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Fifth Millennium Evening,

The White House, January 25, 1999

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

January 25, 1999

**FIFTH MILLENNIUM EVENING AT THE WHITE HOUSE**

Remarks by the President, the First Lady,  
Professor Natalie Davis and Professor Martin Marty

The East Room

7:37 P.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: Good evening. Please be seated, and welcome to the White House. But also, welcome to the world, as it was seen by people 1,000 years ago. They envisioned everything pointing toward the East, for that is where the Garden of Eden could be found. They saw the holy city of Jerusalem at the very center of the world.

Now, as the map turns, Europe is shown as a large land with well-known contours. But they picture the unknown -- Africa and Asia -- not only as incomplete masses, but plagued with two-headed creatures and valleys full of devils.

And then there were miscellaneous places it seems they weren't quite sure what to do with, so they spread them out as islands and stuck them in the dark sea. Ireland, or as it was called then, Scotia, even ended up off the coast of France somewhere. And of course, the New World was still nowhere to be found.

How we draw our world depends upon how we imagine it. Think about how differently we imagine it today. Tonight's Fifth Millennium Evening at the White House will explore the meaning of the millennium -- both the last one and the one about to arrive. With the calendar recently flipping to 1999, there's already been a lot of talk about the millennium, most of it centering on how do we spell it? (Laughter.) How will we celebrate it? Where will the biggest New Year's Eve party be? What is a 2YK bug and does it have anything to do with the apocalypse? And will there be enough champagne to go around?

But tonight we wanted to take a minute and go beyond some of these questions and topics to others -- fundamental ones about how we can find meaning in this time and all time. How did people live 1,000 years ago? Did they approach that time with fear or optimism? What is our millennial thinking today? Do we see the millennium as an end, a beginning, both, or just

And so what you're going to do tonight is to honor the past and imagine the future. Because as the Roman playwright Terence said, nothing human is alien to me.

If we were transported back in time, that's quite a bit that would look familiar to us. You would see university students asking their parents to send more money; children praying -- not for world peace, but for school to be canceled; parents desperate to find babysitters for their children; people laughing and loving, living and dying, as they always have and as we do still today. If we were transported back in time, we'd see some of our first town planners, property developers and shoemakers who helped shape the world we inherited. We'd see the contributions of all cultures, all people -- women and men -- whose stories weave together our past.

And if we were transported back to the Middle Ages, we'd see a very different way of measuring and accounting for time. There were no birthdays -- which, as I get older, sounds like a blessing. No one kept track of how old you were. Time was slower; people traveled by cart, foot, ship. They could spend two whole years on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And, of course, there were no telephones, e-mail or beepers to interrupt them along the way -- something all of us have longed for from time to time -- the ability, literally, to stop the clock and look more carefully around; something that we can try to incorporate in our lives today.

Because even as we look at how we count time, we know that our challenge is to make time count -- which is not a job for computers or clocks, but, rather, for human beings. Just as there were those who preached the end of the world at the last millennium, we have no shortage of negative images from popular culture today. Most of the movies about the future show aliens descending from outer space determined to blow up the world, and somehow they always begin or end with Washington, D.C. (Laughter.)

But just as there were people preaching peace and unity and hope 1,000 years ago, we, too, have our opportunity to create a positive image of our future, so that 1,000 years from now, when scholars are on this stage, or maybe levitating above it, they will not only shake their heads and wonder how we got anything done with our quaint satellite and Internet technology, but they'll also relate to us as human beings. They'll talk about how we paused to mark this moment, and we found a way to preserve hope for the future and create a world that was better for our children to inherit.

Just as those who drew the map that you see on the screens, we all have a way of drawing our own maps from day to day, showing our own lives. And we have two people here who can help us better understand how to draw that map. Professor Davis and Professor Marty were born in the same year -- it must have been a very good year for curiosity and scholarship. Both share a generosity of spirit, a love of family and the traditions that shape them, and a passion for teaching and living and learning.

When we think of Natalie Zemon Davis we can imagine her with her bookbag riding her bicycle all over campus, whatever campus -- Smith and Radcliffe Colleges, Brown University,