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Today Show
Maria Shriver

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TRANSCRIPT

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TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAM
HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
THE FIRST LADY
WASHINGTON, D.C.
DISCUSSES HER NEW BOOK ON NBC TODAY.

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NBC TODAY SHOW

JANUARY 16, 1996

SPEAKERS LIST: MARIA SHRIVER, NBC
HILLARY CLINTON, FIRST LADY

SHRIVER: On Close-up this morning, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. This week she is out on the road promoting her new book "It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Have Taught Us." She is here to talk about that and of course about everything else that is rolling around here. Good morning, Mrs Clinton, thank you for joining us.

CLINTON: I'm glad to be here.

SHRIVER: I know this is an extremely exciting time for you with the publication of your first book, which is really the culmination of about 25 years of work on behalf of kids. But it's also been a difficult time with all of the stories swirling around you from Whitewater to the travel office to missing billing records. What's this last week and a half been like for you personally?

CLINTON: Well it's been a real challenge, Maria. Obviously I would love to be out talking about my book, because I think there is so much to help our children, and every one of us can try to do something for a child. But I also know that these other questions are out there so I'm trying to do my very best to answer the questions about Whitewater and everything else, and then try to keep talking about children. Because I think, ultimately, that's much more important.

SHRIVER: In the book you write about preparing your daughter Chelsea for the negative things people might say to her about her father. But you don't say in the book about preparing her for the negative things people might say to her about her mom. What's this past week, two weeks, been like for her? What have you said to her? What has she said to you about these attacks?

CLINTON: You know in the book, as you know, I talk about how Bill and I

really thought, starting about ten years ago, that we had to prepare her. Any child whose parents are in public life in these days has to be ready to hear all kinds of charges about their parents. And because we started so long ago, and as I explained in the book, even having little mock debates with her about what people might or might not say, we've always been able to have very open conversations. So during these, you know last week and a half, especially since we were snowed in most of those days, we said, you know, what do you think? Do you have any questions? She understands that a lot of this unfortunately goes with the territory of being in public life.

SHRIVER: Do you think it's beyond the territory? I mean this is tough. This is your mom that someone's talking about. Is she upset by this? What have you said to her?

CLINTON: Well, I think she's upset. We're all upset. It's not very pleasant to see people making accusations against people that you love, but she has the same attitude about it we do, and that is that we will answer all the questions. There is nothing there. There never has been. And ultimately we have a lot of faith in the American people to make their own judgment. That's what we get up and believe every day.

SHRIVER: I think at the root of all of these stories and I think a lot of them are complicated and people don't understand the ends and outs of all of them, but at the root of it is your credibility which I know is something that's very important to you. In these polls that we're seeing, more than half the people are saying they don't believe you've told them the whole truth about Whitewater, the travel office. What do you, Hillary Clinton, need to do to regain that credibility?

CLINTON: I think, what I'm doing. Going out and talking. Of course, it's hurtful to have people question your credibility. That never happened to me before my husband started running for president, and I had done a lot of things in my life. But I also understand that it can be confusing for people who are getting bits and pieces of stories. They're only hearing half or maybe even only a tenth of what has actually been found. I bet there's not ten percent of the people in this country, for example, who know that an independent study commissioned by the RTC, headed by a former Republican U.S. Attorney, found that what my husband and I said starting in 1992 about the Whitewater investment was true. That we lost money. That we were passive investors. It was also true, as we said then, that we never ever took any kind of money whatsoever from Madison Savings and Loan. But most people, you know the accusations come so quickly that you don't have the time to stop and say wait a minute.

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XXX wait a minute.

CLINTON: Let's see where we are and hear the questions that have been answered. Now what are the next questions?

SHRIVER: I thought you could give people the whole story. Why not go down to Capitol Hill? Invite yourself down there. Even your critics think you would do a formidable job if you went down there and say, all right. I'm coming down. Give me all your questions. I'm going to answer everything. I'm not going to leave here until you're finished and then let's have this over with.

CLINTON: Well, you know, I have said, and I said again yesterday, I will do whatever it takes to cooperate.

SHRIVER: You think it will take that?

CLINTON: I don't know. It's certainly something that I have said repeatedly -- it's on the table. I will look at anything. Nobody wants this over with more than I do.

SHRIVER: Do you want to do it? Do you want to go down there?

CLINTON: Oh, I think it would be like having your teeth drilled. I mean I can't imagine anything worse, you know, than -- especially since you have no idea what the questions are. I mean, if I knew that they were going to ask me about X and Y, that would be fine, but these people think they can come out of left field, or more likely right field, and ask me anything. So, it's not going to be a very easy experience for anyone. But, I will do whatever it takes.

SHRIVER: Does your husband think you should do it?

CLINTON: I don't know. I haven't really asked him like that. I think what he ...

SHRIVER: You haven't?

CLINTON: No, because his attitude is just keep telling what happened just as we proved that what we said in 1992 was absolutely the truth. We will eventually prove that this is the case too. And I think he's more excited about my book, and he wants me to go out and talk about the book because this is something I've worked on for so many years.

SHRIVER: I want to get to the book, but I want to go through a couple of these things cause I know you want to clear them up as well. Let's talk for a minute about the travel office. You have said consistently that you did not fire anybody, did not ask for anybody to be fired, but you did raise concern. When you raised concern, what did you expect would happen once you said, I'm concerned about this?

CLINTON: I expected that everyone would look into it and that people in positions of responsibility would make whatever the right decisions were. I have consistently said when reports about financial mismanagement in the White

House travel office were first raised, I and others said, my goodness, you know, that sounds like something that needs to be examined. Other people did the work of determining that, indeed, there was financial mismanagement. Other people appropriately the Chief of Staff and others under his authority made the decisions. But I don't have any apology for in any way saying, I've heard there are reports of financial mismanagement.

SHRIVER: But did you want those people fired? Did you think that was appropriate?

CLINTON: Well, you know, once the accounting firm found that there was financial mismanagement, the White House, I believe, acted in the only way that it could have. Now, there have been ...

SHRIVER: By firing the people.

CLINTON: Well, by, yes, by saying, you know, we have found evidence of this. Now, clearly we are the ones who said, namely the administration, that there were mistakes made in the way that the actual decision was implemented. Maybe it wasn't done quite as sensitively, and it turned out there was only really one person who was involved in this financial mismanagement.

But the fact is, I don't know any American who cares about the integrity of the White House who would want anyone to turn a deaf ear to reports of financial mismanagement.

SHRIVER: Whitewater. I know you've been answering questions on this subject for four years. Thousands of pieces of documents have been handed over, but they still want even more. As you look back on this, do wish you'd never worked for Madison Guaranty?

CLINTON: Especially because it wasn't important to me at the time. Yes. I guess I do. Obviously, you know, if you could now have the hindsight in the current political environment where credibility is questioned and accusations are hurled over things that are perfectly appropriate, legal, but in retrospect, give cause for anyone to raise questions, of course, I wish that no one could raise this.

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XXX could raise this.

CLINTON: It's a little bit odd that in my 20 years of law practice and involvement in so many activities, you know, I'm getting grilled over what I did which amounted to about an hour of work over each week, over 15 months. And it was by no means important or significant to me at the time.

SHRIVER: So, you wish you'd never worked for them?

CLINTON: Of course, in retrospect, I didn't do anything wrong. Everyone who's looked at it says there wasn't anything wrong, but would I much rather be talking about children and what we could do to help children than answering questions about something I can barely remember 10 or 11 years ago, yes.

SHRIVER: Regarding these billing records that came about that had been subpoenaed two years ago, people say -- Gosh, how could a woman as smart and politically savvy as Hillary Clinton not know where these records were these past two years? Why didn't she make that her priority to find them, particularly when they were found in her own home under an assistant's desk?

CLINTON: Well, I think that I would love to know where they've been, too, because since they've proved what I've been saying all of these years, I would have loved to have had them out earlier. But, you know, we have literally millions of pieces of paper in the White House, and the one thing I did not do was conduct any searches. Can you imagine if I were the one who had been looking for anything and something had gone wrong what I'd be asked today.

So instead, this was completely the responsibility of the lawyers in the White House, our private lawyers and the people that they used both on the White House staff and outsiders to search. It is not at all surprising to me, personally, given the amount of documents, given the number of boxes that I moved from Arkansas, given the fact that it took us months and months to find things, to answer questions, the documents would still be discovered. But the important thing is that they were turned over as soon as they were found, and I was delighted they were finally found.

SHRIVER: Many women that I've spoken to are big fans of yours say that they find themselves saddened, even disappointed that you, who are so smart, who are so politically savvy could end up in this kind of a mess. Are you disappointed in yourself?

CLINTON: No, I don't have anything to be disappointed in. I think I've learned a lot. I do think that coming to the White House, particularly from my background, of someone who had worked -- I got my first job when I was 13. I had always been an independent person -- I didn't have any real knowledge of what was going to be at stake in terms of moving into this new arena. I think I've learned a lot.

I think that first year, 1993, was really a hard year for me. My father died. My friend Vince Foster killed himself. My mother-in-law's health deteriorated, and she died. If I had been back in Arkansas, that would have been an extraordinarily stressful year.

So, I'm sure that I could have been more quick to learn. I could have

avoided some mistakes, but I think that, you know, it's natural that you have to make your own mistakes, learn from them and go on. But I'm not at all disappointed in myself. I think that what I've tried to do the last three years on behalf of health care, and children and other things is very important.

SHRIVER: In the book, one of the chapters of the book, you said the most important thing we can give a child is a shovel. And I want to ask you to explain that in a second. But you also quote a letter in there that Nelson Mandela wrote to one of his daughters while he was in prison -- and I'm paraphrasing a bit -- but he wrote that there is no personal misfortune, that one can not turn in to a personal triumph if one has the iron will and the necessary skills.

You clearly have an iron will. You clearly are skilled. How are you going to turn this personal misfortune into a personal triumph?

CLINTON: Oh, I don't know if you could turn it into a triumph. And no-one will ever, at least in my personal experience, suffer the way leaders like Nelson Mandela did.

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XXX Nelson Mandela did.

CLINTON: But I do think that there's a lesson there for all of us, and particularly for those of us who raise children.

You have to try to do every day what you believe to be right. You have to admit mistakes the best you can. You have to learn from them. You have to get up every day, do the best you can.

And in every person's life there are problems and difficulties and challenges. And what separates people who at the end of the day have really tried to live their life with integrity -- have tried to make a contribution -- are those people who keep going through the disappointments and the misfortunes as opposed to giving in, feeling like they're a victim and throwing their hands up in despair.

That's why I admire people like President Mandela.

And in that book chapter, I talk about the advice my father used to give me.

SHRIVER: Right.

CLINTON: And I miss him greatly during days like these, because I would call him and I'd say, well what do you think Dad, and he'd have something salty to say.

SHRIVER: He would say, how are you going to shovel yourself out of this one, Hillary?

CLINTON: That's what I say in the book.

He would say, how are you going to shovel yourself out of this one?

And, you know, I'm going to do what I've always done, which is just to go out, do the best I can to answer people's questions. Try to put things into context. Try to work through the blizzard of charges and misinformation and, you know, accusations that are out there.

Because at the end of the day, I really believe that people are fair. And if people believe that you're doing the best you can, they can understand how you and I could see the very same incident differently, and both of us telling the truth about it.

So I don't have any doubt at all that at the end of the day most people will understand as best they can what happened.

SHRIVER: The book -- it's called "It Takes a Village, and Other Lessons Children Teach Us". What's the most important lesson you've learned, since you've been first lady, from children and about children?

CLINTON: That we aren't paying enough attention to them and they desperately need our love, our attention, our discipline.

You know, I get letters, Maria, that just would break your heart -- they

break mine -- from children who've been abused. Who one or the other parent has abandoned them. Who have terrible illnesses that either themselves or their families, and they're not getting treated.

And there's a general sense that I get from talking -- particularly to teenagers, who are usually a little more able to discuss these things than younger children -- that a lot of our kids just feel like they're not the top priority in adults' lives and even in the adults around them.

SHRIVER: You think government should do a lot more than it's doing in terms of making children a priority -- doing things for kids. We're clearly living in an age where people are anti-government. How do you get across the message that we all need to see everybody's kids as our own? We need to have more programs. The government needs to be more involved.

CLINTON: But I don't think it's only government. And that's what I try to point out in the book.

I do think there are things government can do and should do, but I don't believe most of the problems our children are facing today are either caused, by or will be solved by, the government.

I think we have to start with the family. Parents have to be willing to take responsibility. But not only that, but to spend the time children need. So do businesses have to recognize that decisions they make -- whether it's, you know, laying off thousands of workers or, you know, putting machines in to do the work that somebody had done for twenty-five years -- it may be necessary for global economic reasons.

But let's not kid ourselves. Most of the difficulties families are facing today are not due to the government so much as to the changing economic fortunes, and to the media, frankly, which I feel is a huge, huge influence on our children.

SHRIVER: Right. You said that if you had one thing you could do for children as first lady it would be to change the images they get from the media.

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XXX from the media.

SHRIVER: You're tough on the media in this book.

CLINTON: I don't think there's any doubt any longer that if you give children a steady diet of what they get on most programming, it is going to distort their view of the world. But it's not just what children see on television. There's been a lot of about that, and people have criticized the violence and the overt sexuality and other things.

It's the process of watching television. You know, if a two-year-old has control over a remote controller on a TV set, and spends her time switching channels and has the sense that everything is immediate, everything is instant gratification, why should that child ever put in the effort to do something that's difficult or read in order to pick up information?

I really think that it's both the content and the process of television watching that over 40 years now has dramatically changed how children see themselves.

SHRIVER: There is a lot of things to talk about in the book. People want to know, however, as you get out on this book tour, it will bleed into the political season. Are you going to play a big role for your husband? And finally, what advice do you have for Elizabeth Dole? I'm not saying she's going to get your job, but she clearly wants it. She's a working woman, what would you say to her about this role?

CLINTON: Oh, I'd say to anyone that, you know, it is something unlike any experience you've ever been in. Now she has a lot more experience in Washington. She's been in Washington for, I guess, nearly 30 years. And so she probably has a better idea to start with.

But even from that vantage point, I think it is a very quick and immersing experience to find yourself the subject of so many people's expectations while you're still trying to find out where the bathrooms are in the White House. So I think there's a lot that you can better prepare yourself for. And maybe the experience I've gone through, frankly making mistakes, in public in front of everybody will be helpful to women and maybe men who follow in this role.

SHRIVER: OK. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, thank you so much for coming to talk about "It Takes A Village" and for answering the other questions that are on people's minds. It's a terrific book. Thanks a lot.

CLINTON: Thank you.

(BREAK)

GUMBEL: Back now. It's 7:30 on this Tuesday morning, 16th morning of the month. We're moving into the second half of the month. Back at 7:30, I'm Bryant Gumble. We are going to go shortly down to Tampa, Florida, there to talk with now retired General Norman Schwartzkopf. Five years ago today, the

Gulf War began with air strikes against Iraq. We're going to talk about that in just a little bit.

But the headlines being made on this morning are being made by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Throughout this morning, she's been interviewed by Maria Shriver, she's agreed to stay with us a few more moments. Maria?

SHRIVER: Thank you very much, Bryant. And that's true, Mrs. Clinton has agreed to stay. We are talking about her book, "It Takes A Village" and other lessons that children have taught us. And in the book, Mrs. Clinton, you talk about the importance of parental involvement at every aspect of a child's life.

But what I thought was particularly interesting, as you said, that we can affect in the early years everything about our child, including their IQ.

CLINTON: That's right. We now know that it's not a question of just heredity or just environment, it is both. And certainly we all bring certain talents into our life, and we're grateful for those. But those talents can either be squashed or they can be enhanced.

If parents, I believe, understood one thing from my book, it is that the kind of attention, unhurried attention you give your child starting from birth, talking to your child, makes such a difference in how your child is able to perform in school and how your child is able to cope in the world. You know, those lessons you get the first five years of your life are the ones that, whether they're conscious or not, stay with you for a lifetime.

SHRIVER: You talk about the importance of unhurried time.

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XXX of unhurried time.

SHRIVER: You say to people that you should read with your child, eat with your child, play with your child. People say, that sounds great, I'd love to do all of those things, but I'm holding down one or two jobs; I don't have unhurried time in my life.

CLINTON: But we have to make it for our kids. You know, I feel that way myself, especially when Chelsea was little and I was working and I had a lot of help and you'd come in at the end of the day and the last thing you wanted to do was to spend time, you know, maybe playing a game or looking at a movie for the 500th time that you'd seen before.

But I remember my mother saying to me, and I have this in the book, that you know, it could be the most important event in your child's life. And she told me, you know, if you walked in the door at the end of a hard day and there were adults waiting who were unexpected visitors, you'd pull up a chair, you'd sit down, you'd make conversation. We walk into our doors and our children are waiting for us and we treat them like they're not really that important.

I think we just have to change our mindset and it is hard in today's world with people working. Sometimes not only both parents, but more than two jobs between the two of them. But our children did not ask to be born and if they come into the world and we take responsibility for them our priorities just have to give. That may mean you give up time with friends while they're little. It may mean you don't go out to dinner with friends, instead you stay and spend that time with your children.

SHRIVER: You're tough in the book about the fact that you think that we as a nation pay, and these are your words, "lip service to motherhood."

CLINTON: Yes, you know, I believe that. You know, there's so much rhetoric, family values talk about, you know, parenting and honoring that and this. But we don't do very much to help support mothers or fathers. We don't provide family leave, except if you have under the legislation the President signed, employer with more than fifty employees.

We don't give parents the kind of support they need by making schools open at times for working parents to be able to go to find out how their child is doing. We make it just about as hard as possible and I think that's because Americans are ambivalent about women working and having careers outside the home. But the fact is most women have to do that for economic reasons or because that is their choice. And the idea that you work outside the home is not going to determine whether or not you're a good parent. You can have good parents go out of the home and good parents who don't.

SHRIVER: Finally, you make a good point about not pitting women who stay home against women who go to work. Finally, we didn't get a chance to answer it. The '96 campaign; are you going to play the same kind of role that you did the last time out? Will it be as pivotal?

CLINTON: Well, I'm certainly going to do everything I can, because I believe my husband's done a good job and deserves to be reelected and I think

talking about the issues that are important to Americans, which is what I care about. You know, what we do in our homes and our workplaces and how we try to have a community. That's what I'm going to be doing.

SHRIVER: You really want this job again after all you've been through?

CLINTON: Well, I want my husband to have the job again and I want to stay married to him, so ...

SHRIVER: So then you just have to take the job!

CLINTON: Yes, I think it goes with the territory.

SHRIVER: OK, Mrs. Clinton, thank you so much. I know you're going to be out across the country talking about this book and everything else and we thank you for spending the time with us this morning.

CLINTON: Thank you.

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