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Millennium Evening - Women as Citizens Vital Voices Through the Century: [FLOTUS Remarks]
THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS AT MILLENNIUM EVENING
THE PERILS OF INDIFFERENCE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A VIOLENT CENTURY
The East Room

7:37 P.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Welcome to the East Room and the White House for our 7th Millennium Evening, "The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned From a Violent Century.

We're honored to have so many members of Congress, ambassadors, religious leaders, historians, human rights activists, and so many other concerned citizens for what I know will be an unforgettable evening.

Before we begin, I would like to thank our sponsors, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Sun Microsystems. Sun is helping us to bring this event to millions of people around the world via satellite and the Internet. And I also want to thank Pioneer New Media for donating these screens, and the Library of Congress and the United States Holocaust Museum for lending us the extraordinary displays in the Grand Foyer.

And I especially want to thank our guests of honor, Elie, Marion and Elisha Wiesel. When my husband and I look back at our years in the White House, one of the highlights are the times that we've been able and been privileged to spend with Elie and Marion. We always feel enriched by our experience.

We didn't know them before, except through his writings. But for those of us who have ever read those writings, especially
"Night," we can never forget the description of the horrors inflicted on him as a young boy -- a boy of great religious convictions who tells us his God was murdered. A boy of 14 who is forced to ask, "Was I awake? How could it be possible for them to burn children and for the world to remain silent?"

It was more than a year ago that I asked Elie if he would be willing to participate in these Millennium Lectures that we had not yet even started, but which we were planning. I never could have imagined that when the time finally came for him to stand in this spot and to reflect on the past century and the future to come, that we would be seeing children in Kosovo crowded into trains, separated from families, separated from their homes, robbed of their childhoods, their memories, their humanity. It is something that causes all of us to pause and to reflect, as we will this evening, how could this be happening once again at the end of this century.

On any day in the last 40 years it would have been a tremendous honor to hear this man speak at the White House about the need never to give in to silence or to resign ourselves to indifference. But there would not have been a more important day than now, here, on the eve of the Days of Remembrance and in the midst of the crimes against humanity being perpetrated in Kosovo.

When I invited him here I explained that we were planning a series of Millennium Evenings designed to mark this specific turning point in history by honoring the past and imagining the future. And in many ways, our previous evenings have been celebrations of that past -- the founding ideals of our republic, jazz music, poetry and scientific discovery that have defined us as individuals and America as a nation.

But honoring our past and learning from it means looking not just at our noblest achievements, but at our greatest failings; not just at what makes us proud, but at those darkest impulses that have marred this century.

We know that the Nazis were able to pursue their crimes against humanity precisely because they were able to limit the circle of those defined as humans. The mentally ill, the infirm, gypsies, Jews -- all were identified as lives unworthy of life. And this process of dehumanizing comes from the darkest regions of the human soul, where people first withdraw understanding, then empathy, and finally personhood. Now, this phenomenon of indifference, this human capacity for evil we know too well is not unique to that time and place in Nazi Germany.

Many of us in this room have personal experiences that are much more recent and fresh, about what it means to face that evil and that indifference today. I can remember sitting in a room in Tuzla, shortly after the Dayton Peace Accords, talking to a group of Bosnians. They were Serbs and Croats and Muslims,
although I could not tell the difference. They explained how men and boys were put into camps and executed; how women were raped; how children were turned into orphans.

One of the people I was talking to said, you know, when it started in my village, I went to one of my neighbors and I asked, we've known each other; we've been at each other's weddings, we've attended the funerals of our loved ones together. Why is this happening? And the response she was given from that old friend was, well, we read in the newspaper that if we didn't do this to you, you would do it to us. It was the message of hatred that Milosevic and his allies were communicating in order to turn Bosnia into a killing field.

What are we to do today, when leaders hijack holy traditions, even history; not to lift people closer to God or their own human potential, but to push them further apart? What do we do about those who try to constrict the circle of human dignity by convincing us that our differences—race and religion, gender, ethnicity and tribal origin—are more important than our common humanity? If this violent century teaches us anything, it is that whenever the dignity of one is threatened, the dignity of all is threatened as well; and none can or should remain silent.

Imagine how different life would be today for the people of Kosovo and in so many other troubled parts of our world if the evil that was allowed to run free had been stopped by those who stood up and broke the silence, that indifference did not in any way paralyze those who could have taken action.

In 1999, it isn't enough to refuse to commit crimes of hatred, stereotyping one another, going along with the crowd. It isn't enough to look deep into our own hearts and say we find them free of hatred. We have to do more. Every time we let a religious or racial slur go unchallenged or an indignity go unanswered, we are making a choice to be indifferent, a choice to constrict the circle of human dignity; a choice, I believe, to ignore history at our children's peril.

When Elie Wiesel accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, he remembered asking his father how the world could have remained silent. And he imagined what that same young boy would ask him today. Tell me: What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life? And I tell him, Elie says, that I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget.

You have done that. You have taught us never to forget. You have made sure that we always listen to the victims of indifference, hatred and evil. You have been among those in our world to whom we look to for conscience. You have been the
voice of the voiceless -- from Soviet Jewry to the people of South Africa under apartheid, to the people of Yugoslavia today. You have been a teacher.

When that young boy asks Elie Wiesel what he has done with his future, we can point to numerous awards and honors, including, of course, the Nobel Peace Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, or we can hold up the more than 40 books or the service as the Founding Chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial. But that is not his real legacy. His real legacy is what he has given to us and how he continues to prod each of us to understand the peril of indifference.

When he was forced to leave his home more than 50 years ago, he went into the backyard and buried the watch he had received on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. In 1997, he went back to that spot. He took the same number of child-size paces he had taken as a boy. He dug into the ground with his fingernails -- and the watch was still there. That must have been a bittersweet moment. The watch had lasted all those years; but his family, his village, the life he had known, so many friends and relatives were gone.

But just as that watch was still there, Elie Wiesel is still on watch -- on watch for us -- to help us keep our memories alive despite the passage of time, for teaching us the lessons that transcend time, about the perils of indifference.

It is my great honor to introduce a friend, a teacher, a voice for justice and freedom, Elie Wiesel. (Applause.)

MR. WIESEL: Mr. President, Mrs. Clinton, members of Congress, Ambassador Holbrooke, Excellencies, friends: Fifty-four years ago to the day, a young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian Mountains woke up, not far from Goethe's beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart. He thought there never would be again.

Liberated a day earlier by American soldiers, he remembers their rage at what they saw. And even if he lives to be a very old man, he will always be grateful to them for that rage, and also for their compassion. Though he did not understand their language, their eyes told him what he needed to know -- that they, too, would remember, and bear witness.

And now, I stand before you, Mr. President -- Commander-in-Chief of the army that freed me, and tens of thousands of others -- and I am filled with a profound and abiding gratitude to the American people.

Gratitude is a word that I cherish. Gratitude is what defines the humanity of the human being. And I am grateful to you, Hillary -- or Mrs. Clinton -- for what you said, and for
what you are doing for children in the world, for the homeless, for the victims of injustice, the victims of destiny and society. And I thank all of you for being here.

We are on the threshold of a new century, a new millennium. What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium? Surely it will be judged, and judged severely, in both moral and metaphysical terms. These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity: two World Wars, countless civil wars, the senseless chain of assassinations -- Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Sadat, Rabin -- bloodbaths in Cambodia and Nigeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo; the inhumanity in the gulag and the tragedy of Hiroshima. And, on a different level, of course, Auschwitz and Treblinka. So much violence, so much indifference.

What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means "no difference." A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil.

What are its courses and inescapable consequences? Is it a philosophy? Is there a philosophy of indifference conceivable? Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?

Of course, indifference can be tempting -- more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.

Over there, behind the black gates of Auschwitz, the most tragic of all prisoners were the "Muselmanner," as they were called. Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lie on the ground, staring vacantly into space, unaware of who or where they were, strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did not know it.

Rooted in our tradition, some of us felt that to be abandoned by humanity then was not the ultimate. We felt that to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one. For us to be ignored by God was a harsher punishment than to be a victim of His anger. Man can live far from God -- not outside God. God is wherever we are. Even in suffering? Even in suffering.
In a way, to be indifferent to that suffering is what makes the human being inhuman. Indifference, after all, is more dangerous than anger and hatred. Anger can at times be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony, have done something special for the sake of humanity because one is angry at the injustice that one witnesses. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it. Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.

Indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees -- not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity we betray our own.

Indifference, then, is not only a sin, it is a punishment. And this is one of the most important lessons of this outgoing century's wide-ranging experiments in good and evil.

In the place that I come from, society was composed of three simple categories: the killers, the victims, and the bystanders. During the darkest of times, inside the ghettos and death camps -- and I'm glad that Mrs. Clinton mentioned that we are now commemorating that event, that period, that we are now in the Days of Remembrance -- but then, we felt abandoned, forgotten. All of us did.

And our only miserable consolation was that we believed that Auschwitz and Treblinka were closely guarded secrets; that the leaders of the free world did not know what was going on behind those black gates and barbed wire; that they had no knowledge of the war against the Jews that Hitler's armies and their accomplices waged as part of the war against the Allies.

If they knew, we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to intervene. They would have spoken out with great outrage and conviction. They would have bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once.

And now we knew, we learned, we discovered that the Pentagon knew, the State Department knew. And the illustrious occupant of the White House then, who was a great leader -- and I say it with some anguish and pain, because, today is exactly 54 years marking his death -- Franklin Delano Roosevelt died on April the 12th, 1945, so he is very much present to me and to us.

No doubt, he was a great leader. He mobilized the American people and the world, going into battle, bringing
hundreds and thousands of valiant and brave soldiers in America to fight fascism, to fight dictatorship, to fight Hitler. And so many of the young people fell in battle. And, nevertheless, his image in Jewish history -- I must say it -- his image in Jewish history is flawed.

The depressing tale of the St. Louis is a case in point. Sixty years ago, its human cargo -- maybe 1,000 Jews -- was turned back to Nazi Germany. And that happened after the Kristallnacht, after the first state sponsored pogrom, with hundreds of Jewish shops destroyed, synagogues burned, thousands of people put in concentration camps. And that ship, which was already on the shores of the United States, was sent back.

I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help. Why didn't he allow these refugees to disembark? A thousand people -- in America, a great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?

But then, there were human beings who were sensitive to our tragedy. Those non-Jews, those Christians, that we called the "Righteous Gentiles," whose selfless acts of heroism saved the honor of their faith. Why were they so few? Why was there a greater effort to save SS murderers after the war than to save their victims during the war?

Why did some of America's largest corporations continue to do business with Hitler's Germany until 1942? It has been suggested, and it was documented, that the Wehrmacht could not have conducted its invasion of France without oil obtained from American sources. How is one to explain their indifference?

And yet, my friends, good things have also happened in this traumatic century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil, the demise of apartheid, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, the peace accord in Ireland. And let us remember the meeting, filled with drama and emotion, between Rabin and Arafat that you, Mr. President, convened in this very place. I was here and I will never forget it.

And then, of course, the joint decision of the United States and NATO to intervene in Kosovo and save those victims, those refugees, those who were uprooted by a man whom I believe that because of his crimes, should be charged with crimes against humanity. But this time, the world was not silent. This time, we do respond. This time, we intervene.

Does it mean that we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human? Have we really learned from our