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REMARKS OF THE FIRST LADY
AT LIZ CARPENTER'S LECTURESHIP SERIES

University of Texas
Austin, Texas

3:00 P.M. CDT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much. I am reminded, in following Anne Richards, of that old story of the fellow who died in one of the early Arkansas floods and makes his way to heaven and is met at the gates. And St. Peter says, "Well, you're just in time for our monthly seminar. What do you want to talk about?" The man said, "I want to talk about the most important experience that I have ever encountered. I want to talk about what it is like to be in a flood. I feel like I can make a real contribution to that dialogue." St. Peter says, "Fine. You'll go on after Noah." (Laughter.) So, here we are after Noah. (Applause.)

You know, it is not a common experience for me to be in any Texas athletic facility and feel good about it -- (applause) -- but I must say that now that we're no longer in the same conferences, my state and yours, that I am honored to be -- (laughter) -- in the arena where the Lady Longhorns play. (Applause.) And I also have to say -- and I hope that you feel the same way I did -- I was mighty proud of Texas Tech, too. I thought that was a great victory. (Applause.)

You know, when Liz Carpenter asked me to come speak at her little seminar -- (laughter) -- it was one of those conversations that you have with Liz -- those of us who are lucky enough to know her and call her a friend -- where her enthusiasm just kind of takes over. She said, I'm going to have some of my friends in, we're going to do this lecture. You know, it will be fun. I'll get Anne to come over and Mrs. Johnson will come over, and we'll just have a good old time.

And I had this sort of mental image of being over in one of the small rooms at the LBJ School and sitting with a bunch of my friends, maybe with some students around a table. And then I just

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put it out of my mind. And over the last two weeks, as Liz knows, it's been kind of touch-and-go for me whether I thought I could be here, and I told Liz that I would certainly try. And when it became clearer that I could, I renewed contact with the people who were helping her put this on and was then told that there were going to be thousands, maybe 14,000 people at this event.

And my first response was no, no, no, you must have read it wrong, there's an extra zero in there somewhere. But my second was why would I doubt Liz Carpenter on anything? If she's going to put on a lectureship that's like Anne says, it's going to be a big one and besides it's in Texas. So what do we expect? And I'm just pleased to be part of it. (Applause.)

I also want to say a special word of appreciation to Mrs. Johnson. You know, there is that wonderful old saying about how you never quite know what it's like until you've walked in another person's moccasins. Well, I don't know if you've ever worn moccasins, Mrs. Johnson, but I'm getting a sense of what it is like to try to walk in the footsteps of you and the other women who have been in the position that I now find myself in. And every day that goes by, I am more impressed by the kind of qualities that you and other women in this position have brought to taking care of your personal business on behalf of your family and your husband, and also trying to make your contribution to the country. And all of us in this arena are grateful for the grace and beauty by which you carried out both of those functions and as a wonderful example, not just for me, but for all of us. And I very much wanted to say that to you publicly. (Applause.)

You know, after you hear what I have to say, you'll think that Governor Richards and I not only coordinated outfits but coordinated comments. And I suppose the only thing left for me is to get a hair-do like that. (Laughter.) You know, I'm actually due for a new one and I figure that if we ever want to get Bosnia off the front page, all I have to do is either put on a headband or change my hair and we'll be occupied with something else. (Laughter and applause.)

But what Anne Richards talked about is what I want to expand on in my remarks leading into the panel discussion with all of these distinguished panelists and with questions from many of you that I understand were submitted. Because the problems that she alluded to are not just American problems, they are not just governmental problems. We are at a stage in history, I would suggest, in which remolding society certainly in the West is one of the great challenges facing all of us as individuals and as citizens.

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And we have to begin realistically to take stock of where we are, stripping perhaps away the romanticism that Governor Richards referred to, to be able to understand where we are in history at this point and what our real challenges happen to be.

And I say that it is not just an American problem because if one looks around the Western world, if one looks at Europe, if one looks at the emerging democracies, at Asia, if one looks certainly here in North America, you can see the rumblings of discontent, almost regardless of political systems, as we come face to face with the problems that the modern age has dealt us.

And if we take a step back and ask ourselves, why is it in a country as economically wealthy as we are despite our economic problems, in a country that is the longest surviving democracy, there is this undercurrent of discontent -- this sense that somehow economic growth and prosperity, political democracy and freedom are not enough -- that we lack at some core level meaning in our individual lives and meaning collectively -- that sense that our lives are part of some greater effort, that we are connected to one another, that community means that we have a place where we belong no matter who we are. And it isn't very far below the surface because we can see popping through the surface the signs of alienation and despair and hopelessness that are all too common and cannot be ignored. They're in our living rooms at night on the news. They're on the front pages; they are in all of our neighborhoods.

On the plane coming down I read a phrase in an article in the newspaper this morning talking about how desperate conditions are in so many of our cities that are filled with hopeless girls with babies and angry boys with guns. And yet, it is not just the most violent and the most alienated that we can look to. The discontent of which I speak is broader than that, deeper than that. We are, I think, in a crisis of meaning. What do our governmental institutions mean? What do our lives in today's world mean? What does this economic global event that Governor Richards spoke of mean? What do all of our institutions mean? What does it mean to be educated? What does it mean to be a journalist? What does it mean in today's world to pursue not only vocations, to be part of institutions, but to be human?

And, certainly, coming off the last year when the ethos of selfishness and greed were given places of honor never before accorded, it is certainly timely to ask ourselves these questions. (Applause.)

One of the clearest and most poignant posings of this question that I have run across was the one provided by Lee Atwater as he lay dying. For those of you who may not know, Lee Atwater was

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credited with being the architect of the Republican victories of the '70s and the '80s. The vaunted campaign manager of Reagan and Bush. The man who knew how to fight bare-knuckled in the political arena, who was willing to engage in any tactics so long as it worked and he wasn't caught at it.

And yet, when Lee Atwater was struck down with cancer, he said something which we reprinted in Life Magazine, which I cut out and carry with me in a little book I have of sayings and Scriptures that I find important and that replenish me from time to time that I want to share with you.

He said the following: "Long before I was struck with cancer, I felt something stirring in American society. It was a sense among the people of the country, Republicans and Democrats alike, that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I was trying to position the Republican Party to take advantage of it. But I wasn't exactly sure what it was. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me. A little heart, a lot of brotherhood.

The '80s were about acquiring -- acquiring wealth, power prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye-to-eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime.

I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul."*

That to me will be Lee Atwater's real lasting legacy, not the elections that he helped to win. (Applause.)

But I think the answer to his question -- "who will lead us out of this spiritual vacuum" -- the answer is all of us. Because remolding society does not depend on just changing government, on just reinventing our institutions to be more in tune with present realities. It requires each of us to play our part in redefining what our lives are and what they should be.

We are caught between two great political forces. On the one hand we have our economy -- the market economy -- which knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing. That is not its job. And then the state or government which attempts to use its means of acquiring tax money, of making decisions to assist us in

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years is how does one define these new issues. How do we begin to inject some meaning? How do we take old values and apply them to these new -- for many of us -- undreamed of problems that we now confront? And that is what all of us must be engaged in in our own lives, at every level, in every institution with which we interact.

Let me just give you some examples. If we believe that the reconstruction of civil society with its institutions of family, friendship networks, communities, voluntary organizations, are really the glue of what holds us together; if we go back and read deToqueville and notice how he talked over and over again about the unique characteristics that he found among Americans and rooted so many of those in that kind of intermediary institution of civil society that I just mentioned, then we know we have to better understand what we can do to strengthen those institutions, to understand how they have changed over time, and to try to find meaning in them as they currently are.

That's why the debate over family values over the last year, which was devised for political purposes, seemed so off-point. There is no -- or should be no debates that our family structure is in trouble. There should be no debate that children need the stability, the predictability of a family. But there should be debate over how we best make sure that children and families flourish. And once that debate is carried out on honest terms, then we have to recognize that either the old idea that only parental influence and parental values matters, or the nearly as old idea that only state programmatic intervention matters are both equally fallacious.

Instead we ought to recognize what should be a common-sense truth -- that children are the result of both the values of their parents and the values of the society in which they live. And that you can have an important -- (applause) --
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(in progress) -- how best to make sure parental values are the ones that will help children grow and be strengthened, and how social values equally must be recognized for the role they play in how children feel about themselves and act in the world. And then we can begin to have what should be a sensible conversation about how to strengthen both. That's the kind of approach that has to get beyond the dogma of right or left, conservative or liberal. Those views are inadequate to the problems we see.

Any of you who have ever been in an inner city, working with young people as I have over the years, will know as I do the heroic stories of parents and grandparents who, against overwhelming odds, fight to keep their children safe -- just physically safe; and

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becoming a better, more equitable society as it defines it. That is what all societies are currently caught between -- forces that are more complex and bigger than any of us can understand. And missing in that equation, as we have political and ideological struggles between those who think market economics are the answer to everything, those who think government programs are the answer to everything, is the recognition among all of us that neither of those is an adequate explanation for the challenges confronting us.

And what we each must do is to break through the old thinking that has for too long captured us politically and institutionally, so that we can begin to devise new ways of thinking about not only what it means to have governments that work again, not only what it means to have economies that don't discard people like they were excess baggage that we no longer need, but to define our institutional and personal responsibilities in ways that answer this lack of meaning.

"We need a new politics of meaning. We need a new ethos of individual responsibility and caring. We need a new definition of civil society which answers the unanswerable questions posed by both the market forces and the governmental ones, as to how we can have a society that fills us up again and makes us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves."

Now, will it be easy to do that? Of course not. Because we are breaking new ground. This is a trend that has been developing over hundreds of years. It is not something that just happened to us in the last decade or two. And so it is not going to be easy to redefine who we are as human beings in this post-modern age. Nor will it be easy to figure out how to make our institutions more responsive to the kind of human beings we wish to be.

But part of the great challenge of living is defining yourself in your moment, of seizing the opportunities that you are given, and of making the very best choices you can. That is what this administration, this President, and those of us who are hoping for these changes are attempting to do.

I used to wonder during the election when my husband would attempt to explain how so many of the problems that we were confronting were not easy Democratic-Republican-liberal-conservative problems. They were problems that shared different characteristics, that we had to not only define clearly, but search for new ways of confronting.

Then someone would say, well, you know, he can't make up his mind, or he doesn't know what he wants to say about that. When instead what I was hearing and what we had been struggling with for

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who hold high expectations for those children; whose values I would put up against any other person in the country, but who has no control over the day-to-day violence and influence that comes flooding in the doors of that housing project apartment; and who need a society that is more supportive of their value than the one they currently have. (Applause.)

Equally, all of us know the contrary story of families with enough economic means, affluent enough to live in neighborhoods that are as safe as they can be in our country today, so they have the social value structure of what we would hope that each child in AMerica could have in terms of just basic kinds of fundamental safety and physical well-being, but whose parental values are not ones to promote a childhood that is a positive one, giving children the chance to grow up to achieve their own God-given potential. So that the presence of values of society are not enough, either.

There are so many examples of how we have to think differently and how we have to go beyond not only the traditions of the past, but unfortunately for many of us, well-held and cherished views of the past; and how we have to break out of the kind of gridlock mentality which exists not just in the Congress from time to time, but exists as well in all of us as we struggle to see the world differently and cope with the challenges it has given us.

Yet I am very hopeful about where we stand in this last decade of the 20th century, because for all of the problems that we see around us, both abroad and at home, there is a growing body of people who want to deal with them, who want to be part of this conversation about how we break through old views and deal with new problems. And we will need millions more of those conversations.

Those conversations need to take place in every family, every workplace, every political institution in our country. They need to take place in our schools, where we have to be honest about what we are and are not able to convey to our children; where we have to be honest about the conditions with which are confronting so many of our teachers and our students day in and day out; where we have to be honest that we do have to set high expectations for all children and we should not discard any because of who they are or where they come from. (Laughter.)

And where we need to hold accountable every member of the educational enterprise -- parents, teachers and students. Each should be held accountable for the opportunity they have been given to participate in one of the greatest efforts of humankind, passing on knowledge to children. And we have to expect more than we are currently getting. (Applause.)

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We also need to take a hard look at other institutions. As Governor Richards said we are in the midst of an intensive effort of trying to determine how we can provide decent, affordable health care to every American. (Applause.) And in that process we have had to ask hard questions about every aspect of our health care system. Why do doctors do what they do? Why are nurses not permitted to do more than they do? Why are patients put in the position they're in? (Applause.)

And we have with us today Bill Moyers, who has helped to enlighten all of us about how what we currently have is a system for taking care of sickness. We do not have a system for enhancing and promoting health. (Applause.) And what we need to do is recognize how each of us, whether we are a care giver or a care receiver -- and that role may change from time to time as we go through life -- will have to think differently about health care. And we will have to come up with a system that promotes wellness, promotes health and provides care for us when we are sick that we can afford.

But to give you just one example about how this ties in with what I have said before about how these problems we are confronting now in many ways are the result of our progress as we have moved toward being modern men and women: Our ancestors did not have to think about many of the issues we are now confronted with. When does life start; when does life end? Who makes those decisions? How do we dare to impinge upon these areas of such delicate, difficult questions? And, yet, every day in hospitals and homes and hospices all over this country, people are struggling with those very profound issues.

These are not issues that we have guidebooks about. They are issues that we have to summon up what we believe is morally and ethically and spiritually correct and do the best we can with God's guidance. How do we create a system that gets rid of the micromanagement, the regulation and the bureaucracy, and substitutes instead human caring, concern and love? And that is our real challenge in redesigning a health care system. (Applause.)

I want to say a word about another institution and that is the media, because it is the filter through which we see ourselves and one another. And in many ways the challenge confronting it is just as difficult as those confronting any other institution we can imagine. How does one keep up with the extraordinary pace of information now available? How do we make sense of that information? How do we make values about it even if we think we have made sense? How do we rid ourselves of the lowest common denominator that is the easiest way of conveying information? How do we have a media that understands how difficult these issues are and looks at itself

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honestly because the role it must play is so critical to our success in making decisions about how we will proceed as a society?

I remember in the beginning of the campaign being asked a question at an editorial meeting in South Carolina that my husband was at to meet a lot of the editors and reporters from a lot of the small-town papers. These were not folks who you'll see on a TV station anywhere; these are people who got up every day and did the best they could to put out the paper that covered their community or their region. And one of the men, after hearing my husband speak, said, "Now, you've talked about how we have to change. How we have to change government, how we have to change society. But as a journalist, how do I change to be able to understand and report on those changes?" My husband said, "You know, I can't answer that. That's something you have to answer. But I'm really glad you asked the question, because every institution in our life has to ask those hard questions about who we are, what contribution we make to dealing with our problems and to injecting meaning again in the lives of us all."

So every one of our institutions is under the same kind of mandate. Change will come whether we want it or not, and what we have to do is to try to make change our friend, not our enemy. But probably most profoundly and importantly, the changes that will count the most are the millions and millions of changes that take place on the individual level as people reject cynicism, as they are willing to be hopeful again, as they are willing to take risks to meet the challenges they see around them, as they truly begin to try to see other people as they wish to be seen and to treat them as they wish to be treated, to overcome all of the obstacles we have erected around ourselves that keep us apart from one another, fearful and afraid, not willing to build the bridges necessary, to fill that spiritual vacuum that Lee Atwater talked about.

You know, one of my other favorite quotes is from Albert Schweitzer. And he talks about how you know the disease in Central Africa called sleeping sickness; there also exists a sleeping sickness of the soul. The most dangerous aspect is that -- (gap in tape.)

(in progress) -- moving into a new millennium. Let us be willing to help our institutions to change, to deal with the new challenges that confront them. Let us try to restore the importance of civil society by committing ourselves to our children, our families, our friends; and to reaching out beyond the circle of those of whom we know, to the many others on whom we are dependent in this complex society; and understanding a little more about what their lives are like and doing what we can to help ease their burdens.

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Our greatest opportunities lie ahead, because so many of the struggles of the Depression and the World War and the other challenges posed by the Cold War and communism are behind us. The new ones are equally threatening. But we should have learned a lot in the last few years that will prepare us to play our part in remolding a society that we are proud to be a part of.

Thank you all very much.

* Lee Atwater ("Lee Atwater's Last Campaign", Life Magazine, February 1991)