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Cornell Women's Conf.

Cornell Women's Conference:  
"Women and the New Millenium"

Ithaca, New York

March 10, 2000

Thank you so much President Hunter Rawlings. Thank you Marty Webster, Harold Tanner. Thank you Thaisa Way and all who are associated with this important conference, including the Chair, Toby Kleban Levine, Karen Keating, Gloria Lang, and Thaisa Way. I want to thank After Eight for performing and singing before I arrived.

I am delighted to be here back at this great university and this magnificent hall. I was last in this hall in 1993 when I was here with Senator Moynihan and Congressman Peaking talking about health care. I well remember that evening because there were many people on ....who could not get in and continued to pound on the doors as the program began.

It is truly an honor to be in front of all of you at this 10th Anniversary conference of the President's Council of Cornell Women, celebrating the leadership and the many contributions that the women of Cornell have made and will make in the future. I am told that this is one of the largest gatherings of alumnae in Cornell history - that mothers, daughters, and granddaughters have all come back to their alma mater to celebrate this occasion. Some have come from as far away as Namibia and Cameroon, Louisiana, Hawaii, California, others from right here in Ithaca or Seneca Falls. So I honor your school spirit - and your commitment to the women who have followed in your footsteps.

While today we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the council and conference, the history of women at Cornell starts back to the very first years at Cornell. Long before any other Ivy League institution opened its doors to women, men and women were sitting side by side in front of Webster Hall, standing together side by side next to the library, and working side by side in the Cornell laboratories. So give yourselves a round of applause. [Applause]

More than 125 years ago, Ezra Cornell called his university's visionary efforts in coeducation a "great experiment." There have been no greater beneficiaries of that "great experiment"

than America itself. As an American and a woman, I say thank you for giving our nation so many generations of pioneering women to become leaders.

I thank Cornell for training young scientists that pushed back the frontiers of knowledge and space: Scientists like Caroline Baldwin Morrison, the Class of 1895, the first women to earn a Doctorate of Science in America. Women like Barbara McClintock, the Class of '23, the noble prize winning geneticist, or Dr. Mae, Medical School Class of '81, the first African-American woman to fly in space.

I thank Cornell for nurturing the talents of writers whose work has touched our hearts and has stirred our consciences. Writers like Pearl Buck, the Class of '25, winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Noble Prize for Literature. Writers like Toni Morrison, class of '63, who also won the Noble Prize. Writers like Sheryl WuDunn, class of '81, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her writing in China. And one of my favorite Cornell graduates, a woman whose work I used to eagerly look for as a young girl every Friday in Life Magazine, Margaret Bourke White, Class of '27, Pulitzer Prize-winner for Photography.

I thank Cornell for giving us so many trail-blazing academics and public servants. People like Barbara Bergman, Class of '48, professor of Economics and expert on the impact of economic discrimination against women. Gail Laughlin, Class of 1898, who was the first women elected to the Maine Legislature, or Constance Cook, Class of '43 elected to State Assembly here in New York. And two of Cornell's most prominent graduates; Janet Reno, class of '60 and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, class of '54. [Applause]

As I look through the list of distinguished alumni - some of whom will be on campus for this conference this weekend - I could have spent my entire time before you reciting their accomplishments and thanking them for their contributions to America. And then I could have gone a step farther and I could have delved a little deeper, and I could have the names of the countless women who have been leaders at their universities around the country, leaders of their community, leaders of business, leaders who have created opportunities for so many others to follow them.

I don't want to forget to mention my dear friend who had first invited me two years ago to speak at this conference Diane

Divers Blair, Class of '59, distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Arkansas, someone who has made her mark on the quality of life in that state. So I thank Cornell for all of the women, many whom may not necessarily appear in a history book, but who have made history because of the examples you have set. You have been leaders in so many ways to so many people. And I also thank Cornell for what you are doing now to inspire and educate the 21st century generation of women, the undergraduates in this audience who will continue this remarkable tradition of accomplishments.

I was invited to share my thoughts on a rather daunting subject, "Women and the New Millennium." Now that is a thousand years to talk about. It is impossible for me, some days, to know what I am doing tomorrow. So to think about talking about a thousand years seems more than I could possibly do. Instead I thought I would narrow it down to this century.

Before I tackle that however, I would like to take a brief look back to the 20th century. I was recently in conversation with a distinguished British political scientist who studies political development all over the world. He said to me, "You know, I believe the most significant advancement that occurred in the 20th century is not the one that is most often cited, mainly technology and increases in human productivity. But instead," he went on, "it is the revolution that has taken place in the role of women. And American women have been on the forefront of that revolution."

I agree with him, thinking about all the ways American women have struggled and advocated and championed their rights, and by extension, the rights of women everywhere. I thought about how my own mother was born a year before we won the right to vote. I thought of my own childhood dream of becoming an astronaut, which was detoured by a response from NASA telling me that they were not recruiting girls.

Certainly, I took that as a sign that I should look for some other line of work. But since then, you've seen the extraordinary adventures, the journeys by Sally Ride, Shannon Lucid, Mae Jemison and Eileen Collins. I thought about the days when I was one of two women lawyers on the House Watergate Committee back in 1974. And what it was like to be the first woman lawyer to have ever appeared in a

courtroom in some parts of the state of Arkansas, or in so many other areas where women are breaking down barriers and breaking through glass ceilings.

For the next brief memory that I engaged in, I almost missed what this gentleman said next. He said "What I wonder is whether American women will keep leading us forward. With all these important rights that have been won, will American women turn inwards and be satisfied just trying to balance the demands of their ordinary lives?"

I realized how tempting it is in this era of peace and unprecedented prosperity to become complacent. To look backwards and be grateful for the sacrifices that others made, but not to bother looking forward at the challenges we still face. It is easy to lose ourselves in the daily struggle of studying for midterms, or finishing work on time to pick the children up from school, or competing for the next promotion at the office.

All of that is so time-consuming and grating, it is hard to imagine finding the energy to turn our attention outwards, to complete the struggle for women's rights and freedom here in America and around the world. How easy it is to be turned-off by politics as we know it today - negative commercials and 30-second sound bites - to trick ourselves into thinking we are powerless to change what we think should be changed around us. And just to check ourselves from the public and political process.

But I want to believe that woman at any point of American history, and especially now, cannot afford to check out. Two summers ago, I traveled to Seneca Falls to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the first Women's Rights Convention and it happened here in New York.

I remember so well what that day looked like. I reflected back on the bravery of those women and few hardy men who made that journey to Seneca Falls. Think about the courage that it took for them to tell their husbands, their wives, their friends, their neighbors. Think of going on a journey to promote women's rights, something that seems impossible even to imagine. But at the end of that convention, 100 people - 68 women and 32 men - signed the Declaration Assembly that you can still read on the walls here at Seneca Falls. Some of those names you can still remember and honor today like

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Martha White, Frederick Douglas, others who were honored as they were two years ago, whose families, whose memories they still keep alive.

Those women and men understood that what they were doing that day at Seneca Falls would not necessarily affect their own lives. When they came up with the idea that Elizabeth Cady Stanton promoted to hold such a convention, women were denied legal citizenship and society's structural values and social structures constricted their opportunity. So when that declaration baldly and boldly asserted, "We hold these truths to be self evident that men and women are created equal," it was the shock heard around the world. And we still here it echoed today.

We have made so much progress that I sometimes feel that we don't appreciate how difficult it was to take the steps that led us here today. We have to tell and re-tell the stories of the progress that was made and thank those who came before. Thank those who fought for the vote who never got to vote. Thank those who changed the laws effecting inheritance and ownership of property that never had the right to exercise them themselves. Thank those who could see into the future a century or beyond and know that the work they were doing would benefit their daughters and sons.

Progress in America only happens when citizens look beyond themselves for a vision of a better, more just world and work to bring that vision to life. And it requires, in our system, that people be willing to be involved in the public sphere and the political process. Much of what has happened in the history of women's rights in America, is due to one or a handful of courageous and brave women and a few men who could see beyond their own narrow views of the world and the future.

How do we both pay tribute by honoring those in the past, and at the same time, create again the energy and commitment to imagine and build a future which continues widening the circle of human dignity and responsibility and opportunity. I believe our challenges lie in our personal lives, in our professional lives, and in the public and political spheres. In recent years, we have seen the power of women's political participation. Issues that once were relegated as "soft issues" or "women's issues" are now being seen appropriately as "family issues" or "human issues."

I remember some years back, when talk of family leave or education reform or childcare or health care reform even, rose to the top of our national agenda because women were involved. And that is often described as the "feminization of politics." Instead, what I prefer to call it is the "humanization of politics." Because when we provide better education, when we take care of our mothers and fathers and grandsons as I saw so beautifully illustrated at the Longview Ithacare Community Center in Ithaca just a few hours ago, we are talking about how we build a better quality of human life for all of us.

So what are some of the challenges that we see on the horizons? If Elizabeth Cady Stanton invited you for a cup of tea, and you were in her small living room with her seven children running around, what would you think would be the issues that we should ponder about women's roles, rights and responsibilities in this next century and beyond the millennium?

I would begin by focusing on the personal. It is, for each of us, a challenge that only we, individually, can meet - to believe in ourselves, to have that confidence that we can do what we were meant to do in our own lives, to be willing to work hard, to get the kind of education that will equip us for a world of dynamic and constant change. We have to listen to our quiet voice inside our own hearts about what is right for us. I appreciated the President's remarks about my strong belief that individual women's choices must be respected.

For too long we have pitted women against women, we have tried to lift them up by putting others down. Instead I would argue that there is no formula for being a successful woman today. Each of us, individually, now has the rights and opportunities that no woman in history has had to this extent before, to shape our own destiny. So let us, first and foremost, commit ourselves to supporting the responsible choices that individual women make and end the blaming and gaming about other women's choices. Because through that kind of unity, we can build a stronger voice for what women need. [Applause]

In the world of work and in our professional lives, we have made an enormous amount of progress. I remember so well when I graduated first from high school and then from college,

there were many doors that were not open to women of my generation. Scholarships that were not available. Colleges that would not admit you. No athletic scholarships...that were available to young men. Jobs that had signs that women need not apply attached to the door. We have made legal progress and we have changed cultural values. And they have gone hand-in-hand. Had it not been for Title 9, I don't believe we would have opened up the world of college athletics. We would not have seen the women's soccer team win the world cup. [Applause]

Sometimes I have young women ask me why they should care about politics or be involved in it. I recite some of the changes that have occurred in my life that they may not be aware of, starting with Title 9, starting with the implementation of the Civil Rights Act and the opportunities that are available now.

We also know that in the workplace there are still many doors to open, many more glass ceilings to shatter. Race discrimination still exists in America. There are some who try to deny that it does. But I was struck forcefully by a study conducted by MIT last year, a study conducted by tenured women professors, who delved deeply into the data available, and could only reach one conclusion: That when you compared apples to apples, tenured professors to tenured professors, there was still inequality - inequality ranging from wages, inequality in lab space, and classroom time, inequality in so many ways. The MIT faculty were very brave and I appreciate greatly their willingness to admit there was work to do.

While that is inherent in our society, in institutions, not only in academia, but in business and every other walk of life, there is no reason why at the beginning of this century, women in America still make 75 cents for every dollar earned by a man. There is no reason why women lawyers on average make \$300 a week less than the men in their firm. And why women professors make \$170 dollars less than the men in the faculty. Why even women nurses make \$30 dollars a week less than male nurses. So we have to be willing to root out the vestiges of inequality and discrimination in the workplace. No women should be denied equal rights or equal pay. [Applause]

We cannot forget that for most women, we hold down two

full-time jobs, in the world of trade work and in the world of family work. Two thirds of all the women with small children are now in the labor force. For many working families, affording quality childcare remains a stubborn obstacle. They cannot overcome what keeps many mired in property and feeling that they just cannot get ahead. By speaking out, we can make sure that no parent has to choose between the job they need and children they love.

I believe the time is long overdue for Americans to take more responsibility for helping working families take the childcare they need and for enabling new parents to stay home with their newborns and for raising the quality of care for all families and making sure that all children have safe and enriching places to go after school.

Now many people as I have referred to earlier will say that those are the "soft issues" that really every family should work out on it's own. It's not our responsibility to help a young mother to make the decision to be able to stay at home if she can afford it, or to go to work with the comfort of knowing her child is now taken care of.

I could not disagree more. We are so fortunate that generations of women pioneers helped to end the abuses in the workplace.

Go back and read Jane Adams and what she found as she traveled in and out of the tenements in Chicago and finding that working parents and working mothers in the factories of that time - immigrant families - were required to tie their children below the chairs or to beds because they had no safe place to leave them.

Well we have certainly made progress, but not near enough. Any fair, objective study of childcare today demonstrates fully that many children are left in substandard care, not because their family chooses, but because they have no alternative. That is not a problem for them. It is a problem for all of us.

I hope that we teach these issues as balancing of family and work at the top of the agenda for professional, political and public change. We also know that there are more strains on the family today than perhaps we have seen in quite a while. Some of it is of our own making - people striving to earn more, do better, live more fancily. Some of it is caused by the way

economy is so demanding, so fast-paced. People have to work so hard just to keep up - the commuting hours, the hours taken away from family life because of the increasing numbers of hours people spend at work. We have to begin to get some grip on this.

I was recently in Northern California about a year ago, visiting a community. It was a very affluent community. I was there with a Congresswoman who represented that area. The people there have children who have Cornell graduates commute at least an hour to San Francisco or two to three hours... They spend two to six hours in their car every day. And all of a sudden there were problems in that affluent American suburb they never have seen before. Lots of children who were not well nourished. Children were getting into trouble because they did not have state-supervised places to go. And the people there said "Wait a minute, we have got to stop and take a hard look at how we are living." Earning a living is not living a life. And we need to be more thoughtful about how we create our work situations so that we can put our family where they should be - first in our lives.

This is going to be a conversation that moves out of kitchens and dining rooms and dens and family rooms, and even out of the huddled, whispered conversations that take place in so many work settings that I remember as a lawyer. Around two or three o'clock, the phone would ring and all the women there would be waiting anxiously to hear that their child had arrived safely from school and gotten into the house and locked all the doors and was supposedly doing his or her homework. We know these are issues that have to see the light of day.

It is not only the caring of the young we have to talk about; it is about the caring of the old, our parents and our grandparents. It is predicted now that we will spend more time as caretakers of our own parents than of our own children.

I saw a wonderful example set of how that could be done in a community when I visited.... But that is just one example. We are in the so-called "sandwich generation." And as we work at advances and in our research, that sandwich becomes the club sandwich or the submarine. I met a 75 year-old woman who was taking care of her 98 year-old mother. And her 52 year-old daughter, who was just in a serious car accident, is now taking care of her as well. That is not an exceptional story.

We have to honor our duties to our parents without shortchanging our children. That's why I believe we should do two things that meet the needs of families today. I think that we should provide tax credits to relieve the financial burden of long-term care in the home so that more families can care for their loved ones...[Applause]

And at the same time, we have many parents who need it. They take in their mother with Alzheimer's, they take in their father who has had a stroke, and they find that the family finances are so severely stretched that the next thing you know they are dipping into their children's college funds. That's why I think college tuition should be tax-deductible. So that no young person is denied college for financial reasons.

We also cannot forget that millions of women and men, and millions more in the years to come, will have to rely on Social Security and Medicare. Nearly a quarter of all elderly women depend on Social Security for their sole source of income. And because more women depend on it, my husband says that the revenge is being made. We have more chronic health care needs, we retire with small pension plans. We therefore need Medicare very much. We have to figure how to reform and modernize those two covers of a decent standard of life: Social Security and Medicare.

We have to be sure that we provide more prescription drugs. I don't know if someone you know is facing the terrible decision of trying to decide whether she can afford prescription drugs or pay the utilities or pay the rent. I have older women come up to me, holding their prescription drug bills, their utility bills, their rent bills, and ask me how they are expected to pay for it all. There is no easy answer, but in a caring, committed society where women's needs help set the agenda for the 21st Century, we'll figure out a way to do that.

We also have to be sure that as we look at the problems that overlap our professional and working lives, and public and political processes. We must continue to encourage women to be a part of both the public and the political. You know, I know that it is not always an easy choice for women to make on the citizenship level or the leadership level. But I am more convinced than ever that if women do not become involved publicly, speaking out on our own experiences and our own needs, we will not be heard.

Therefore I would urge that all of us, as we look towards this century, think about how we will become engaged. It is difficult to break through with the real needs of people, but the more voices that are active, the more likely they will be heard. It is important for American women to continue to advocate for change so that change does ripple around the world.

When I made my speech in Beijing, I knew I was speaking for all American women, so that all sympathized men understood the struggles that women face around the world. Girls who are denied education, who are fed last, who are not given the health care they need, who are disadvantaged compared to their brothers. Women who are still not permitted to vote, or drive a car, or run for office - women who are abused are denied the most ...of personhood. All one has to do is cast one gaze across our world today. Yes, we can see great progress. But we can also see places like Afghanistan, where women are being pushed back into the dark ages.

It is important for American women to constantly keep that in mind. I started something called Vital Voices where we brought women from many different parts of the world together to look for ways women could be peacemakers and leaders, to set the agenda for the new century. In Northern Ireland, I held a conference in Belfast where Catholic and Protestant women - those separate traditions - came together for the first time, brought together by American women. And as we sat and listened to their stories, they began to recognize in one another what they had in common.

They realized that they both feared that their husbands and sons, when they left home at night, might not make it home safely. They both said that they went to church on Sunday and prayed for the safety and peace of their community. They began to understand that together they had a great stake in making sure that their voices were heard.

In Bosnia and Kosovo, I met with women who, against all the odds, kept the lines of hope for peace, who worked across the lines that divided them, who sought common ground. And time and time again, I was moved and overwhelmed by their courage. To just walk across to another part of town, to have someone from a different religion to your home, could be a death sentence, and they were willing to take those risks. Fortunately, our risks are not so brave. But we too must give

heart to those who struggled on the frontiers of change.

When I think about the challenges of leadership in the 21st Century, I am reminded of Susan B. Anthony's prophecy at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1900, after a lifetime of struggle for women's rights, here was her prediction: "The woman of the 20th Century will be the peer of man. In education, in art, in science, in literature, in the home, the church, the state; everywhere she will be his acknowledged equal. The twentieth century will see man and woman working together to make the world better for them having lived. All hail to the 20th Century." Much of what she said has come to pass. We do have the right to vote, although too many of us do not exercise it. We have the opportunity to open a bank account and keep our own wages. We have the right enshrined in law that she could only dream of when she made that visionary statement.

How would we now express our dreams for the twenty-first century? In addition to the personal and professional challenges that I made in my life, I believe that we now have an opportunity to fulfill our founders' dream...what it means that people were given the right to pursue life and liberty and happiness. Even when that Constitution was written - although it included male property holders - it lit a fuse that is burning today.

So a great deal of history of this past century was about the expansion of liberty and the notions of equality and justice. And now we can turn to the pursuit of happiness. But what do we mean by that? Do we mean pursuing material wealth blindly or he who has the most points at the end wins? Or does it mean something that takes us back to the Scriptures, to the classics, to those that always articulated a grander view of what was possible in the human spirit.

I think that we continue to face the liberty and equality issues, particularly related to wealth and power, so that we do have to close the divide that threatens to push us apart...divisions in education and opportunity. But even more than that, we have to work at ways of coming together. I think that women have a special opportunity and responsibility to lead us in that direction. We have to be willing to ask hard questions about our diversity, about the meaning of our lives together.

Not so long ago, at the White House, we had the Millennium Lecture. The Millennium Lecture was about information technology and genetics. Because they go hand-in-hand... would not be possible without the advances in computer technology... something that I have thought about constantly since.

We are coming to the conclusion that all human beings are 99 percent alike. Think of what that means. That in race, ethnicity, culture, geography and yes, gender, we are 99 percent alike. Will we, in the 21st Century, continue to emphasize the one percent of difference, to stereotype one another, to hold one another back, to create divisiveness and hostility, because of the colors of our skin, our sexual orientation, our gender or our ethnicity? Or will we look forward to make that 99 percent commonality the rule of how we live together? [Applause] If we do, then the promise of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Seneca Falls, or the prophecy of Susan B. Anthony will come to fruition.

We also have to work in this interconnected world, to care for and preserve our planet. In the face of all the evidence that we are changing the climate, we are seeing the extinction of species at a rapid rate. It is important for all of us as caretakers - which is not solely a female characteristic - all of us as caretakers turn our attention to care for this world that has given us so much.

Each of you in your own way can pick up your own agenda. What you would like to see happen on behalf of humanity; on behalf of America, New York, Ithaca and Cornell; on behalf of yourselves; on behalf of your family. And I hope that is the way you think about it, because if we are focused on building a better future, that will affect the decisions we make today. If we work together, I believe that we can truly build on the progress of the 20th Century.

So let me just offer some of my own hopes for the women of the 21st Century: The woman of the 21st Century will be blessed with choice and empowered with the tools of opportunity to make the most of her God-given talents. She will be free to pursue her own vision in the world of work, in the public sphere, in the political process and to build loving and strong families at home. Her voice will be heard, her concerns will be followed.

The 21st Century is the opportunity so many generations have waited for. Let's get to work to see that men and women join together to make the world better for our having lived. All hail to the woman and man of the 21st century. We have work to do. God speed us on our journey. Thank you very much.  
[Applause]