

Press Release

**June 8, 2006**

## **Schakowsky Welcomes Chilean President Michelle Bachelet**

Addresses White House Project Dinner in Washington

**WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky attended a dinner honoring Chilean President Michelle Bachelet on her first visit to the United States since her election in January. Representative Schakowsky gave remarks about her trip to Chile to witness the inauguration of President Bachelet.**

**Below is the text of Representative Schakowsky's speech:**

**Welcome Madame President. Thank you Marie Wilson and the White House Project. This is a very special night in Washington, D.C., a gathering of U.S. women leaders to celebrate the first woman in Latin America to be elected head of state, the President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet. Thanks to the White House Project, our hosts tonight, I was privileged to travel to Chile to witness her inauguration on March 11. What an inspiring, thrilling experience that was.**

**The atmosphere in Santiago was electric, joyful. Banners like this were waving everywhere. Women especially were excited about their new leader, and they were clearly proud. Some wore red, white and blue sashes like the Presidential sash placed on the new President by the outgoing one. And banners like this one were everywhere.**

**In Chile, when the new President is inaugurated and is wearing the sash, the former President and all his cabinet leave the building. President Lagos, a tall, elegant man who leaves office with a 70% approval rating, walked out to great applause and held his arms out like this. When Michelle came in, she waved liked this. It was a charming difference I**

noticed.

In many ways Michelle Bachelet is an unlikely president for a socially conservative country like Chile. In her own words, "Who would have thought, 20, 10 or even 5 years ago, that Chile would elect a woman President!" And not just any woman either. Michelle modestly said about herself that she embodies "all of the mortal sins in Chile" being female, socialist, separated and agnostic.

As unlikely as her victory might seem on paper, it was completely understandable once I saw her. Michelle Bachelet really has IT! She has that magical way of connecting with people that is positively irresistible -- her smile, her friendly wave, her straight-forward talk. I'm sure even those of you in the back of the room could immediately see and feel it yourself. So strong and yet so feminine, some say motherly -- though she doesn't want to carry the mother thing too far - "not a permissive mother," she says. "One who can be firm."

She also has a very compelling story to tell. Michelle's father, Air Force General Alberto Bachelet, was serving in the democratically-elected socialist government of Salvador Allende, when Augusto Pinochet came to power through a military coup, assisted by the United States, in 1973. He died in prison where he was subjected to daily torture. A few months later, Michelle and her mother were arrested and detained at a clandestine torture center called Villa Grimaldi.

Our group visited Villa Grimaldi, guided by two women who had also been detained there. They told us the grisly details of life in that secret prison where some 4,500 political had been brought - most surviving, many "disappeared", and some executed. Lelia told us how the woman survived in these tiny cells, about 3 X 3 feet, that unbelievably held up to five women - for an average of 15 days but some for months. She said, "We took care of each other. We shared water. We learned the better ways to survive torture, how to react, how to create a credible profile of a traditional woman by doing things like crying. It gave us some control. We dealt with hygiene. An old woman was allowed to go to the bathroom more often, so she would wear all our clothes and wash it. A young medical student helped the women. Now she is President of Chile."

Michelle Bachelet didn't come out of nowhere. Trained as a pediatrician, she eventually was appointed by outgoing President, Ricardo Lagos as Health Minister. She also had a deep interest in civil-military relations, studying at the InterAmerican Defense College in Washington, and was appointed Defense Minister in 2002, one of the few women in the world to hold that position.

President Bachelet promised and then delivered on that promise to appoint a Cabinet made up of an equal number of men and women. But gender equality doesn't stop at the minister level in Chile. Throughout her Administration, women hold positions of prominence that are the envy of feminists around the world. But we need to do more than cheer her on. We also have to do everything we can to make sure that her government succeeds, and I believe I speak for my sisters in the House of Representatives when I say

**we look forward to working collaboratively with you and your Administration.**

**My trip to Chile filled me with hope, and reinforced my belief that profound change can and does happen. Michelle Bachelet went from political prisoner to President of her country. The same is true of Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, the President of Liberia, the first woman to head an African nation. They are an inspiration to girls and women all around the world and to those of us who look forward to the day when the United States of America will be led, not just in a TV series, as important as that is, Geena, but in reality, by a woman we call Madame President.**

**Enjoy this wonderful celebration, enjoy this beautiful dinner. Buen provecho!**