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AN INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
BY ELAINE PORTERFIELD FOR THE MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Q I covered your husband when he came out for the Governors Conference about three or four years ago, where he was talking about health care reform.

MRS. CLINTON: Good.

A VOICE: We have got just right at 10 minutes, maybe a little less. We are running behind schedule.

Q Okay. Anyway, I hear you know a lot about the state plane.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes.

Q Our insurance commissioner and our governor both told me that. One of the things I am hearing from my legislature is business is leaning pretty hard on them to maybe hold up elements of our state plan until we know more of the federal plan. I guess it is some of our big hitters in the state. What kind of advice would you give?

MRS. CLINTON: I would tell them not to do it, because we are going to give states like Washington, which have had the courage and leadership to go forward, the opportunity to continue doing that. And it would be a great mistake, given the progress you are making and the way costs are beginning to be stabilized and decreased, to let the pressure up. And so I would really strongly advise legislators not to do it.

Because either a plan will pass that gives Washington the chance to keep doing what it is doing, or we will continue to be fighting about it for the next months, in which case, if Washington stops, you lose all that you have

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already achieved.

Q You probably know, and I am sure every reporter asks you this: ERISA waivers are going to be a big part of whatever we are able to do. What are you hearing? What do you think is possible?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I am hoping with real, national health care reform, the whole need for ERISA waivers will disappear because states will have a national framework, but they will be able to make decisions within that, such as what Washington has already done. So that should be a problem that reform takes care of.

In the event it does not, then Washington has a very strong case and should be granted whatever waivers it needs to do the job it is doing.

Q Not according to Durenberger, but.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, he doesn't make those decisions. Because the problem is it has to be looked at through the view of what is in the best interest of the people of Washington.

Q Yes. Unfortunately, when they passed the big omnibus legislation a couple years ago -- I guess it was in '93 -- one of the elements the more conservative interests were able to insert was exempting large self-insurers like Boeing, which I think is going to make implementation kind of interesting here for a while.

MRS. CLINTON: But that's really, they set it at 7,000 or more. Are there any --

Q It's 5,000 or more. But I'm hearing like on the Moynihan plan, it would be like just 100 or more. What do you think we might see, ultimately, from the federal government? And is that true? Does Moynihan's plan just --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, there is no plan by anybody. It is all being melded together to come up with a piece of legislation in both the House and the Senate. And we will have to see what the final result is. But that is why Washington should go forward with its own plan.

Q Do you indeed think we are coming up to the

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final, last, most important week, as the national press keeps reporting?

MRS. CLINTON: I think the next couple of weeks. I don't think this next week is that last, most important week. I think the next couple of weeks will be very important because we have been working up to this point. The debate needs to get focused on two alternatives -- one in the House, one in the Senate -- so that people can really judge how it will affect them and make their decisions accordingly.

That is what always happens with complex legislation. You have to get to a point where you can easily see what the alternatives are. And the debate for the last year and a half has been about principles, and it has been about how we needed reform and what reform could do to help people. But now we have to get to the point of actually making the hard, legislative calls.

Q What do you think when you look out on crowds like that, and the whole back half was a lot of Rush Limbaugh fans and other local conservative radio people? What kind of message -- I was kind of intrigued by what you said, that there are always people who are against Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid.

MRS. CLINTON: Right. I think that it is a very high compliment that they are paying us, because they wouldn't be so agitated if the President were not succeeding in changing the country away from the years of high deficits and denial of social responsibility and irresponsibility; to dealing with the deficit, bringing it down; creating 3.8 million jobs through an economic recovery; dealing with tough issues like guns on our streets and putting on more police to protect us. Just the whole range of approaches that the President is taking which are beginning to work.

For whatever reason, these people are opposed to it. So I consider it kind of high flattery that they are so agitated.

Q I was impressed. I was impressed by Jim McDermott standing up. He was sounding pretty enthusiastic.

MRS. CLINTON: Jim McDermott has been a great leader on health care reform for the entire Congress. He is a doctor. He understands first hand what we are trying to

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achieve. I am very grateful for all the help and advice he has given to us. And he is going to be there, fighting to make this work for real people.

Q Yes. I thought he was being pretty graceful about everything, actually.

Now, what element have I not asked you about that you think the press has been missing, and that you think is important?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, let me say that one of the great challenges that we have in the next few weeks is that, for most Americans, this debate is only now coming into focus. And I hope that the press, through the media, will be educating people. Because most people want more information than they are getting. If all they get is misinformation or sound bites or the kind of negative opposition that they can turn on their radio and here, they are not going to be able to help make good decisions by letting their members of Congress know.

The American people are pretty smart about this. Consistently, 70 to 80 percent have supported universal coverage with guaranteed insurance paid for by an employer-employee based system.

Q Sixty-five percent.

MRS. CLINTON: You bet. And, in fact, most polls have it higher: 72, 75 percent. So we know that the American people get this issue.

What the press has to do is make sure they keep getting the information they need to make good judgments about how we are doing it.

Q Do you think there has been a tendency to report it as a baseball game as opposed to a fundamental, moral issue?

MRS. CLINTON: Yeah. I think that is one of the problems that we have had. And I think that if you go back and look at a lot of the coverage that was done even last year, around the time that the President presented his principles, there was some very good, informative coverage. But we have to do it again. It is not enough to say one time, "Here is how insurance works. Here is how we will save

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money if everybody is insured." You have to explain it to people.

It took me months to understand this stuff. I am one of those people who always had health insurance and never read my health insurance policy. And I have been blessed, because I have never needed it.

Except -- I will tell you what happened. After my daughter was born and I read the baby books about how many immunizations she needed and how many well child exams she needed, I was shocked when I took her to the doctor the first time and was told my insurance policy didn't cover taking her to the doctor. Whereas if she had gotten sick and I had taken her to the emergency room, everything would have been covered.

So, like a lot of Americans, I never paid any attention to health insurance. I took it for granted. Well, those days are over, for all of us. And we have to really understand how the system currently works, why it is a real burden for working, middle-class, insured people. And we have to figure out how to give every American the same guaranteed health insurance that members of Congress and federal employees have.

And that is doable. And it won't take a lot of effort if we just put our minds to it and figure out how we are going to get it done. Hawaii did it 20 years ago. And they didn't lose jobs. And small business has insurance at 30 percent less than what it is on the mainland. We can do this in America, and Washington is leading the way.

Q I have tried fruitlessly to get a junket to Hawaii for several months now.

MRS. CLINTON: Keep trying. It is worth it. Have you ever been there to study the system?

Q No. (Inaudible) we sent somebody over last year. But I still want to find out for myself.

MRS. CLINTON: Let me just give you one last anecdote. Pizza Hut is against health care reform in America. Pizza Hut sells lots of pizzas around the world, and in countries like Germany and Japan, they pay for health care for their German and Japanese workers. Pizza Hut also

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sells a lot of pizzas in Hawaii, and they pay for health care for their Hawaiian workers. They haven't gone out of business. In fact, a pizza costs less in Hawaii than it costs in Alaska, which has no employer-employee guaranteed insurance system.

So we ought to start asking, How come American businesses -- especially the big ones -- can afford to insure people in Germany and Japan and even in Hawaii, and they can't do it, or claim they can't do it in Washington or Oregon or California?

And for small businesses, we need to educate them that they are being taken advantage of by big businesses like that. Because big businesses can get breaks if they decide, because they are so big. Small businesses are the ones that are discriminated against.

And in Hawaii, where small businesses have to pay for health insurance for their employees, insurance is 30 percent less than it is on the mainland.

So we need to get better information to small business, because they are being used by people who, for political and financial reasons, do not want health care in America.

Q Thank you so much.

MRS. CLINTON: You're welcome.

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