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NOW Calls on Clinton to Foreswear "Nuts or Sluts" Defense, Work with Congress to Strengthen Women's Rights Laws

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Statement of NOW President Patricia Ireland

We will likely never know the truth about Juanita Broaddrick's accusation against Bill Clinton. It's virtually impossible to prove or defend against a 21-year-old rape charge. Perhaps the best way to respond is to call on President Clinton and his supporters not to launch a broadside against his accuser and to urge the president and the Congress to work to improve the status of women.

The Washington Post reports that government investigators "found her account inconclusive." Ms. Broaddrick's account, however, is particularly compelling because, like Kathleen Willey, she has been a reluctant witness with no apparent political or financial motivation.

I understand why she would not want to get involved with the Paula Jones case and why she would give an affidavit denying what she now says is true,

I understand why a woman wouldn't file charges of rape 21 years ago--especially against the attorney general of Arkansas -- especially if she's a married woman who's having an affair. And I understand why she has been reluctant to come forward now.

When I was in law school, I learned that the best rape survivor from the prosecution's point of view is a woman who is old enough to tell her story, but not old enough to have ever had a smoke, a drink or a date.

Ever since the Garden of Eden, in sexual matters, men have been dominant and women have taken the blame.

Ms. Broaddrick says even she blamed herself at the time. After all, she had invited him up to her room. And she was sure she would not be believed.

Now that she has come forward with her story, the National Organization for Women urges everyone to treat Juanita Broaddrick fairly and respectfully and to take her charges seriously. She must not be besieged by attacks on her mental state or character.

NOW calls on President Clinton to denounce this "nuts or sluts" defense, the argument that she either made it up or asked for it. The president should pledge publicly not to seek, or leak, irrelevant sexual history or other parts of Ms. Broaddrick's personal or work life, and not to let anyone do so on his behalf.

As with other charges against Clinton, a phalanx of partisan lawyers, spokespeople and politicians who are opponents of the women's rights movement are linked to the most recent accusation. Ms. Broaddrick's story was unearthed by the attorneys in the Jones suit. When they did not get Ms. Broaddrick's cooperation, Ken Starr pursued her and convinced her to testify against the president, after giving her immunity on perjury. Ms. Broaddrick was not deposed by the House leadership or managers. Instead, wavering House members were urged to review the Independent Counsel's still-

secret files on the investigation by his office of her accusation.

Unlike most of the voices raised on Ms. Broaddrick's behalf, NOW has been working to improve women's rights on the job for more than three decades. Ultra conservatives are using this case to advance their long-standing political interest in weakening the president, undermining equal opportunity laws and discrediting the movement to strengthen women's rights.

The House managers, with their Johnny-come-lately concern about sexual harassment, should join us in a campaign to strengthen the laws against it. The unreasonable time limit of only 180 days to file charges must be at least doubled. And women ought to be able to collect every penny of damages they prove in sex discrimination cases, without the existing arbitrary limit on the amount.

Those who are horrified by the reality of rape should work to pass the new Violence Against Women Act to support survivors of such violence and put more programs in place to prevent it. We must push to amend the Hate Crimes Act to cover hate crimes against women.

Traditional opponents of women's rights need to put up or shut up.

If they care about women's rights, then stop wasting time on unprovable charges and start working to improve the lives of women. That is what NOW has done and will continue to do.

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