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Senior Executive Women's Forum

Chicago, IL

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Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Chicago, Illinois
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Thank you very much, Susan, and thank you all for being part of this important forum. I cannot see a soul out there, but I am told that Former Governor Thompson is here, and Lieutenant Governor Woods is here, and State Treasurer Topinka is here, as well as some other elected officials. And I am delighted to be able to join so many of you for what has become a very exciting forum.

It really was the brainchild of the two founders—the two Susans. And from what I understand, when they held their first event in 1994, they expected a handful of people, and about 150 showed up. And because of that, they understood that the voices of senior businesswomen and women at high levels of responsibility, and many aspects of the life of Chicago and Illinois, needed to be heard at every level of the political process. So it's a great pleasure for me to be back in Chicago, and to be participating in this forum.

I've had an incredible day already here in Chicago. I just came from the Robie House on the University of Chicago campus—really one of Frank Lloyd Wright's signature Prairie style homes—and we just announced a very generous gift from the Pritzger Family Foundation for the renovation of that home. I was also earlier at another famous address in Chicago—2120 South Michigan Avenue, immortalized by the Rolling Stones—at Chess Records and Studio, with Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, and Koko Taylor, in order to bring attention to this treasure that needs to be preserved. And tomorrow, I will be going to the Pullman Historic Landmark District, which is such an important site for so much of industrial and labor history.

Now one might wonder, what do those sites have in common, and what do they have in common with this conference? Well I see them all as part of the story of this city and country, part of what we are trying to preserve through the Save America's Treasures program. And they remind us, according to the theme that we have adopted for the millennium, to honor the past and imagine the future.

Well that seems not only a fitting theme for art and culture and monuments and skyscrapers, but it also seems a very important and timely theme for the subject of today's forum. If we look at the many women whose contributions helped shape this century, many of them came from right here in Chicago. This was a site for so much that happened that really set the stage for what was to follow and what we celebrate today.

Illinois was the first state east of the Mississippi to give women the right to vote in presidential and municipal elections. We can still hear the words of Bertha Palmer, who in 1883, having finally secured a spot for a woman's building at the World's Columbian Exposition, said, "Even more important than the discovery of Columbus... is the fact that the general government has just discovered women."

We can hear Ida Wells-Barnett insist on walking with the entire Illinois delegation, not just the African American women who attended the 1913 suffrage march in Washington. She said, "Either I go with you or not at all. I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race."

And if we listen, we can still hear the voices of the members of the National American Women's Suffrage Association, who gathered, on February 14, 1920, at the nearby Congress Hotel for their last convention. They knew that the 19th amendment would soon be ratified. And so the meeting began with a celebration as they sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "There will be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." According to the minutes, "For three quarters of an hour, horns tooted, and state delegations stood on chairs; they sang, they gave their yells, they formed in groups and marched around the room waving American flags. The Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey marched amicably arm in arm to the platform."

Now imagine what those women, those pioneers, would think if they were here with us today, and they could look around this room and know that women were holding very high positions in corporations, as general counsels, vice-presidents and presidents; that they were holding office, that they were candidates for office; that they had taken the work and the sacrifice of those who came before, and pushed it even further, and by doing so made it possible for women to dream even bigger dreams.

All of us come here with the image in our minds of those who courageously marched for, died for, and quietly worked for the opportunities we take for granted today. Some are famous, like the ones I mentioned. But some are colleagues; some might be mothers and grandmothers, or aunts or sisters. I know that Susan Gallagher's mother—Kathleen Blackner, who is here—is still a public school teacher, which she tells her seven children is a piece of cake after raising all of them. I think of my own mother, born here in Chicago before women got the right to vote, but who has always encouraged me and urged me to go as far as I could.

Now will we be role models for the women and girls who follow us? Well I believe we can be, but I think we have to be very conscious about the lessons we are teaching and the gifts we are giving. And the subject of today's forum about politics requires us to think a little differently, perhaps, than our foremothers ever could have imagined, and to realize that politics is part of how we do anything in a democracy. Politics with a small "p" matters in all of our lives, because as citizens of this democracy each of us has an obligation, not perhaps to hold or run for office, but as a citizen, to be sure that we participate. Jane Addams once said, "Politics is...housekeeping on a grand scale." What she showed every day at Hull House and in her life is that civic involvement is really the lifeblood of democracy. It is how we make decisions, whether or not we get along with one another; how we move closer to our ideals as Americans.

The delegates who gathered at the Congress Hotel in 1920 adopted resolutions on issues ranging from the minimum wage to education, to equal opportunity for women in

politics and business. But it was up to the women who came after, and particularly the women of the last decade, to bring those issues to the top of the political agenda. We know that, and I am sure you heard from the pollsters and others who addressed you earlier, that there is what is called the "gender gap" in elections. And certainly that was apparent in the 1996 presidential election. But we can look at the poll that you released. We can look at many of the issues being debated daily in the media and in Congress. Whether it's health care or education or domestic violence or child care, there are so many issues that are no longer just women's issues, they are issues for the entire body politic. When children don't have a safe place to go after school, when women don't earn equal pay for equal work, those issues affect families and communities.

Now I recall during the 1996 election that there were some political commentators who said that the focus on issues like child care, for example, was leading to what they termed the "feminization of politics." I think they meant it as an insult. But I prefer to believe that what is really going on is the *humanization* of politics. Because what we are talking about is how people actually live their lives, and how we can ensure that politics works.

So when someone asks, "Does it matter whether women are involved in politics," I think of the last six and a half years. It certainly has mattered to women and to families that we have made a lot of progress in our nation, that we have record unemployment, record surpluses, the strongest economy in a generation, and more women-owned businesses than ever before.

It's mattered that crime is down, and that health insurance is being extended to children; that the Family and Medical Leave Act is ensuring that parents won't have to choose between the job they need and the child they love.

But at this time of unprecedented prosperity and opportunity, I think we—men and women—face a fundamental choice: Are we satisfied that the progress we have made is good enough? Are we ready to retreat into our own private sphere and say, "I'm fine, my family's fine, my business is fine; I don't have to worry about anyone else?" Or do we take advantage of this moment to confront the challenges that we all still face?

Because right now at the national, state, and local level, decisions are being made that will determine the quality of our lives into the next century. You know so many of those issues from your own personal experience. Right now, almost two-thirds of women with small children are in the labor force. What happens in Washington, or Chicago, or Springfield determines whether or not millions of low-income families are eligible for child care subsidies, and whether all those parents who need a safe place for their child after school will have one.

We know that never before has a good education been more of a passport to prosperity—or a bad education more of a life-sentence. Chicago has shown how public schools can be turned around. But what will happen to the 5,000 school buildings across America that need to be repaired or replaced? What will happen to the nearly 1.7 million

school children who are now in smaller classes because we passed the initiative to put 100,000 more teachers in the classroom? But those teachers may not be funded for another year, and those students may find themselves back in those same old, overcrowded classrooms.

Right now, decisions are being made that will determine whether we do get violence out of our schools and guns away from our children. And this is especially on our minds in light of what happened this past week—from the bomb the student brought to Downers Grove North High School, to the tragic death of Congressman Bobby Rush's son.

Right now, decisions are being made that will determine whether women will finally receive equal pay for equal work. One of my staff members showed me a cartoon that her mother had sent her that she stuck up on the refrigerator at home. It showed six people sitting around a conference room table—all in suits, all wearing glasses, all men. And one of them announces, "Gentlemen, we must cut our expenses in half, so I'm replacing each of you with a woman."

Now clearly, things are not that bad. As the Council of Economic Advisors report makes clear, the gap between women's and men's wages has narrowed since 1963, when the Equal Pay Act was passed. But women still bring home only about 75 cents for every man's dollar, and we now have some very sophisticated studies about the persistence of wage discrimination at the highest levels of our academic and business world. And we know that that a 25-cent difference isn't much of a comfort when you have to pay for the expenses that keep a family going.

There are some who call the equal pay issue—and I quote—"an imaginary hobgoblin." They say that any wage gap that can't be explained by differences in experience, education and occupation can be made up for—and I quote again—by "the non-monetary benefits of female-dominated jobs, including better supervisors, fewer risks, easier commutes, and more flexible hours."

Well tell that to the women lawyers who on average make \$300 a week less than their male counterparts. Or the women accountants who make \$200 less than their male counterparts. There is no other way to explain it. As the MIT study demonstrated clearly, when you held constant for experience, for tenure, for qualifications of every kind, there were still discrepancies. Wage discrimination exists, and as long as it does, we need to strengthen the enforcement of equal pay laws.

Right now, decisions are being made that will determine whether we pass, and the president signs, a Patient's Bill of Rights for every American; whether we save and strengthen Medicare and Social Security for future generations. Those are two programs that are especially important to women. Nearly a quarter of all elderly women rely on Social Security for their sole source of income. And as women, we live longer than men, have more chronic health problems, relatively smaller pensions, and therefore depend on Medicare even more.

A few months ago, I met a woman named Mary Lee. When her mother got sick, Mary Lee moved her mother in with her, as many of us have or would do. She found that as her mother's health deteriorated, she even had to stop working in order to care for her around the clock. But her mother's Medicare—and her mother's Medicare gap policy—didn't cover the prescription drug costs, which cost \$4,500 a year.

And so, as with so many families, Mary Lee's family had to make some tough choices—whether children's needs or her mother's needs came first. Mary Lee's mother passed away, but the courageous efforts that Mary Lee put forth to care for her are certainly a reminder of what happens in millions and millions of families.

We in this room are often the blessed and fortunate ones in our society. We have been able to take advantage of good educations, we've been given opportunities. And the question is, where will we stand on the issues I've mentioned, and so many others? Will we speak out on behalf of changes that might not directly affect us right away, but certainly indirectly could, and would directly affect so many others? I often think of how fortunate I am that many of the problems that plagued women with economic issues and health issues are ones that I have not experienced, but I know that there but for the grace of God go I and everyone else. Women who don't have any position from which to speak—women who don't have a voice that will be heard—need our voices. Politics is about organizing and raising those voices here at home and around the world.

I've been privileged to represent our country in many different settings in the last six and a half years. And I have seen firsthand the struggles that women face around the globe. It often puts into stark perspective our own situation. I've been in villages in Africa and small huts in Asia and health clinics in Latin America, and I've listened to countless women talk to me about their lives. I think it's a good reminder for those of us as to what it's like for the majority of women still living in the world, who often put in very long hours—getting up before the sun to gather firewood, to milk a goat, or even, as I saw in Mongolia, a horse; to prepare the food that often takes hours; to do the planting and the harvesting; to go to the market; to be employed by or run the small businesses that are the backbones of most developing countries' economies—and who still, with all of their effort, often find themselves ignored, marginalized within their families and their communities.

We started an initiative called Vital Voices, and we have taken that initiative throughout the world so that we could give a platform to women's voices, and by doing so, try to help women become political. We started in Austria with women from the former Soviet Union. And we listened to how women who once held positions are finding themselves unemployed, and are seeing their economies not moving forward, and in many instances, are finding that they are now not so sought after because the jobs are scarcer, and men are the ones who often receive them.

We moved on to Latin America where we had a hemispheric conference in Uruguay, where woman after woman talked about what it meant to no longer be living

under totalitarian military dictatorships—every country in our hemisphere, save one, is now a democracy. Many of those women had stood on the front lines as they saw loved ones disappear, as they saw democracy return after very difficult battles, and they were determined to take their rightful place in every sector of society. I attended a joint meeting of all the women in the legislature in Uruguay—of every political stripe, from the far right to the far left—who had banded together to make sure women's voices were heard.

And in El Salvador, I sat down with women who were on opposite sides of that bloody struggle. One woman had been a guerilla leader, the other was a member of a very prominent family that had been on the other side. And they talked about how, as women, they were able to make concessions that their male colleagues found very difficult, to try to make those tentative steps toward building trust with one another:

In Belfast, Northern Ireland, we convened a Vital Voices conference and brought together women from the north who had never ever sat down and talked with one another—women from different traditions who found they had more in common and could make common cause in the political system. Women have been elected to the assembly in Northern Ireland, and we are all hopeful that the peace process takes hold and moves forward. But on the ground, in the small “p” political arena, women are knitting communities together, crossing sectarian lines, creating small businesses, building playgrounds in areas where children have never felt safe to play outdoors.

And then just a few weeks ago, I was in Iceland, where women from Russia and the Baltics came together with women from Scandinavia and America to talk about democracy. And there are so many challenges facing the women of Russia, yet they were there, bravely looking for ways that they can help themselves, their businesses, their communities, become political participants in a very difficult environment. We also had women from other parts of the world come to speak. Rasha, from Kuwait, spoke about how finally after years of struggle, the Emir had said that women would be permitted to vote, but the Parliament has yet to act on that decree. The parliamentary leaders keep saying to women who have never been allowed to vote, “What is the urgency?” And Rasha said she had been stunned by the question. These were women who had stood shoulder to shoulder during the Iraqi invasion. They had undertaken very difficult, and sometimes even dangerous, missions, and they are still being told to wait.

A woman from Belarus—Vera, a lawyer who stands up for human rights in a country that is reverting to communism and totalitarian authoritarianism—spoke movingly about what it's like to try to be a lawyer who speaks for human rights when your colleagues disappear, when you're disbarred, when newspapers are shut down.

I mention these examples to remind us that we have so many more blessings, not just in comparison to the women who met at the Congress Hotel, or the women who helped Jane Addams with projects she undertook at Hull House, or the women at Seneca Falls in 1848 who published their Declaration of Sentiments on behalf of women. We are so blessed in comparison to women who live in most of the rest of the world right now.

And as with any blessing, it carries an obligation. What will we do to make sure our voices are heard? We have the blessings we enjoy today, not because some benevolent ruler gave them to us, but because we worked for them, we advocated for them, we struggled for them, and yes, we voted for them.

We have an extraordinary moment in history as we end this 20th century. We can decide to honor the past and imagine and build a better future; or we can allow the complacency that often sets in when times are good to dull our senses and close our eyes to the work that is yet to be done. If we want to honor the past, then we have to be part of imagining and making that future.

When I think about politics in 1999, I know that so often it is more about 30-second commercials than about substance; I know that women still have some obstacles to overcome; and I know that it's often talked about these days as though it were some entertainment or sporting event that we could all be spectators at and turn it off if we found it distasteful or boring. But I have seen in so many ways what a difference it makes.

And so I come today to urge that you leave this forum committed to the political process; that you use your talents and opportunities to become involved in an issue—in a campaign, as a candidate—to advocate on behalf of what you believe in, and not to be deterred by the often uncomfortable, and even painful and mean-spirited atmosphere that sometimes marks our politics.

We've seen an increasing reluctance of people to vote. One of my favorite posters from 1996 was of a woman with a piece of tape covering her mouth. And under it, it said: "Most politicians think women should be seen and not heard. In the last election, 54 million women agreed with them."

So the bottom line, the most fundamental obligation, is to vote. It's surprising how many people of affluence and standing tell me that they have given up on the political process; they don't think there is any difference; they don't vote because they don't think it matters. And I always ask them whether they think that it mattered that we turned the economy around, that it was a hard-fought legislative battle. I ask them whether they think it matters that we did finally pass a Family and Medical Leave Act that now 20 million Americans have taken advantage of. I ask them whether they think it matters that finally, against the extraordinary opposition of the NRA, the Brady Bill was passed, and now more than 400,000 people have been turned away from their efforts to buy a weapon.

I think those things do matter. I think, as we look across the landscape of America today, we can see how it matters that our prosperity is lifting so many people—their incomes, their fortunes, their futures are rising. I think it matters in this city that there is political leadership that took on the problems of the public schools, and has made such a contribution to education reform under the mayor's leadership. So one can never

convince me that it doesn't matter, but I understand the underlying reluctance. Because of the way we communicate about politics today, it's very distancing.

My friend Deborah Tannen—whom some of you may know from her seminal work about the differences men and women have in the way that they talk—has written an incredible book about the culture of argument. And if we turn on our television sets, it looks like all of our politics is an argument. People insulting each other, yelling at each other, arguing constantly. You wouldn't want them in your home, so why do you want them on your television screens? It's just easier to try to shut it off. And I also know that in the atmosphere of the last several years, there has been a lot of negativity and the politics of personal destruction has had a major role. But, you see, if you turn away from politics because of what is happening, you leave the field clear to those who promote that kind of political agenda. And by leaving the field clear, you lose your voice and your vote in determining whether or not it would be possible to keep that kind of political mean-spiritedness out of our national life, and whether it is possible to create a more positive vision of what we want from politics.

This is a fundamental choice that each of us faces. In addition to our own voice and our own vote, we have an opportunity to come together around issues that matter. There are many significant problems, some of which can be addressed by political leadership, but most of which can only be addressed by partnerships—between government and the private sector, between the not-for-profit sector and the private sector. And creating those partnerships influences politics.

Women have an extraordinary opportunity today to make sure that the gains of this century are built on and carried into the next. I'm not going to tell you that it's easy to be involved in politics; I could never with a straight face tell you that. But I can tell you that it is rewarding. That when you do stand up for what you believe, and you see that it makes a difference, you feel like you've maybe paid back a little bit for all that you've been given.

There are some wonderful lessons that people have taught us that are not new at all that I would recommend to you. Eleanor Roosevelt, one of my favorite predecessors, wrote a very influential essay back in the 1920s about women in politics. Basically, she said that women had to be much better prepared than men, that women had to be ready to be questioned and criticized, that women had to grow skin as thick as a rhinoceros. But she urged women to do all of the necessary steps to be politically active. Because she understood, as she often said, that you must do the thing you think you cannot do. And one of my favorite Eleanor Roosevelt sayings is, "Women are like teabags, they don't know how strong they are until they get into hot water."

We also need women to use their pocketbooks and their financial resources. We lost two very impressive candidates in the last months—Christie Todd Whitman and Elizabeth Dole. I may be of another party, but I admired both of them and their willingness to enter the political fray. They both basically said that raising the money was just too much of an obstacle. It is still harder for women to raise money in our

political system. And women who now control a majority of the wealth, the individual wealth in America, have an opportunity to participate financially, and I would urge you to do that.

I know that Mrs. Dole had hoped to be here today and was not able to come. And I am often asked, when do I think a woman will be president. Well, again, Eleanor Roosevelt was asked, and she said by the 1970s. And in the 1970s, Rosalynn Carter was asked, and she said by the year 2000. So now, to play it safe, I'll say in the 21st century. But part of the reason it's so difficult and daunting a challenge is because of the way we finance campaigns. So while I urge you to participate financially because that is a way for your voice to be heard, and for you to support candidates whom you believe will speak for the issues that you care about, I also hope that women's voices will be heard more loudly in the effort to change the campaign finance rules, because I believe that they are undermining our democracy and undermining the voices of many citizens.

So voting, raising your voice, becoming part of coalitions, contributing to candidates, advocating for change—they are all ways that each of us can participate. And then there is the next step—that more and more women are taking—to become candidates, and then to serve in public life.

I don't know that it is any different anywhere else in the world, where I have met many women who have taken the step to become active in their country's political process, but I do think our system is harder in many ways. Because in a parliamentary system, a woman is a colleague. Margaret Thatcher could get to know her colleagues, and her colleagues could develop a relationship with her. And she could represent a relatively small constituency, and through hard work and leadership be chosen by her colleagues to head her party.

A woman in our country has a much stiffer hill to climb, but I am pleased that more and more women are doing just that. I am learning a little bit more about that myself these days, and I admire any woman and any man who will step forward, and I urge more of you to think seriously about doing that.

And then for those who hold office, it's a real challenge to keep focused on the issues that matter. In our system, you are elected to Congress, or you are elected governor, or you are elected senator, or to the state legislature. And for many who are elected, they have to start immediately campaigning for office again, and that means raising the money that is necessary to fund those campaigns.

So there are many people, as we have seen in the last years, who are resigning or are failing to run because they just don't think the process works. I understand their concerns, but I think it's important that we not give up and walk away from the process, but continue to try to reform it.

Finally, I would say that if politics is to be meaningful in the next century, we are going to have to take advantage of technology, and we are going to have to learn how

better to communicate with each other. And there is no reason why women cannot be at the forefront of doing just that—breaking new ground in how the political process actually will work. Because if we look at the issues that await us, I think we have unfinished business of the 20th century—to continue our economic progress and make sure it reaches every single American; to continue reforming our public education system, and ensure that every child has a chance to learn and has access to the information age technology that he or she will require; to make it possible for us to once again put patients and doctors in the center of the health care system; to ensure that we do what is necessary to keep guns out of the hands of children and criminals; to protect our environment.

On so many fronts, we have the unfinished work of this century. But we also will face new challenges, and those new challenges range from ensuring that we finally have a health care system that provides quality, affordable health care to every American; to looking for ways to marry the environment and the economy so that we don't pit one against the other; to ensuring that the digital divide is just a phrase and not a fact that further widens the wealth gap in our country; to working on the unfinished business of making this one America where all people are respected and have a chance to participate fully; to continuing to lead around the world and making clear that America is the strongest force for peace and prosperity and stability, and that means doing things like looking for ways to end the spread of nuclear weapons, and dealing with threats like global warming and proliferation of chemical and biological weapons, and ensuring that we are up to speed on our public health agenda so that we don't have the spread of epidemics or other challenges. There is much much work to be done.

The other night at the White House, we had one of our Millennium Lectures—that we have had now 10 of—that are broadcast on the Internet and bring together thinkers and academics and people who have something to say about the past and the future. This one was particularly compelling because we brought together an expert in informatics and an expert in genomics. The expert in genetics said that we will find, when we map the human genome, that all human beings are 99.9 percent the same—our DNA differs by just one-tenth of a percent. You may be a man, I may be a woman, you may be black, I may be white, you may be tall, I may be medium—we have so many superficial differences, but they fit into that one-tenth of one percent.

So what do we do with this new knowledge? Do we take it as a great invitation to look for ways that we bring people together? That we celebrate our differences, but we recognize that underneath our common humanity is so much greater? Do we teach our daughters that they should celebrate being a woman, but they should recognize that their feelings, their aspirations, are rooted in a long history of development?

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...are responsible and to quit pitting women against women, homemakers against professional women, and most of us in the middle who have tried to balance both? Will

we admit that there is no single, cookie-cutter model for being a successful and fulfilled woman today? That we can choose to be a full-time mother, or have no children at all? Or as we live longer, find different ways of living out different decades of our lives?

If we can come to terms with who we are as women as we end this century and begin the next, then by our examples, by the choices we make, we will set a new course in politics, and we will pass on to our daughters the lessons that it is, as Susan said, far less important what we look like than what we feel, what we say, what we think. That it is far more important that we try to make life a little better for those who come after than to just be a captive of the consumer culture. There are a lot of decisions being made in each of our lives, and the aggregate of those decisions will affect our political life.

So I thank you for gathering to talk about politics to make sure that it is there on a stage to be discussed and not to be rejected or maligned, that we look for ways that our voices, our votes, our resources, our activism can make a difference. The 20th century has been America's century. I believe that the 21st can be a century of progress for American women.

I was recently at a conference about the future of politics, and I was there with a very distinguished British scholar who studies political developments around the world. And he said, You know, the most significant advance that has occurred in the 20th century is not what often is talked about—namely technology and productivity. He said those have been very important. But the most important advance and the most important change has been the role of women. And American women have broken new ground, have navigated uncharted waters. And he turned to me and he said, But will American women keep doing so, or will they be satisfied just to try to balance the demands of their own lives? I thought that was a good question. I think the answer is that we will continue to do what we can to use politics to advance the common good as we see it. And by doing so, continue to demonstrate the leadership that women in the past have shown that we have tried to live up to.

Thank you all very much.