

WLF Reception
October 7, 1998
Westport, Connecticut

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Women's Leadership Forum Reception
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Thank you very much. Thank you all. I just can't tell you how excited and privileged I feel to be here tonight. I know that this is the first event for the Women's Leadership Forum in Connecticut and I have been attending such events around our country for four years now ever since we kicked off the WLF. And I have to tell you that there has never been a better, more enthusiastic crowd anywhere in America than there is here tonight.

I want to thank our hostesses. You know it is never easy to say you will have seven or eight hundred people in your backyard but to be able to share that with a friend and neighbor maybe eases it just a bit. And the two remarkable women who have invited us here tonight really deserve our thanks because they have done this evening with such enormous class and it makes us all feel good to be here together. So I want Sandra and Fran to stand up and let us thank you both.

Thanks as well to Diane Goss-Farell and to state party chair Ed Marcus and the WLF national chair Cynthia Friedman and I also want to thank my friend and the person who deserves a lot of credit for tonight -- Ronni Ginott who is here somewhere with her family. I want to thank Ronni.

And I am pleased that Connecticut has the foresight to have so many women running not only for state-wide office but local office as well. And I want to wish each of you, not only best wishes in the upcoming election but I want to thank you for putting yourselves into the public arena. It is something that I am very grateful for -- that women and men with progressive, positive ideas about their communities, their states, our country, are willing to go into elective office and to hold and run for that office. So I want to congratulate and thank all of you who are running in the elections coming in the next few weeks.

And I want to say a special word about my friend and your candidate for governor. Barbara Kennelly is so well respected in the House of Representatives. She has been for a long time in the leadership on the Democratic side. She is someone other members of Congress go to to get a hard piece of legislation passed, to get advice and counsel. She could have stayed the congresswoman from her district for another forty or fifty years or however long she wanted to do it.

But she became concerned and I know that first-hand that she was because she had conversations with Bill and me a year ago about what she saw happening in her state that she loves so much and her family has contributed to so much over the years. And what concerned her were that there was a good news/bad news story going on in Connecticut.

It is certainly one of the most beautiful and prosperous states in our country. But everyone wasn't sharing that prosperity. Not everyone in working families was able to afford to go to college or afford a home mortgage. A lot of our older cities in an old state like Connecticut was beginning to show a lot of wear and tear.

And Barbara spent a lot of time talking to experts and fellow members of Congress about what could be done to reverse some of the trends that she saw that didn't sit well with her. She really studied up about all kinds of issues -- how to make college affordable for working families, how to increase economic opportunity, how to make home mortgages more affordable. And whenever she could on the Federal level through her powerful seat on the House Ways and Means Committee, she would move legislation forward that she thought would help the people of Connecticut and particularly those who she wanted to share in the prosperity that our good times have brought us.

And then she decided -- and it was a very tough decision -- that maybe she should not just talk about what needed to be done, not just pass legislation at the Federal level but to run for governor to use her many years of legislative experience for the state she cared so much about.

I have to tell you that there were a lot of people said to Barbara, "Why would you do that? You have a safe seat in Congress. You are one of the most powerful members on the Democratic side. You can work with Republicans. A lot of cross-aisle partnerships don't happen but you can make them happen." And she just said over and over again that she would just feel like she were walking away from her obligation if she walked away from this race.

She is a very experienced politician. And she knows how very difficult it is to take on an incumbent governor -- to go against the daily kind of attention that a governor gets, especially when you don't start off running for state-wide office. And she knew it would be an uphill struggle and she has worked hard every single day on getting her message out.

And on every issue that matters to the future of Connecticut she has experience and ideas and she has proven the ability to translate those ideas into action. And she was, as usual, much too modest in what she said about the piece of legislation which she described to you.

It was Barbara Kennelly's idea. She got it through the committees in the House. She got it through the House of Representatives. And there are a lot of people in Congress if you go and say to them we have half a million children in foster care in the United States, we have dozens and dozens of babies and toddlers being put into foster care every day and they languish there because we don't have systems in place at the state level to take care of these children -- "We need to address this." There would be a lot of Congressmen who would say, "You know Barbara, I am more interested in something else." But she wouldn't let them get away with that. And the legislation was passed and I was privileged to help in the Senate. And when it was signed, it was a real tribute to Barbara.

And yesterday she was here in Connecticut and the other three major sponsors of the bill -- Congressman Camp and Senators Rockefeller and Chaffee -- and we were all, including Barbara,

given an award from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. She couldn't be there but everyone acknowledged her leadership on this issue.

Now, I mention this because this is an issue that is in the state's control. When a child is removed from a family for abuse or neglect, that is one of the worst decisions anyone can make. And then all of us -- the entire community -- become responsible for what happens to that child because through our officials we have made that decision. And whoever is the governor of the state bears ultimate responsibility for how well those children are cared for.

And that is something Barbara feels deep inside. So I want publicly here in Connecticut to commend her not only for being a very accomplished member of Congress but for often caring about issues that may not make headlines but affect the lives and destinies of countless people, particularly children.

And I can guarantee you that if you support her, you contribute to her and you vote for her, you will have a hands-on governor who will go to bed every night and wake-up every morning caring about Connecticut. And I think Connecticut deserves a governor that cares that deeply.

And that is really part of the larger reason why we are all gathered here. It is through politics that we make decisions in a democracy. It is not just politics with a big "p" that we think about at election time. It is all the process of people coming together to determine how people will live together as a society -- how we will solve problems, how we will make progress together. And one of the things I believe so deeply is that politics is an honorable profession and it is filled with people who are determined to do the best they can.

But it is also the life blood of democracy. And you are either a participant or a dropout. Most of us who don't run for office are grateful to those like Barbara and so many of you who do. But those of us who don't run have a very important job -- in many respects even more important in a democracy than those who hold office -- because we are citizens.

We are the people who allow ourselves to be governed. We are the people who put into office and take out of office those who are our leaders. And it is important that all of us recognize what that fundamental obligation of citizenship is. And that is to vote -- to be part of the democratic process in our country.

Many of you are here at your first political event. Welcome and thank you for demonstrating your citizenship by willing to become involved. But I can imagine that some of you tried to bring friends or neighbors or colleagues or family members and you were maybe met with a quizzical look or a comment like, "I just don't get involved in politics. I don't want anything to do with politics. Politics is just not for me."

And I hope that because of your being here tonight, you will be able to carry your message, why you did come and how critical it is to connect critical decisions with the lives we lead together. Because if we can draw the connections more clearly for people then they will understand how important it is for them to vote.

Let's just pick a couple of examples. It matters who is in office in Washington. It matters deeply and there are a lot of people who worked very hard to put up this tent, decorate it, cook the food, serve the food. It matters whether there are people in Congress who vote to increase the minimum wage or not. It really matters.

I bet there are many people in this tent who took advantage or have someone they know who took advantage of the Family and Medical Leave Act. It mattered that we had a Democratic President and Congress who would pass and put into law that act.

We are enjoying one of the longest sustained periods of economic growth this country ever had. There are many reasons for that. Much of it is do to the extraordinarily hard work and entrepreneurial risk-taking of America. But some of it is do to good fiscal policy and the discipline to implement it. And if it wasn't for the President's plan which was passed only by Democrats we would not have had the economic success we have enjoyed.

It mattered in 1994 when the President made a proposal about how to cut crime in this country by putting more police on the streets and taking the assault weapons off the streets. The Democrats stepped up and said we are going to vote for this. And we have now had the sixth year of declining crime in a row in our country because it mattered who was in political leadership.

It matters what direction we take in the future and that is why this upcoming election is so critical. We have a lot we can be proud of in the last six years. We can be grateful we have had the leadership that we've had. But you know as well as I do that it has been a struggle in the last four years since the change in Congress. You know that people who have assumed positions of responsibility are more interested in partisanship than in unity. They are more interested in division than in unity. They are more interested in diversion than in the hard work of making the country move forward together.

But make no mistake. They have a strategy. Their strategy is very simple. Their strategy is to raise an enormous amount of money and then to run against individual candidates running for Congress or the Senate with all kinds of negative ads, making all sorts of claims about them to discourage their supporters from voting for them.

There are some people that believe that you can actually, through negative advertising, alter the opinion of someone that you know very well because that repetitive message begins to work on a person. And there are a lot of candidates out there -- Democrats who deserve to return to the Congress and challengers who deserve to be there because they have the right ideas for America -- who will be confronted by an incredible assault of negativity.

And then there is another part of the strategy. And that is to so poison the atmosphere that many Americans say, "I don't want anything to do with politics or voting. I am just going to stay home. It is too much trouble." And then who comes out to vote? The most ideologically extreme people in our society who line up to vote because they want people in Congress who will do their bidding -- not the majority of the people who stayed home -- but their bidding.

So there is a real strategy at work here against Democrats. Because the issues the Democrats have been championing and the accomplishments of the last five and a half or six years are such that you can't argue about them on their merits. They have worked. So instead, you have to come with a negative campaign.

Let's just take some of the issues that are outstanding. In the State of the Union, the President proposed an education agenda. An education agenda to lower class size, especially in the lower grades so that kids, especially at risk kids would get more personal attention which we know will result in more academic outcomes. And he proposed to help fund 100,000 more teachers, to train them and put them in those classrooms so we could lower those class sizes.

And then he also said there are schools around our country which are falling apart. And there are classrooms in suburban America which are in trailers instead of permanent school buildings because a lot of school districts don't have the funds either to repair, modernize or build new schools. Why doesn't the Federal government help with some bonded indebtedness so that more school districts can afford to repair and fix their schools?

And then he said let's make sure we have high standards that parents and business leaders and others can know we are meeting. A whole education package which made a lot of sense. It was based on research and had the idea that if we did this as a nation we would upgrade our public schools for the next century. We cannot even get a hearing on that bill in the Congress. That is not important enough for the Congress to pay attention to.

Now maybe in the last couple of days because they know it is so popular out in the country, that they will do something. But they have gone right up to the edge and done nothing. The Patients Bill of Rights is intended to once again have a better balance so that physicians and patients have the right to determine their medical care. And it is determined where it should be, in the offices of doctors, not in book keeper's offices.

Now the Republican majority passed a bill which was worse than meaningless. It would have not given patients and physicians the rights they needed. It will not come out of this Congress. And we will continue to hear a lot of stories and hear a lot of distress because there isn't the balance back in the medical system that we need to ensure that decisions are made based on medical reasons. Another reason to vote for Democrats.

We also have a lot of work to do on social security. That is going to be one of the great issues in the next century. It needs to be dealt with in a way that is fair to everybody. And there is no doubt in my mind after listening to some of the comments coming out of the Republican leadership that it would be a very unfortunate development if the Republican majority determined what happened to social security in the years to come.

On so many other issues whether it is the environment or funding the IMF or paying our dues to the United Nations, there has been either no movement or backward movement. Let me just give you an example of the backward movement.

I mentioned earlier the President's anti-crime strategy which has worked. And the main reason it has worked according to all of the studies, he understood something that others had missed. And that is because of our population growth and our demographic shifts from the 1950's until the 1990's, we have had far fewer police on the streets per felony committed.

So one of the things he concluded was that we should put more police back on the streets. Let's use them the old-fashioned way -- get them out of offices and out of patrol cars and back in the neighborhoods, trying to prevent crime before it happens. And that has worked. One of the reasons why it has worked is because the President said let's fund 100,000 police from Federal funds to supplement local police departments and show people how to do community policing.

Well, in every community I have been in, either in Connecticut or any other state, I have heard story after story about what a difference it has made and that is reflected in the declining statistic. We have another 16,000 police to be funded because they have been funded carefully, put into place and not just dumped on communities. So it has been done in stages. The Republican leadership has been trying to stop the funding on the remaining 16,000 police and eliminate the funding on those who went before.

Now you say to yourself, why would you stop something that demonstrably works? The easy answer is that because it works, the Democrats and the President can take credit for it and go back to what didn't work which meant mainly talking tough and building prisons while people were out marauding and hurting us. It makes absolutely no logical sense.

But that is how the thinking has developed down there. Everything is partisan. Everything is calculated not for the best interest of the country but to keep power for the sake of having power. But I have to tell you, there is only one way to keep that strategy from being successful and that is for people to show up and vote.

And when I was recently honored to be at Seneca Falls to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the Women's Declaration of Sentiment, I read a lot about those women and those hearty men who joined them 150 years ago. They said things that were unthinkable about women having rights. They talked about married women being able to own the clothes on their back and have access to inheritance and other forms of ownership and the most important thing that they thought would transform their lives was the right to vote.

And it took a long time. There were only two women who were basically teenage girls who lived long enough to see suffrage in the United States. But every one of them believed it would make a difference. And it has made a difference. Women voting in America has changed American politics. And in the last several election cycles, women voting has made the critical difference.

And I have thought a lot about that because people write about the so-called "gender gap." And women vote primarily for Democrats who espouse ideas like building stronger communities, protecting families, education, the environment health care and the like.

And I think it is because many women understand that we are in this together. That it is very difficult for us to stand apart from our society. That we want communities in which our children can go safely to parks. We want public schools that prepare good citizens. We want health care we can depend on when we age or our parents age. We understand the human connection between political decisions and our daily lives. I call it kitchen table politics because it is real life politics.

And there has never been a time more critical for you to be here on behalf of the Women's Leadership Forum and to encourage people to vote in the upcoming election. And I want to ask you to do a few things if you will. I want you to ask everyone you see if they intend to vote.

I think we should wear buttons not only on the day of the election but for the next four weeks that say, "Do you intend to vote?" or "Will you vote for your future? Vote for Democrats." We need to make sure that it is a constant theme. And I hope that you will also talk to people who have given up on the political process or don't think it matters to them about why it is important.

I ended my speech at Seneca Falls saying that if you think about all that we as American women have to be grateful for, living in this extraordinary country at the end of this century. Most of us in this room would not have lived so long or so well had we been born anywhere else or in a previous generation. We have so much to be grateful for because we are Americans but it is easy to lose what we have as Americans if we don't participate.

I just came from Montevideo where I participated in a conference called the Vital Voices Conference. This is the third one we have held to bring women from different parts of the world together to talk about how women can empower themselves to be full participants in their societies. We talk about voting; we talk about running for office, we talk about getting access to credit, we talk about domestic violence, we talk about issues that are common to issues everywhere.

And many American women come to provide technical assistance and encouragement. And I wish every American, man and woman could have been with me at any one of these three conferences because then you would know in your heart how important politics and governmental leadership is.

The first one in Vienna brought together women from the former Soviet Union -- women who were oppressed and repressed and who are now finally finding their voices. They found their voices because of different political leadership and different ideas.

The second one was in Belfast where we brought together Catholic and Protestant women who had never been in the room with the other before. And now they have to sit down and talk about building a new peace -- something that came about only because of different political leadership.

And then finally, last Friday in Montevideo, the room was filled with women who had suffered under dictatorships, who have lived through terror, who understood that democracy is worth fighting for and voting for. Before I spoke a woman stood up -- a dignified and elegant looking

woman with lines or pain etched in her face -- and she said "My husband was assassinated by terrorists and I decided to run for office because I wanted to change my country."

And then a young woman from Guatemala stood up and when she was sixteen years old she saw what was happening to her country because of the civil war there. She saw that people were abused because of tyrannical, dictatorial leadership. And she started speaking out on civil rights and at the age of sixteen she was told she should flee the country because she was going to be murdered.

She sought asylum in the United States where she has lived for the last twelve years. She stood up to thank America for giving her safe haven and providing her with an example of how people with all different backgrounds and beliefs can live together.

And finally, someone said so eloquently to me that America must always remain the example. We must keep proving to all these people who we convinced during the Cold War to work for democracy. It is worth the sacrifice. It is worth the pain. It is worth the idiocy that sometimes goes on in Democratic politics. It is worth it all but we can only keep it if we work for it. And working it means being a citizens who vote. Please vote for Democrats on November 3.

Thank you all very much.