



AmericanRhetoric.com

Barack Obama

Address at the Clinton Global Initiative on Human Trafficking

delivered 25 September 2012



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Well, good afternoon, everybody. And, President Clinton, thank you for your very kind introduction. Although I have to admit, I really did like the speech a few weeks ago a little bit better. Afterwards, somebody tweeted that somebody needs to make him "Secretary of Explaining Things." Although they didn't use the word, "things."

President Clinton, you are a tireless, passionate advocate on behalf of what's best in our country. You have helped to improve and save the lives of millions of people around the world. I am grateful for your friendship and your extraordinary leadership. And I think I speak for the entire country when we say that you continue to be a great treasure for all of us.

As always, I also have to thank President Clinton for being so understanding with the record-breaking number of countries visited by our Secretary of State. As we've seen again in recent days, Hillary Clinton is a leader of grace and grit -- and I believe she will go down as one of the finest Secretaries of State in American history. So we are grateful to her.

To the dedicated CGI staff and every organization that's made commitments and touched the lives of hundreds of millions of people, thank you for being an example of what we need more of in the world, especially in Washington -- working together to actually solve problems.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And that's why I'm here. As Bill mentioned, I've come to CGI every year that I've been President, and I've talked with you about how we need to sustain the economic recovery, how we need to create more jobs. I've talked about the importance of development -- from global health to our fight against HIV/AIDS to the growth that lifts nations to prosperity. We've talked about development and how it has to include women and girls -- because by every benchmark, nations that educate their women and girls end up being more successful.

And today, I want to discuss an issue that relates to each of these challenges. It ought to concern every person, because it is a debasement of our common humanity. It ought to concern every community, because it tears at our social fabric. It ought to concern every business, because it distorts markets. It ought to concern every nation, because it endangers public health and fuels violence and organized crime. I'm talking about the injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking, which must be called by its true name -- modern slavery.

Now, I do not use that word, "slavery" lightly. It evokes obviously one of the most painful chapters in our nation's history. But around the world, there's no denying the awful reality. When a man, desperate for work, finds himself in a factory or on a fishing boat or in a field, working, toiling, for little or no pay, and beaten if he tries to escape -- that is slavery. When a woman is locked in a sweatshop, or trapped in a home as a domestic servant, alone and abused and incapable of leaving -- that's slavery.

When a little boy is kidnapped, turned into a child soldier, forced to kill or be killed -- that's slavery. When a little girl is sold by her impoverished family -- girls my daughters' age -- runs away from home, or is lured by the false promises of a better life, and then imprisoned in a brothel and tortured if she resists -- that's slavery. It is barbaric, and it is evil, and it has no place in a civilized world.

Now, as a nation, we've long rejected such cruelty. Just a few days ago, we marked the 150th anniversary of a document that I have hanging in the Oval Office -- the Emancipation Proclamation. With the advance of Union forces, it brought a new day -- that "all persons held as slaves" would thenceforth be forever free. We wrote that promise into our Constitution. We spent decades struggling to make it real. We joined with other nations, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so that "slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

A global movement was sparked, with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act -- signed by President Clinton and carried on by President Bush.

And here at CGI, you've made impressive commitments in this fight. We are especially honored to be joined today by advocates who dedicate their lives -- and, at times, risk their lives -- to liberate victims and help them recover. This includes men and women of faith, who, like the great abolitionists before them, are truly doing the Lord's work -- evangelicals, the Catholic Church, International Justice Mission and World Relief, even individual congregations, like Passion City Church in Atlanta, and so many young people of faith who've



AmericanRhetoric.com

decided that their conscience compels them to act in the face of injustice. Groups like these are answering the Bible's call -- to "seek justice" and "rescue the oppressed." Some of them join us today, and we are grateful for your leadership.

Now, as President, I've made it clear that the United States will continue to be a leader in this global movement. We've got a comprehensive strategy. We're shining a spotlight on the dark corners where it persists. Under Hillary's leadership, we're doing more than ever -- with our annual trafficking report, with new outreach and partnerships -- to give countries incentives to meet their responsibilities and calling them out when they don't.

I recently renewed sanctions on some of the worst abusers, including North Korea and Eritrea. We're partnering with groups that help women and children escape from the grip of their abusers. We're helping other countries step up their own efforts. And we're seeing results. More nations have passed and more are enforcing modern anti-trafficking laws.

Last week I was proud to welcome to the Oval Office not only a great champion of democracy but a fierce advocate against the use of forced labor and child soldiers -- Aung San Suu Kyi. And as part of our engagement, we'll encourage Burma to keep taking steps to reform -- because nations must speak with one voice: Our people and our children are not for sale.

But for all the progress that we've made, the bitter truth is that trafficking also goes on right here, in the United States. It's the migrant worker unable to pay off the debt to his trafficker. The man, lured here with the promise of a job, his documents then taken, and forced to work endless hours in a kitchen. The teenage girl, beaten, forced to walk the streets. This should not be happening in the United States of America.

As President, I directed my administration to step up our efforts -- and we have. For the first time, at Hillary's direction, our annual trafficking report now includes the United States, because we can't ask other nations to do what we are not doing ourselves. We've expanded our interagency task force to include more federal partners, including the FBI. The intelligence community is devoting more resources to identifying trafficking networks. We've strengthened protections so that foreign-born workers know their rights.

And most of all, we're going after the traffickers. New anti-trafficking teams are dismantling their networks. Last year, we charged a record number of these predators with human trafficking. We're putting them where they belong -- behind bars.

But with more than 20 million victims of human trafficking around the world -- think about that, more than 20 million -- they've got a lot more to do. And that's why, earlier this year, I directed my administration to increase our efforts. And today, I can announce a series of additional steps that we're going to take.



AmericanRhetoric.com

First, we're going to do more to spot it and stop it. We'll prepare a new assessment of human trafficking in the United States so we better understand the scope and scale of the problem. We'll strengthen training, so investigators and law enforcement are even better equipped to take action -- and treat victims as victims, not as criminals. We're going to work with Amtrak, and bus and truck inspectors, so that they're on the lookout. We'll help teachers and educators spot the signs as well, and better serve those who are vulnerable, especially our young people.

Second, we're turning the tables on the traffickers. Just as they are now using technology and the Internet to exploit their victims, we're going to harness technology to stop them. We're encouraging tech companies and advocates and law enforcement -- and we're also challenging college students -- to develop tools that our young people can use to stay safe online and on their smart phones.

Third, we'll do even more to help victims recover and rebuild their lives. We'll develop a new action plan to improve coordination across the federal government. We're increasing access to services to help survivors become self-sufficient. We're working to simplify visa procedures for "T" visas so that innocent victims from other countries can stay here as they help us prosecute their traffickers.

This coming year, my Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships will make the fight against human trafficking a focus of its work. They're doing great work. And I'm also proud to announce a new partnership with Humanity United, which is a leader in anti-trafficking -- a multi-million dollar challenge to local communities to find new ways to care for trafficking victims. And I want to thank Johns Hopkins University, which will be focusing on how to best care for child victims.

Now, finally, as one of the largest purchasers of goods and services in the world, the United States government will lead by example. We've already taken steps to make sure our contractors do not engage in forced labor. And today we're going to go further. I've signed a new executive order that raises the bar. It's specific about the prohibitions. It does more to protect workers. It ensures stronger compliance. In short, we're making clear that American tax dollars must never, ever be used to support the trafficking of human beings. We will have zero tolerance. We mean what we say. We will enforce it.

Of course, no government, no nation, can meet this challenge alone. Everybody has a responsibility. Every nation can take action. Modern anti-trafficking laws must be passed and enforced and justice systems must be strengthened. Victims must be cared for. So here in the United States, Congress should renew the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Whether you are a conservative or a liberal, Democrat or Republican, this is a no-brainer. This is something we should all agree on. We need to get that done.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And more broadly, as nations, let's recommit to addressing the underlying forces that push so many into bondage in the first place. With development and economic growth that creates legitimate jobs, there's less likelihood of indentured servitude around the globe. A sense of justice that says no child should ever be exploited, that has to be burned into the cultures of every country. A commitment to equality -- as in the Equal Futures Partnership that we launched with other nations yesterday so societies empower our sisters and our daughters just as much as our brothers and sons.

And every business can take action. All the business leaders who are here and our global economy companies have a responsibility to make sure that their supply chains, stretching into the far corners of the globe, are free of forced labor. The good news is more and more responsible companies are holding themselves to higher standards. And today, I want to salute the new commitments that are being made. That includes the new Global Business Coalition Against Trafficking -- companies that are sending a message: Human trafficking is not a business model, it is a crime, and we are going to stop it. We're proud of them.

Every faith community can take action as well, by educating their congregations, by joining in coalitions that are bound by a love of God and a concern for the oppressed. And like that Good Samaritan on the road to Jericho, we can't just pass by, indifferent. We've got to be moved by compassion. We've got to bind up the wounds. Let's come together around a simple truth -- that we are our brother's keepers and we are our sister's keepers.

And finally, every citizen can take action: by learning more; by going to the website that we helped create -- SlaveryFootprint.org; by speaking up and insisting that the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the products we buy are made free of forced labor; by standing up against the degradation and abuse of women.

That's how real change happens -- from the bottom up. And if you doubt that, ask Marie Godet Niyonyota, from the Congo. Think about Marie's story. She was kidnapped by rebels, turned into a slave. She was abused -- physically and sexually. They got her pregnant five times. In one awful battle, her children were killed -- all five of them. Miraculously, she survived and escaped. And with care and support, she began to heal. And she learned to read and write and sew, and today Marie is back home, working toward a new future.

Or ask Ima Matul. She grew up in Indonesia, and at 17 was given the opportunity to work as a nanny here in the United States. But when she arrived, it turned out to be a nightmare. Cooking, cleaning -- 18-hour days, seven days a week. One beating was so bad it sent her to the emergency room. And finally, she escaped. And with the help from a group that cared, today Ima has a stable job. She's an advocate -- she's even testified before Congress.

Or ask Sheila White, who grew up in the Bronx. Fleeing an abusive home, she fell in with a guy who said he'd protect her. Instead, he sold her -- just 15 years old -- 15 -- to men who raped her and beat her, and burned her with irons.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And finally, after years -- with the help of a non-profit led by other survivors -- she found the courage to break free and get the services she needed. Sheila earned her GED. Today she is a powerful, fierce advocate who helped to pass a new anti-trafficking law right here in New York.

These women endured unspeakable horror. But in their unbreakable will, in their courage, in their resilience, they remind us that this cycle can be broken; victims can become not only survivors, they can become leaders and advocates, and bring about change.

And I just met Ima and Sheila and several of their fellow advocates, and I have to tell you they are an incredible inspiration. They are here -- they've chosen to tell their stories. I want them to stand and be recognized because they are inspiring all of us. Please -- Sheila, Ima.

To Ima and Sheila, and each of you -- in the darkest hours of your lives, you may have felt utterly alone, and it seemed like nobody cared. And the important thing for us to understand is there are millions around the world who are feeling that same way at this very moment.

Right now, there is a man on a boat, casting the net with his bleeding hands, knowing he deserves a better life, a life of dignity, but doesn't know if anybody is paying attention. Right now, there's a woman, hunched over a sewing machine, glancing beyond the bars on the window, knowing if just given the chance, she might some day sell her own wares, but she doesn't think anybody is paying attention. Right now, there's a young boy, in a brick factory, covered in dust, hauling his heavy load under a blazing sun, thinking if he could just go to school, he might know a different future, but he doesn't think anybody is paying attention. Right now, there is a girl, somewhere trapped in a brothel, crying herself to sleep again, and maybe daring to imagine that some day, just maybe, she might be treated not like a piece of property, but as a human being.

And so our message today, to them, is -- to the millions around the world -- we see you. We hear you. We insist on your dignity. And we share your belief that if just given the chance, you will forge a life equal to your talents and worthy of your dreams.

Our fight against human trafficking is one of the great human rights causes of our time, and the United States will continue to lead it -- in partnership with you. The change we seek will not come easy, but we can draw strength from the movements of the past. For we know that every life saved -- in the words of that great Proclamation -- is "an act of justice," worthy of "the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

That's what we believe. That's what we're fighting for. And I'm so proud to be in partnership with CGI to make this happen.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.