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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO BE DELIVERED TO THE NATIONAL
COMMISSION ON THE OBSERVANCE OF INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S YEAR

EAST GARDEN

Let me thank all 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.

I also thank the many others who contributed to this report, many of whom are here today. You have my assurance I will study your report with the same care you took in preparing it.

I regret Jill Ruckelshaus will be unable to continue as Presiding Officer of the Commission. But I am pleased 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 Elizabeth Athanasakos as the new Presiding Officer. Betty is a practicing attorney and a former municipal judge.

She has served as Chairperson of the H.E.W. Advisory Committee on the Rights and Responsibilities of Women, and as a member of the President's Task Force on 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.

Today, the Commission enters a new phase. You are now charged with planning and convening 56 state and territorial conferences and a national women's conference.

To those commission members who are unable to continue serving, let me add a personal note of thanks for a fine job done. You can be 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 this 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 -- and what affects the rights of one affects the freedom of all.

The job before us, in which you will play such an important role, is to bring our national life into harmony with our national philosophy. That is an awesome task -- but we have faced such tasks before.

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America faced such a task one century ago. We had to eliminate a shameful contradiction between our political philosophy -- which proclaimed all persons equal -- and our nation's daily life -- in which four 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, to speak out in public, and to 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 fifty years.

More than half a century after women's suffrage became law, much still remains to be done. Not just compassion, but justice and logic dictate that we remove the inequities that still exist.

We must remove the injustices suffered by those like Mrs. Mary Heath, who is here with us today. For 33 years, 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 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 the purchase or improvement of the ranch, for tax purposes she was no better than a stranger on her own land.

This problem is not unique to 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 by the Congress.

That proposal was part of this Administration's efforts across a wide front. Since becoming President I have supported and signed into law legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in housing, in credit, and in education.

Some of the laws discriminating against women appear petty or 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, I am in favor of the E.R.A., and I hope to see it part of our Constitution before long.

But injustice cannot wait upon politics, nor upon the lengthy public discussion which has already delayed ratification of this Constitutional amendment.

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The time to act is now. Therefore, I have today directed the Attorney General to develop, in consultation with 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.

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 those conferences is the widening earnings gap between men and women.

This has very serious implications, not just for 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.

My 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 the two women in my family. I am proud that Betty has become a leader in her own right -- and I want to ensure that our daughter Susan will have the same freedom of choice and opportunity as our sons, Mike, Jack and Steve.

As the United States enters its third century, we can ill afford to disregard the rights -- or neglect the strengths and talents of one-half 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 two hundred years ago.

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