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THE WHITE HOUSE

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INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY  
BY ANGIE CANNON, KNIGHT-RIDDER  
The Residence

Q This book tour was supposed to be a chance for you to, you know, highlight your 25 years of experience on children's issues. Instead, look what's happening.

MRS. CLINTON: Right.

Q You're sitting here and you've done four of these today, a couple of -- you've spent your whole weekend, in a way, having to clear your name and defend yourself. Is this somewhat of a disappointment for you?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it certainly is not the best timing in the world, that's one thing. I'm hopeful, though, that I'll be able to get the message of this book out through the storm over Whitewater, because the whole idea of "It Takes A Village" is that each of us is responsible for raising children, and there is something all of us can do, whether it's mentoring or tutoring a child, or adopting family-friendly policies in the workplace, or just spending more time talking to and reading with your own child.

I have some things I want to say as a mother and as a woman and as a long-time volunteer and worker on behalf of children that I believe, based on my own visits around the country, are of interest to other people who share my concern about children. So although I would have wished that this would not have happened in this way at this time, I'm going to continue talking about my book and trying to answer questions at the same time.

Q You know, throughout your career you've been portrayed as a tough, smart, political person who, from time to time has maybe tried to soften that image. And here comes another big political campaign and a new book about child-rearing. Some of your critics, you know, are saying that this may be another attempt to portray a softer image. Is it that?

MRS. CLINTON: No. And I think the only way someone could say that is if they think children's issues are soft issues. And I fundamentally disagree with that. I believe that raising children both in your own family and in a society poses the hardest issues any of us ever face.

There are many things I could have done if I had not wanted to write a book that not only summed up my experience, but more importantly, shared stories about what works around the country. But this is a labor of many years for me, and I'm reminded of some of the stories that I tell in there. Like I told the story about the maternity hospital we visited in Brazil, because I think there is a lesson for Americans in the very difficult conditions those women were facing in that hospital. And I tell the stories about my own experiences, trying to raise Chelsea and the mistakes that I made and the need for help from people, not just books that I could read.

So these are issues that I care deeply about, that I think are more important than much of what is talked about that is here today and gone tomorrow. So I think the book can maybe help start a conversation that could really help many of us with our responsibilities to children.

Q You were saying that there were other things that you could have done.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, sure -- I could have not written a book. But, you know, there are things that I've already been questioned about that people think of as controversial in this book. You know, my feelings about divorce are that you should not jump into a divorce if you have children, but you try to keep your marriage together, and that divorce should be harder to get if you have children.

On the other hand, I think that every child should have health care. Now, both of those are controversial issues. So I didn't have to talk about those or write about them, but it's what I feel in my heart. And whether people agree with me or not, if we can get this conversation about children started, I'm confident that people will look for ways that they can help our children.

Q In the book you mention, on the point about divorce, that you are sort of ambivalent about no-fault divorce and, you know, the idea of a waiting period when children were involved. In Michigan, for example, right now the legislature is considering repealing a no-fault divorce law. Is there something that you think the government could really do to try to make divorce more rare?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, Angie. And I don't think we should immediately go to repealing no-fault divorce. I think there are some other steps we should take first.

I believe that it's in everyone's interest if the government and not-for-profit agencies began to advertise more widely what we now know about divorce. Many people still view the effects of divorce on children as benign, and we know that's not the case. I also believe that we should try breaking mechanisms. And by that I mean mandatory education and counseling for couples with children; so they know what the likely impact of a divorce is, or they learn how they might get their marriage back on the right track through some kind of help.

So I believe there are things we should try first before we make no-fault divorce unavailable, or make it so difficult that people are put back in the position of lying and cheating and all the other things they used to do to get a divorce. But I want everyone to just take a deep breath and stop and consider how damaging, on the whole, divorce has been to children over the last 30 years.

Q This, perhaps, mandatory counseling, like, it would be part of your -- if you were going in to file for divorce?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes.

Q So, through the court system?

MRS. CLINTON: Right. Like, it might take you longer to get a divorce if you had children. You know, not that you'd have to make up something as you would if no-fault divorce were eliminated, but that you just couldn't rush to it. You had to take time. And you had to go to a series of education and counseling sessions, and you could not go forward with your divorce unless you proved you had actually gone to those sessions. Those are some of the things I think we ought to look at.

Q Not necessarily something on the federal level?

MRS. CLINTON: No. No, I think this is rightly the province of the states. But the other piece of that is that child support has to be enforced; and families where children are born out of wedlock, there has to be a better job in finding fathers and having them take responsibilities.

So it's not just a divorce issue, it's the whole question of parental responsibility for the children

that they bring into the world. And the federal government, state government, but beyond that -- local groups, religious institutions -- everybody should be concerned about that. And there are many different actions that different institutions could take.

Q Let's go back to sort of an unpleasant subject again for a minute. Polls show that a lot of Americans think that you lied. Why do you think this is, and what does that say about you? And, also, what does that say about the mood of the country right now?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it certainly concerns me. But I think it's understandable in light of the barrage of accusations that have been made against me, particularly over the last month or so. And it is rare that the other side of the story gets out with as much intensity and repetition.

I don't believe, for example, that more than 10 percent of the country knows that an independent investigation conducted for the RTC by a national law firm headed by a former Republican U.S. Attorney has verified that what we said four years ago about Whitewater was true.

You know, we said then that it was a failed real estate transaction where we lost money and were passive investors. Four years later this independent study confirms that's the truth. Then we were accused, perhaps, of taking money from this Madison Savings and Loan, and we said it did not happen. We couldn't disprove someone's accusations because we didn't have access to the files of that savings and loan. But this independent study did. So, four years later they've looked at everything, spent \$4 million, and they come back and say we were telling the truth.

And so every time our truthfulness is validated, that doesn't get anything like the attention as both the original charges and whatever new charges come up received. So I'm not at all surprised that people would be asking questions and wondering where the truth was. And I'm going to do as much as I can to answer every question publicly, to respond as best I can and to explain how I think all this happened.

And then I believe that the American public is fundamentally fair. And I will just trust the American public to make their judgment about me. And that's what I'm going to be doing.

Q You sort of indicated that you might be willing to go up voluntarily and testify on the Hill. Are you going to do that?

MRS. CLINTON: I can't really speculate on that yet, other than to say that I am going to cooperate. And that means cooperate in every way I can. There isn't anyone who wants this matter resolved more than I do. And I have tried to cooperate as fully as I knew how. I will continue to do so.

Q You haven't quite made up your mind yet about going up there?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I don't have any opinion about exactly everything I'll be doing in order to put this matter to rest. But I will do whatever it takes.

Q Are you thinking about maybe another press conference or something like that?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't have any plans. Right now I want to get out and answer people's questions that have arisen, and try to do the best I can to put everything into context so that it makes sense to people as much as possible. So that's what I'm really concentrating on right now.

Q Do you think that there is sexism involved in some of these attacks against you?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know. I don't know. I really don't understand some of the motivation behind some of the attacks which are so blown out of proportion, and making claims about matters that don't really stand up. But I think it's more in the nature of the political season. I think that's really what's going on here. That, you know, we're in a presidential election year and things get political. It kind of goes with the territory, unfortunately, these days.

Q Do you -- how do you -- one thing I've wondered is, how do you talk to Chelsea about all of this stuff with the attacks? I mean, what do you say to her about that? She must hear that kind of stuff. That must be hard.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it is. You know, and I write in the book in a chapter called "The Best Tool You Can Give Your Child Is A Shovel," about my father, you know, in times of difficulty saying, "Well, how are you going to dig yourself out of this?" And I've always carried these little mental images of shovels around. And I think you always have to be prepared. You know, it's a particularly apt metaphor after having survived this blizzard, because shovels were in great demand.

And starting when Chelsea was about six, as I explain in the book, her dad and I tried to make sure that she was prepared, she felt part of what we were doing so she could always come to us with questions. And we did that by telling her that

in politics people sometimes make up stories about their opponents, they say bad things about them, and she should always recognize that that was an unfortunate part of politics. And we even practiced little mock debates with her where she would play her daddy and then, you know, Bill would play his opponent and say, you know, mean things about himself.

So from the very earliest age, she became quite aware of what happens in politics. And so any time anything like this comes up -- you know, she reads the paper, she follows the news -- you know, I'll say, "Well, do you have any questions, do you want to talk about this?" Bill will do the same. And we just try to be as straightforward with her as we can, because we want her to feel comfortable in knowing what we think is happening -- we obviously can't predict other people's actions -- so that she has a good understanding.

And I think that she sees a lot of what happens in political life these days for what it is. And I'm glad we prepared her so that she would not be hurt by it or upset by it.

Q She's not too upset by it? She's handling it?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. I'm sure she is, as I would be, if people were saying things about my parents. But she mostly has a pretty good head on her shoulders and is a really, you know, kind of an aware child. So I think we've done the best we knew how to do. And I feel that it's been helpful to her.

Q Another thing that I was wondering about was, it seems that other first ladies have also been very, sort of, out front. Roslyn Carter was involved with mental health issues. Nancy Reagan was behind some personnel moves in the White House. One difference, maybe, was that you campaigned on the "two-for-one" slogan. In retrospect, do you think that it would have been better to play sort of a more traditional game during the campaign and maybe to have been more circumspect as they were about power in the White House? Do you know what I mean?

MRS. CLINTON: I do. I do. I don't know quite how to answer it because our problems in the presidential campaign started almost from the day that Bill announced. He was such a threat to so many people that we just were the targets from the very beginning. Because I really don't believe a lot of this is directed at me so much as it is at him by trying to almost do a bank shot off of me.

Because I don't think, from my reading of history, that the wives of presidents influence votes much one way or the other. I mean, there are first ladies in our history who have been enormously popular, and their husbands did not win re-election; and first ladies who have not been particularly well

liked, and their husbands did. So I think it's important to judge each individual on his or her merits. And certainly the President should be looked at for what he's done and who he is. And I would ask the same for me.

I do think one of the differences, though, is that I brought a lifetime's worth of work to the White House, you know, starting -- I had my first job, as I say in the book, when I was about 13. And I had a lot of -- I had many different experiences. And I had always functioned as an independent person and had always been direct with people. And I think that that took some adjusting on the part of some people, to have someone with that kind of background in the White House. And I'm sure that I could have, perhaps, you know, communicated maybe a little differently, or understood the expectations differently.

But I have to be who I am. And who I am is someone who cares deeply about the issues that I write about in this book; who saw a chance, for example, through health care to try to work on helping to provide health care to the more than 40 million Americans who don't have it. That's who I am. And that's why I would say that when all this sifts through there will be people who approve of what I do and who disapprove of what I do for many different reasons. But what I would hope is that they will make their judgments based on the facts, not on what somebody claims or charges. And that's what I'm trying to help sort out for people right now.

Q When you said that maybe that you could communicated things differently, do you mean maybe not using the "two-for-one," maybe not saying that? Or are you thinking about the travel office thing, that maybe expressing -- sometimes in any kind of institution -- even in a newsroom an editor says, "I don't like stories about ducks," well, they don't do stories about them, you know?

MRS. CLINTON: Right.

Q But if you express a concern about something, people sometimes interpret it -- is that what you're thinking or --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I wasn't exactly thinking that, but I think you're on to something, because I have been thinking recently about how this experience I brought to the White House was perfectly appropriate and useful in every other setting I had ever been -- whether it was in my work life or my volunteer life or serving on a board of a hospital or a corporation. I was thinking, for example, today that, you know, I would be in a board of directors meeting and if I heard about something that was going wrong I might say, "You know, I've heard these stories about these problems we're having. What's going on?" You know,

"Gosh, are we paying attention to this?" And nobody would ever view that as my directing anybody to do anything. It would have been an expression of concern.

Well, to some extent, I think that I didn't realize how I would not be perceived as I had always been perceived -- as a colleague, as a peer, as someone with concerns and opinions to be put into the mix. So that if, for example, my husband says, "I like bananas," the next day everywhere he goes in the White House there are bunches of bananas. And I think for me it's been a learning experience about how this place magnifies everything, so that an expression of concern, an offhand comment, something you don't even remember saying -- I've told this story to a couple of people because I remembered it when President Mitterrand died -- when I was in France -- were you on that trip with the President?

Q I wasn't on that one.

MRS. CLINTON: You know, we were having a State Dinner, and that morning of the State Dinner I met with Madame Mitterrand and we talked about mostly her interests in human rights issues. And at the end, as I was leaving she said, "Oh, I apologize ahead of time that the tables will be so bare tonight." And I said, "Oh, all right." And she said, "But we have followed your directions, no fresh flowers." I said, "Madame, what do you mean?" And she said, "Well, we know you have prohibited fresh flowers anywhere the President appears because of his allergies." I said, "We have fresh flowers everywhere in the White House. We love fresh flowers." I said, "Who told you that?" "Oh, my people said that your people told them, based on," you know. And it was one of these, like, playing telephone deals.

And, you know, we never got to the bottom of it, but I could have made an offhand comment that, you know, "Gee, my husband's allergies are, you know, up again. And so we've got to be careful for him," which then gets translated into some, you know, prohibition of flowers at the State Dinner. Luckily, she told me and I was able to say, "Please," you know, "let your people put the flowers out. Make it beautiful." But I do think that I've had to really learn how to function in this environment, which was very different, given my background. I mean, if I had always been somebody who played a behind-the-scenes role, if I had never, you know, been out working and leading an independent life, I think I would not have, you know, seen much difference. But it was a big difference to me.

Q Since you've come here you've seen friends who have had their reputations tarnished, some go to jail, commit suicide. You and your husband have seen your family finances drained, your integrity questioned. Do you think it was all

worth it?

MRS. CLINTON: Absolutely. You know, certainly, the problems and even tragedies of some of the people we know are painful. No one wants to see people hurt, whether it's of their own making or not. And I regret that deeply. But I've become, I guess, more accepting of the fact that so much of this, both now and in history, is part of not only politics and the presidency, but trying to speak out on behalf of issues and people, as the President does; so that it's not just a caretaker president, but a very active one trying to, you know, explain our involvement in Bosnia and defend Medicare and Medicaid. It's so much a part of what he believes in doing.

And I think it is absolutely worth it, because I really believe that he's not only done a good job for the country, but that what he's done is beginning to be understood by people. So we get a lot of daily satisfaction out of trying to help individuals. Sometimes he'll come in at the end of a day and he'll say, "I really know why I was elected president today," because of something he was able to do. I come away from encounters with people who come to me for help, or want me to solve a problem for them -- just two weeks ago we had the Denny (phonetic) family from Oklahoma City here, whose two little children were among the six who survived the bombing. And I spent, you know, lots of time with them and I have a picture of those two little kids, Brandon and Rebecca, up on my -- one of my tables in the center sitting hall, because they really represent hope and miracles and all of that.

So I get to see the best of America, as well as what is, you know, difficult to take personally. And that's really -- you know, what Bill and I have to put up with personally is nothing compared to what so many people in America live with every day. And you can't really compare the two. You know, when you're standing there talking to Mr. Denny about how every day is a gift from God, how grateful they are for the way the country rallied around. The rest of this stuff that happens doesn't seem all that important in comparison.

Q I think that's a really healthy attitude to take. Although, I know most people say -- always say to me, "How does she deal with it?" You know? But I think when you do put it in that broader perspective that you're right, absolutely.

MRS. CLINTON: I also have the tremendous benefit of knowing I didn't do anything wrong and that eventually all of this will be resolved. So it's a matter of being patient and getting through every day, doing the best you can. And I have a lot of, you know, faith in what the future holds.

Q Just a couple last quick things. What do you

think of the way Senator D'Amato has been handling the Whitewater investigation?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't have any opinion about that. He does -- he has to do what he thinks he has to do.

Q And I am also wondering if you are thinking -- or had thought at all about the idea of throwing a lamp at Bill Safire?

MRS. CLINTON: (Laughter.) No, no. I have too high a regard for lamps.

Q Okay. And I just wondered if you had -- did you know that -- you know that Clinger was announcing today that he was --

MRS. CLINTON: I heard that. Has he said anything other than --

Q He's just -- I haven't seen that. I just didn't -- I wondered if you had had any thoughts about his retirement at all?

MRS. CLINTON: No. No. I don't know him, but I am -- I know Pat Williams, who I do know quite well, also announced over the weekend that he was not running again. And I regret that we're losing a lot of people with many years of experience and we'll miss, you know, a number of them quite a bit.

Q Just one last thing, if that's okay. Are you at all worried that you're becoming somewhat of a political liability for your husband?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I really hope not. You know, obviously, I love my husband very much, and I also believe he's been a good president and deserves to be re-elected. But I think the voters will judge the President on who he is and what he's done. And I think I will be judged on who I am and what I have done. I don't know what else either of us can do, except to every day do the best we can. And I think at the end, at the time of the election most people will believe that Bill Clinton is the person that they want to be their president again.

Q Thank you so much.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. I was real glad to see you again.

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