

EXCERPT FROM REMARKS GIVEN AT THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM LUNCH†

*JUSTICE RUTH BADER GINSBURG**

Turning from advice, I would like to devote the remainder of my brief time with you to an account of what it means to me to be—as I am often billed, and as indeed I am, and as I expect all people here are—a feminist. I had the good fortune to be alive and a lawyer in the late 1960s when, for the first time in history, it became possible to urge before courts, successfully, that society would benefit enormously if women were regarded as persons equal in stature to men. In my college years, 1950-1954, it was widely thought that women were not suited for many of life's occupations—lawyering and bartending, banking and brokering, military service, foreign service, piloting planes, jury service, tenured positions at universities, to take just a few of many examples that now seem ancient. So much has changed for the good since then. But there are still too many people who regard feminism with suspicion, people who are discomforted by the very word, even people who call it (friends in Oklahoma told me) the “F” word.

A case in point: on June 26, 1996, with only one dissenting opinion, the Supreme Court held that, under the Constitution's equal protection principle, the Commonwealth of Virginia could not exclude from a public military college, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), women who wished to attend and could meet the entrance requirements.¹ I wrote the Court's opinion, which some greeted with applause, and others deplored. Among the deplorers, Phyllis Schlafly wrote in an open letter from the *Eagle Forum*:

The VMI decision was wholly predictable when Clinton appointed Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Court. Her activist determination to write her radical feminist goals into the Constitution was all laid out in her published writings, but no Senator questioned her about them. Every Senator who voted for her confirmation shares in the shame of this decision.

† Washington, D.C., Oct. 15, 1999.

* Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States.

¹ U.S. v. Virginia, 518 U.S. 515 (1996).

Also sharing in the shame, or in my judgment, the good sense and legal fidelity of the decision, were six of my colleagues. For, in truth, the VMI decision was not about the military or the viability of single-sex schools. Rather, it was about a State that heavily invested in a college designed to produce business and civic leaders, that succeeded admirably in the endeavor, and that rigorously limited this special opportunity to men.

And I continue to gain encouragement from people who appreciate what feminism really means. It is *not* a pejorative. It means freeing people, men as well as women, to be you and me, allowing people to pursue the talents and qualities they have without artificial restraints.

Some seasons ago, my grand colleague, Sandra Day O'Connor, first and for twelve years sole woman on the United States Supreme Court, made a surprise appearance in the D.C. Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Henry V*. Playing the role of Isabel, Queen of France, she spoke the famous line: "Haply a woman's voice may do some good." Indeed it may.

Just one illustration, called to my attention by Justice O'Connor: in 1993, Helen Suzman published the story of her life and times in a book called *In No Uncertain Terms*. For many years, Suzman was the sole voice against apartheid in South Africa's Parliament, and the lone woman in that legislative chamber. She recounts this scolding from another member of the Parliament:

The Honorable Member . . . must stop chattering. She is in the habit of chattering continually. If my wife chattered like that Honorable Member, I would know what to do with her. There is nothing that works on my nerves more than a woman who continually interrupts me. She is like water dripping on a tin roof.

That was in 1965. The Honorable Member was "chattering" about the need to end apartheid. The scolding came from the mouth of former President of South Africa, P.W. Botha, who later learned that voices for democracy can do more than grate on the nerves of oppressors.

A few years ago, at the celebration of the reopening of the renovated Library of Congress Jefferson Building, a college student came up to my table and asked if I could help with an assignment. She had one question and hoped to compose a paper by asking people attending the celebration to respond. What, she asked, did I think was the largest problem for the next century? My mind raced past privacy concerns in the electronic age, assisted suicide, deadly weapons, outer space. I thought of Helen Suzman's "chattering," of Thurgood Marshall's praise of the evolution of the constitutional concept, "We, the people," to include once excluded, ignored, or undervalued people, then of the U.S.A.'s motto: *E Pluribus Unum*, of many, one. The challenge is to make or keep our communities places where we can understand, accommodate, even celebrate, our differences, while putting together for the common good.

“Of many, one” is the main aspiration, I believe; it is my hope for my country and for our world.

