

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JULY 1, 1976

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
TO THE
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE
OBSERVANCE OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

THE EAST GARDEN

3:50 P.M. EDT

Jill, Betty and Senator Chuck Percy, and other Members of Congress, and other members of this group:

It is wonderful to be here, and let me thank all of the members of the Commission for the job you have done in identifying the barriers which block women's full participation in our national life.

At this point, let me express, Betty's absence -- I know all of you know how strongly she feels about ERA. She said to me, "You send me out to all of the tough places to make speeches. Maybe I can ask you to come down and speak to a group that is sympathetic to my viewpoint." I said, "Well, I am sympathetic to their viewpoint." So, she has been working so hard on the campaign trail that she just asked your indulgence in understanding why she isn't here this afternoon.

I do want to thank others who have contributed to this report, many of whom are here and many who are not. And you have my full assurance that your report will be taken with great care, the same care that you have taken in the preparation of it.

Jill, I regret that you won't be able to continue as Presiding Officer of the Commission, but I am pleased that we will still have the benefit of your talents as a member of the Commission.

This afternoon, it is my privilege to announce the appointment of Betty Athanasakos as the new Presiding Officer. Many of you know that Betty is a practicing lawyer and a former municipal judge.

She served as Chairperson of the HEW Advisory Committee on the Rights and Responsibilities of Women, and as a member of the President's Task Force for Women's Rights and Responsibilities.

Betty will be ably assisted by Ersa Poston, as Vice Presiding Officer. Ersa is the past president of the New York State Civil Service Commission.

MORE

Today, the Commission enters a new phase. You are now charged with the planning and convening of 56 State and territorial conferences and the National Women's Conference itself.

To those Commission women who are unable to continue serving -- and I know there are some -- let me add a personal note of thanks for the job you have done. You can be extremely proud of what you have accomplished and confident that your work will be carried on in the same spirit of dedication by the new members whose appointments we announced this morning.

The work of the Commission is not just for women but for the whole United States. Because this Nation is founded on the principle that all citizens share the same rights, what affects the rights of one affects the freedoms of all.

The job before us in which you will play such a vital and important part is to bring our national life into harmony with our national philosophy. This is an awesome task. It is a difficult problem. But we faced such tasks before and I think we can win.

America faced such a task one century ago. We had to eliminate the shameful contradiction between our political philosophy which proclaimed all persons equal in our national daily life, in which 4 million men and women were slaves. Many of America's early crusaders for women's rights were active in the abolitionist movement. It was there they learned to organize and speak out in public and develop a philosophy of their own basic rights.

It is a bitter irony of American history that when the Fifteenth Amendment was passed in 1870 at long last giving the vote to black men, it did not enfranchise women, either black or white. That was to wait another 50 years.

More than half a century after women's suffrage became law, much still remains to be done, and all of you are more authoritative than myself on that point. Not just compassion but justice and logic dictate that we remove the inequities that still exist.

We must remove these injustices suffered by those like Mrs. Mary Heath, who is here with us today. For 33 years, I am told, she worked with her husband side-by-side building a Nebraska ranch to pass on to their children. In 1974, her husband passed away and Mrs. Heath learned that she might have to sell that ranch to pay off the estate tax. If she had died first, her husband would not have been faced with such a painful choice. But, according to tax law, her years of work counted for nothing. Unless she could prove she had contributed money to purchase or improve the ranch, for tax purposes she was no better than a stranger on her own land.

MORE

This problem is not unique to American farm women. It is nothing more or less than a widow's tax, and it is nothing more or less than a gross injustice.

Last March, I proposed legislation to eliminate that injustice, legislation that still awaits action on Capitol Hill. That proposal was part of my suggested efforts across a wide front.

Since becoming President, I have supported and signed into law legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in housing credit and education. Some of the laws discriminating against women appear petty and even ridiculous. But the fact is, they are all equally unjust, all equally demeaning to Americans, and all equally inconsistent with the American philosophy of equality.

There are different ways to approach this problem. One would be to await the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. As you know, and as Jill has said, I have long favored, voted for E.R.A., and I hope to see it a part of our Constitution before too long.

But injustice cannot await upon politics, nor upon the lengthy public discussion which has already delayed ratification of this constitutional amendment. The time to act is now. Therefore, I have today directed the Attorney General to develop in consultation with other affected Federal agencies a plan to review the entire United States Code.

The purpose will be to determine the need for revising sex-based provisions that are not justified in law nor supported by wise policy.

I encourage the Governors of all the States to initiate a similar review of all State laws to bring them into harmony with our American philosophy of absolute equality under the law.

Many outdated laws and statutes have already been identified and many of you here today have taken part in that effort. I am sure you will agree that the time has come for a massive Federal effort in this particular area.

I am also confident that the State conferences to be held by your Commission will help in this process.

Another problem I would suggest for your attention at these respective conferences is the widening earnings gap between men and women. This has extremely serious implications, not just for the women being denied the wages they deserve but for the entire American economy. It is a problem we will address in the immediate future, a matter of priority for this Administration.

MORE

The Administration is firmly committed to legal and economic justice for women. I speak now not only as President but also as a husband and father. I prize the individuality and independence of two women in my family, and I think their record is pretty clear in both resolves. (Laughter) Even if I wanted it differently, it wouldn't be. (Laughter)

I am proud that Betty has become a leader in her own right, and I want to insure that our daughter, Susan, will have the same freedom of choice and opportunity as her two brothers -- her three brothers -- Mike, Jack and Steve. (Laughter) One of them is married, and, you know, they don't have quite the same -- (Laughter).

Now, as the United States enters its third century, we can all ill-afford to disregard the rights or neglect the strengths and talents of one-half of our population. There is no such thing as women's rights. There are only the rights of all Americans to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Women's rights should not be granted as an act of charity, for those rights are theirs already. By eliminating the barriers to freedom, we are doing no more than fulfilling a promise made in Philadelphia 200 years ago.

I thank you for your help. I thank you for the great job you have done. And I commend you for what you will do in the months ahead.

Now, let me indicate to you that we are going to have a little reception over here on the South Lawn, and also Betty has indicated that I should extend to all of you an opportunity to see the ground floor as well as the State Floor after you have wandered around and enjoyed yourselves out at the reception.

Thank you very, very much.

END (AT 4:00 P.M. EDT)