around a table with men and women working to make sure the press was free, that children and women had access to medical care, that minorities were guaranteed their rights. And in the faces of those people I saw democracy in action. I felt the same way in Poland, the Czech Republic, in Slovakia, Hungary and Estonia. As I sat and visited with people who do what you do, but for who it is very new -- this concept of bringing people together to help themselves, and each other.

The key to our success as a democratic society has always been that as individual citizens we have the power to change things, to make things better, to solve our most serious problems by working together -- taking responsibility and serving each other.

And as we now prepare to meet the challenges of our own time, we have to be willing to reinvest ourselves in public service. Our country's modest investment in the Corporation for National Service enables thousands of Americans to share their talents and abilities with their communities and fulfill their own god-given potential to Learn and Serve America, Americorps, and the National Senior Service Corps. Our nation reinforces the principal that in America, service is a life-long endeavor that can begin in childhood and last well into one's later years.

My husband often says that our country cannot afford to waste any of our citizens. And that means citizens at every stage of life. In retirement the senior citizens who work so

hard to make this country great, are still one of the resources for all communities.

For proof we only need to look at the thirty year history of the foster-grandparent program, the twenty-five year experience of RSVP, and the twenty-year record of the Senior Companions program. These programs look upon aging in America not as a burden, but as an opportunity for neglected children and teen mothers, and some of our poorest neighborhoods to feel the care and guidance of a foster grandparent, and opportunity for a frail senior to avoid the costs and loneliness of a nursing home through help in their daily chores from a senior companion, an opportunity for libraries, police stations, schools, and hospitals across our country to save costs and serve citizens more efficiently.

I know that what you are doing, you and your senior volunteers, are truly renewing America through Senior Service and I have seen the way this renewal works; neighborhoods are being reclaimed from crime through block watches by Senior Corps members. I have heard about the Traveling Grannies program of Grand Rapids, Michigan, that is helping to break the cycles of poverty and teen parenthood. That program sends foster grandmothers to visit with and mentor teen mothers in their own homes. One teen mother told a Senior Corps member that her foster grandmother was her inspiration to graduate from high school and go onto college. She said that it wasn't just that she helped by driving me to appointments and just getting through the day, it's that she motivated me.

Each and every one of our 51 million fit and active seniors need to contribute, and we need to make it possible for all of them to do that. If you had been with me in Central Europe you would know that the idea of volunteering is still somewhat new in those countries. And when you talk about that kind of work, as I did on various occasions, that many of your groups do, people look a little quizzical, -- "A foster grandparent, volunteering to help a teen mother, all on her own, just doing that because she cared about making a contribution and helping another human being? We've never heard of such a thing."

But because we've heard of it, and because we are trying to make sure everyone in America hears of it, we are all the better for it. I heard about an Alaskan foster grandparent who described the value of seniors best when he said to a group of children, "You young people look at me and you say who is this old man, he has no values, he can not even read, he can not write, he has no teeth; but I can tell you who you are". That generational commitment is essential to America.

And you know too that seniors themselves are renewed by their participation in the programs of the Senior Service Corps. For those who meet income requirements, the small stipends that the Corps provides can make life more comfortable. And studies

have shown that seniors who serve are healthier, more satisfied with life, and live longer than those who don't.

The President wants you to know, and wants you to take back to all who you work with, that he will do everything he can to make sure that the Senior Corps thrives and grows to meet the needs of our community. My husband understands that the Senior Corps is essential for making America what we want it to be.

We have seen some progress in the last few years. We have our economy doing well, now 10 million new jobs created, small businesses opening and flourishing at a record rate, the lowest combined rate of inflation and unemployment in more than twenty years. We have seen crime rates going down in our major cities, in all categories except for youth crime. We have seen a lot of progress of people understanding their responsibilities for themselves, their families, and our nation. And service is an essential part of continuing that progress, and we know that government cannot do that alone. That is why I am so pleased that you have been reaching out and receiving help from private and non-profit agencies.

On Monday afternoon, for example, I know that a group of men and women came to the White House for an unprecedented gathering, fifty leaders from business, foundations, universities, the not-for-profit world, and the media to find ways to bolster Senior Service. We need partnerships like these. These are the type of relationships that will really ensure that Senior Service, all forms of service, have a long and lasting life.

The doubling of our senior population in the next thirty years -- and you know I am about to be married to a man who is eligible for AARP membership, in about a month -- means that certainly for my husband and me, it becomes a very personal commitment. We intend to serve in whatever capacity we are able and we look forward to being a part of Senior Service at some point in the future.

America with its diversity represented in this audience, as I look out and see your faces, has so much that we can show to the rest of the world and sometimes, even to ourselves. The trip I made before this recent one included a visit to Bosnia, and again I wish all of you could have been with me. Because I was able on your behalf to do two things.

Primarily to thank our soldiers for the role they are playing in attempting to enforce the Dayton Peace Accords, but also to visit with civilians, Muslims, Croats, and Serbs who had survived the horrors of that time. I met with them first at our military base and I sat in a small room, with several groups of people, doctors and nurses who had tried to keep clinic open under bombardment, teachers who had tried to keep teaching children despite the horrors and the conditions they faced; I talked to women who hadn't seen their husbands since they had

been dragged away, and mothers who didn't know where their sons and daughters were. I saw the pain in their eyes and heard it in their voices as they wondered about what had happened, how did this time come to pass -- they had a government, they were developing businesses, they had an economy -- what was missing was the capacity for people to work together, to serve each other, and to respect and tolerate each other across ethnic and religious lines.

What was missing is what we take for granted in America -- a civil society. They talked about their hopes for trying to rebuild civil society, their schedule to have elections, they are trying to open shops and businesses, investment is being sought, but peace and democracy and freedom will depend upon whether or not they understand that it benefits all of them, if each of them respects and serves someone else.

I went from there out to military camps that our forces have built, and as the helicopter I was in was landing, I could see our soldiers ready to greet me and our party -- and what did I see as I was landing in that field to meet these young men and women? I saw black, and brown, and white faces of every hue. I met young people from the city and the country and the suburbs with accents ranging from Brooklyn to New Orleans. There were Muslims and Jews and Christians and every religion you can imagine at an American gathering.

And as I talked with them, what I heard in their voices was pride, pride that they were helping to make a peace, pride that their training and experience and commitment were paying off. Stories about how they were meeting kids in the areas where they were living and how all of a sudden these kids were out there for the first time. Parents were letting them play again. Happiness that they were making relationships, breaking through some of the barriers and I thought to myself, that as much as they are doing militarily, what they are doing by example may have the most long-lasting effect.

So that Bosnians of all backgrounds can see what it means when a society like ours values every citizen. And yes, sometimes we fall short of our own ideals and values, we have problems we still have to contend with -- hate crimes, like church burnings -- we are not perfect, no human enterprise is.

But for more than 200 years we have tried, year in and year out, to live up to those ideals and values, and as a result we have much to demonstrate to the world and to ourselves.

Whenever I come home from these trips I wonder why more of our own citizens don't realize the blessings we take for granted. And how do we as people who appreciate just the normalcy of our daily existence, how do we convey that to others? Well, I think one of the key ways we do that is through service. By going out and crossing those barriers of race, ethnicity, religion, that in

other parts of the world cause people to hate and kill each other. By crossing them and serving each other we demonstrate not only what America is, but what it is becoming everyday.

You bring to that effort a welcome experience and a core of dedicated people who have made their contributions, but also know they have much left to give. Thank you for what you do everyday. Not only on behalf of the individual people and institutions you serve, but more than that for what you do that demonstrates what America is really all about.

If we could package that and take it to Bosnia, take it to Central Europe, take it into so many of the places in the world that are trying to figure out what democracy really is and means in the modern age, I have no doubt we would have a more peaceful world.

And you are making that happen here at home. Thank you all very very much.