

As a Jew, I am particularly honored to be invited here tonight. I warmly embrace the message of this foundation -- that our enduring response to the Holocaust must be a resolve to speak out against indifference to all human suffering.

I am also thrilled that tonight you honor a woman who has long fought on behalf of those who suffer most -- children. She has taken nurturing for the young and vulnerable, traditional women-centered values, into our political life. But as a woman she has also paid a price.

Let's talk about women for a minute. The focus tonight is human rights, and as a group, women throughout the world have systematically been denied their rightful place.

Women are the majority, yet throughout most of human history, they have been treated as an oppressed minority. They are the producers and nurturers of life, yet the men who they produce tend to be frightened and feel threatened if they show signs of substance, let alone brilliance, as in the case of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

When they are smart, they are told to be careful not to be too smart, and they are taught to mask their strengths and convictions lest they be perceived to be unfeminine. In most of the world's cultures, our own included, women have at one time or another been denied fundamental rights to vote, to control their bodies, to determine their destiny.

Despite the barriers, increasing numbers of women have competed in this man's world with great distinction.

Your honoree is one such woman, and that is why I am so pleased to be here tonight. There is no one in this country who would deny the competence, intellect, stamina, warmth and courage of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

After years as Chair of the Children's Defense Fund, our First Lady has led the most important fight on behalf of the forty million children and their parents who have been denied access to basic medical care.

The President deserves much credit for raising this issue and making the principle of universal health coverage a non-negotiable demand.

But, as he has said, it is Hillary who did the hard work, mastering the complex details, delineating the subtle alternatives and refusing to compromise away the heart of health reform.

When Mrs. Clinton addressed Congress on this issue, she dazzled her audience in the chamber and in the media with her depth of knowledge and her stunning eloquence.

However, it has become a national pastime to build people up and then tear them down. The media, which too often seems to find policy boring or not useful for high ratings, delights in sensationalism rather than covering serious debate.

And the criticism of Hillary Clinton has again demonstrated that the strong, competent woman is still a threatening figure in our culture.

A man who graduated high in his class at Yale Law school, made partnership in a top law firm would be celebrated. A man who invested wisely would be admired. But a woman who accomplishes this is treated with suspicion.

Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of the acclaimed biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, recently noted of Hillary Clinton, and I quote, "I don't think there is a First Lady who has been treated as rudely and meanly, except for Eleanor Roosevelt."

The comparison between these 2 women is not accidental. Both of them stepped forth, boldly risking the scorn of those threatened by the image of a woman carrying the fight for social justice into the public arena.

I detest these attacks on someone who gives so much of herself to make this a better country.

The talk shows and the gossip sheets with their insatiable appetite for scandal have become the modern equivalent of the Roman Circus -- a dizzying distraction from the nation's serious problems.

But people are getting tired of this. Thank God, it's enough already. Too much is at stake at a time when we face major difficulties in our economy, our sense of nationhood, our spiritual decline and our place in the world. Gossip may be entertaining, but if you can't get your kid to a doctor, or you can't pay the rent because you've lost your job, you need something more substantial from the media and government.

I believe Hillary Clinton personifies substance. I also believe in the common decency of people, and that the truth will win out. Hillary Clinton will rise above her critics because at her core there is a steady resolve to make a difference and improve the quality of our lives.

I join you tonight in celebrating your honoree as a woman of immense commitment, seriousness of purpose, and who is a gift to this nation.