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MITCHELL, SENATOR GEORGE
PORTLAND, MAINE

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
PRESS AVAILABILITY WITH SENATOR MITCHELL, PORTLAND MAINE

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, how far is the President willing to compromise in this particular plan? Obviously what's in the plan now may not be what it finally is. How far is the President willing to go in terms of compromise? Because there is a lot of critics at this point.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, the President has said what he believes has to be done, and that is to provide guaranteed private insurance to every American. The process has now moved to the Congress and stands ready to work with members of Congress to achieve that objective. That is the most important objective (inaudible) he has said over and over.

A PARTICIPANT: Do you believe that the plan, he talks of (inaudible) and momentum, that other people who are proposing other plans are (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I don't think so at all. I think that now Congress is really starting to focus on this issue and asking all the hard questions. They will ask of the President's approach, they will ask of everybody else's approach. I think that's very healthy.

What we are concerned about is not who gets the credit, or who gets to say they did whatever they did. We are concerned about the final product. And we are just at the beginning of that process. And these gentlemen here are going to be involved over the next months in putting together the bill that will be voted on.

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, after a day in Maine, what do you come away convinced are the unique needs of the people of Maine as opposed -- putting aside the rest of the country?

MRS. CLINTON: I think Maine has some unique

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characteristics that we hope we have addressed in the President's plan. One is certainly the rural nature of Maine and the difficulty of delivering health care across very long distances. And there are a number of features in the President's plan that will make it possible to deliver health care very effectively throughout rural Maine, which we think is important.

The other point I would make is that Maine has a lot of centers of population that need to be linked with the rest of the state so that through the use of technology someone in Portland will be able to perhaps communicate with somebody in another part of the state. Instead of having people move from one part or the other to receive their medical care, we can link people together. And that's not just good for rural areas. It's good for urban areas as well in the state.

A PARTICIPANT: How doable is this plan by the time the next election process gets started which takes the focus out of everything?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we think it's going to be done this year.

A PARTICIPANT: That confident?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes.

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, Congress with its national budget problems is expected to say that private health care should be on the budget (inaudible) through taxes. If so, how much would that help or hurt your plan?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I heard today that they were going to say that. I think that's really a technical dispute among policy analysts in Washington. I don't think it's going to make much difference one way or the other out in the country. It would be like saying that because Congress requires a minimum wage, that every wage that any restaurant in Portland pays to a minimum wage employee should be on the federal budget. It doesn't make any sense to me, so I don't think it's going to be a real issue with real people one way or the other.

What I hear in Maine, what I heard this morning, what I hear this afternoon, are very specific questions about

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"what will happen to me and family." And I think the American public will get a little impatient if the debate in Congress is offering some technical policy as being the issue instead of saying, well, it's going to cover insulin, it's going to cover prenatal care. I mean, that's the kind of thing people talk to me about.

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, after talking to the kind of people that you spoke with today, seniors, people on fixed income, what's your feeling as to the biggest hurdle that you may have to overcome to convince them to (inaudible) your plan and support it?

MRS. CLINTON: I think most older Americans, through their organized groups, certainly, such as AARP and the National Council of Senior Citizens, the Council on Aging, and some other groups are very supportive of preserving and improving Medicare. I think it is natural for older Americans, like my mother, to worry about Medicare. Because, after all, Medicare is the only secure health care system we have in the country. If you are over 65, you have health security to the extent that Medicare pays for it.

So I wanted to particularly emphasize today that what we are trying to do is to preserve and improve Medicare because we don't want any older American to worry about that. We want them to know we are going to try to provide prescription drug coverage and long-term care which are the two things I am asked about most.

A PARTICIPANT: (Inaudible).

MRS. CLINTON: It's a very important issue in states like Maine. As I have said, I am very convinced, coming from a state that is rural, that we have to do the right thing by our rural citizens. In many parts of our country rural residents don't have adequate access. So we are going to do some things. We are going to provide guaranteed private insurance which will provide a financial base of stability to provide health care in rural areas.

We are going to increase the National Health Service Corps to encourage more physicians and advanced practice nurses to go into rural areas by forgiving their loans for medical school and paying them so that they can afford to practice in those areas.

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We are also going to be looking at hospitals and other facilities in rural parts of states like Maine in saying that they are essential providers and therefore need to be supported.

And we are going to increase our use of technology. I have seen some wonderful things this past year. I have been in places where rural physicians' office, they can take an x-ray and hold it up to a screen, and it can be read 400 miles away in the medical school. That means two things: It means that the person whose x-ray that is, hasn't had to get in the car to drive 400 miles. And it also means that the physician in that rural area can be supportive. They are not out there all by themselves as so many rural doctors are.

So we are particularly concerned. My husband cares deeply about rural areas of our country. And this plan tries to address their health care needs.

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, (inaudible) Maine, how is the largely uninsured student population exhibited in the plan?

MRS. CLINTON: That's a good question. Under the President's plan every citizen will be included in health care. Many students, if they come from families with insurance, are kept on their families' plans until 21, sometimes until 23. But it is true that many students in their 20s then lose coverage, don't have it. Under the President's plan there are provisions for helping to provide discount for students to enable them to be insured, and also to support facilities like school health clinics and university clinics so that they have real access to health care. So they will be part of the system.

SENATOR MITCHELL: I would like to make one point, if I might, emphasizing the point that Mrs. Clinton made, that's appropriate for us standing here in a senior citizens' facility. Only the President's plan, from all of the plans that have been proposed, provides prescription drug coverage for senior citizens. Only the President's plan among all of the plans that have been proposed provides long-term care in a home-base setting.

Indeed, it is precisely those factors which improve coverage for elderly Americans, that has subjected the President's plan to so much criticism from the opposed who

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argue that we cannot and should not include these provisions in the plan. And that will be one of the decisive battlegrounds in the Congress on this issue. Those who oppose the President's plan are against including prescription drug coverage for senior citizens and long-term care, home-based care for senior citizens. The President has put it in his plan, and is determined to fight for it.

And I think it's important that as this debate unfolds, senior Americans understand there is only one plan that proposes to help them in this way, and that's the President's plan.

Thank you all very much.

(The interview was concluded.)

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