

Remarks at a Vogue Magazine Reception October 26, 1999

Thank you very much, Annie, Anna, Madam Secretary, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, you've just heard in Madeleine Albright, who has done a magnificent job for our country, the introduction; give her a hand. [Applause] She was so generous to me, it was a perfect illustration of Clinton's third law of politics: Always be introduced by someone you appointed to high office.

It was so nice, I had to pinch myself to make sure I was still alive. [Laughter] Normally, you have to keel over before people say things like that for you. [Laughter]

Let me say, I am so honored to have all of you here for this truly historic moment in the cultural history of our country. We're here to honor two groups of people that I think are very important to our present and to our future, women and photographers. [Laughter] The White House—some of my former photographers, as well as some of my present ones, are here tonight, but a lot of people in the office have almost made fun of me, because I'm always comparing the job of a photographer in Washington with the job of a reporter or a columnist. And in some ways, the job of the photographer is easy, because a photographer is rewarded just for looking to see what's there and capturing it in some remarkable, clear, crystal way. The poor reporters and columnists have to perform reverse plastic surgery on the event to get any notice whatever. [Laughter] But it's a really important thing.

I want to say one thing. I'm delighted that Senator and Mrs. Leahy are here. Senator Leahy, some of you may know, is also a very accomplished photographer. And we have in the home of our cabin at Camp David a magnificent picture that he took in Tibet, which we treasure very much. So there are a lot of people here who admire you, Annie, and your craft.

I also want to thank Susan Sontag for her participation in this. You never know how a book like this is going to do, but in terms of its appropriateness at this moment in our history, it strikes me that it could have the kind of impact that James Agee and Walker Evans had so many decades ago with their magnificent book, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," which

captured the faces of the Depression. And for people like me who grew up the children of Depression-era parents in very poor places, it had a profound impact. And that's what I sense is possible here.

This work also—you heard about our vital voices initiative that Hillary has worked so hard on, the Secretary of State has worked so hard to support. But vital voices has a lot in common with what is being celebrated here, because it has worked to empower women all over the world who are just interested in making politics what it's supposed to be, an instrument of solving common problems. And I have seen the power of this.

Hillary and I went to Africa a couple of years ago, and we were in, I think it was Senegal, at the end of our trip, but we went to this meeting. Hillary is always getting to go to these meetings and talk to people about solving—[laughter]. And all of a sudden—and she said, "You know, I met these people the last time I was here from this little village, these women who were determined to end the practice of female genital mutilation." And they had a few token guys there who were cheering them on. It's the same thing everywhere. [Laughter] "And they have come all the way to the Capital to meet you. So you've got to understand this, and you've got to handle this."

So we go into this meeting, and there are these people just in these resplendent, bright, brilliant, beautiful native dresses, these women and their token male supporters, who were also pretty dolled up and pretty proud of themselves for trekking in and sticking up. [Laughter] But they were alive.

I met with Irish women that Hillary had been working with for several years, by the time I met with them, who had been critical to the progress we've made in the Irish peace process. In Bosnia, when the Muslims and Croats and the Serbs wouldn't even talk to each other, there were women in groups reaching across the ethnic and religious lines to work for the common future of their children. And they weren't really antipolitical. They were political in the best sense.

One of the things that happens to all political systems and all movements is that people tend to acquire a vested interest in the perpetuation of whatever the problem is, because that's how they got where they are. And we all have to be willing to let it go and go on.

And this vital voice, she just got back from Iceland. And in Reykjavik, they had women from central Europe, from the Baltic States, from Russia, from all the Scandinavian countries coming together to talk about common problems. This is a huge potential force in world politics. And I, for one, am very grateful.

I've also seen the work that we have done since we've been here—and I thank you, Secretary Albright—through our AID programs. We fund now 2 million microenterprise loans every single year, almost all of which go to poor village women in Latin America and Asia and Africa, who with just a little bit of money can change the future.

We met a woman in Uganda in a little village who was now in the rabbit business, having gone up from the chicken business. We met another woman who had started her own restaurant in this little village. All these things are an important part of changing the new millennium for women and their daughters.

I'm especially grateful, too, for the work that Hillary and Madeleine have done to try to encourage the education of young women. And I loved it, when we were in Africa and Uganda, they were bragging about the fact that they had more girls in school than other African countries, that they knew we wanted to hear it. They knew we cared, but they knew it was the right thing to do.

And the last thing I would like to say, because no one has mentioned this yet, perhaps the most difficult place in the world for women today is still Afghanistan. And I hope that the fact that we have had two Afghan women here in one of our human rights events and the fact that we continue to push for changes in the

lives of those people and to take as many in as we can here will someday lead to a change in that country because no women should have to undergo what those women have experienced.

Now, we celebrate tonight Annie Leibovitz's photographs of our women, from coal miners to Supreme Court justices. We say that they are all important, that they all matter, that they are not any longer invisible, nor are they any longer discounted, that we know our ability to manage all of our other diversities in America, and we are fast becoming the most diverse, complicated, big democracy in the world, racially, ethnically, religiously, many other ways.

Our ability to manage them all must begin with our ability to have genuine equal treatment, mutual respect, and equal empowerment of women and men. And I truly believe that the stunning gifts of this great artist and fine human being, who happens to be a woman, will make a major contribution to that end.

I'm glad you brought your family. They're a pretty rowdy bunch. [*Laughter*] And I see where you got your spirit. And I see how you became so observant. It was probably necessary from time to time to be observant just to survive in this crowd. [*Laughter*] I thank you, Annie, for doing this. I thank you for your dedication to your work. I thank you for showing that capturing the simple truth about people is the most interesting thing of all.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:52 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to photographer Annie Leibovitz; Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief, Vogue magazine; Senator Leahy's wife, Marcelle; and author and critic Susan Sontag whose essay appears in "Annie Leibovitz: Women," a companion catalog to the exhibit of the same title which opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art on October 27. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady.