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International Association of
Fire Fighters Annual Conference

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The International Association of Fire Fighters Annual Conference
Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Washington, D.C.
March 20, 2000

Thank you so much. I am honored to be here. I feel like I am the one who should be applauding you for the work you do around our country every day and every night to keep us safe and protect us, and to demonstrate clearly what it takes to be a committed firefighter.

I want to thank Al Whitehead, Vinnie Bollon, and Harold Schaitberger. I want to recognize the IAFF members from New York—especially Kevin Gallagher, Pete Gorman, and Charlie Morello. That's just a little aside. (Laughter.) And I'm always happy to be anywhere with Chris Dodd. I came in as Chris was finishing his remarks, and there is no better senator, there is no better fighter, there is no better friend than Chris Dodd from Connecticut, and I thank you. (Applause.)

There were many reasons why I wanted to come here today. And the first one, as I said, was to say thank you to the firefighters and the paramedics in this audience and all whom you represent. I have just a small inkling of the incredible work that you do. And over the past few months, I've gained even a greater appreciation for your job as I have traveled in and out of communities and spoken with many people who have been on the frontlines of your work. I know it's not easy, and there isn't any way that anyone who is a layperson can adequately say thank you. But please convey that thanks to your 230,000 members back in your homes and communities.

I speak not only for myself, but also for the President, the Vice-President and all the members of the administration. We are so grateful for your help.

Now I don't know if there are any of you from New Hampshire, but I remember very well in 1992, when you were on the frontlines for a young governor from Arkansas who had some ideas about how we could improve the lives of working people and turn our economy around and stand for social and economic justice and progress. Well, on many occasions, you were the only people in (inaudible) that we came to to address. And it was a pretty good investment, because I would certainly believe that if we looked back to 1992 and fast-forwarded to today, we could say that we've made a lot of progress together. And I for one am very proud of the progress that the President and the Vice-President made for our country. We are a better country today than we were in 1992. (Applause.)

And I also want to thank you for the support you gave to the Vice-President. Now that the nomination is secured, we have a lot of work to do to get out the facts and to draw the contrasts and make clear what the differences would be between continuing the progress and building on it, deepening it and expanding it, so that every person has the chance to fulfill his or her God-given potential in this country; or taking a U-turn back to where we came from in the 1980s and the very early 1990s. So I thank you for the strong support you've given to the Vice-

President and to the Democratic Party, because together we will remain partners on behalf of working people and on behalf of the labor movement in our country.

Since the terrible tragedy in Worcester, America's firefighters have been on a lot of our minds. I think that was such an incredible ordeal for the entire country to go through. I know that you played an instrumental role in organizing the memorial service that was held in Worcester. And I thank you for all you did, not only to honor the dead, but also to comfort the heartbroken and send a clear signal to the children of those brave firefighters that they would not be forgotten, that their needs would be taken care of.

The sight of those six families and those 17 fatherless children brought home to all of us that firefighting is truly dangerous and life-threatening work. It's work that demands, deserves—and too often claims—the bravest among us.

Now Worcester reminded all Americans that our firefighters and our paramedics are some of our greatest heroes—and yet too often, we may take you for granted. We may take for granted that when a fire sweeps through our home or when a loved one falls ill and we're desperately calling for help, that you'll be there—because you have been, and you will. Too often we take for granted that the hundreds of thousands of men and women who stand ready at a moment's notice to answer the call for help, they risk their own lives to deliver us to safety.

I want you to know that this administration has not, does not, and will never take you for granted. We understand the risks and the demands of the jobs you do for the rest of us. America's firefighters and paramedics deserve our thanks and our respect, and our committed efforts to improve your working conditions, to make your jobs as safe as possible. You know, words are cheap. And what we've tried to do is to put action behind our words so that when the President, the Vice President and the administration and allies in the Congress—like Chris—say they are going to be there for you, we try to deliver.

We are grateful for your friendship and support that because of you we've been able to have a partnership that has been good for America. You've helped us politically, and we now live in an era of unprecedented prosperity—the longest economic expansion in the history of the United States. We've balanced the budget; we moved from record deficits to record surpluses. We've created 21 million new jobs, and we've achieved the lowest unemployment in a generation. We've also achieved the lowest poverty rate in 20 years—and we've made college and health care for our children more affordable.

We've also made firefighting safer than ever before. It has been a privilege to work with IAFF to help bring new innovations in fire and emergency services to all of our communities. Together, we've worked to bring the "Two-In/Two Out" rule to fire departments all across our nation. (Applause.) Now that's such a common sense rule, to make sure that at least two of you are stationed outside a burning building, ready to help your comrades in moments of danger. And I hope that we'll be able to, by this time next year, say that we've covered the entire country.

Together, we've worked to ensure that the death of every firefighter in the line of duty is investigated at the federal level. (Applause.) That way, we know we can save lives and prevent similar tragedies in the future.

And together, we have successfully fought off misguided attempts in the Congress to slash the budget of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and other federal agencies that are crucial to firefighter safety and training, and the development of new, safer technology. In fact, since 1998, we've worked to expand the NIOSH budget by more than \$30 million.

But we still have much more to do together. We have to make sure that every firefighter is guaranteed the right to organize and bargain collectively. (Applause.) This, to me, is an issue of basic human dignity and human rights. We want to make sure that the respect that all of us should feel, and that many say they feel, is actually implemented by guaranteeing the right to organize and bargain collectively, so that our firefighters—who do work that is risky at any time, any day, at any hour—are going to be given the support that is needed.

And who better than the firefighters themselves to speak for themselves about what you need on the job to make sure you are doing it in the safest possible way? No one should have to fear losing a job for simply bringing co-workers together to seek better wages and better working conditions. I thought that debate had been settled in America decades ago. But, you know as well as I, that there are people who don't believe in labor's right to organize, who don't believe that people on the frontlines of doing the work we ask to be done should have any say in how that work is done, and under what conditions.

I am proud that the President and the Vice President have always stood firm against efforts in Congress to punish workers who try to organize. But we cannot rest until we have won all firefighters the right to organize and bargain collectively, and I will be on your side in that fight until (inaudible). (Applause.)

And together, I will be on your side in the fight to continue to support all the efforts that honor your work and save firefighters' lives. Because, as you know better than anyone, for all of our advances in safety, one in three firefighters is still injured in the line of duty every year. Now, that's a very high percentage, isn't it? And we need to make sure that our fellow Americans understand that one in three is not just a statistic—that it's the lives, it's the physical abilities, it's the future, it's the wage-earning capacity of individual firefighters that is at stake. That's why the President's balanced budget includes \$25 million for new firefighter health and safety initiatives. And I support the FIRE Act to help local fire departments hire more firefighters, and provide more training, equipment, and education programs. (Applause.)

You know, back in Arkansas, when Bill was attorney general and then governor, we worked very hard to provide more equipment and support to firefighters throughout that state. And we used to sort of turn around and (inaudible) old military vehicles and old hospital vehicles—anything we could find that could upgrade the resources that were available. We've made a lot of progress since then, but we still have a lot of work to do.

And I thank you for giving me a chance to be part of this legislative conference. You know, it's no secret that when IAFF speaks, Washington listens, and listens carefully, as we should. When we first moved into our new home in Chappaqua, the President and I were leaving after we had spent the first night opening boxes and trying to get things arranged, and trying to figure out how to have our own home for the first time in 17 years, because it is our first house since then. And as we were leaving town, we turned a corner and there was the local fire station, and the entire staff and crew was out there and waving at us. So we immediately stopped and we got out and began to visit with the men and women who were there. And I was very gratified that we had a chance on our first day in our new house to thank people who do so much work, and who really, just like every other citizen, we'll rely on. And I appreciated greatly the kind remarks and gratitude that I heard there and around New York—and in my travels everywhere—for the work that the President has done.

I want you to know that I would like to continue that work. Because I believe strongly that, as you go up to Capitol Hill this week to continue your effort to educate and persuade, to make your voices heard, you are speaking not only for yourselves, and not just for those hundreds of thousands of your fellow workers around our country. But you're speaking for all those voices that will never be heard again—all of those people who made the ultimate sacrifice; those brave men in Worcester; and so many others through the years who have answered the call of duty, and didn't return home safely to their own families.

I hope that as you visit the offices on Capitol Hill, that you will carry your needs and your desires for the future, but you will also honor the past sacrifice and work of all those who came before. And you'll make sure that everyone in a position to vote on a budget, or to decide whether or not labor is to be given the respects and rights labor deserves, will know you've been there, and that your voice is being amplified. All Americans can sleep more soundly knowing that you and all the members of IAFF are on watch. As an American, I thank you for that. And I hope that we'll have the chance in the future to make sure that you do your work as safely and fairly, with the respect you deserve, as is possible.

Thank you all, and God bless you.