



Remarks by State Treasurer Denise L. Nappier
"Women of Color in American Politics – A Seat at the Table"
League of Women Voters, Norwalk
Monday, February 24, 2003

Good evening, and thank you for that gracious introduction. It is a great pleasure to be here in Norwalk again, and I thank the **League of Women Voters** for sponsoring this evening, and the **Norwalk Public Library** for hosting tonight's program.

It is been my pleasure to have spent considerable time in Norwalk these past few years – and you should know that some in my family are beginning to consider this to be my second home. Well, while I'm quite proud of my hometown of Hartford, I must admit that there are few places I'd rather be than right here in Norwalk.

You know, the subject of my remarks this evening is quite fitting, for two very important reasons – reasons, as you will see, that are intertwined and interconnected. First, it is Black History Month, when we honor and highlight the achievements and the aspirations of African Americans throughout our nation. But that's not all. This month also marks the day in 1922, when the US Supreme Court unanimously voted to uphold the 19th amendment that guaranteed a woman's right to vote!

It is with that backdrop, and with that history in mind, that I address the topic *"Women of Color in American Politics – A Seat at the Table."* And I can think of no better place to talk about it, than at a program sponsored by the League of Women Voters – an organization that has been at the forefront, and continues to be, each and every day.

Throughout my career in public service, I have had the privilege to work with many talented women, thanks to organizations like the League of Women Voters. They share with me a concern about the status and progress of women in society. As women, workers, mothers, and professionals – many of you here today share the same concerns. You have been on the frontlines, fighting for progress, striving for success, working for a seat at the table – and earning it!

You know, from the perspective of my experience, and my observations – and some of you may have heard me say this before -- I believe the dynamics surrounding gender--and race--in our country, can be summarized as not only a marathon, but a marathon run over an obstacle course. Our endurance is challenged by how long we have to run, and our agility is tested as we hurdle the inevitable obstacles we find in our path.

But, with preparation, perseverance and opportunity, and let me add-in today's expanding global market--with economic opportunity, we can and will succeed.

There is absolutely no time like the present to begin to prepare the next generation of young women and minorities to seize opportunity by providing them with training in the fields of finance and economics, or introducing them to the good that can be achieved in public service.

In my own case, my youthful ambition and interest in politics and public service was kindled in the 1970s by my family – where giving back to the community was a given and education was highly valued – and by the emergence of several women on our nation's political scene, including two dynamic and accomplished members of Congress... Representatives Shirley Chisholm of New York and the late Barbara Jordan of Texas. To many of you these are familiar names, but sadly, to many of our young people, they are not.

As a youth, they were my role models, and their example suggested to me 'where and when I could enter' the political process.

Role models are vitally important. That is because perceptions, or misperceptions I should say, about women, about minorities, about anyone different, still challenge our initiative and threaten to undermine our progress.

For example, more often than not, during my 1998 campaign for State Treasurer, whether because of my gender or my race, or both, people assumed I knew nothing about the field of finance.

That was hard to take. I had served as Hartford's City Treasurer for nearly ten years. Based on my actual experience, I was the most qualified candidate in the field. I knew I could do that job and that knowledge made me strong. And I also knew that others before me had faced doubting audiences and still emerged victorious. That knowledge made me even stronger.

No doubt, I was certainly not the first to be subjected to misperception. Most of us now know that it is not that African Americans have lacked for significant contributions to society, but that our contributions were, and often still are, discounted, dismissed—just plain “dissed”, as they say, in this nation.

It is this struggle to be fairly counted in our nation that has brought America closer to her pledge to being “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Yes, we have seen progress in so many fields. Barriers have been shattered, and milestones have been achieved.

But there remains much to be done. African Americans, and all Americans, who are dedicated to social justice, equality and economic opportunity still have a chapter to write in this American story. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday and life's achievements we celebrated just a month ago, once said that “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

There is still so much that matters, but it is easy to lose our way or be sidetracked from our mission, because our society is full of paradoxes...

You know, it's been observed that... we have wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy less.

As we mark this year's observance of Black History Month, we are all acutely aware that true equality remains elusive... whether it is in Lewiston, Maine or in the Halls of Congress, our work is not done. A new century is unfolding, and yet:

- we are still struggling with the central issue of **economic empowerment**, and a shared distribution of the wealth of this country and this state,
- **poverty** still burdens too many of our families and children,
- **racial profiling** reflects prejudice in new and unsettling ways,
- **crimes of hate and prejudice** still stir, and
- **equal education** and **basic health care** are unattainable for too many.

We must meet these challenges honestly, effectively and head-on.

Those of us in a position to control the flow of money in the marketplace should not allow an economic slowdown to get in the way of our important mission to level the playing field. And whether we face good times or bad times, there remains one constant; we must continue to work to rectify the disparity that exists in the economic outlook of this country's citizens.

Among these challenges, one struggle is central to the League of Women Voters and central to the progress of this nation: the right to vote.

The right to vote was denied for too long, for far too many, and achieved only through the blood, sweat and tears of many generations. We cannot -- in this new millennium -- allow ourselves to fall back to a time when some votes were counted, while others were discounted.

We cannot allow voting rights to become a part of history, rather than an Election Day reality. And I know you believe that, firmly and fervently!

As we work together to tackle these challenges, I believe that women bring a unique set of values to the political process, and a different perspective, a different approach to solving the intractable problems we face. And that, in large part, is because women embrace change. In fact, women not only embrace change, we have been working for change as long as any of us can remember. That is on the homefront, in the workplace and throughout our communities.

From what I have observed and experienced, women use power through what can be called participatory politics. Women seek counsel and consensus, whereas men often employ power tactics that are hard-hitting, confrontational or authoritarian.

The perception is that women's style is less than equal to men. Women tend to do a better job at doing our homework and getting both sides of the issue. We're better policy-makers because of it – we're better informed about issues and their implications for the larger society.

It is not too much to say that gender and race help to shape women's use of power. For example, it's natural for me to consider anything that comes across my desk in terms of its fairness, equity, inclusionary or exclusionary consequences.

Let me give you several examples in my role as State Treasurer...

As the principal fiduciary of our state's more than \$17 billion pension fund, I have an obligation to act in the primary interest of the beneficiaries of our state pension funds who depend on these funds for their future financial security. My core responsibility is to safeguard and grow the pension fund assets.

As a constitutional officer of the state of Connecticut, I also am required to take measures that safeguard and promote the long-term economic interests of all citizens of our state.

By considering and balancing these factors – and not just by performing the mathematics of the investment equation, I make not only honest, but conscientious decisions. My objective is to invest not only in strong companies, but in strong companies that treat their employees fairly, that respect the environment and that follow equal opportunity employment practices... what has come to be known as "corporate responsibility."

And we have seen, in recent years, the harm that comes when a different path is chosen, when we ignore bad corporate behavior. People lose their jobs, their retirement savings or both. There ought to be a zero tolerance level for this type of corporate behavior fueled by corporate greed at the expense of every decent, hard working man and woman.

This is not merely a moral obligation. It is an economic necessity that we tap the full value of our human resources and conduct ourselves with integrity and honesty. Every individual held back by society seems to hold society back as well. It is the sum of our individual potentials, which ultimately will determine whether we compete successfully and sustain this country's role as a leader within the global marketplace.

That's why as important as I believe it is for women to have a seat at the *political* table of power – in my view it is just as important to our progress and our society that more women, and more people of color, be represented at the seat of *corporate and economic* power.

On that score, there's still considerable work to do... breaking through the glass ceilings that still prevents equal pay and equal opportunity, ensuring that women have a place on the

management teams of America's leading corporations. We have climbed to greater heights, but the climb is still not without obstacles, and not without resistance.

And I'm proud to say that in the Treasurer's Office we are working on several initiatives that will help to expand opportunity for those of us who have traditionally been shut out.

- We established Connecticut's **Individual Development Account (IDA)** initiative, the first statewide initiative of its kind in the nation. IDAs are matched savings accounts that enable low- and moderate-income families to save for first-time home purchases, job training, education, and business start-ups.

The strategy of the IDA program is an asset-based strategy—one that helps poor working families by not only building individual assets but teaching people how to manage their finances so they can have what every American wants... a decent home, an education and a good job.. IDAs teach working families how to build their assets and gain a foothold on the ladder of success. For families living paycheck to paycheck, the IDA program is one way to offer hope that hard work can bring results.

- Through our **Board Diversity** Initiative, we are working together to create opportunities that will permit women, and minorities, to serve in unprecedented numbers, bringing their expertise, experience and independence to our leading corporations.
- We have initiated a **domestic equity** pilot project to give women and minority owned investment firms – and Connecticut owned firms – an opportunity to earn some of the Treasury's business. Just last month, the results of this pilot project were endorsed by our state's independent Investment Advisory Council, which unanimously agreed our efforts should continue.

With efforts like the Board Diversity Project and the domestic equity plot project we can continue to change the old network, and open up the Wall Street club that has virtually been closed since the day it opened.

You know, public service is very important to me. It has been my career, and my life, for as long as I can remember. Public service is, at its roots, the opportunity to make a difference in your community... to use your skills and talents not just to help yourself, but to make have a real impact on people's lives, to be an advocate for improving the quality of individual lives.

Whether it is public service or politics, community activism or corporate leadership, women, and women of color, have earned a seat at the table. And we have seen, time and again, that once seated, the way business gets done will change – and change for the better.

I say, let us pledge to keep on working - to keep on clearing the obstacles to progress, so that our daughters-- our granddaughters, can truly climb as high as their talents can take them.

There is work to be done to make society better. And I'm not here to say that we must participate in that work in spite of our race...or in spite of our gender. I'm here to tell you that we must participate because of our race and because of our gender.

I'm here to tell you that it can be done, and we will do it. I am confident that no one knows that better than the people here today, because that is not only *your challenge*, that is *your experience*.

I look forward to working with you, and to making change a reality!

Thank you very much.