

9-1-2003

Women and politics: Transforming Public Leadership

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim '76 (2003) "Women and politics: Transforming Public Leadership," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol46/iss3/6>

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Women

The Riley Institute Second Annual National Conference

and politics

Transforming Public Leadership

When it comes to bringing big names to Furman, it's hard to beat the short but impressive track record of the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership.

For its first national conference in the spring of 2002, the Riley Institute, which was established in 1999, featured a lecture by Madeleine Albright, the former Secretary of State, and a panel discussion on international affairs and national security that included journalists from *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

This fall, for its second national conference, the institute topped itself by attracting the powerhouse combination of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Democratic senator from New York and the first First Lady to serve in the U.S. Senate, and Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund. The conference, with the theme "Women and Politics: Transforming Public Leadership," began October 6 with Clinton's appearance at the Peace Center for the Performing Arts in Greenville. Edelman closed the proceedings the next night with a lecture in McAlister Auditorium.

In between, during the day on October 7, the Riley Institute presented roundtable discussions on such topics as "Women, Politics and the Media," "Women and Politics in South Carolina" and "The Future of Women in Politics." Furman professors, state and federal officials, journalists and assorted politicians participated, including Jenny Sanford, who managed the successful 2002 gubernatorial campaign of her husband, South Carolina governor Mark Sanford '83; Liz Patterson, former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from the Fourth District of South Carolina; and Inez Tenenbaum, South Carolina Superintendent of Education and Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate.

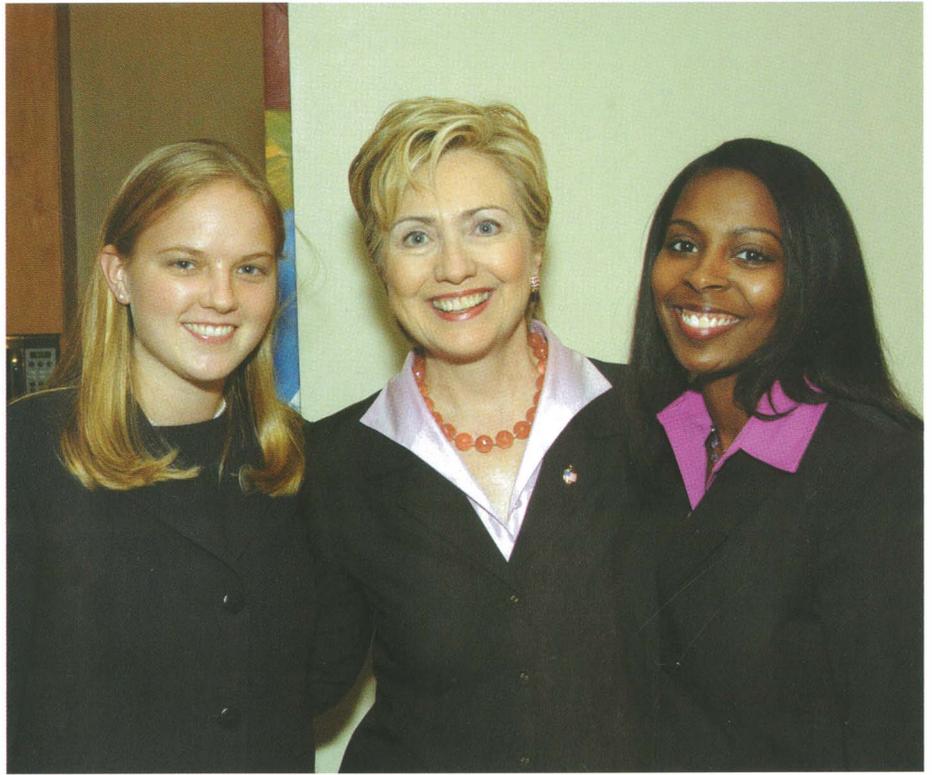
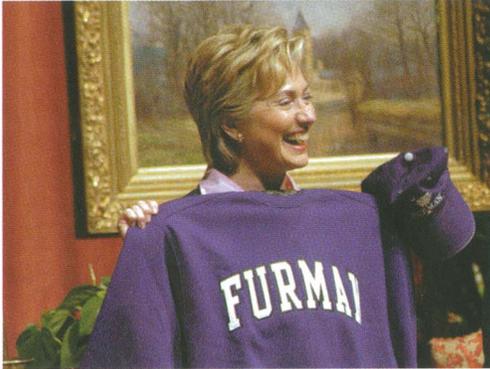
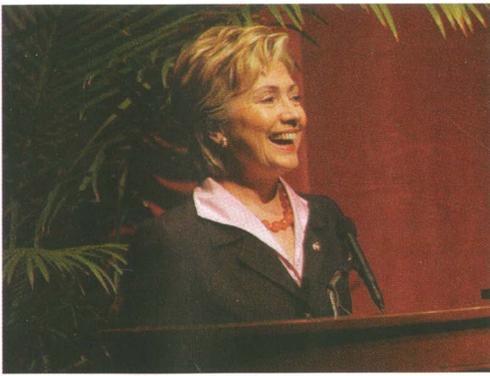
Of course, the main attractions for the two-day conference were Clinton and Edelman, both of whom were well acquainted with Richard W. Riley from his days as Bill Clinton's Secretary of Education (1993-2001) — a period of service for which, Hillary Clinton said, Riley earned "an A for effort and for achievement, and also for attendance."

As institute director and professor of political science Don Gordon points out, Riley is the reason the institute is able to attract so many headliners. Riley, says Gordon, is actively involved in the institute's work, helping to organize and plan events throughout the year.

"Dick has been such an honest public servant and extraordinary statesman," says Gordon of the 1954 Furman graduate and former governor of South Carolina. "Most of these people came here because he asked them to."

And Furman already has more high-profile names lined up for future Riley Institute programs. They include Olympia Snowe, Republican senator from Maine, and Nancy Kassebaum Baker, former Republican senator from Kansas. Lesley Stahl, the CBS News correspondent who was slated to share the Peace Center stage with Clinton until network bosses made a last-minute decision to send her to California to cover the gubernatorial recall election, sent regrets for the short notice and agreed to make a presentation on campus at a later date.

But the Riley Institute is much more than an occasional splashy conference with well-known participants. Since 1999 it has sponsored a variety of on-campus programs and speakers, with guests ranging from foreign dignitaries to ambassadors, mayors, journalists and assorted policy wonks. In addition, the institute supports programs for high school students, teachers and community leaders in an effort to expand their understanding of government, civic responsibility and political participation. (Visit www.furman.edu/riley for more on the Riley Institute.)



There is little doubt that appearances by such headliners as Albright, Clinton and Edelman give the Riley Institute and the university a jolt of recognition.

And few politicians today stir the interest of the public — or the media — as does Hillary Rodham Clinton. Her visit October 6 is believed to be the largest media event in Furman history, with more than 50 newspapers and radio and television stations requesting credentials. Aside from the media blitz, an estimated 2,000 people paid \$50 each to attend her presentation at the Peace Center.

An array of Clinton supporters (Hillary Now!) and detractors were seen in and around the performing arts center before the program began, hawking their wares — and opinions. Throughout the evening, however, Clinton adopted a decidedly non-partisan tone and steered clear of controversial or hot-button political issues, such as whether or not she might be a candidate for president in 2004. Instead, she stuck with the theme: Women and Politics.

In both her prepared remarks and a follow-up conversation with DeeDee Corradini, former mayor of Salt Lake City, Clinton addressed the role of women in the American political system and the possibilities for greater involvement in the future. She praised

the Riley Institute for presenting such a “timely” conference and added, “This is exactly the kind of program Dick Riley would be spearheading.”

The New York senator expressed the belief that women bring a refreshing style to politics, one that improves the level and the tenor of legislative discourse. “It’s not easy to subject yourself to the political process these days,” she said. “There is a mean-spiritedness to the process that is no respecter of men or women. But I believe the kind of give and take women bring to the table has a civility and an openness that is reassuring.” The 14 women currently serving in the Senate, she stated, have brought about “better debate, better dialogue and better legislation.”

She also touched on the status of women internationally, emphasizing that the United States is less likely to face danger from countries in which women are full participants in the political process. She said that as First Lady, she decried the Taliban’s mistreatment and intimidation of women in schools and clinics, and that in Iraq the presence of disorder made women timid and fearful for their well-being. In countries where women are treated more fairly and inclusively, she said, “Democracy is more likely to flourish and take deeper root.”

Furman students Madeline Clark (left) of Rockville, Md., and Shunta Harmon of Riverdale, Ga., enjoyed a Kodak moment with Sen. Clinton, who seemed pleased to add a Furman outfit to her wardrobe.

Photos by Charlie Register

Although she applauded the advances women have made through the years, Clinton said that doors are still just beginning to open in many areas — and that challenges remain.

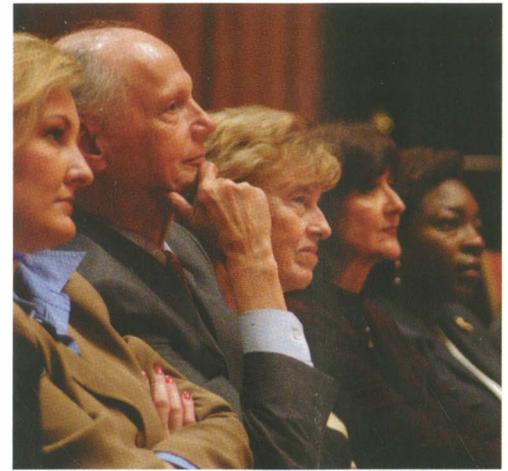
To illustrate her point, she told how Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Republican senator from Texas, had shared with her a feature from a newspaper in her home state. The Texas paper had conducted a poll of people on the street, asking four men and a woman if they would vote for a woman for president. Each of the men said yes; two said they would vote for Clinton, one supported Hutchinson, the fourth named Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana. The woman, however, said no, she didn’t think women are qualified to be president.

Which, Clinton said, left her and Hutchinson looking at each other incredulously.

While she encouraged women of all ages to become involved in politics — to “dare to compete” — Clinton also addressed some of the



Marian Wright Edelman emphasized the need to re-establish priorities and pay more attention to the rights and needs of children. Right: Richard Riley and his wife, Tunky (on his left), were attentive guests; during a discussion on women and politics in South Carolina, the state's First Lady, Jenny Sanford, makes a point.



problems and obstacles women face in what is still a male-dominated political system. Among her points:

Money matters. In today's political climate, all candidates, male and female, need hefty war chests, especially for national campaigns. She used her own Senate campaign in 2000 as an example of the high cost of running for office. She raised a total of \$45 million, while her opponents — she lumped former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, who eventually dropped out of the race, with her actual foe, Congressman Rick Lazio — together raised \$75 million. But Clinton said that the act of asking for money — “not for a charitable cause, but for yourself” — makes many women uncomfortable.

It's difficult to do it all. Clinton said that women have traditionally borne the primary responsibility for caring for home, family and, often, aging parents. It's hard for many women, she said, to feel that they

can balance all of their obligations and run for office without short-changing something. Which leads to the question women frequently ask:

Am I good enough? Men, she said, tend not to worry about this issue, but women constantly critique themselves and worry that they aren't fulfilling all of their responsibilities.

Stereotypes die hard. Said Clinton, “Women are still judged by their clothing and hairstyles — something with which I am familiar.” It's part of the legacy of the past, she said, that society has yet to overcome.

During the 2002 elections, fewer women ran for local and state office than at any time in the previous 20 years. Clinton suggested that the unrelenting scrutiny and intensity of politics, even at the local level, may have contributed to the decline.

“You're constantly under fire, and many people, both men and women, are asking if it's worth it to run,” she said. And because women now have many more professional and volunteer opportunities than in the past, they may not be as ready for or interested in the tradeoff in lifestyle and privacy that public life requires.

Her parting thoughts, which she directed not just to women but to the entire audience: Take seriously the duties of citizenship. Register to vote and understand the importance of

every individual taking part in the process. Impress on young people the importance of voting. Get involved in a political campaign. “It's a tremendous experience, especially for students,” she said. “And learn about issues — it builds confidence and competence. It really does matter if you know what you're talking about.”

In contrast to the evening with Hillary Clinton, which had a relaxed, fireside chat-style atmosphere, Marian Wright Edelman's appearance at the conference-closing event October 7 struck a more urgent tone.

But when you have dedicated your life to serving as a voice for children — the poor, the handicapped and the displaced — you can't help but be a passionate advocate.

A native of Bennettsville, S.C., and daughter of a Baptist minister, Edelman earned her undergraduate degree from Spelman College and a law degree from Yale University. In the 1960s she became the first African-American woman to practice law in the state of Mississippi, and after working with the civil rights movement for a number of years, she founded the Children's Defense Fund in 1973. The author of several books, she has received more than 65 honorary degrees and been named



a MacArthur Foundation Prize Fellow.

According to its Web site (www.childrensdefense.org), CDF is “the nation’s strongest voice for children and families. The mission of the Children’s Defense Fund is to *Leave No Child Behind*® and to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start*, and a *Moral Start* in life with the support of caring families and communities.”

This was the message Edelman brought to Furman, where she called for changes in the nation’s priorities. “We can make the well-being of children the major focus of the first civil rights movement of the 21st century,” she said. “We can build a movement to save our children.”

She tossed out some sobering statistics to drive her points home: Every 21 seconds, a child is born into poverty in the United States. Every 30 seconds, a child is abused. Every three hours, a child is shot and killed. The United States spends three times more money on prisons than on educating its students.

And she quoted German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who once said, “The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.” Edelman’s coda to

Bonhoeffer’s remark: “The United States is flunking that test.”

How did all of this apply to women and politics? Edelman emphasized the critical roles women have played in major social and political movements throughout history, from abolition (Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth) to social reform (Jane Addams) to the environmental movement (Rachel Carson).

“It took Rosa Parks to sit down to get Dr. [Martin Luther] King to stand up,” Edelman said before adding, “Women can be extraordinary pests for change. And enough fleas biting strategically can make very big dogs uncomfortable.”

What, then, can be done to change the priorities of the world’s richest nation so that it places more value on the physical and educational needs of children? Edelman said that more individuals must be willing to step forward without fear of mistakes or failure. “Stand and speak the truth,” she said — not in a shrill or hostile way, but in a manner that will encourage leaders to do more than pay lip service to the words they use.

Further, she echoed Eleanor Roosevelt in stating that when pressing for action, women “must have skin as tough as rhinos’ hides.” And they must be persistent in asking

Current and former South Carolina politicians who participated in the October 7 sessions included, clockwise from left, Inez Tenenbaum, state Superintendent of Education and Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate; Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter of Orangeburg County, who was first elected to office in 1992; Pansy Ridgeway, who served as mayor of Manning for 26 years; and Harriet Keyserling, who represented Beaufort County in the state House for 16 years.

why this country seems so unwilling to make the needs of children and families a primary consideration.

Today, she said, the only thing the United States guarantees every child is detention — or prison — if they get into trouble. She deplored that children are not assured of prenatal care, food, shelter or even a quality preschool experience that will help boost their chance for success. As a result, too many children who fall below the poverty level never have the opportunity to overcome the circumstances into which they are born.

“A child’s chance to succeed shouldn’t depend on the lottery of birth,” Edelman said. “Education costs less than ignorance. We need to invest more in prevention than in punishment.”

Which is what the Children’s Defense Fund is all about. ●