

Remarks of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

White House Millennium Evening -- Lecture by Bernard Bailyn

East Room

February 11, 1998

I am honored to join the President in welcoming you to the White House for our first Millennium Evening. I'd like to thank everyone who made it possible, especially Bernard Bailyn; Ellen Lovell; our co-sponsor, The National Endowment for the Humanities and all the State Humanities Councils who organized discussion groups tonight; the Howard Gillman Foundation; and Sun Microsystems, who provided the technology to simultaneously bring this lecture to the world and preserve it for the ages.

Right now satellite feeds are allowing students and teachers to watch this event at 131 colleges in 42 states...and that information is then being immediately and digitally translated to the Internet. This is the very first cybercast from the White House. As we speak, people surfing the Internet anywhere can hear or read our words, e-mail us questions, and be part of digital history. We all remember Pablo Casals' concert at the White House when the Kennedy's were here...and that's because it was the first live broadcast from the White House and we could actually be part of it. Now, with the click of a mouse, we are truly bringing democracy and history into the future.

This Monday, we will celebrate the birthdays of two of our greatest Presidents. The portrait of one of them, George Washington, hangs behind me. But, as I often point out, that's only because of what Dolley Madison did to save it. When her husband sent word that the British were approaching during the War of 1812, she had little time to flee, but she still managed to take Gilbert Stuart's famous painting.

She knew that this portrait -- like other treasures from our past -- is part of our common history as Americans. Despite our differences, it is this common ground, these shared values, that must continue to bring us together. And, despite the dramatic transformations taking place, it is this American story that we must continue to rethink and retell for every generation.

As we approach the Millennium, we now have a wonderful opportunity to make these next few years a time not just of celebration, but of conversation and collaboration -- a time to step back and take stock of who were as Americans, who we are, and who we want to be.

That's the goal of the White House Millennium efforts that the President announced in August, to inspire all Americans to "Honor the Past and imagine the future." As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the White House, this is the first of many Millennium Evenings that we will host through the year 2000. At each of them, we'll be inviting scholars, creators, and other visionaries to help us look backwards and forwards. In fact, on March 6, the renowned physicist, Stephen Hawking will lecture on "Creativity and Science in the 21st century," thereby bringing us from the American Revolution to the entire Universe in only one month.

For more than 200 years, America has been not just a place, but an idea. And few scholars have so brilliantly explored how citizens created this enduring democratic ideal as Bernard Bailyn. He began teaching at Harvard University back in 1949 and is now their Adams University Professor Emeritus. For half a century, Bailyn's creative exploration of the early American experience has earned him two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award, a Bancroft Prize and the gratitude of students and citizens around the world. On March 23, he will deliver the National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson lecture, the highest honor in the humanities bestowed by the federal government.

Not content to look at our history through a narrow prism, Bernard Bailyn's boundless curiosity and elegant writing have allowed him to illuminate the economic, intellectual, and social dimensions of our American story. He once compared historical discovery to a spacecraft, sailing into the unknown territory of remote times and places...and I would only add, coming back here to earth.

Because perhaps Bernard Bailyn's greatest gift -- and the one he will share with us tonight -- is his ability to use our greatest lessons from the past to shed light on where we stand today, and where our children must stand tomorrow .

It is my great honor to introduce Professor Bernard Bailyn