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Women's Leadership Forum
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Women's Leadership Forum Speech on Women and Politics

**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
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Thank you very much. Thank you all. Thank you. You know, I was asked a few months ago if I would come to New York for a WLF event with a few of my friends, and it is just an amazing sight to behold all of you. And there is an overflow room that I will visit, and I want to tell everybody who's there, which is nearly as big as this room. It gives me just a great boost to see all of you here and supporting causes and concerns that we share. There are many people to thank. Like Laura [Ross], I wish that I could single out many of you whom I know personally and have worked with and have become friends of mine. But I want to start by thanking Laura for her extraordinary leadership and commitment. She is legendary in her willingness to work hard on behalf of causes and candidates that she believes in, and I am very grateful to her.

I also want to thank Roy Romer -- the DNC General Chair, the former long serving governor of Colorado -- who is here. I am delighted that Chuck Schumer could have been with us, and I understand why he needs to hurry back to Washington to be there for whatever vote needs to take place. I am also told that the attorney general, Landslide [Elliott] Spitzer, is here with his wife, Silva. And I am delighted they could be with us. I think that Judith Hope, the New York State party chair, is here as well, and I am glad to greet Judith. And also, I believe that public advocate Mark Green is here and Mark, somewhere. The city council speaker, Peter Valone. I think Peter is with us as well. There are other members of the New York City Council, I don't have names but I want to thank you and maybe you could stand and we could recognize you and express our appreciation that you would come today.

The Manhattan Borough president, Virginia Fields, is here. Thank you, Virginia, for coming. And the Bronx Borough president, Freddie Ferrar, is here somewhere and I want to thank President Ferrar for being with us. The DNC vice-chair, Bill Lynch; DNC finance chair, Beth Dozoretz, I think the first woman to hold that position which makes me very pleased indeed. The WLF national chair, Cynthia Friedman. I want to thank Cynthia and their board members, including my friend Shahara Ahmad-Llewellyn, who is here in the crowd. And the WLF Connecticut Chapter chair, Ronni Ginott, is here as well.

As I said though, I could identify and point out so many of you in this room. There is one person I want especially to thank. Her tireless commitment and her vision about the kind of country we want to be as we move toward a new century has helped to fill this room with people who are both activists and donors. She is a remarkable woman and a real example, and I want to thank Pat Pepper for her leadership and her friendship over the years.

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You might ask, "Why is this an important event? Why are we all gathered here?" Well, I was told that there were some who thought that I might have an announcement to make.... But I don't. But I do have a lot on my mind that I'd like to share with each of you because your being here speaks volumes to me about the kind of politics and the sort of society that we all want to see.

It has been an interesting time in the last six years to see the progress that we have been able to make as a nation. And that is progress that is really the result of the hard work and dedication of countless millions of Americans. Every time a businessman or woman made a decision to reach down deep and take a risk and employ more people and try to expand, to go into new markets and really make a mark for him or herself, that was a decision that helped move us forward. Every time a teacher looked out at a diverse group of students and said, "You know, I'm going to do everything in my power to give these young boys and girls the chance they deserve," that was also a decision for the kind of future we want. Every time a doctor or a nurse said to themselves, "You know, I'm just going to do what I need to do for this patient and I'm going to fulfill my obligations and I'm going to try and make this health care system work for people and not just for accountants or bureaucrats." And that moved us forward as to the kind of country we want to be.

There are countless examples -- people whose names might be in a headline and people who would never be in the newspaper, but you and I know, people who are doing the very best they can every single day to make a contribution and to try to make a difference. Now I know that some people, when we talk about politics or public service, you know you can see that they are put off, they don't know quite how to think about what it is that makes our democracy vibrant.

And I am often asked, as I've told some of you before, "You know, what do you really think about politics?" Or in a slightly more biased tone, "How can you stand politics?" And whenever someone asks me that, I pause for a minute and I say, "Well, you know, have you ever been a member of a family or a church or a synagogue or a civic organization or anything else where you had to work with people to make decisions by consensus, by majority vote, by working out the likes and dislikes of all the people who you were working with?" Because really politics -- with a small "p" -- is how in a democracy we get along with one another. And we make decisions that we think are in our best interest as well as the larger society's or a family's or a group's. And when we think about it that way, more in the line of de Tocqueville and others, we can see how unique this great American experiment is, how lucky we are that we have for more than 200 plus years now understood that politics, in the good times and the bad times, is really the life blood of a democracy.

And so when I stand before all of you, I am really impressed that you are willing to make

a contribution, not only of your financial resources, but of your time and your energy to something political, something that really, we hope, stands for something greater than each of us could achieve on our own. And it is especially important, and the reason why the WLF was formed in 1993, it's especially important that women feel connected to the political process. Because there are so many decisions made at the local, state and national level that truly do affect how we live: how good the schools are that we send our children to, the kind of health care that's available to our parents.

I was especially reminded of that last summer when, with some of you, I took a bus trip that led me from Newburg, New York, to Seneca Falls. And I was able to see a lot of places and visit with people because we were attempting to, in the spirit of the Millennium, think about saving America's treasures. And you know, it's not just the big treasures that we know about -- the Star Spangled Banner -- it's the quieter places. It's the monument in a city center, it's a building that has stood the test of time, it's a document that might be in an attic somewhere. But as I traveled on that bus, stopping and talking and listening, I could see and feel that maybe we don't think often enough about all of the sacrifices that have gone before and all of the blessings we take for granted.

Now I couldn't help but be reminded of that by the time I got to Seneca Falls for the 150th anniversary of the first Women's Rights Convention. Think for a minute of the courage it took -- some of you were there, thousands of people were there -- to pay tribute to these women and some hardy men who thought differently about what was possible.

And I read some of the individual stories about some of the participants. And one young woman in particular made an impression on me. She was a glove maker. You know, I am always a little bit taken aback when people in today's world talk as though women have only worked for the last 10 or 15 years when we know that women have always worked both in the home and outside, sometimes for wages, sometimes and mostly not, but have always made a contribution through their hard work. And certainly in Seneca Falls and in the surrounding area with the industrialization that was building up in the early part of the nineteenth century, there were a lot of women who were working. And one young woman, just 19 years old, heard about this convention that was aimed at talking about the rights that women should have. Because then women couldn't own property in their name; they had no rights to their children if there were a divorce; there were many, many ways in which they were legally prevented from claiming their full citizenship.

And this young glove maker read about this convention and went from door to door in her community encouraging people to come with her, and they did. And they met like-minded women and men who understood what the convention was attempting to do, which was to claim the rights of women to be full human beings, to make the choices that were the ones they thought were best for them.

Now advocating for those rights at that time caused a lot of controversy, and the women

who were there were called all kinds of names -- fanatics and old maids and everything else you can imagine. But they understood something that we also have to understand, and that is that those who advocate for progress and change will often pay a price, but if we persevere, if we see that kind of commitment through the changes that can happen, will benefit maybe us but more likely our daughters and our granddaughters.

Now today when we think about what is happening in the world around us, we can see that women have begun to take their rightful places in the political landscape, not only as candidates who run for or hold office but as contributors, as people who actively participate in the political process as many of you do. And for all of us who are able to participate, who can be here in this glorious room just like those first women at Seneca Falls, we are standing in for countless other women who cannot be here, who couldn't afford the ticket, who wouldn't think they had anything to wear or anything to contribute, who wouldn't see themselves as a political person at all.

And one of our great challenges in the next years is to make sure that our society doesn't split apart along income lines, so that there are some who feel entitled and able to participate in politics and public service and others who feel that there is no place for them and, because of apathy, indifference, fear and insecurity, don't. One of the goals of the last six years has been to try to open up politics and make public service available to as many people as possible. That is part of the reason the WLF began. And for all of us who are asked the question I'm often asked -- "Why would we be involved in politics?" -- let me give you a few answers from just the last six years.

It makes a difference in the lives of men and women, but particularly women for whom the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage have helped to lift their families and children out of poverty. That didn't happen by accident. It happened because people like the President and the Vice President and others in the Administration and members of Congress understood that if we were a society built upon individual initiative, then we needed to reward work, not penalize it. And for all the people who are working at minimum wage, all the people who are striving to make ends meet, we wanted to send them a message that your work is not in vain. You can get a stake in this society if you are willing to pay the price, if you are willing to work hard.

Our streets are safer in city after city and in neighborhood after neighborhood throughout America. The Crime Bill of 1994 helped to put a strategy for dealing with crime in the forefront of our national consciousness. All during the 1980s people gave speeches against crime, didn't they? They pointed their fingers, they built more prisons and the crime rate kept going up. But when this Administration came into office there was a different attitude. We needed to do something about guns, we needed to put more police on the street, we needed to encourage ideas like community policing. And as a result, crime has decreased for five years in a row around our country.

Now that is the kind of difference, that is the kind of difference that politics can make. That was a bitterly fought battle in Washington. One of the untold stories about the 1994 elections and all the Democratic losses is that many Democratic members of Congress who were persuaded to vote for the Crime Bill and the Brady Bill lost their seats because of the incredible lobbying of the gun lobby against them when they were up for election. But they did the right thing, and every time. We can breathe a little easier. We should thank people who had the courage to make that decision.

Another set of issues that have been a real problem for us in our country is the economic front. Think about where we were in 1992 when there were other countries lecturing the United States about our economic house not being in order. Now here we are after some tough decisions and some tough votes that cost a lot of good people their jobs, including a very brave congresswoman from outside of Philadelphia. I don't know if you remember this, but remember when the President's deficit reduction plan was being voted on? It won by one vote in the House and one vote in the Senate -- thankfully the Vice President's vote. But in the House, Marjorie Margolis Mezvinsky, who came from an affluent district and who knew that it would be a tough sell for her, because we all know that the taxes were raised as well as spending was cut and other things were done that had to be done. When Marjorie walked up that aisle and the Republicans on both sides were waving at her "goodbye, Marjorie," she knew she was putting her seat at risk and she did it anyway because it was the right thing to do. And now we can look back at that historic vote and we can thank her and the other brave members of Congress who stood with the President to do something about our economic situation in this country.

We've also seen some good news on some of the social indicators. We've seen both teen pregnancy rates and abortions finally going down. And that was under a pro-choice president who refused to back down on a woman's right to choose.

You know, it is one thing to deplore a problem and it is another thing to try to solve it. And sometimes it is a lot easier just to point fingers, isn't it? Not to take responsibility but to just keep saying, "Look at what those people are doing," or "Look at that problem." And what we've tried to do, and what I think you can fairly say has happened in the last six years, is that this Administration and many citizen allies like you out in the country have tried to deal with problems, not put them under a rug, not ignore them, but to try to come up with strategies to solve them.

And there are many more examples that I could point to, but the issue is not, as we stand here on the brink of a new century, what we have done but what we will do. What kinds of decisions are we willing to make now as we move forward? We are living in good times and we're proud that we are.

We see the United States as the indispensable nation. We see our economy continuing to grow. We see a lot of progress being made. And so we have to ask ourselves, "Is now the time that we retreat into our own worlds where we say, 'I'm fine, my family's fine, my business is

fine, I don't have to worry about anybody else.'" Or do we take these good times that we have carefully created and have the resources to continue and make good decisions about and try to continue confronting problems and making it possible for us to say that we are together creating progress in our country?

Well now, obviously I believe it's time for us to deal with remaining problems that we confront. I think what drew many of us into the WLF or into politics in general is that we do believe we have a social contract with one another; that we do believe that our country can continue to become better and better if, but only if, a critical majority of people are willing to do what needs to be done when the times arise.

You know, I'm always amused when occasionally I hear that the President or I or someone in the Administration advocating issues that are women's issues or that are not really big, significant issues -- issues like child care, or issues like choice, or issues like education, or issues like health care. And you know, I've always been amused when I hear somebody say that all of this talk about these issues was leading to "the feminization of politics." Now, the commentator who said that, I think, *meant* it as maybe insulting. I don't want to make any conclusions about that, but I've never considered issues like health care, education, child care as women's issues.

I've met lots and lots of fathers and husbands and sons who were just as concerned. The point is that we are attempting to humanize politics. We are attempting to give people the belief that the political actually can work for them. And so when someone asks you to get involved with the WLF or the Democratic Party, think about what it means for all of the people who aren't here today that you would have made a contribution and staked yourself out on the side of issues that are humanizing American politics.

You know, a few weeks ago I was in Brooklyn at a wonderful event at the YMCA there, and I met with a group of women who talked to me very personally about their lives. A single mom who makes \$30,000 a year, which is too much for any kind of subsidy. But after she pays everything she has to pay she doesn't know where to leave her son while she goes to work -- and we all want her to work, and \$30,000 is a good salary. But she can't figure out what to do about child care.

I met another mom who's working with three small children and she doesn't know what to do with them after school. And for her that is not a trivial issue, it's a critical one about how she can have peace at work and try to make sure that her family has a good income, but knows that her children are well taken care of. And she needed after-school programs, and thanks to increased funding in the President's budget, she now has a place for at least one of her children to go after school.

I met a woman whose daughter was in a very serious automobile accident last spring. And if it were not for the Family and Medical Leave Act, she doesn't know what she would have

done. She was able to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave and have a job waiting when she went back. Imagine how you would feel: you're a working mom, your child's in an accident, that child needs to be in a hospital then needs rehabilitation and physical therapy, and you have to make a choice between taking care of your child or losing your job. This mom understood clearly how important the Family and Medical Leave Act is, and I would like to see its provisions -- which, remember, are unpaid leave -- extended to even more employers so that more employees would have a right to do that.

So just there in that one encounter, child care, after-school care, family and medical leave. Those were not abstract issues to the women I spoke with. They were the stuff of real life. And because of politics each of them had better options than they ever could have had before.

And we are also confronting some very big issues when it comes to Social Security and Medicare. And again, these are not just concerns for a certain group of Americans but should be concerns for all of us. If we have older parents, as I am still fortunate to have my mother, we know that Social Security and Medicare are essential. But we sometimes forget that Social Security is also available to young people who suffer diseases or accidents and can't go on working.

I remember hearing about one young man who had an incapacitating stroke in his early 30s -- something we don't imagine happening to young people. His health problems left his wife and his children to fend for themselves. But because of Social Security he was able to have disability insurance for the children and he knew that they at least would have some measure of financial security.

It truly is a family protection system for America's families. It's also the single reason why half of all American women over 65 are not living in poverty. That is a stunning statistic, and I've taken in my own mind -- as I travel around or go to church or go visit people or look out the window of a car as I drive by -- I'm thinking to myself that for every woman, every two women over 65 whom I see on the street, one of them would be impoverished were it not for Social Security. So this debate about Social Security that is going on in the Congress, and I hope throughout the country, is important for every American, but it is especially important for women and it has special meaning for those millions of Americans who depend upon SSI and other benefits that we often don't think of and we just say Social Security.

It's also critical that we look at what to do to save Medicare. And this is also a problem not just for older Americans but for those of us who have older relatives or feel responsible for someone over 65. I don't know how many friends of yours have had to quit a job or cut back on hours or go to extraordinary lengths to take care of an older relative or friend or in some way make a contribution to the well-being of somebody over 65, but I've met countless Americans who are in that position.

A few weeks ago in the White House, we had a woman whose mother is in a very advanced state of Alzheimers. They couldn't afford to put her in a home, and they really didn't want to. So she quit her job so she could become the full-time caretaker. That meant that her husband had to take on more work to try to maintain their standard of living. You know, one of the hopes that we have in this session of Congress is that the President's proposal to help families with long-term care will be successful. Because especially when families are trying to do the right thing -- keep somebody at home, make the sacrifices -- let's give them the support that they need so that they can continue doing what they know is right for themselves and their families.

There are many examples of where political decisions have made a difference in the lives of real Americans. And this decision that we are confronting about Social Security and Medicare will be one of the most important we face. I happen to think that the President's proposal to dedicate the surplus, 77 percent of it to Social Security and Medicare, is the responsible action to take.

I told a group earlier today that a friend of mine had a great line. She said, "You know, if Roosevelt's line was that 'This is a generation that has a rendezvous with destiny,' ours is a generation which has a rendezvous with responsibility." And that means that for all of these issues, if we don't confront them and try to deal with them now, they will only get worse. And as those of us in the so-called "baby boom generation" age, the choices we face will be incredibly draconian. And people like you and me, most of us in this room, we can probably figure out a way to take care of ourselves, but do we really want to live in a society where the vast majority of Americans are rendered insecure, where their health care is up to the choice of whatever insurance company gets their business? I think not.

I think part of what we have to face is how we in this time of dynamic change have enough security and confidence in the future that we are able to encourage every American to live up to his or her God-given potential. As we look at the future, one of the efforts we are trying to make in the White House to help frame our thinking is through the Millennium Council that we've set up. We've adopted a slogan -- "Honor the past and imagine the future." And if one thinks about it, that's a pretty good idea that we can bring not only to saving America's treasures or thinking about the great accomplishments of the past and what might happen in the future, but it's a pretty good definition for citizens of any democracy.

We honor the past when we recognize the sacrifices that went before us. We honor the past when we recognize that my mother was born before she could vote. We honor the past when we say to ourselves that this country, for all of its difficulties, has gone further in giving to every person who is a part of the American experience an opportunity to be whatever that person has the guts and the hard work and the willingness to make of himself or herself. So we can honor the past in lots of ways. But we do a disservice to ourselves, our children, and our future if we think we can live in the past.

There are many people who believe they can turn the clock back, shut our borders, tell people how to live, point fingers at one another, instead of extending a helping hand and saying, "I will help you on your journey if you help me on mine." And what we as Americans have to recognize is that we cannot drop out of the political process and leave the arena to those with very specific agendas. We cannot say, "I won't be involved in politics because I don't like the negativity, I don't like all of the ads on television, I don't feel comfortable thinking about or talking about politics and the way it has become."

I can certainly understand why someone might feel that way, but it is not a feeling that you should act on. It is a feeling that should be tangential. You could say all you want about the flaws of our political system, but when it comes right down to it, somebody is going to make the decisions. Will we or will we not fund the \$100,000 to bring down class size? Will we or will we not build the schools and repair them that our children need? Will we or will we not pass a patient's bill of rights? Will we or will we not be fiscally responsible with the surplus and begin to deal with Social Security, Medicare, and our savings deficit through USA accounts?

Those are not decisions that we should leave to someone else, some other organized group. Those are decisions each of us have a stake in. And so I begin to think about the future in political terms because I've always believed that we are at our best as a nation when everybody understands their obligations as a citizen. And that is what you are doing here today.

I've had a lot of wonderful experiences in the last six years. I've been able to travel around the world representing our country, both with my husband and on my own. I've looked into the faces of countless people here and abroad, I've listened to their stories, I've shared their hopes and their anguish -- from everything that might happen in their families here in the United States to the political dilemmas they face abroad. And every time I do go out, either to another country or to another part of our country, I am struck time and time again by how blessed we are at this point in our history.

The women at Seneca Falls could never even have imagined the freedoms and the rights we take for granted. The real challenge for us is to decide whether all the sacrifices that were made in the past should just be honored by rhetoric or honored by action. And whether we can be part of imagining a kind of future for our country that keeps faith with all the people who went before. This is a great, great time to be a woman in America. We are so blessed and we should be so grateful, no matter what our personal circumstances are, that we live at a time in a society where we do have the opportunities that we have before us today.

But among our obligations and among the debts we owe to those who came before are to be involved in the political process that makes the American democracy work. And I want to thank all of you for being part of making that happen. Thank you very much.