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Hillary Clinton Gives Plea for Unity at Penn

By ROBERT PEAR
Special to The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA, May 17 — Accepting an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania, which has experienced racial tension in the last year, Hillary Rodham Clinton urged students today to “repair the social contract” and uphold the idea of colleges as “havens for free speech and free thought.”

“What we have to do here at this university and in this country is to find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences without fracturing our communities,” she said.

Penn, like other Ivy League schools, has been roiled by disagreements between black and white students. Efforts by the university president, F. Sheldon Hackney, to fashion a compromise have left many people dissatisfied. President Clinton has named Dr. Hackney to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and his wife, Lucy D. Hackney, has worked closely with Mrs. Clinton as an advocate for children.

In her commencement address today, Mrs. Clinton suggested that a firm commitment to free speech must be combined with respect for the racial and ethnic differences that have caused conflict on college campuses and in American society at large.

‘Free Exchange of Ideas’

While voicing distress at “hateful acts, hateful words,” Mrs. Clinton warned her audience to avoid censorship. “For all the injustices in our past and our present,” she said, “we have to believe that in the free exchange of ideas, justice will prevail over injustice, tolerance over intolerance and progress over reaction.”

A total of 6,711 degrees, including 3,053 bachelor’s degrees, were conferred on the Class of 1993 in ceremonies at Franklin Field.

Mrs. Clinton told graduating students that they could find meaning in their lives by selfless efforts to help others, through programs of national service like the one proposed by President Clinton.

“How do we strike the right balance between individual rights and responsibility?” Mrs. Clinton asked. “How do we create a new spirit of community given all the problems that we are so aware of? Regrettably, the balance between the individual and the community, between rights and responsibilities, has been thrown out of kilter over the last years.

“Throughout the 1980’s, we did hear too much about individual gain and the ethos of selfishness and greed. We did not hear enough about how to be a good member of a community, to define the common good

and to repair the social contract. And we also found that while prosperity does not trickle down from the most powerful to the rest of us, all too often indifference and even intolerance do.”

The strain in race relations at the University of Pennsylvania was illustrated by a January incident in which a white student referred to several black women who were making loud noises outside his dormitory window as “water buffaloes.” On Friday, a judicial board of the university held a preliminary hearing to determine whether the white student had violated Penn’s ban on racial harassment.

Civil libertarians say the university has no business regulating speech. Some white students complain that blacks often segregate themselves on campus. Some black students say they have been insulted by whites, treated harshly by the university police and made to feel unwelcome on campus.

In a separate incident last month, blacks confiscated thousands of copies of The Daily Pennsylvanian, the student newspaper, to emphasize their objections to a conservative columnist whom they saw as racially biased.

After noting that the nation’s first medical school was established here at the University of Pennsylvania in 1765, Mrs. Clinton described the radical changes she envisioned in the American health-care system.

“If you change jobs or if you lose your job,” she said, “you will still be insured. If you are an older American and need help with prescription drugs and a start on long-term care, particularly in your home, you will be insured. If you are a physician or a nurse or a pharmacist or a dentist, you will no longer spend 20 to 40 percent of your time and income filling out countless meaningless forms.”

The others who received honorary degrees at Penn today are Jeanne Quint Benoliel, a retired professor of nursing at the University of Washington, in Seattle; Miriam Ben-Porat, State Comptroller of Israel; Dr. Al-

fred Gellhorn, a former dean of the School of Medicine at Penn; Ralph Landau, a chemical engineer, and William Julius Wilson, an expert on urban poverty.