

04/23/93
WALSH, KEN
U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

April 23, 1993

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
AND THE FIRST LADY BY
KEN WALSH OF U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT

The Rose Garden

Q I wanted to just, since this has been such an extraordinary week, take maybe five minutes to just ask you, just coming off the news, if I could -- I know you're having a press conference this afternoon -- given the events of this week, how you deal with sort of the emotional part of a Waco or a Bosnia. If you could sort of cut that off, if you can put that out of your mind; if you even should? If there's an aspect of this dealing with a crisis that you have to sort of divorce yourself emotionally from it at some point?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think there's a point at which you have to let it go because you have to go on to other things. But of course, it affects you personally. Those things do. We talk about them at night and when we come home -- In some ways it's more difficult here because you kind of work where you live and it's all -- that's nice in some ways because it gives our family a lot more immediate access to one another. You don't spend as much time going to and from work as we used to.

But it had an effect, obviously, on us and -- a couple times I just picked up the phone and called Janet Reno to see how she was doing with that. Those things happen. And you can't -- the life we've lived all these years, it's just impossible to leave everything at the office. You can't do it.

Q Is it helpful to you that you feel that you really should leave things at the office? I mean, there can't be that sort of separation between sort of your own emotions and dealing with something and --

THE PRESIDENT: For example, we've spent a lot of time over the last month or so talking about the situation in Bosnia in our personal -- (inaudible) -- but we also, at some point, try to let it go. We try to spend some time every night after we go to bed reading, and talking, just doing something that has nothing to do

MORE

with work, because if you don't, it's very hard to get replenished for the next day.

Q Right. And the other side of it is on the policy side, where you didn't get your stimulus proposal through the Senate. When you deal with a setback like that, is it a matter that you get angry, that you feel that you just sort of leave it there and don't take things personally? How do you deal on the policy side of the setback?

THE PRESIDENT: I think when something like that happens -- for one thing, that's a very different sort of thing. I dealt with a very -- kind of contentious and difficult legislative situation from time to time for over a decade as a governor. Some of the changes I have fought for, particularly in the area of political reform, took 10 years to get done. The country's been going in a certain direction for more than a decade; I'm trying to turn it around. I've been here less than 100 days, so I don't take that personally. There are all kinds of political, as well as economic elements in that whole issue. And what we try to do when something like that happens is to regroup, analyze what happens, what were the motivations of the people who were on all sides of the issues, why did it come out the way it did, what could we have done differently to make it come out better.

There will be sort of an endless string of these back and forth with Congress over these domestic issues. Frankly, I was amazed they adopted the budget resolution as quickly as they did, more or less intact. I mean, these things are -- it's not just politics, there are also real ideas at stake. There's a certain mindset that I'm trying to break in this town and I knew it would take a while to do. So I'm not particularly discouraged about it. In fact, I'm like everybody else; if I can win 100 percent of the time, I'd do it. But you can't do that. You just have to keep going.

Q Is part of that mindset that the 100 days -- I mean, is that even a realistic gauge of anything?

THE PRESIDENT: Not anymore. I mean, when Roosevelt had his 100 days, he had two advantages I didn't have. Number one, he didn't have to start until March. So he got a hugely greater time to get started. And, secondly, there was a level of receptivity because one in four people were unemployed, and the government was -- thirdly, the government was much less bureaucratic. I'm amazed at just how long it takes once we nominate someone to go through their FBI checks. It just takes forever -- too long to get things done. But we've done a lot in 100 days, and we've got to do some more. And

MORE

on the 100th day, we're going to introduce the national service bill. And then after that, there's a lot more coming.

We've got our whole empowerment strategy for the cities coming. We've got all the political reform things that are coming -- campaign finance reform, more on the lobbying front and a number of other issues, in terms of reforming the government. We've got the big welfare reform initiative still coming this year. But I was telling Hillary this morning and we were laughing about it a little bit -- when I was elected Governor in '82, we had until September to develop an education program which was a big, complex thing, but not as complex as health care. So I think we're moving this pretty quickly.

Now it's ten years later and there's a lot more kind of bureaucracy in the government. We've got federal -- all these federal forces, so we're going to keep pushing it. I hope the people will be a little patient with the administration and understand what the realistic time frames are.

Q On that same thing, Mrs. Clinton, we want to ask you, obviously, Americans really felt for you and your father recently. I think they're also curious just how momentous a personal event like that affects your views of health care and whether a very recent experience with physicians and hospitals made you think differently about health care, or think anew about it?

MRS. CLINTON: You know, I haven't really processed all that. It's something that we went through, and we had a very good relationship with all of the doctors. They were all friends of ours. We knew the people at the hospital, and it was a very supportive environment for my whole family. Obviously, I would like to see everyone have the same kind of opportunity to be supported when they go through something like that.

It certainly reinforced for me how, at the bottom of all of this talk about financing health care and organizing the delivery of it and all of the ways that they talk about it in Washington, at the bottom are these very profound human relations. What we're trying to do is to free up people in health care to once again take care of patients and not fill out forms and not be second-guessed by bureaucrats and try to strip away a lot of paperwork and the red tape that really does stand in the way of people actually coming together as human beings around these really profound and difficult issues of life and death.

So I think it reinforced me in my fundamental belief about what is at the end of this process and what it is we're trying

MORE

to do for every American to make them secure and feel the way that my family felt at the end of a very difficult experience.

Q Just on the main reason we asked you to talk to us today --

MRS. CLINTON: Can I move a little closer to you? I feel like I'm not really hearing you as well as I'd like to.

Q Great. Basically, on the point of -- so many American working families have to juggle their jobs and their personal lives, find time for each other for activities and still pursue their careers. And I wonder if you have some guiding principles on how you do that balancing, if you carve time out for each other or for Chelsea and how that's done.

THE PRESIDENT: We're still trying to get it right. (Laughter.) After all these years. I don't know that this is particularly an appropriate time for us to evaluate it because we're still trying to establish a routine here. But, basically, we do try to have dinner every night together. We think that's important. And I try to get Chelsea up every morning. I talk to her a while then.

It appears now that -- it used to be that the mornings were the best time for Chelsea and me at least. I would always take her to school. But now, that's not practical. I mean, I could do it, but it would be terrible for her because of the press pool and all that -- (laughter) -- a lot of it is no fun when you're 13 to be taken to school by a caravan. But now we can at least meet at home at night.

But the real trick for us now, I think, is trying to find some time -- family time, and time for Hillary and me to be together at this time when we're trying to do all this health care and all these other things that we need to do that just swallow up your whole weekend. One of the things we really have to fight for is some time on Sunday -- sometimes a little bit on Saturday where we can just be together and do nothing -- just do nothing. One of the things Hillary has worked for years is to try to get me to do nothing.

Q I hear that from your staff as well. But is it -- what do you think the most valuable family time is for the Clinton family these days? Is it having dinner together? Is it the time you both can spend together or one on one with Chelsea? What is most important to you?

MRS. CLINTON: I think all of that is. I think that we've worked really hard to establish some time in the evening so

MORE

that when we have dinner together, we try to do it as informally as possible so that it's a real family time and not something that is too structured. And we also try to spend time afterwards just talking, just finding out what's going on and helping with homework and -- just really being with each other. I think that organized activities are great, and we have movies here together and we've gone to Camp David once and we're going to do that again because that's really a good environment for all of us. But just kind of being with each other and letting the thoughts come out that are there -- how we feel about what's going on and -- that's the best time for us.

Q It seems like you've made a real effort to try to have a lot of friends in and keep in touch with folks and sort of avoid the bubble. How do you think all that is going ?

MRS. CLINTON: We have tried. We have tried. And we've tried to have our families here a lot, too. In fact, we had dinner with our mothers last night, with Chelsea. And it's really important to have our friends and our family around, and it's really important to Chelsea, too, to be with familiar people and people that knew us before we lived here. So we like to do a lot of that, and hope that we'll be able to keep that up.

Q Has it been easy for your friends to feel intimate with you and to feel as comfortable around you as they always have? Or is this whole setting a little off-putting sometimes?

THE PRESIDENT: I think a lot of -- it's hard to generalize. One of the nice things about it is that we have -- our families can come and stay with us more comfortably and more closely than they did before. That's -- (inaudible) -- a lot of -- nearly everybody that comes by from home, would come by and we'd have a visit -- that's been very nice. Very nice.

The thing that I find more difficult, with the exception of my morning run, is just the opportunities that I used to take in a very consistent way to try to keep -- (inaudible.) I always found that was much more valuable than polling or all that kind of thing. Polls come and go. You get a real sense of people's lives and the language they speak and the way they look at the world when you can relate to them in a kind of an unstructured way, that I could always do as Governor, and even as a candidate for president. It's much more difficult --

Q Is there anything you've been able to do, like dipping into the mail or --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I do that every -- I'll tell you what I do -- I get a representative sample of mail every week, and I

MORE

sign a fair number of the letters that go out every week just to real citizens, talking about their problems or what they think, and that's important.

I must say one of the most rewarding but frustrating aspects of this -- and I don't want to get off the -- (inaudible) -- we're getting more mail than any family ever had, and we just can't keep up with it. We cut back the number of people working on the staff, but we've dramatically increased the volunteers dealing with the mail. We've got -- we must have over 200 people helping us with the mail. And we're still -- we've got 500,000 letters over there.

Q We've seen stacks of them in the halls in the Old EOB.

MRS. CLINTON: It's really distressing us because we always answered every letter and felt a real obligation if people reached out to do that. It is very distressing to us personally that we have just been deluged. I mean, the good news is that people want to share their thoughts, and there are a lot of very not only heartfelt letters, but good ideas coming in from people. And the bad news is, we're just incapable right now of getting all that answered. And it really makes us feel bad.

Q Is there a pattern to what people are asking about in the mail, or is it just --

THE PRESIDENT: No. I mean, it depends on what's in the news. We'll get more letters on a subject in the news in a given week. We also are getting an awful lot of letters where citizens have done and write about things. We understood when we got here -- and I'm somewhat more sympathetic to it now than I was -- that previous administrations have not answered as much as two-thirds of the mail that -- (inaudible) -- but we came in with the hope that we could answer all the letters. Maybe even especially those were critical -- especially if they were genuine -- instead of, you know, just "I don't agree with you, why don't you do this" -- that kind.

And, yet, with 34,000 a day or something coming in, the highest volume they've ever recorded, we're still -- we'll get it down. We'll figure out how to do it. But I hope that --

THE FIRST LADY: We want everybody reading --

THE PRESIDENT: Well --

THE FIRST LADY: It's -- you will get an answer sometime, trust us.

MORE

THE PRESIDENT: We're working hard on it.

THE FIRST LADY: I felt so bad when I was in Montana. This really attractive boy came up to me, and his whole high school class had written letters. Each one had written about whatever it is that they were concerned about. They had written last month. And he said, you know, we haven't heard back. And I said, I'm so sorry, I said, I'll see if we can't try to find your letters for you. (Laughter.)

Q But I mean, it's nice if there's a -- people still feel there should be that personal connection, and can be. They expect it.

THE FIRST LADY: In addition to the letters that have come in just in general, we have now processed probably, I think, 60,000 -- and stacks more of those wait. But those were really impressive letters. I mean, just amazing letters. People doing things like, saying, I was in the hospital last year in two different places, and I got these bills, and look at how they differ. You know, it was just fascinating that people went to that trouble.

THE PRESIDENT: The mail on the health care has been very helpful to the work of Hillary's task force.

THE FIRST LADY: It sure has.

THE PRESIDENT: And we've gotten a lot of letters from doctors, not in an organized way, writing in, saying I want to help, here are the changes that I'd be prepared to make, here are the changes I wouldn't be prepared to make, here are the things that -- really detailed -- immensely helpful. And we have had the staff --

Q They've been given --

THE FIRST LADY: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: -- the health care credits. And people who would understand what they were reading. So that's been a great -- it's been amazingly helpful. I don't know if any endeavor like this before has ever been genuinely influenced by the spontaneous mail of citizens. But this one has, just because they're writing -- you know, go back to the original -- one of the things that we've always struggled with over the years that I think we really -- we've been trying to reassess here lately is that part of why people feel this personal connection is because we tried to be real people. And one of the things that we had to keep reminding ourselves of is that we have four years to work on this, we can't get it all done today, and we just have to keep pulling back and trying to make time for

MORE

each other and Chelsea and -- and our family and our friends. You know, if you lose that, that's part of what enabled you to --

Q Well, that -- I'm not -- each other. How do you do that? You have to be flexible. All working couples have to figure this out. I mean, do you try to -- do you still call each other a lot during the day?

Q And is it a mix of policy and --

THE FIRST LADY: Person --

Q Personal stuff?

THE PRESIDENT: When we talk on the phone during the day it's --

THE FIRST LADY: Usually personal.

THE PRESIDENT: Almost never policy. One in four, one in five -- I don't know --

Q And do you just pick up the phone and call each other, or do you try to touch base like once a day without fail, or -

THE PRESIDENT: Sometimes I just pick up the phone to see how she's doing. Sometimes I just get lonesome in there. -- I've taken a good whipping I'll stop and --

Q Are you able to sort of have lunch together alone at all?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, we've done that a couple of times.

THE PRESIDENT: We have done that a couple of times. We've got a little garden here in the White House and now that it's warming up.

MRS. CLINTON: Or in the study next to the Oval Office.

THE PRESIDENT: You know, it's interesting. That's the one thing I never did before I came here is I never have eaten lunch regularly. Ever. I always just work through lunch four out of five times unless I had a speech or, you know, some working lunch. I just didn't do it. Now, I've tried to adjust my diet --

Q -- lunch every day.

MORE

THE PRESIDENT: It's really quite nice to be here where I can see Hillary and -- (inaudible.)

Q I wanted to get back to Chelsea for a moment. As parents, how do you divide sort of responsibilities or sort of priorities in everything ranging from who handles what with her homework to, I understand, for instance, that when Chelsea gets home from school every day as most children do, call one of her parents and say I'm home. And then you go over to see her most days just to see how she's doing. Is that what happens?

MRS. CLINTON: Or she comes over to see us. She'll come over and see her dad sometimes and, on a few occasions, you know, bring her homework with her. He's the algebra homework --

THE PRESIDENT: I do the math.

MRS. CLINTON: He does the math. That's absolutely his domain. Then kind of depending upon what's going on we'll check in and see what she needs. Maybe she'll call and say, you know, I want to go to a friends house. Because we're both here she can find either one of us which is kind of nice.

Q Right.

MRS. CLINTON: And then we try to meet her friends that she's making, you know, new friends here. So, we have them over. We've had girls over for meals and for overnights and we both try to be there when that happens so that we can meet them and meet the parents as they pick them up or drop them off.

I got to go to two soccer games and the softball games keep getting rained out, so I haven't got to those yet. But it's pretty much like most working families. You try to be there as much as you possibly can physically and you then try to stay in touch by phone and other ways. But what we try to do is to schedule this time at night to know that we're going to have dinner together and know we're going to spend time together.

She and her dad like to watch terrible movies together.

THE PRESIDENT: We like adventure movies.

MRS. CLINTON: What I view terrible.

THE PRESIDENT: -- there was a James Bond. One of the networks were showing two James Bond movies back to back so after Chelsea did her homework she came and we watched the end of one of the James Bond movies. She got in the bed and she laid in front of

MORE

her mother, who didn't like them as much. Oh, she kind of likes Sean Connery.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, I like Sean Connery. Yes, that's from my youth.

THE PRESIDENT: Last night after she finished her homework, she came into my office that's up in the residence and we watched the end of the incredible Philadelphia 76ers and the Portland Trailblazers last night. -- (inaudible) -- the lead changed hands three times in the last minute. It was unbelievable.

Q Is she a basketball fan?

THE PRESIDENT: We like basketball because Arkansas has had a good basketball team ever since she's been a little girl, ever since she was born. So, she's kind of gotten into that. So, we watched that and played Crazy 8s for a while and just talked.

Q Well, I understand that during Chelsea's birthday weekend she had some friends over and -- (inaudible) -- they played hide and seek and one of the girls asked you a place to hide. Could you tell us where that was?

THE PRESIDENT: It's a secret.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, that's top secret. That's classified.

Q But you did help --

THE PRESIDENT: I really liked it when she had all those girls over. That was good. She had a --

MRS. CLINTON: Of course, they all stayed up all night long. It was wonderful except we're too old for that any more.

THE PRESIDENT: They bowled. They went over to the old EOB and bowled.

Q What I want to ask is I'm writing a piece as part of this package. Just about the question of sort of management in the White House, and I know you've thought a lot about -- over the years. I've been talking to folks here and to people like -- (inaudible) -- I'm curious as to how you think that's going? If you feel like you've got the kind of process where you want it?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's going reasonably well. No, I think we've got part of it where we want it. I think that the real

MORE

trick I think is that basically the teamwork is working well. We have -- I just got a long sort of recommendations today, for example, on two issues that I care a lot about. One, is the -- empowerment agenda and the other is the community development banks which relate to that. How do we more for the community banks. And I really was impressed by the way all the relevant folks in the White House and all the relevant folks in the government got together, worked together, came up with a fairly quick decision and had -- (inaudible) -- that I still have to decide myself.

That's where the stuff is going in. And by and large I think Hillary would say the same about where the health care thing is working. We brought in all the different government departments and there's a real sense of teamwork.

We have been, usually but not always, very good at kind of involving people outside the White House. You know, the people in the Congress, people in the -- (inaudible) --

So, I like all that. I still am not satisfied with the level of flexibility and response sort of in -- there's a -- this place is -- I'm so much more understanding of my previous presidents who have had difficulty breaking out, changing, doing things differently; that the whole system is designed basically to slow you down and just -- (inaudible.)

And I'm working on it but it's just not quite there yet. I've visited a couple of departments and I want to visit a lot more. Al Gore's going out -- (inaudible) -- there are just a lot more things that I want to do. I think after I've been here about six months I think I'll have it down. But it's not quite where I want it yet.

Q Just, finally, any sort of advice you'd have for working folks around the country in how to juggle all these responsibilities these days in whatever their lives are like?

THE PRESIDENT: All I can say is that, you know, we have really struggled with it and we've worked at it for 20 years. And sometimes we've been better at it than others. You always pay a price if you sacrifice too much -- (inaudible.) Some guy said to me four or five years ago, I can't remember who it was, but hardly anybody ever said on his or her

MORE