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NAAPC Annual Conf.

**NAACP Annual Convention**  
**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**Baltimore, Maryland**  
**July 11, 2000**

Thank you so much. I am delighted to be here. And as President Mfume just said, I have looked forward to returning and having an opportunity to see all of you again at this convention. I want to thank Mayor O'Malley for being here in the headquarter city of the NAACP, and in a new, revitalized Baltimore. It's a pleasure to have you here. I want to thank the leaders of this organization—certainly your president, your chairmen of the board, and all who are part of moving the NAACP into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I was delighted to see once again Myrlie Evers Williams, and to see the very impressive bust of Medgar here as well. And I thank you, Myrlie, for your leadership. To Rossalyn Brock (phonetic); to my friend and neighbor, Hazel Dukes (phonetic); to Secretary Alexis Herman; to Reverend Morris Sharon (phonetic); and to all who are gathered here: It is a special, special pleasure for me to stand here before all of you, and I want to begin by thanking you for all the personal and public and prayerful support that you have given to the President, to me, to our family over the last eight years. You have been, in large ways and small, steadfast and stalwart friends, and we will never forget that friendship.

I'm also pleased to participate again, as I have several times in the past for both national and regional gatherings at the NAACP, and to see gathered before me leaders from all walks of life, from every part of our country, but with one common vision. A vision to ensure that the promises made in the founding of our nation will one day soon come true for all of our citizens. That is the work that you have been devoted to and carried on for 91 years. And I am particularly grateful that I could come at a time when this is the first convention of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I remember five years ago in Minneapolis when both Myrlie and Alexis told me what it was like when they were young girls and received their NAACP cards. Alexis told me that in order to get her card, she first had to get a library card. Because her local chapter wouldn't give a child an NAACP membership unless they showed up with a library card. I think that's a pretty good policy that all of us ought to try to follow. Myrlie told me how she carried around that first—by that time yellow—NAACP card, because she carried it with her first receipt from the poll tax. And if it hadn't been for the NAACP, she might not have had that remnant, that antique that showed what life was like in the memories of so many who are gathered here.

You know, not only for Alexis and Myrlie or Julian or anyone else who's gathered has the NAACP meant a personal commitment and a personal part of our lives. But you know and I hope you appreciate what a powerful symbol and what an important actor this organization has been in our ongoing struggle for racial justice and for equal opportunity. There has always been an NAACP to stand on the front lines, to raise the hard questions, to organize, to make clear to all of us what that common mission must be. For 91 years you have stood for and taught us, as the Scripture says, "that we are all made from one blood to dwell on the face of the earth." We

know that that is even more true today than it was 91 years ago, because now with the human genome we know that we are 99.9 percent alike. And there may be some folks that are maybe not comfortable with that, but I find it really reassuring myself.

I remember so well the great privilege I had as a young girl to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in Chicago. The year was 1963, I was a high school student and I was taken there by my youth minister. We went down to Orchestra Hall on a cold January night and Dr. King delivered a sermon that has stayed with me my entire life. He called his sermon "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." He told us how a literary character, Rip Van Winkle, had slept through a revolution. And he challenged all of us there that evening, as he did throughout his life, to stay awake during the great civil rights revolution that was sweeping our country.

Now I know that people have a tendency, as we all do, to get tired. To rest on our laurels. And today in our country with so many blessings and so much prosperity, it would be easy to fall asleep. It would be just the simplest thing in the world to say, "You know, all that hard work getting rid of the poll tax, fighting for the right to vote, moving into the economic mainstream—all of that has resulted in such positive changes that maybe it's time for a sleep. You know, a body dose get tired."

But I am hoping, as I stand here before you today, that we all remember that although the revolution may not be as obvious or vivid as it was when I was a young girl listening to Dr. King, there is still a need for all of us to remain awake and vigilant and focused and working together. Because that evening long ago, Dr. King asked us what we would say when we appear before the throne of judgment, and the God of history asks each one of us, "What did you do for others?" He said that in all probability, no matter who we were and what our answer might have been, God would say, "Well, that is not enough." There is always more to be done.

I think of those words and that message all the time. I think about it when I go into a crumbling school and look into the bright eyes of children who are being denied access to computers, who are crowded 35 or 40 in a classroom or having no text books and resources that are modern and up to date. I think about it when I meet a young mother who doesn't know whether she's going to be able to afford the health and dental care that her child needs. I think about it when I meet a father who, in an anguished tone of voice, tells me about the mental health problems that his son or daughter faces that he can not afford to help fix and doesn't know where to turn. I think about it every time I read another story of a hate crime that happens anywhere in our country. I think about it when young men and women with all of the motivation in the world can't afford still to see their dreams fulfilled because financially it is such a stretch for them to go and stay in college.

So there is much to be done, isn't there? And none of us can afford yet to rest or fall asleep because the revolution continues and we all have a role to play.

Now the theme of the convention this year, "Race to Vote," can mean a lot of different things. And I'm very proud that the NAACP has already registered 3 million voters and is well on the way to that 4 million voter goal. But in Kweisi Mfume's wonderful autobiography, which

he titled "No Free Ride," we know that just registering to vote, just expressing an opinion, just talking the talk doesn't get us where we need to go. There is more work to be done.

It's especially meaningful that the theme "Race to Vote" would coincide with the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the voting rights march and all of the people—some of whose names we could call out here this afternoon—who have fought for, were jailed for and even died for the right we take so much for granted. I run into young people all the time of every race and ethnic background who tell me they don't see any point in voting. They're not *into* voting. They don't even really understand why they need a government. Because they just think they're on their own. They, you know, graduated from college and are out in the world and making a good living and apparently just forget that everybody who came behind them made that possible. So we have work to do to convince our young people that it's not only important to register, it's going to be important to vote. And frankly, we have some work to do to convince some of our older people as well.

You know, I'm always amazed when someone with a straight face tells me that they don't vote because they just are turned off by voting. They don't want to participate in our electoral process. And they therefore leave the entire electoral field open to people who have very different values and visions of where we are going as a country. So we not only need a "Race to Vote," we need to ensure that we cross the finish line and we do vote and we make it clear that we have very specific ideas about what we need to be doing as a nation. The choices we make in the months ahead, on election day, will determine not only who will lead us, but what direction we will go. These choices will determine if the scales of justice in the highest court of our land will tilt toward protecting our rights or constricting them. They will determine whether we keep marching on the road to equality or take a rest and even turn back.

Now we do hear a lot of people these days who talk the talk of opportunity and justice. And it's a tribute to all of you that every body wants to come and talk to the NAACP in the year 2000. I would have loved to have seen them in Knoxville when I was there or Minneapolis when I was there or Little Rock when I was there talking to the NAACP. So as we listen to all of the talk and all of the promises that are made during this election season, I like to keep in mind what my mother taught me: "Watch what they do, not what they say." Well, I'm all for compassion; it is a wonderful emotion. And I know there are lots of people who feel *real* bad when somebody is discriminated against. And there are people who just feel *terrible* when someone is the victim of a hate crime. And there are folks who are truly compassionate when someone doesn't get the education or the health care that they need. But we need to move beyond an expression of compassion. We need to move forward with conviction and action and change. . . (inaudible). Because I don't want anyone to fall asleep like Rip Van Winkle.

You know, in times of great blessings like the ones we're living through—you go back and read the Bible—you know, when we get fat and happy, that's when trouble comes through the door. That's when we kind of lose our ability to discriminate between what is good and what is not so good. So we have to remain awake and vigilant—and particularly in this election season—because for all the work that we have done together over the last eight years, there is much more to be done.

Yes, let us build on our progress and our prosperity. We are a better country than we were in 1992 because of the changes that we have worked on together. We are a better country because we have seen the appointment of more minorities and women to physicians and government and judiciaries than any time in our history. We are a safer country because we stood up to the gun lobby. We passed the Brady Bill, we passed the Assault Weapons Ban, and we were able to put more police on the street and lower the crime rate. So we are a safer country than we were. But we know we have a long way to go. We are a richer country because we moved from deficits to surpluses. We are a stronger country because among African Americans, we have the highest home ownership rate of our entire history, and the lowest unemployment and child poverty rate of our entire history.

And we have watched as those changes have occurred, and we can not forget that some were with us and some were not. You know, in an election we choose between people, and unfortunately we don't choose between perfection and more perfection. We choose between human beings—their positions, their records, their beliefs, what they do. And some were with us and some were not.

We think about the economic plan that was passed in 1993. It passed without a single Republican vote. And in that plan we not only moved our country on the route to surplus and balanced budgets, but we doubled the tax relief for poor people. We said, "If you are going to work hard, we are going to make sure that you can lift yourself out of poverty." We created empowerment zones and enterprise communities. And I have now visited places that were desolate that now for the first time have jobs again, have supermarkets in the inner city, employing people, providing opportunities.

We have seen the difference it can make, and we know what a difference it will continue to make if we keep our eye on the economic opportunities that all people deserve to have. Some are with us when it comes to raising the minimum wage, and some are against raising the minimum wage. Some are for equal pay for equal work for women, and some are against that very fundamental principle. These are all the issues that we have to keep focused on as we move toward this election.

And we know also that despite our tremendous record in appointing qualified minorities and women, we know right now that the Senate leadership is bottling up people who by all rights deserve to serve on the federal bench and deserve a chance to be voted on, up or down. There are four African Americans poised to make a difference and make history on the circuit court. Judge James Wynn and Roger Gregory would be the first African Americans to serve on the 4<sup>th</sup> Circuit, which is home to more African Americans than any other jurisdiction. And the Republican leadership won't give them a vote. Kathleen McCree-Lewis would be the first African American woman on the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit, and Johnnie Rawlinson the first African American woman on the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit.

Now you know, senators—I think a lot about senators these days—senators have a constitutional obligation to vote to confirm. If they don't want to vote for these fine people, then let them vote no. But at least we need to send a message to the Republican leadership: "Let these nominees go." Give them a vote on the floor of the United States Senate. And I hope we never

again see a repeat of what happened to Justice Ronnie White, a qualified Supreme Court justice from the state of Missouri who was held hostage to partisan politics and unfairness. So when we talk to our friends and neighbors about this election, we can put specific names to the fact that it makes a difference who sits in those seats in the Senate and who makes those nominations from the White House. Because there are huge differences going from the White House through the Senate to the House, that must be focused on in this election season.

You know, when it comes to health care, some support a real patients' bill of rights that gives us the right to sue the HMO if they have mistreated us, have refused to give us the kind of medical care that we deserve to have. Some support a real prescription drug benefit for Medicare that will make affordable prescription drugs available to all of our seniors. Some support extending health care to every child in America as well as the parents of those children, as well as people between the ages of 55 and 65, who should be given an opportunity to buy into Medicare. Some support the fundamental goal of making it absolutely possible for this country to offer quality, affordable health care to every single American. Some support that health care agenda, and some don't. There is a big difference on health care that we need to keep focused on.

When it comes to education, you know and I know that there are schools in this country that no child should have to attend. I have been in and out of those schools all over New York and all over America. The other week I was in Buffalo, New York. I visited a school built in 1894; it was last modernized in 1928. 400 children, they may have been poor in material riches but they were rich in spirit, and yet they were going to a school that didn't have computers for all those children. They had 35 computers. 25 of them weren't connected to the Internet because the school is so old; it's too expensive to wire.

Now I know that the real magic of learning takes place between a teacher and a student. But there are things that a president and senators and members of Congress can do. Some people are for putting 100,000 more qualified teachers into our classrooms. Some people are for the plan that the President has proposed to modernize and repair and construct the schools we need, which would enable us to build 5,000 new schools and repair 5,000 schools a year for the next five years.

Some people are for a national teacher corps that would say to young men and women, "If you're willing to become a teacher, we'll give you a full scholarship for four years of college." And some people want to make college tuition tax deductible, which is something that would open the doors of college to every young person. Some people want to make sure that we have enough after-school and summer school spots for every child who needs it, that we have enough Head Start places for every child that deserves to have a head start before going to school. Some of us believe that we should turn around our failing schools, not just point fingers at them. So some of us have a policy to reform and improve education that will make a real difference to the vast majority of the students of our country, and some don't.

Some of us believe that the President was right when he said with respect to affirmative action: "Let's mend it, not end it." Because we know we have a lot of work still to do. Some of us approve the NAACP suing the gun manufacturers and we want to close the gun show loop

hole; we want to ban those ammunition clips; and we want to license hand gun owners, because we don't want guns in the wrong hands of children or criminals or others. Some of us still believe that we can have one America, and that's why we support federal hate crimes legislation, to make it clear we will not tolerate such crimes of violence and prejudice.

And some of us know that we are going to face a very stark choice in this election between what direction we go economically. Some of us believe that we have worked hard to get these budget surpluses. They ought to be devoted to Social Security; to Medicare; to pay down the national debt; to providing tax cuts that would go for child care, college tuition, long term care, easing a marriage penalty—doing what will help the most Americans. But there is a radically different idea that would take all of those projected surpluses and act like we have them in our pocket right now. You know, there are some people who believe that we should go ahead and make big decisions based on what our income is going to be for the next 10 years. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not gonna make big decisions based on my income for the next 10 years, and I don't want my government making big decisions. But the other party, what they want to do is a huge across-the-board tax cut that mostly only helps people who are already doing quite well. They also want to put part of Social Security into private accounts—privatizing it—which would cost a whole lot of money to try to make sure we kept pace with older people already receiving Social Security.

And they want to do a lot of other things that would be very expensive, using the money that we don't yet have. I believe that we have prospered because we've been good stewards. We've made hard decisions. We've taken care of what needs to be taken care of first. And I think—just like Franklin Roosevelt said, his generation had a rendezvous with destiny—our generation has a rendezvous with responsibility. Let's take care of Social Security and Medicare and pay down the national debt first. And then let's focus on closing the divides that still too often determine the fate of a child. Let's close the education divide, the health care divide. We know that different people in our country get different levels of health care, don't we? The surgeon general is doing a report that I know will demonstrate that is the fact, because too many of us have real world experience that absolutely makes that clear to us. Let's close that digital divide so that in the years to come none of us have to walk into a school and see children who are not getting the kind of preparation for the new economy that they deserve to have. Let's close this credit divide. Nobody should be denied credit to buy a home or to go further in a business and have the opportunity financially to succeed.

But we have a lot of work to do in this time of unprecedented prosperity. And you know we still have a lot of work before we can even lift our eyes to the throne of judgement to give even an inadequate answer to God's questions. We are going to have to work a lot harder to keep pulling our country together, to keep recognizing that we are all one—not only one America, but now we are one people. You know, I was tickled when the human genome demonstrated that we were 99.9 percent alike, because I think that that's a wonderful piece of news. Because now we can go out and say to the people who are dead set on protecting the confederate flag which symbolizes one of the worst chapters in American history. We can say to those people, just look them right in the eye and say, "We're 99.9 percent the same. You put aside all that superficial difference—slight difference in skin color or a slight difference in hair texture—we're 99.9 percent the same."

So why do we keep focusing on the one-tenth of one percent difference instead of coming together on the 99.9 percent similarity? Because then we could make some common resolutions to fulfill our common American mission. We can resolve that all children will have the chance to attend schools with good teachers, safe playgrounds, modern classrooms, and all of the equipment and resources they need. We can resolve that all children will have the chance to grow up on the right side of the digital divide. We can resolve that all people, regardless of where they live or who they are or how much money they have, will have good quality, affordable health care. We can resolve that we will stand against hate and bigotry together because there is so much work for us to do to move ourselves forward together.

Now I know that there is a lot of work ahead of us, but you know, in Jeremiah 6 it's written, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask where the good way is, and walk in it." It doesn't say, "Look around and be thankful for your blessings and sit down." It doesn't say, "You got yours, so nobody else deserves to have theirs." It doesn't say, "Climb the ladder of opportunity and then fold it up so nobody else gets a chance." It doesn't say, "Talk the good talk." It says, "Walk the good walk down the road we all need to proceed to a better future for all (inaudible) in our country." So once and for all, NAACP, stand firm, walk down that road, take as many with you as we will come, make very clear there is no them or they in America or in our.... (cassette switches sides; some remarks missing).

...stand up to injustice, lack of opportunity, unfairness, bigotry, prejudice and stereo types. Only we can decide if we will reject the history of divisiveness and move forward united. But the wonderful opportunity we have is that we can all do that. But we can not do it if we don't register to vote and we don't vote. I believe we should tell all of our friends who tell us how they don't think they want to vote, they're not interested. Say that they lose their rights to complain. No voting, no complaining.

But if we are focused and ready to seize the future and make it what it should be, then here in this year of 2000 we can stay awake during the continuance of the revolution that started so many decades ago that this organization was instrumental in bringing across our country and across the world. We can decide that we will be ready to the best of our human ability to answer that question: What have you done? And if we answer it right then we will see a continuation of the prosperity, the peace and the progress we've enjoyed for the last eight years. And I know with your leadership and with God's help, we do and will have the opportunity to seize this moment to give every child the chance to be all he or she can become. And when that happens, much of the credit will belong to you.

Thank you all very much

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