ERA Countdown: 58 Years

KEYNOTE SPEECH BEFORE THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

BY

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OPENING PLENARY SESSION

The 1981 National Conference of the National Organization for Women is now in session.

We are convened only a few days short of the 15th Anniversary of the founding of NOW in this city -- our nation's capital -- in 1966. Fifteen years ago, NOW was born out of the hopes and dreams of a small band of women and men dedicated to establishing and achieving the goal of equality for women.

Equal Rights Amendment

Section 1: Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2: The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this Article.

Section 3: This Amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.
Equality of opportunity in education.
Equality of opportunity in employment.
Equal pay.
Equal partnership in marriage.
And equality of rights under the law.

For fifteen years we have worked and worked. For fifteen years we have fought law, by law, by law to establish and to advance the rights of women. For fifteen long years we have taken case, after case, after case to court to fight for equality for women.

For years we have warned this nation that laws established by majority vote of legislators, by majority vote of Congress, can be changed by a majority vote. We have warned that regulations enacted to enforce those laws by one administration or a Congress could be changed by an administration or by Congress that is hostile to women's rights. This is exactly what is happening under the Reagan administration.

For 15 years we have taken cases to court and we have analyzed and we have watched. We have watched as we have a tremendous victory one day and a defeat the next day -- a step forward one day and then a step backward the next day.

It just happened at the end of June 1981. The Supreme Court ruled that they could discriminate and exclude women from service in this country. We warned, we active feminists, we in the National Organization for Women warned the nation that this

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We are deep into the ERA Countdown period. The date June 30, 1982 is ever present before us. This is a campaign that demands so much from each of us. In fact it demands all that we can give.

A serious political campaign, in 1981, which is nationwide in scope requires millions of dollars for successful execution. We are already organizing and using the most modern of campaign techniques. In fact, we are even inventing some techniques.

We are reaching out to thousands of people by word of mouth. We are doing this by ERA Message Brigades, by Action Teams, by phone banks, and by going door to door, and we don't care where we have to go. We are going into the heartland of our opposition. We are literally mailing millions and millions of pieces of mail, phoning thousands of people, printing millions of pieces of information.

But it isn't enough. We have got to constantly do more. It is tough for me to ask you who have given so much. And, let's face it, I know we have got to change our lives. But so many of us already have! And we will change even more and we will adjust even more because we intend to launch a nationwide multi-million dollar media campaign with the urgent message of ERA ratification.

We intend to enter those living rooms with the urgent need for ratification, with the message of the Countdown and the timeline—that shrinking timeline—and with the message of the consequences of what will happen to Americans and their families if the ERA should fail.

We will deliver a hard-hitting emotional message and we will deliver a message which will convey the harsh reality of inequality and it's true cost in dollars and cents and in human suffering.
We will insist that every American will work to avert an American tragedy. We know that we cannot turn back, and that our nation cannot turn back, on progress for women. The years of struggle, the 58 years of struggle that the suffragists began—we must get on with it.

Every citizen needs to be involved now. We are involved in national and international crises most of us could not even have dreamed of just a few years ago—and this nation needs all the talent and resources it can muster. It cannot ignore the talented resources of its female citizens any longer.

American women cannot be forced at this crucial time in American history to be placed on the sidelines fighting for their birthright and when we are needed to avert what could be a holocaust.

I ask you to give, this time to give in every way more than you have ever given before. We have to save the last and best hope for women for full equality in this country and it will take money, millions and millions of dollars. I want you to give and to give now, rather than you and your family and your loved ones paying for the rest of all of our lives.

We have said it so many times. We have given for our mothers, and for our daughters, and we always think of those people who have suffered the most—but we also must do it for ourselves. We must do it because our talents and our time and energy and our resources are needed. Needed more than ever.
A lot of people ask me if it is possible. The smart political money is against us. They say, what are you wasting your time for? The reason is that I know it is possible. The reason I believe it is possible is because I can't imagine, literally cannot imagine, our nation turning its back on progress for people and for women.

Frankly, I refuse to believe that we can't rise to the crisis. I refuse to believe that if our foremothers didn't even have the right to speak in public--can you imagine not having the right to speak in public?--and they had to travel by horseback, and they brought us as far as they did, that we cannot go that extra mile.

What we have been asking of ourselves is not out of the ordinary. It is extraordinary! It is sacrifice. What we have all been asking of ourselves is to rise above ourselves. For this is the one moment in history to be all that we can, to be all that we can and to know that it has been enough for women to achieve full equality in this nation.

I have the utmost confidence in the feminist movement and the women's movement. I started with each one of you. I started with you at my kitchen table. I started at a time when to think of a goal of millions of dollars was not even possible. But we didn't even know if it was necessary, because we knew we could do it.

Maybe we never even knew the magnitude of the task, but we always took that next step. No matter how tough a defeat was, we would always regroup and think it out and begin again. And we would think of another way of doing it, and every time you turn around, we would think of another way.
You know there has always been more of us, and every time we have tried something, we always seem to try with a very few people and before you knew it there were so many of us.

I can't tell you how many times I have never done what it was that we were supposed to do. I keep saying that if there were only a blueprint or manual somewhere. You know everything is for the first time and right now we are at an awfully important crossroads.

We have to turn a tide and when all the rest of the country is going--or it seems to be going, I don't know if it is--into a reactionary period, we need to go forward. We don't have time to go back.

We have to figure out how to do it, but I know that we will figure out how to do it and we will keep on going. Whatever it takes for equality, we are going to give it without question.

If it takes having a multi-million dollar media campaign, so be it. We will do it. The women of this nation and, indeed, of this world, deserve no less. Do you realize that long-forgotten presidential candidates have been able to spend more on mass media that we have so far? Whatever it takes we are going to do it, because we are going to end this discussion once and for all. In fact, we are going to end this humiliation once and for all.

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Why am I so confident? Because I know. I can remember when we ratified the State Equal Rights Amendment in Pennsylvania and people said what's going to happen to women's sports. You know we can't run as hard. How can you be so confident that we, us mere creatures, females, can compete? I know we could not only compete but we had better opportunity than we have had.

Every time people ask me why do we do it, I say, "Why don't you?" I believe that there is hope for everybody. Because I know that we will go over the top, there won't be one person who was against us!

In this room collectively, there have been more speeches delivered for women's rights than in any other comparable body of people and I believe we are experts on the subject. I believe that after you have given a speech on women's rights that no one has ever come up and said, "You know my mother, my grandmother, my old man, he stood against suffrage. He was one of those anti-suffragists." Do you hear anybody say that? Never. Well, Susan B. Anthony fought against somebody all of those years!

I can tell you with confidence, no one will say they were against women. They'll say we just didn't have our act together. I know with confidence that when we go over the top, they are going to tell us that they were with us all along. As a matter of fact, Mr. Reagan will tell us he was with us in '72--he got a little diverted along the track.

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Are you willing to make the sacrifices necessary? Will you make the commitment necessary? When I say those words, I know each one of you knows exactly what they mean.

It is not empty rhetoric. What more can you do? You are just one person. Alice Paul said one person was enough and she did get us an awful far way.

I know that the women of this nation can count on us. What I am asking is, can the women of this nation count on each of you to give all you can?