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June 13, 2006

WOMEN'S RIGHTS: National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association Luncheon

Thank you so much Judy. It is a delight and an honor to be with you. I particularly want to commend Judy for her leadership. NFPRHA is fortunate to have you at the helm. Thirty-five years of advocacy and service and education. There's no better place for us to gather than the Sewell-Belmont house. One of the iconic structures that really was the home of so much that went into the women's movement, the suffrage movement and everything that we gained during the 20th century as women.

There are a number of distinguished members of this audience, and I just want to recognize a few: Marilyn Keefe, Nancy Sasaki, Beverly Winikoff and so many who are part of the coalition on behalf of family planning. There's someone else that, I don't see her, I've been looking for her, Dr. Susan Wood who was the former head of the FDA's Office on Women's Health, who resigned as a matter of principle when the FDA under the direction of this Administration substituted ideology for science, and I still am just so grateful to you for making that principled stand. Also here is Sarah Brown, the head of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, something that I helped to start back during the Clinton Administration. And we all come to this place on different pathways. For me, my experience and views with respect to family planning and reproductive rights was really rooted in my belief that women as well as men should have the right and responsibility for their health. It also was deepened and broadened by my travels as First Lady when I saw in so many different settings around the world what happens when governments try to control a woman's reproductive health decisions. Whether it was Romania under a dictatorship saying you had to have children for the good of the state, preferably four or five, or China saying you had to have only one child for the good of the state, the government was dictating the most private and important decisions that we as individuals or families can make.

And as Judy mentioned, at the 1995 Beijing conference for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, women came as well as men from around the world to send a very clear message that that conference, also with Cairo and other movements afoot in the world, were converging on a consensus that we had to support women in making these choices.

Now, we can never lose sight of how important this is at home and abroad.

Here at home we know that it's not just choice that is under attack, it's contraception which is under attack. People focus on, you know, the Roe decision and what can happen in the future and we have to stand up in favor of this constitutional right that is rooted in the right to privacy. But we also have to understand that there's a broader agenda at work and it is aimed right at family planning and contraception.

This should not be an ideological battle. This should not be about politics or partisanship. We need to be united to respect and protect the rights that women and men have achieved over the last 100 years. And if we unite around that common belief that we want to protect these fundamental, personal, important decision-making rights, there is a lot of common ground we can find together. Let us unite

around a common goal of reducing the amount of abortions, not by making them illegal as many are attempting to do or overturning Roe v. Wade and undermining the constitutional protections that decision provided, but by preventing unintended pregnancies in the first place through education, contraception, accessible health care and services, empowering women to make decisions.

I was very hopeful when we launched the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy following my husband's 1995 State of the Union that we could make progress. We set a very ambitious goal of reducing the number of unintended pregnancies by one-third over the decade. Well, we did it, we got to 32.5 percent. The teen birthrate fell by that third which we hoped for. Why did that happen? Well, it happened because people came together instead of pointing fingers at each other and, you know, walling each other off in our respective camps. People from all walks of life in different communities said, you know what, we can do this and we can do it in the right way. But today the US continues to have one of the highest rates of unintended pregnancies in the industrialized world. Half of the six million pregnancies are unintended, and nearly half of those end in abortion every year. Last month the non-partisan Guttmacher Institute released a report revealing the two-tiered system that is emerging in this country. We all know it. High income women have quick, convenient access to contraceptives, low income women do not. And the result is often and increasingly becoming unintentional, unintended pregnancy. Today, a poor woman is four times as likely to experience an unplanned pregnancy as a higher-income woman. Lack of insurance coverage for contraception and other health care costs result in women of reproductive age paying 68 percent more in out-of-pocket costs for health care services than do men of similar age.

Now, this study is just one of the many recent wake-up calls that I've been seeing to really concern us and urge us to promote policies that further the goal of prevention. Now how do we do that? Well, a big first step: increasing access to family planning services. As Judy said, I've been a strong supporter of Title X which is, as you know, the only federal program devoted solely to making comprehensive family planning services available to everyone. And during the Clinton Administration we worked together to improve that funding by 58 percent. Now, unfortunately today the program cannot keep pace with basic services, let alone meet the growing costs of diagnostic tests and new forms of contraception. The Bush Administration has proposed no increase for Title X in any of the six budgets it has submitted. So, we have to stay vigilant and focused in how to keep Title X funded at a level that keeps up with the needs.

Another incredibly important step is to support access to contraception as a means of reducing unintended pregnancies. We should start with the facts: seven percent of American women who do not use contraception account for roughly one-half of all unintended pregnancies. Now, that's an unnerving statistic to me and one that should again bring us together. However, in Washington these days, that's often not the case.

Increasingly, I see Washington being turned into an evidence free zone where, you know, inconvenient facts are totally denied or dismissed, where politics are placed above policies that work, where the beliefs and values of Americans take a back seat to the ideological agenda of a select few.

So, I'm here to issue a challenge. As Judy mentioned, I introduced a resolution that calls on Congress to support access to contraception and support programs and policies that make it easier for all women to obtain contraceptives and use them consistently and correctly. The resolution states in unequivocal terms: Congress recognizes that preventing unintended pregnancies and reducing the number of abortions is a goal that transcends the ideology so pervasive in Washington today. What I am attempting to do with your help is to get the Congress to go on record, because day after day I have colleagues who say they support prevention and contraception, they support family planning, and yet when it comes time to vote for the funding and services that actually make up family planning, and provide contraceptives, they hide behind cost as the reason why they are against those common sense approaches. Well, this resolution doesn't cost a penny, it simply asks Members, in both Houses, because my friend and Congresswoman Nita Lowey

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introduced it in the House. It simply asks Members to go on record in support of the idea that all women, regardless of income, should have access to family planning. Now, a Member of Congress who says he or she supports family planning should have no trouble supporting my non-binding, no cost resolution. So when you go to the Hill, I hope you'll be asking everyone you speak with to do just that.

You know, this is not just about family planning or contraceptives, it's not even just about politics, it's about the kind of country we believe in, what kind of obligations we owe one another. We have a very high value placed on individual choice and individual responsibility. But we don't often empower people to be able to make those choices in a responsible way.

I recently introduced the Unintended Pregnancy Reduction Act of 2006 to strengthen Medicaid coverage of family planning services, so Medicaid coverage for family planning can remain accessible to low income women and states extend coverage for family planning services and supplies to women would be making it possible for Medicaid recipients to get the full range of services that they need, not just pre-natal, labor, delivery and post-partum care.

And I've introduced with my good friend Harry Reid the Prevention First Act, and that also includes a number of common ground, common sense policies: improve education about emergency contraception, something that Dr. Wood really went all the way for because of the FDA's refusal to approve over-the-counter access to Plan B; make sure government funded sex education programs provide medically accurate information about contraception, something which many of them do not do right now. And let's once and for all end insurance discrimination against women. I'm very proud that in New York State contraceptive equity is already the law, and it should be a model for the rest of the country. I've said it before, I'll say it again here: if insurance companies can cover drugs like Viagra they can certainly cover prescription contraceptives.

Senate Republicans didn't even want a vote on the Clinton-Reid Prevention First Act. When we introduced it as an amendment, they used a procedural motion to block it, so let's really understand what we're up against.

This is not just about Roe, this is not just about choice, this is about contraception, family planning, and, most profoundly, women's roles and responsibilities and rights.

Now, this is part of a larger story. Many of you I'm sure saw the recent New York Times Magazine cover story that blew the whistle on the Washington Republican war on contraception and there's no better example of that than Emergency Contraception. And I just want to bring you up to date on this. Two successive FDA Commissioners, both Bush Administration political appointees, blocked Plan B from being sold over-the-counter, overruling the FDA's medical experts, advisors, and the recommendations of over 70 organizations including the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Government Accountability Office has confirmed that the FDA's 2004 decision not to approve over-the-counter sales was politically motivated.

It is time for the FDA to make a decision. Last time Senator Murray and I put a hold on the nominee, Dr. Crawford. We said we will not lift the hold until the FDA makes a decision. They assured us they would make a decision; we lifted the hold, he was confirmed, then they made a decision to make no decision. Well, this time Senator Murray and I have placed a hold on the nomination of the current Acting FDA Commissioner Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach. We will continue to hold that nomination until the FDA issues a decision on Plan B, yes or no. We're not telling them how to decide it, we're telling them to decide it because it would be indefensible to ignore the recent scientific investigations they've been given.

So there's a lot to be done, but I'm actually optimistic about all of this because I think the real agenda is being made clear here. And we need all of you to be the voices for all those who are been left behind. You have the power to reach out and seek common ground on so many of these issues - Emergency Contraception, funding for pre-natal care, Medicaid coverage and so much else.

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You know, I have been an advocate for children and families throughout my life. As a lawyer, I occasionally represented victims of sexual assault and rape. As a mother, as a wife, as a woman, I think I know the difference that good information, good education and good health care makes in empowering women and girls to lead the lives that are responsible and hopeful that we all wish for them. I think we ought to agree that there's no reason why we can't work toward a time when every child born in this country and even around the world is wanted and cherished and loved. We can make a real difference.

I thank you for this award. It means a great deal to me. But more than that, I thank you for what you do every single day. Do not grow weary, keep your energies up because I think we are clarifying the debate, and as we clarify the debate I believe we will have more and more support for doing what we know needs to be done in our country and around the world on behalf of women and girls. Thank you all very much.

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