

National Women's Conference
Opening Session Speech
Houston, Texas
November, 1977

Thank you, all of you, and thank you, Lady Bird Johnson, for an introduction of which I am worthy.

Seriously, that was very nice, Lady Bird, and you will remain my First Lady, just as your husband remains "First Man" in my heart.

To all of the First Ladies, thank you for coming to Houston.

I want all of you to know, and especially Congresswomen Holtzer and Heckler, you are in my District right now.

The Mayor welcomed you, but I will welcome you to the best represented District in the country.

Now, I'm going to be brief.

If we are to believe what we read in Harper's Magazine, Harper's Bazaar, 33 1/3% of the most powerful women in America are before you right now.

If you read Proverbs, the 31st Chapter, it begins a litany of praise for the worthy woman. It begins this way: "Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above rubies."

From virtue to power. What we are about here now will require no small amount of virtue and a great deal of power.

The value of women mostly in a narrowly construed fashion has been recognized throughout the ages, but the value of women has been periodically reevaluated and sometimes devaluated.

American history is peppered with efforts by women to be recognized as human beings and as citizens and to be included in the whole of our national life.

This conference is one more effort on the part of women for total recognition and total inclusion.

The success or failure of this Conference is our responsibility and we should not waste one moment trying to find scapegoats.

If this Conference succeeds, there will be ample accolades for everybody, and, if it fails, all of you may look into your mirror and identify a contributing culprit.

Nothing stated in the goals of this Conference are incompatible with the goals of America.

As a matter of fact, the goals of this Conference, as a matter of fact, sound like stanzas to "America the Beautiful."

You have several of the goals written in your program--recognize the contribution of women to the development of our country, assess the progress which has been made to date by both the public and the private sectors in promoting equality between men and women in all aspects of life in America; as such, the role of women in religious, social, cultural and economic life. The goals are there.

They are non-controversial.

But, I would remind you that when these goals were written into the authorizing legislation for this Conference, there was controversy. A two-thirds majority vote in the House of Representatives was not possible, and so the legislation was approved by a simple majority.

Those goals of this Conference are as laudable and reasonable to me as the goals President Carter talks about of human rights in America's foreign policy.

If Americans were asked to differentiate or distinguish between what characterized other countries and what characterized us, we would say our high regard for the individual.

That is the thing which makes us different.

We endorse personal and political freedom as a natural right of human kind.

Human rights are more than abstractions, particularly when they are limited or non-existent. Human rights apply equally to Soviet dissidents, Chilean peasants and American women.

Women are human.

We are united on that.

When our rights are limited, when our rights are violated, we need a domestic human rights program.

This Conference could be the beginning of such an effort, an effort which would be enhanced if we would not allow ourselves to be brainwashed by people who predict chaos for us and failure for us.

Tell them they lie--and move on!

Implicit in being free to be you and me, implicit in that is the recognition of the diverse opinion represented here.

We must not impose on others what we would not have imposed on ourselves.

This Conference is inclusive; everybody is here and everyone must be free to define the meaning of total women, for himself.

The differences among us at this Conference cannot and should not be ignored.

They are racial--the differences--economic, cultural, social, political, ideological. The differences are there.

The delegates to this Conference are a priori not of a single mind. We should not be of a single mind.

No one person and no sub-group at this Conference has the right answer.

"Wonder Woman" is not a delegate here.

The "Bionic Woman" is not here either.

American representatives are here to try to work through the problems of this Conference.

Of course, we will debate; of course, we will differ. We will plead and placate.

We will make Points of Order and overrule Points of Order.

We will persuade and dissuade, and, when the debate becomes heated, I hope you will remember Lyndon Johnson's invocation of Isaiah's invocation: "Come now, let us reason together."

This statement was made by Hubert Humphrey recently on the floor of the United States Senate, and he was talking about the Senate when he said: "There are no problems between the different points of view and this body that cannot be reconciled if we are willing to give a little and share a little."

Do that.

We can't expect it all to be our way.

At a time when this country is drifting--if it is not shifting--to the right, Civil Rights and Affirmative Action efforts are lagging.

Intra-women's movement rancor has no place. Intra-women's movement rancor must be displaced by interdependence and mutual respect.

That has to happen.

This is the time for foot soldiers, not "Kamikaze" pilots.

Perhaps this is the most important conference to be held since Seneca Falls. What occurs here and what does not occur here can make a difference in our personal and collective lives.

The legislation which authorized this Conference mandated a course of future action.

One hundred and twenty days after we finish here, a report is to be submitted to each house of the Congress.

What will you have in it?

One hundred and twenty days after that President Carter is to submit recommendations to each house of Congress based on the report which emanates from this body.

What will he recommend?

Eight months from the time we leave here, something is supposed to happen.

Recommendations will be submitted.

But I have no doubt that legislation which emanates from this Conference as the source, however embryonically, will have a better chance of passage if support for that recommendation is widespread.

The Congress approved five million dollars for this Conference, but if we do nothing productive, constructive or healing, we will have wasted much more than money.

We will have wasted, lost, negated an opportunity to do something for ourselves and for generations which are not here.

Not making a difference is a cost we cannot afford.

The cause of equal and human rights will reap what is sown
November 18 through November 21, 1977.

What will you reap?

What will you sow?