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Shanker Award - NY Teachers
Niagara Falls, NY
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**Albert Shanker Award for Distinguished Service
New York State United Teachers**

**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Niagara Falls, New York
April 22, 1999**

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Tom [Hobart, Jr., president of the New York State United Teachers]. I am deeply honored and moved by this award, and feel very grateful to you for your leadership. And all those who lead with you and all who are assembled here, for your commitment and dedication to the causes that we believe so strongly in -- our children's future, the kind of nation we want to be proud citizens of, and the obligations each of us has to do our part to make sure that those concerns can be realized.

I am delighted to be here with Congressman John LeFolce, who I think is right here in the head table, and we're in his district. With Randi Weingarten [president, United Federation of Teachers] and Sandy Feldman [president, American Federation of Teachers]-- I want to recognize and thank both of them. And I also want to recognize all of the officers and executive committee who are arrayed before you. And I too want to appreciate the Niagara Falls All City Marching Band. They are a beautiful sight over there in their red and white uniforms.

This is the second time I've been in this convention center. I was here before on important matters relating to health and education, and I am particularly pleased to be back here among people who are so committed. Each of you who represents your constituencies -- as classroom teachers, college and university faculty and staff, school bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, cafeteria workers, teachers' assistants and aides, nurses, health care technicians -- all of you are really on the front lines of caring for people, particularly young people. And I am very personally grateful for what you do every day.

Sometimes we take for granted the work that you know has to be done to help encourage a young person to bind up his or her hurt feelings, or even worse. And I for one, along with the President, know how essential the services you perform are.

I also know that we stand here in large measure because of the leadership of an extraordinary man. Al Shanker is someone who we should be celebrating all of the time. Because he, in his inimitable way, caused us all to look at education -- the future of our country -- in a different way. I had the opportunity to work with him on various issues over 15 years. I considered him, of course, a remarkable union organizer. But he was also a world leader and a true friend. He had real courage to stand up and be counted -- sometimes when it wasn't popular, often when he knew that the stand he would take would be controversial even with people he cared about and sometimes represented. He showed that courage in so many ways, from the voter registration drives in the South, to the fight for collective bargaining for public workers, to the arguments he eloquently made about raising standards in our public schools. He reminded Americans time

and time again that our public schools are the very bedrock of our democracy, and that anyone who forgot that, or anyone who wished to undermine that, was doing a grave disservice to democracy in America as we have known it and as we have learned to appreciate it.

I was privileged to speak at Columbia University Teachers College earlier this week, and I said there what I would say again. And that is that the public education system of America is one of the essential reasons that America is what it is today. You cannot feel good about our country as we end this century if you cannot understand the fundamental role that public schools have played in giving us not only the resources and the opportunities that we enjoy, but in making it possible for us to come together in our diversity and appreciate our commonality.

So each of you who is here as a teacher or an employee of a public school or an institution of public higher education are doing what you can do to make sure that not only our education system is successful, but that America continues to offer that dream of potential to every young person.

But Al Shanker would remind us that we cannot be complacent. We cannot rest on our past laurels, ensuring that education is always up to the standards we need it to be. As we move into a new economy with new challenges, it requires each of us to ask hard questions. I recall very well when the national report, *A Nation at Risk*, came out in 1983, and it made some very controversial claims. It flatly stated that we were committing what it called "unilateral disarmament" because we were not doing what we needed to do to create world-class schools. Both Bill and I notice that Al Shanker was the first union leader in the country to come out and say, you know, "This report is a good thing. We have a lot of work to do, and we're going to roll up our sleeves and get about the business of doing the work." And I have seen the results of his leadership and your work, as I have been privileged to visit schools throughout our country.

Now I was planning to give a very different speech tonight than the one that I will give. I was going to come here and talk about the progress we've made together. Thanks, in large part, to the leadership of people like Al and Tom and Sandy and others, and the incredible effort and creativity that you have brought to establishing standards-based education reform, and putting teachers once again in a position of authority and respect.

I was also going to talk about how I have seen schools in some of our most distressed neighborhoods turning around, giving their students the opportunities those young people deserve. But how I, along with all of you, still see situations in which children who are poor or of color or of some other background that are in some way left out of that educational advancement are still falling behind.

And I wanted to talk with you about what we still needed to do to make sure that quality education was available to every child in America. At Teachers College I quoted the motto of a public school in Manhattan, PS #1. It's a very simple motto: *Every child can learn. No excuses. No exceptions.* And that is what you have been attempting to prove in the efforts that you have been making.

I was also going to thank you for the role that you have played in demonstrating we can make tangible improvements. Our nation's reading scores are up for the first time in all three grade levels. We've made progress across the board in math and science. We see the SAT and ACT scores going up. So we have a lot to show on paper that you and the students and the communities here in New York, and indeed around America, are really getting results.

I also wanted to talk about the Administration's plans to build on this progress by putting 100,000 more teachers into classrooms to lower classroom size so that teachers can give their students the attention they need. And how we do need to target more investments to disadvantaged children; and promote accountability for results; and focus on teacher quality improvements like real professional staff development and not one-day, one-shot workshops that you have to attend. And I also wanted to talk about how publicly funded vouchers are not the answer to any problem in our public schools.

These are all very important discussions, and I hope that I will have many opportunities to talk with you further about every one of these matters; and to hear from you about what is on your minds about how we can form a better partnership at all levels -- not only of government, but of society -- to make sure that the goals we share in common can be realized. But in coming here tonight, I know that my heavy heart is not the only one in this great hall. I thank Tom for his moment of silence, because I think our thoughts and prayers are with people thousands of miles away -- the families, the teachers, the students, the law enforcement officials, the citizens of Littleton, Colorado -- who have lost so many beloved members of their community. This terrible tragedy has put our entire nation into mourning; and it reminds us once again that everything in life pales in comparison to our ability to keep our children safe and out of harm's way.

I've talked with a lot of people in the last 48 hours, and each of them has expressed a sense of helplessness, and sometimes even hopelessness. They ask, "What can we do? How do we talk to our own children? How do we reach out to the people of Littleton to let them know that we are thinking of them and standing with them?"

My husband went to a school today and talked with students, and listened to what was on their minds. And he reminded them, as I have reminded others, that there is no way to explain or even understand a tragedy such as this. But we have to try. And we have to recognize that we are not helpless or hopeless. There are steps we can take, ways we can try to prevent such tragedies from ever happening again. And all we have to do is to look at the people of Littleton to remind ourselves of how good our country fundamentally is.

I saw the lines of men and women waiting hours to give blood, turning out for vigils, donating money to help with long-term counseling. And I thank you, Tom, for your donation to the healing process. Local hotels are providing free rooms for family members of victims who have rushed to Littleton. Clergy, teachers and psychologists are gathering from all over the state to comfort parents and students.

So we can see, even now, that in the face of this terrible tragedy people are not helpless or hopeless.

But we have to do more than just reflect on what has happened in Littleton. And again, I turn to Al Shanker. I think about how in 1995 he announced on behalf of the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] a national campaign to argue for safe and orderly schools with rigorous academic standards. He knew, as all of you know, that we had to do the best we could to provide a safe and orderly environment in all of our schools.

Now I am not sure that many of us would have pictured in our minds -- when we first heard Al Shanker say that or read his column promoting that -- the school in Littleton, would we? We would have had a very different picture about where the problems were, where the violence occurred, the kinds of kids involved. And what this spate of school shootings and killings of the last two-and-a-half years have proven, if we ever needed to be reminded, is that there isn't any community that can afford to think it is immune from what happens in the larger society.

We also need no more powerful reminder that every single day our teachers are on the front lines in our schools. Even as the bullets whizzed around them, the teachers at Columbine High School never forgot their responsibilities to the students in their care. They risked their lives to shield their students and help lead them to safety. And one teacher, William David Sanders, gave his life to protect his students. And two teachers were wounded.

So as we gather here tonight, I want to commend this union for being at the vanguard of the movement to stop the violence and to create safe schools where all children are ready and able to learn. And yet I'm not sure that we have really absorbed the lessons you've been trying to teach us. We know that most schools in America are safe. They are, in fact, often the safest place that children can be in a community. But I don't need to tell you they are not islands cut off from the rest of society. No school security system can keep society out of the school house door. And when a tragedy like Littleton happens, too often, the immediate response is a lot of finger pointing. The gun lobby points at the media. The media points back at the gun lobby. Parents point at the schools. And everyone points at the parents. I don't think that's a very useful exercise.

There are reasons why the young men who have made the names of their towns so well known, like Littleton and Jonesboro and Paducah and Springfield and Pearl -- there are reasons why these events have happened, and there are ways we can better try to prepare ourselves to intervene and prevent them in the future. There's no way to outline completely all of the factors that go into what we have seen with the two young men in Littleton. But there is no escaping the fact that there is responsibility for all of us to fulfill. I believe, as I said in my book, that it takes a village, because I think that all of us have to be willing to accept our share of responsibility for the raising of our children. And there were some who criticized me and said, "No, it is only parents." And of course, parents are the primary and foremost influences in their children's lives. There isn't anything that can, in any way, overtake parents' responsibility in the understanding of what motivates and shapes children. But parents do not act in a vacuum. Children are not raised in test tubes. They are influenced by all that goes on around them. And

those of us who have lived long enough know enough circumstances where the family does not seem to have played the major role in the creating the problem that we can see in a young person.

So we have to be thoughtful about how we understand the various factors at work and the responsibilities each of us should be taking.

There are a few points that I would like to see us make. And I would ask you, who understand more about these issues than most people in our society, to join with me and others in trying to present a clearer picture of what needs to be done. Here are just some thoughts I would like to share with you.

We held a White House Conference on School Safety last October. We brought together parents and teachers, law enforcement officials, religious leaders, elected office holders, child advocates -- everyone we could imagine who had a direct stake in contributing to the safety and well-being of our children. We looked at all the experts' opinions and the research about school violence.

And out of that came a guide to safe schools, issued jointly by the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education, called *Early Warning, Timely Response*. This was sent to every school district, and it would not surprise any veteran teacher to know what it contained in terms of what we should be looking for if we are going to try to intervene and help young people to avoid violence.

I don't know how many of these brochures actually ended up in the hands of teachers, but we're going to be sending more out to try to give those on the front lines -- the teachers -- the arguments, the support that they need to be able to get the resources that are required to do the job you know needs to be done. We do not have enough resources available to most of our schools to take care of the problems that teachers identify among students. We have got to do a better job of creating more psychological counseling resources, social work counseling resources, and other support services.

I have friends who are teachers -- and I'm sure this is an experience some of you have had -- who have had to work for countless hours and days to try to find some help for a student that you know is likely to hurt himself or others. And it is often a lonely and frustrating search. So the community and the school systems have to be more willing to provide the support and the resources so that when the alarm bells go off in your heads, you have somebody you can turn to. And I hope we will begin to focus on that and have a national response, but we will need your leadership and voice in order to achieve that.

We also have to find some ways for students to make referrals -- anonymously, if necessary -- so they can bring to teachers' and administrators' attention what they know is happening among some of their peers. I would like to see in every community some kind of hotline, some kind of number that can be called, both to report concerns and to seek help. And a referral service that can really back up the referrals with the services that are needed.

We are attempting in this Administration to provide more support for people with mental illness, and we've dramatically increased the funding for children's mental health services. And I want to thank my friend, Tipper Gore, who has been a real champion of mental health for everyone, particularly for children. But we will not make the progress we need until we treat mental illness just as seriously as physical illness and provide the resources to treat it. We know there's a lot of confusion, alienation, and just plain growing-up adolescent angst out there. And some of it is just normal development, and some of it is more serious than that. So we do have to begin to make a distinction, and have enough trained people to treat and counsel those whom we believe are in trouble.

We also need to stand up and say what needs to be said about guns and firearms and bombs. We know that young people will have disagreements, arguments, even fights. We know that adolescents have problems with impulse control. Why on earth would we permit any young person to have access to the kind of firearms that these two young men brought into that school?

In preparation for the White House Conference on School Safety and Violence, we had a roundtable discussion with a lot of very accomplished people, experts and researchers. And I will never forget the comment that one of them made. He said, "You know, I've studied the attitudes and the psychological profiles of young people in many different societies around the world. And I believe that the single biggest difference why our rate of violence is higher than theirs is because we have so many weapons that are easily available." If you take away that capacity to immediately discharge those feelings, to use that weapon against others instead of learning how to deal with your own emotions, we know too well the results.

Now some have still argued against the need for sensible gun control, but we can see the results. When my husband stood up against the gun lobby and fought for the Brady Bill, there were those who said it wouldn't make any difference, it would just interfere with the right of Americans to have access to weapons. Well today we can look back. And since the Brady Bill was enacted, 250,000 felons, fugitives and stalkers have been denied handguns. And I am grateful that they have.

The President will be sending crime legislation to the Congress shortly. And in it he's going to ask the Congress to extend the Brady Bill so that young people who commit serious and violent offenses can't ever purchase handguns when they become adults. And also to ask that child safety locks be put on all guns, and to raise the penalties for juveniles who possess handguns and for adults who illegally transfer them to young people. We should hold people who allow children easy access to firearms criminally responsible for their reckless actions when children get access to their guns.

But we also have to recognize something else. Why is it, in addition to the accessibility to these weapons, that a young American can take one and turn it on his fellow classmates, and then on himself? We also have to be willing to stand up and talk about the culture of violence that infects the lives of our children. You cannot any longer argue against the research findings that started with the Surgeon General's report in 1972 and have continued unabated from this country and others, that the constant exposure to violence -- on television, in the movies, in video games,

in the music -- does not have an effect on the way children see themselves and others. There is just too much evidence that children are desensitized, they lose empathy. And there is increasing concern about the impact on vulnerable young people of video games that are interactive, that you win based on how many people you kill.

I was reading about a study that compared what needed to be done in the military to prepare people to overcome the natural inhibition that most humans feel about killing another human being. And the military often has to work very hard to prepare people to be on the front lines. And how do they do it? By repetitive practice. By target shooting where the targets look like people. By creating an instantaneous, habitual reaction, much as we see in these video games.

In the last five years we've had an additional concern raised by the Internet. And again, we are getting increasingly worried about the access that children have on the Internet to all kinds of information and propaganda that is very difficult to mediate between them and the information or to control. Now in the last several years we have tried in various ways to empower parents and other responsible adults so that they can be the ones to be those mediators. That's the idea behind the V-chip, where parents would be able to control what came in on the television set. That's the idea behind having some kind of standards in place for what is pornography on the Internet through legislation. So there have been efforts made to try at the national level to equip parents and adults so that they didn't feel quite so helpless in the face of this explosion of media images, many of which are violent.

Now the problem of course is, as anyone will quickly recognize, that there's so much of it, we are awash in it, and most kids are not terribly affected by it. The combination of parenting or genetics, resilience, empathy, experience, whatever, guides them through this climate of violence. But for other young people, who for whatever reason are vulnerable, we don't have early warning signals and we don't have enough safeguards built in. We are going to have to do some serious thinking in our country about how we will take more control over what our children see, and what they experience, and how they understand what they see and experience.

Now rightfully we have a lot of concerns about the First Amendment and government censorship, so we have to be very thoughtful about how we navigate through those. But I hope to be working with community groups, parents' groups, educators' groups to try to think of some better ways we can take back responsibility in this area.

We can no longer shut our eyes to the impact that the media is having on all of our children, and on the potentially violent impact it is having on some. And I will be asking you to help us -- to help Tipper Gore and me and the President, the Vice President and others -- to think of ways we can devise to persuade parents to exercise more authority, to help peers influence each other, so that we can begin to fight back against the violence and the impact that it has.

It raises large questions about why we as a culture glorify violence, why we consider it acceptable, why we laugh at it, why we turn our backs to it when our children are involved in it. And I think we're going to have to be very honest about what kind of steps we are willing to take to do something about it.

And finally, parents, of course, have to be equipped and empowered to feel that they have more responsibility and authority on the lives of their children. I hear it from teachers all the time. How for so many reasons, parents are not able to be as involved in their children's lives as they used to be. How you don't see them in school meetings or parent-teacher conferences. How you can't find them if you're trying to call to discuss a problem. And of course, much of that is because of the long hours and the emotional demands of work and family and single-parent families. We know that from recent reports, parents often have a high level of conflict between the obligations they feel at the workplace and what they feel to their family.

Because of these pressures -- the breakup of families, the disappearance of fathers from children's lives -- we have many young people trying to navigate to adulthood without enough adults around them.

So how do we provide more support for working parents? How do we encourage more parents to stay involved in their children's lives, especially as those children get older? Some say that that's a task for each individual family. I don't believe that. I think we should help parents more than we are. I believe that legislation like the Family and Medical Leave Act should be extended so that parents can go to parent-teacher conferences off the job. I believe it is in all of our interests to subsidize quality child care and after-school programs so that children can be safe. I believe that communities have to work harder to involve parents in taking care of children, and provide opportunities and places for children to be during summers and evenings and weekends.

There is a lot we can do that we know works. We just lack the will to put into effect what we know works. We are not willing to do all that is necessary to give parents the tools they need to be the best possible parents they can be. And we also have to be sure that we help parents know where they can go for help. A lot of parents don't know. And they throw up their hands and they walk away.

We have seen what parents can do when they join together. Just think about how before Mothers Against Drunk Driving, it was considered more or less okay to have a few drinks and get behind the wheel of a car. But MADD fundamentally changed the way we think about that now. We have designated drivers. We have people who are under more social pressure not to drink and drive. Well that is one way that parents coming together, citizens banding together, have been able to change the environment and do what they needed to do to change behavior.

There is much we have to talk about. But I know that if Al Shanker were here, he would tell us to say what has to be said and to do what has to be done. Not to be afraid or hide our heads in the sand or back away from the challenges we face. Because we can meet them. It takes courage and faith and sometimes a really thick skin to overcome the hopelessness and helplessness that we can feel at times like these. But think about the amount of courage and faith it took for those students and teachers in Littleton during that crisis. Or what the community has shown us in the days since. We owe it to them, and we owe it to all our children and all of our teachers and all of our parents. And we owe it to ourselves to make sure that we

adopt whatever strategy it takes – wiping out gun violence, reaching our kids with counseling, standing up against the culture of violence. Because that is what we should expect from ourselves.

I go back to that motto from PS #1: *No excuses. No exceptions.* I can think of no more important tribute to those who lost their lives, or who will be struggling to rebuild theirs, than to take on this issue that you led the way on years ago. Help us. Help us to understand how to make our schools safe and orderly, how to make our communities safe and orderly, and how to give hope to children who otherwise feel that no one cares. There is no better group to lead us in this effort than our nation's teachers. I thank you for what you've done. I thank you for this honor you have given me. And I look forward to working with you on behalf of America's children.

Thank you very much.