

THE 1992 SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR MEDAL OF HONOR* RECIPIENT

Hillary Rodham Clinton**

Address to Seton Hall University School of Law
April 2, 1992

I want to thank all of you for this honor. It is a tremendous honor for me to receive the first annual Sandra Day O'Connor Medal of Honor. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is someone who has been a trailblazer and has represented the highest standards of the legal profession. I am very grateful that you chose me to receive this first medal. I am also pleased to be invited to take a few minutes to address the students and faculty here at Seton Hall University School of Law. I would like to take the time to share with you some observations about the issues that are most important to our country now and the role that lawyers can play in resolving such issues.

* The Sandra Day O'Connor Medal of Honor was created by the Seton Hall University School of Law Legislative Bureau, Law Review and Women's Law Forum. Its purpose is to salute those women who have achieved distinction in law and/or public policy. The student members of these organizations are proud to celebrate the success of women in the law, hoping to further ensure that "equality under the law" remains an exalted value championed by this generation and those to come.

** Hillary Rodham Clinton, originally from Park Ridge, Illinois, is widely admired throughout this country as a formidable litigator, prolific scholar and tenacious advocate of children's rights and the public education system. Mrs. Clinton was twice named one of *The 100 Most Influential Lawyers in America* by the NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL.

Mrs. Clinton graduated with high honors from Wellesley College in 1969. While at Wellesley, Mrs. Clinton served as President of the College Government and was the first student speaker at the College's commencement exercises. Mrs. Clinton received her J.D., with honors, from Yale Law School. At Yale, Mrs. Clinton served as Director of the Barristers' Union and on the Board of Editors for the YALE REVIEW OF LAW AND SOCIAL ACTION.

Upon graduation from law school, Mrs. Clinton worked for the Impeachment Inquiry Staff of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives. Mrs. Clinton also taught at the University of Arkansas School of Law. In addition, Mrs. Clinton served as Chairperson of the Children's Defense Fund, and is a partner in the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Hillary Rodham Clinton is married to Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas; they have a daughter, Chelsea, 12.

I gave a speech at the beginning of this week at the New York University Law School and am pleased, now several days later, to be at Seton Hall University School of Law because I believe that lawyers have some special obligations that during the 1980s were not as significant as they need to be today in determining the life of our society. Many of your faculty, as well as myself, went to law school in the 1960s and 1970s. We were motivated in large measure because of our belief that the law and its training would enable us to make contributions that would continue progress in achieving the underlying goals of our legal system. We wanted to do our part to ensure that the words by which we define our civil life together were not just on a page, but were acted out everyday in our courts, in our system of government and among all of us.

During the 1980s, it was not just the legal profession, but society in general which lost sight of that kind of public ethos. In its place we saw the pursuit of self-interest elevated to a point that had not been as blatant since the 1920s in our country. We saw the kind of fall-out that comes from professionals who sacrifice their judgment, their ethics, and their training in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement, in the belief that the only rules that counted were the ones that were being rewritten everyday in a world that was constantly changing.

Today, we can look back on that decade and note its excesses. We worry about the impact that those kinds of attitudes have had on our justice system as well as on each of us individually. But it is not enough to look back and be regretful. It is not enough to look back and protest and be negative about the past. Now, we have to begin to rebuild a vision of society and a vision of our profession that enables us to begin to address the real problems within each. That obligation does not rest solely with those who study and teach ethics. That obligation does not rest just with those who are going to make a career in public service. I believe, as I was taught, that each of us, as lawyers, carry some special obligations that require us to utilize our skills to further civil society and its legitimate ends.

To that end, let me share with you what I see as some of our major problems, and ask you to enlist your skills and the training you are receiving in the efforts to meet them head-on and hopefully to resolve them in the next years.

We have before us some incredible challenges. The United States stands today in a world that it largely created, but is unsure it will continue to lead. We have seen remarkable changes in the last few years. None of us, if we were standing here five or six years ago, could have predicted them. Yet, as we watch democracy breaking out; as we see the collapse of systems that were not founded on many of the very legal principles that enable us to have continued as the longest lasting democracy; and as we see the spread of a market economy, we are not celebrating here at home the triumph of our most basic values around the world. This is because we are living in a time when we find ourselves insecure and anxious about our own futures. We watch as Nelson Mandela walks out of a prison in South Africa and asks that his country have a Bill of Rights like our own. We watch as Boris Yeltsin climbs atop a tank in Moscow and invokes democracy as his goal. We listen to the eloquent words of a statesman like Václav Havel, who has reminded us again and again that what is leading the fires of democracy around the world are the words and the actions of the people who created our government. The ones who gave us our laws and those who we learn about in grade school, but too often forget about when we enter the marketplace in which we all compete.

While we watch what happens around the world, we have to address our challenges here at home. Those challenges begin first with an honest recognition of the problems we face. Secondly, after we make that honest assessment, we have to be willing to recognize that we need a new vision of America and we need leadership to attain that vision. It is not sufficient to have new leadership, whether at the top of our government or at any level, because in effect we all have to become leaders and agents on behalf of the changes that will be required. We need a new economic approach because during the 1980s the incomes of most Americans either stagnated or declined. We started the 1980s with the highest wages in the world. We ended them with the tenth highest and falling. We started in 1980 with the biggest banks in the world. Today, American banks are no longer the biggest and we owe more money than any nation on earth.

We have to change our economic priorities and to do that we have to create an economic philosophy where it needs to begin: With the capacities and potential of our people. We have to in-

vest in our people. We have to give them the skills and training they need. We have to provide the incentives required to invest in new plants and equipment here at home. We also need an education policy that goes hand-in-hand with that kind of development, a policy which calls for elevating the opportunities for young people in return for their taking responsibilities. We need a program that helps to train those who will not get four-year college degrees. We need to give them the skills through a national apprenticeship program which will enable them to be competitive. We have to provide assistance for all young people who wish to go to college. This should be done through a national service trust fund where students can borrow money to go to school and pay it back as a percentage of their income over time, or by engaging in two to three years of national service here at home. It is this kind of reciprocity of opportunity being extended in return for responsibility being accepted that needs to become the hallmark of how we rebuild our society together.

There are many other issues that need to be addressed. We have problems that are solveable. When it comes to health care, when it comes to crime, and when it comes to housing, there are solutions that are being tried all over this country that could become the models for the kind of national action that we need. We also need to reexamine our position in the world and be sure that our foreign policy is rooted in the values that America believes in: The spread of democracy, demilitarization and economic opportunity.

We cannot expect to solve the problems that we have spawned over decades if we do not do two other things that are as equally important as facing up to them: exploring solutions and being willing to make the hard choices to implement them. These two things rest on the kind of leadership we have and the kind of commitment each of us is willing to make. As to the former, we need again to have leaders, and many of them will have to come from the bar, who call out the best among us; leaders who ask each of us to believe again that we can come together as a nation instead of continuing to drift apart; leaders who stand against discrimination and bigotry wherever it might be found and believe that justice can be made to work equally for every person.

I chaired the ABA Commission on the Status of Women for

its beginning years. One of the great surprises and disappointments to me during my tenure was to discover that there indeed persisted the kind of illegal discrimination against women and minorities that we had outlawed in the past. It persisted because people were unwilling to put aside their stereotypes, to see each other as the individuals that we all are, to extend the respect that we each deserve and to treat each of us as a person and not as a member of a certain gender, class, ethnic or racial group. We called upon the American Bar Association to commit itself again to ending discrimination in the legal profession where ever it was found. We should continue to call upon all of us who are lawyers and officers of the court to do the same until we finally eradicate its vestiges.

There will be many opportunities for our leaders. There will also be opportunities for all of us who may never run for any kind of elective office, either in politics or in a Bar or anything else, but who day-by-day influence what happens around us. What I hope is that each of you would be recommitted to using the skills you are gaining, the experience you will be having and the license you will be granted, not only to make as good a living for yourself as you are able, but also to help make a better living for your communities and your country. It has been a long time since we have been asked to do that, but it is high time to ask ourselves, and that we respond affirmatively.

I've been asked a number of times in this last month why my husband and I would engage in this campaign. I have been asked with quizzical looks on the faces of those who asked. Why would you do this? I could answer very personally for Bill and me that we've been engaged in a conversation for more than twenty years. The conversation started when we were at Yale Law School together, continued when we taught together at the University of Arkansas Law School and continued all through our marriage and our partnership.

We feel very blessed, as many of you in this room should feel. By whatever combination of parenting and upbringing, belief and faith and opportunity, we have been able to find our way to a point in the life, ourselves and our country where we will be able to take care of ourselves and take advantage of certain opportunities. Every day this becomes less possible for many of our fellow citizens. The indicators are going in the wrong direction.

Poverty exploded during the 1980s. The largest number of people who are in poverty are women and their children. Violence exploded. We have the highest rate of incarceration, the highest rate of drug addiction and the highest rate of teenage pregnancy. The indicators show that something is terribly wrong with the way we are fulfilling our most basic responsibility to nurture and develop the next generation. That is an issue each of us could make a contribution to trying to alleviate by paying attention to the conditions around us and by committing some portion of our time and energy to reaching out across the divides that separate us to try to make life better.

We must believe again that this kind of progress is possible in America. I would hope that you will in your own way, however you define it, want to be as Sojourner Truth so eloquently described it when she was campaigning for the abolition of slavery and a man in the audience said that he didn't care what she said any more than he cared for what a flea did. Her response was to say, "Sir, if you believe I'm a flea, then I'm a flea for justice." It does not matter how small the contribution, if all of us have that kind of very basic attitude about what we can achieve by putting ourselves on the line, we can begin to make a difference again. I hope that each of you will want to enlist in that campaign on behalf of our profession, on behalf of our communities and on behalf of our country. Thank you all very much.