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INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
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The Map Room

Q Just, if we could, why did you write the book? What are you trying to accomplish?

MRS. CLINTON: I wrote it because I want people to talk about what's best for children, and to think of ways all of us in our own lives can begin to act together so that we can make life better for kids. I'm very concerned about what's happening to children not only in our country, although that's my primary concern, but really everywhere. And I've worked on this for more than 25 years now. And a lot of the problems are ones that are getting worse, yet we know so much more about what children need to be healthy and happy and develop well.

And I know so many people who are doing great work with children, but somehow that information either doesn't get out or doesn't get out to the people who could put it to good use. So I thought I would take some time out and just share some of my thoughts about kids from the perspective not only of somebody who's worked on and studied kids, but as a mother myself and as somebody who really cares about them.

Q In talking to some of your staffers and friends to do the companion piece we asked them kind of why you're out there and what drives you to keep doing these things you've been doing for 25 years. And some talk about your Methodism, some talked about your time at Yale Law School. How would you explain what motivates you and what keeps you going and drives you?

MRS. CLINTON: I've thought about that writing this book. I guess I hadn't really considered it before. Ever since I can remember, as a little girl, I have been drawn to children. And I think some of that probably comes from my mother and her feelings about children and what children need, in part because of her own life. And also the encouragement that I got to work with children starting when I was in junior high school and high school. I always was grateful for what I had and I always felt bad for kids that I went to school with who seemed like really good kids and never had any luck, never had any breaks at all, and needed just a little bit of help maybe from somebody -- a teacher, a coach, a minister.

And then when I got to college and law school and began to study child development, so much of this is really common sense about what makes for strong families and resilient children. And there are so many forces at work in our society and in our culture that seemed to be undermining what we know is best for children. So I've just always been drawn to kids and then I became more and more interested in trying to learn about kids and then work on what would help kids.

Q One thing that struck me reading the book that's going to be interesting to readers is you are routinely pictured as a traditional liberal, maybe a '90s version, but the word "liberal"

often gets attached to your name. Yet your own social values in the book would seem to most Americans as being pretty conservative. I mean, you mentioned things like dress codes, very down on easy divorce, no sex until you're 21 -- it would be better at least if people didn't have sex -- I mean, a fairly conservative personal social code.

Talk to us a little bit about that, of reconciling this perception of your political liberalism with what at least appears to be a more conservative personal code.

MRS. CLINTON: One of the reasons I think I wrote this book, although I didn't really frame it in my own mind this way, is because I really do have a lot of opinions and beliefs that I think most people have that don't fall easily into any category of politics or ideology. And as I -- I quote in the book from one of my favorite documents about children and families, what the Catholic bishops wrote about putting families first, that there isn't any liberal or conservative answer for helping kids and families.

I was raised and have tried to live my life in a way that marries personal and mutual responsibility -- what I have to do for myself, for my family, for my child, for the people that are close to me, what my responsibility as a citizen is and the rest. But also, how do we accept responsibility for each other. So I think some of that is rooted in my religious upbringing and faith. I think some of it is rooted in the kind of community I grew up in that really did have these invisible webs of support for children and families. And I think some of it is out of the American tradition of practical approaches to problems.

When I look at what's happening to children in lots of parts of the country, it strikes me that political partisan rhetoric is not going to solve the problems these kids face. So we ought to put that to one side and really ask as our basic premise what is best for kids. And if the answer falls into one category or the other, that to me is not as important as then trying to decide what we're going

to do to change conditions for children.

Q Some of this stuff in the latest budget rankling doesn't always seem to be in the best interest of children. Are some of the compromises that the President has to make, are they just necessary for the pragmatism of politics, or are you pushing for certain things? I mean, what's your role in kind of the latest budget rankling?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't have any role in the rankling, I have a very keen interest in following what's going on and have a strong feeling about the kind of investments we need to make on behalf of families and children.

This whole set of issues that I think are being debated right now are really proxies for a lot of other debates. Yes, they are about balancing the budget and trying to bring fiscal responsibility into our governance, which I am all for and believe strongly in. But they're more about what is it we all believe should be part of our mutual responsibility and in what way should that mutual responsibility be enacted through the government as our mutual instrument. And I think that when one looks at what's happening to families and children in a time of such great change in the economy and in the culture, it strikes me as a very conservative position to say, we want to do what we can to strengthen families, not just through government policy, but through employment, through rebuilding community structures, through religious outreach, all the other institutions.

So I think that a lot of the feelings people have right now in the country that are being kind of focused on Washington really stand -- Washington stands for a lot of the debates that are taking place around kitchen tables and water coolers and in every other setting in America about who are we and how are we going to do the best job we can moving into this next century.

Q I want to come back to the book and specifically your writing of it, but I've got to veer off for a second into some week's news. We got this document I guess it was either leaked or released last night about the Travel Office, where this memo from Watkins which seems to have, according to Watkins, have you being pretty insistent with both him and Foster about firing the Travel Office staff, as I read the first couple pages. But then when the GAO sends you written questions and asks, "How would you describe and to whom would you attribute the origin of the decision to remove the Travel Office employees, and how would you characterize your role in that decision" the written answers say that you don't know the origin of the decision to remove the White House Travel Office employees, had no role in the decision to terminate

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the employees. Help us reconcile this.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you know, it's no surprise because I have said it in the past that I was concerned about reports of financial mismanagement in the Travel Office and I expressed that concern because I thought that it needed to be looked into. And it was looked into, and indeed, there was financial mismanagement. And changes were made that led to the Travel Office being cleaned up and now operating under appropriate accounting principles. But those decisions about who should do what and when they should be done, those were made by other people.

Q Well, in the memo, it reports a direct conversation.

MRS. CLINTON: I had one conversation with David, which has also been reported in the past. That's in at least one of the seven reports that have been done about this Travel Office matter.

Q And it said, "Foster regularly informed me of the First Lady's concern and desired action. The action desired was the firing of the Travel Office staff." Did --

MRS. CLINTON: You know, I just don't have any memory of that. What I do remember is having a conversation with David Watkins at Vince Foster's suggestion in which David Watkins told me that Peat Marwick had begun an investigation into the financial management of the Travel Office, and I said, it sounded like that's what should be done.

Q Nineteen ninety-four was a particularly politically vitriolic year, it seems to a lot of people, and one of the things that's come up is obviously Whitewater, and we're wondering if you feel that Whitewater has become targeted at you specifically? Is that now what's going on?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't know. It's been going on a long time. We've tried to cooperate in every way we can, because nobody would like this matter over with more than I would. But it's been difficult because the issues keep changing, the ground keep shifting about what it supposedly is about. The RTC report comes out and says that -- what we had said four years ago, that we had been in this failed land investment and lost money is indeed what happened. That doesn't end it; it keeps a life of its own. And I do think that at least some of the reason for that is because it's the political season again and has been ever since the '92 campaign. So we'll continue to just try to cooperate and try to help get this matter resolved.

Q Certainly, that absolutely seems to be the

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case, but there is also some confusion that even people who aren't kind of out to get you or who would be for you think, you know, it is kind of confusing -- had spin, including mine, when we look at some of this stuff. One thing that's come up recently that we are hoping you might just come out and clear the air on is this thing about Madison. In '92, during the campaign, you said that Madison Guaranty you worked for kind of minimally. But then in recent weeks, through Susan Thomases' notes, I think it said something like "several conferences," or something along those lines. Again, how do we kind of reconcile that? How would you describe your role?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I would describe it as I've always described it. Based on the evidence that we've seen, the Rose Law Firm represented Madison for about 15 months, and over those 15 months I did about an hour a week worth of work. And I don't know, really, what the direction of some of the questions are because there is no way that I can, in my own mind, think of an hour a week over 15 months as being a significant amount of work.

So I'll just have to wait and see what the questions are, because certainly, the records that have been made available are the ones that tell us how much work was done and how much was paid and that money was returned to Madison because there was no more work to be done for them, and the documents pertaining to the work that had been turned over demonstrate what the work is. We've given everything we have, and we'll continue to try to answer the questions. I can't really add anything to that.

Q One area of confusion that keeps coming up again is about the documents in Foster's office after his death. Were you concerned about law enforcement having unfettered access to them?

MRS. CLINTON: No, and, you know, let me be really clear about this. No documents were taken out of Vince Foster's office the night he died, and I did not direct anyone to interfere with any investigation into his death.

I don't know how best to convey, after two and a half years, the level of grief and shock and just distraughtness that I and other people felt at the news and, really, the refusal to believe that it could be true. But that certainly was what was most paramount to me about those days was the way we were all feeling, our worries about his family, and there was no discussion of documents or Whitewater or anything like that. That was not what any of us were thinking about or concerned about.

Q So there's no way possibly somebody could have construed what you've said as a concern about keeping

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-- either keeping the Justice Department out or getting these documents to you for you to review?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't see how. I can only tell you that for months and even, I guess now, for a couple of years, I didn't even remember who I had talked to until I saw phone records. I had very little memory about the specifics. I could just remember the overwhelming emotional reality of what had happened, and that's what has stayed with me during all of these months.

Q I guess there's just one last point along those lines. But there were documents here in the Residence for five days, and people kind of go, you know, even if they want to say I can understand, a close friend dies, certainly there's a lot of emotional stuff going around at that time, why weren't the documents here for five days, if not to review them?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, because when I was in Arkansas and I was called that Bernie Nussbaum was distributing the documents out of Vince's office and there were personal documents of mine which I didn't even know Vince had files that were personal to us in his office, I was asked what should be done with them, and I said, well, send them to our lawyers. And through a variety of phone calls back and forth and the convenience of people and people getting ready to go to Arkansas for the funeral, the decision was made that they couldn't get sent over that day, and I was asked if there were a place that they could be stored, and I said, I don't know, talk to some of the people in the Residence. And so they were locked up there.

I mean, it's difficult to keep track of all of the spider webs that are spun and the theories and the innuendoes. It was something that seemed natural to do. And so they were locked in a closet and then they were picked up by our lawyer and they were then examined, and then an index was made of them, and the index was sent to me, and that was the first time I knew what was in there.

Q So you never reviewed them while --

MRS. CLINTON: No, no. Because -- it wasn't important to us. I keep going back -- with two and a half years, people can try to take a cold, dispassionate view of what was going on. And I'm not saying that there weren't mistakes made and that people didn't act out of grief and they didn't rush around trying to keep busy to deal with the emotion that they were unable to cope with. I imagine that people were bumping into each other just all of the time. But nobody -- nobody was trying to destroy or secrete documents. Nobody was trying to interfere with any investigation. They were dealing with something that had never happened before. And maybe if we had been here for a

couple of years, maybe if we knew a little bit more about what the possible conspiracies that could be spun might look like in retrospect, I'm sure everybody would have tried to be more thoughtful or dispassionate in the heat of that moment. But, honest to goodness, the shock of even talking about it now just really -- it's very difficult to do.

Q It's understandably a really emotional thing, and it must be hard, I assume, to kind of see close friends now kind of being put through that D'Amato wringer. Is that hard to deal with, and has that been a struggle?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it does make me sad and it also makes me angry from time to time. My husband chose to be in public life, and although I wish it weren't quite as brutal as it has become in recent years, that's a choice he made and it's a choice I support. So to a great extent, we are here by our own choosing. But that's not true of many of our friends and colleagues and family members -- people who get thrust into this situation and harassed. And that does make me feel badly because I don't think it's fair.

But it's something that you can't spend a lot of time worrying about or being consumed by because there's too much to do. And certainly the President gets up every day thinking about what he's going to do for the country, and so do I.

I mean, that's one of the reasons that I wrote this book because when I traveled around during '93 and '94, particularly about health care, I kept running into people who just didn't understand what was going on in the lives of so many kids. They didn't really -- they had never met an uninsured child or they'd never met a child with a chronic disease.

And so part of the reason that I took the time to write this was that I thought I have a lot of things that I care deeply about and wanted to share with people. And to put it in my own words gave me a chance to do that.

Q That's definitely in your own words. I was saying to Becky, so what do you think. I said it sounds like the little I've gotten a feel for you -- really, it's -- Ivan is going to kill me because he wants to go back to the book. But I just have one quick question which was going back to watching people up there go through the wringer, and does it ever make you feel and are you thinking about going up there yourself, and, also, personally giving testimony at this point on Whitewater to say finally and clear the air and get up there yourself at some point?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we're going to continue to cooperate. I'm not going to predict, you know, what turn this takes. I'd be out of business if I tried to predict

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it four years ago because it's been totally unpredictable.

Q Do you have any plans about doing it -- I mean, there's been this sort of parade of witnesses all fall. Are you going to go up yourself?

MRS. CLINTON: I'm just going to wait and see what happens with all of these various things that are in the air and will continue to cooperate.

Q Waiting for a subpoena as opposed to voluntary --

MRS. CLINTON: I'm not going to predict what might or might not happen because I can't possibly do that.

Q Let me go back to the book for a second and do it in terms of being a First Lady and how other First Ladies have carried out their role. I mean, the comparison has been made to Eleanor Roosevelt. Talk to us a little bit about your perception of your role as a First Lady and how this book fits into that.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you know, I think that one of the things that I've learned in the last couple of years is how good an opportunity people have in this position to highlight problems that they're concerned about. You know, Mrs. Bush did it with literacy, and Mrs. Reagan did it with drugs. And Mrs. Carter did it with mental illness, and Mrs. Ford did it with drug abuse and breast cancer. And, certainly, nobody did it like Mrs. Roosevelt because she had so many interests and she had so many years to be a spokesperson for them.

And I think it's an important part of the role. And it's something that comes naturally to me because I care deeply about what's happening to children. And so I was struck, mostly during the health care travels that I did, how I kept hearing a lot of the same things from around the country that people were not connecting one to the other. They weren't saying, well, here's a program that's happening in Seattle that we ought to know about in Miami.

And I thought maybe if I used this position to highlight some of the programs and people and ideas that I've worked on for all these years, I could really help people get organized around doing what they could in their own families and then rippling out from there on behalf of kids.

Q Has the press gotten in the way of that? I mean, they're the natural megaphone. Have they helped or hurt this cause?

MRS. CLINTON: You know, I think it's been both.

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But I think it's very difficult in the way that the press has available to it to report on issues to be able to stay with something over time. You know, by the very nature of your business, you really can't do that.

So much of the good information has been reported somewhere, but it's not been a steady drumbeat that people have been able to latch onto.

Q What about in terms of your role. We always here, oh, now all of a sudden you are nontraditional, and all of a sudden you're traditional. You talked about this a little bit in Paraguay. Have we in the media just misunderstood? I mean, what -- I know we've been culprits to some extent, but I'm curious how you see it in terms of how we've treated you.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't think I've made it very easy for you. I have to confess. You know, I've said in the past that I've had to learn to rezone my zone of privacy and kind of understand more about how to convey what I care about and what I'm doing so that, for example, issues that I've worked all these years would come as a surprise to some people because I haven't talked about them in a large forum or I haven't let people know that it's something I've worked on a long time. So I take a lot of the responsibility for not being perhaps as clear as I could be.

You know, during the '92 campaign I said I wanted to be a voice for children, and that's what I've always wanted to be. But then I immediately got into the health care debate. And that's all I did for nearly two years -- a year and a half, I guess. So that's all anybody knew about what I was doing.

And because of the nature of that debate -- I mean, you go back and you look at what happened to Harry Truman when he tried to do health care reform, and even the moderate reforms of Eisenhower and certainly Medicare and Medicaid with Johnson all through what Kennedy tried to do and Nixon's plan and the like -- I mean, it is inherently such a controversial issue that I don't think it really gave people a chance to know much about all the other things that I care about and why health care to me was a natural extension of my long-term interest in children's health.

So I don't fault anybody. I think it's been largely my responsibility that I haven't quite conveyed as fully as I should what I'm about and what I care about.

Q Was this unavoidable? I mean, you were going to do health care. Health care was something that was going to happen one way or the other, right? Was there another way to bake this pie?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I'm sure there are many ways to bake the pie, but I think that from the President's perspective, he believed strongly then, believes strongly now that health care will continue to be a problem. And certainly the evidence is that it's getting worse. We have more uninsured people today than we did just a few years ago.

So it was going to be addressed. And I'm grateful I got a chance to be involved in it because I learned a lot and I cared a lot about it. And things didn't work out. It didn't create the kind of mood for back and forth and compromise and negotiation and hammering out a good reasonable solution that we had hoped it would. But I don't regret being involved in it. I just feel a little bit sad that that's all I got to do in a way.

Q People say both as a criticism and a compliment that you are very focused, directed, that when you have a mission or a purpose, you're going down this road and you are going down it. And I've heard that -- again, it's pejorative and it's praise. How would you -- how do you react to that?

MRS. CLINTON: I think there's some truth in that. And I think it's probably both good and bad. I mean, it's true that when I was working on health care, that's really what I was working on. And that's why a lot of these things that now come up about what was happening during health care were things that were not on my radar screen particularly.

I might have asked a question or made a comment, but I was really focused on doing what the President asked me to do. And particularly during those first months of the administration because, remember, we were going to try to have it done by May 1st. I mean, it was just an unbelievable task. And, of course, we didn't make May 1st, and then we were going to try to have it done by June 1st. So I do take seriously assignments I'm given and that was the biggest thing I've ever been asked to do.

But I also feel that maybe because I've had a lucky life compared to so many people, that I have an obligation. And everywhere I've ever lived or every place I've ever been, I've always felt that I had to do something to give back. And it's been a joy for me. It's not a burden to me. And I also get very wrapped up in the lives of the people that I try to help.

So I'm sure that somebody looking from the outside could say, gee, you know, on the one hand that's -- it's good, and I'm glad she's doing it. On the other hand, you know, lighten up a little.

Q -- that burden, but at least in the books that get written, which I take for a grain of salt, but you often emerge as a fighter. One of the themes, one of the pictures of Hillary Clinton that comes out is a battler, a fighter. There will be a lot of talk, typically in the scene -- one side will be arguing one way, one will be arguing the other. Your husband will be judiciously listening to both and sort of enjoying the debate. And then you will enter, saying, okay, let's cut to the chase; this is what we got to do; we have to fight for it. I mean, that is a familiar scene in books that are written about the White House. How do you react to that?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that that's true for a lot of women. I don't view that necessarily as just a personal trait that -- that at some point you sort of say, well, gee, what is it we're going to do now, that all of the talk has gone on and the debate's been held. And I do think that in my life I've tried to be an advocate on behalf of causes and people that I believe in. So that would -- that would be a fair thing to say about me.

Q And a last sort of characterization, the perfectionist.

MRS. CLINTON: I don't think I'm a perfectionist. I think I work very hard, but I don't believe in perfection, at least not in this life. I may appear to people to be someone who is willing to put in a lot of hours and to work on behalf of things that I care about, but I enjoy that. That's something that gives me pleasure, because it's like a simple thing -- like there's a story in this book about one of these children. And I'm now trying to do things on adoption and foster care. And there's a gathering I had before the holidays where I brought kids from all over the country who had been adopted. And unfortunately, we have the event on a day when the budget was blowing up or something was happening, so we didn't get a lot of attention here about this issue. But we did get attention out in the country because people came from all over and their local newspapers covered it. There's a little girl who read a poem, and over Christmas she got adopted. And, I mean, that's the kind of effort that I really think is worth making. And if it takes intensity to try to bring that to somebody's attention and to try to help solve a problem for somebody, I think that's worth doing.

Q Was this book a way -- obviously, the health care -- there's a rough year there -- health care went down, Foster died, family members -- I mean, just a tough year. Was this book a way to in part to come out of that and --

MRS. CLINTON: No. I didn't think about it that way, but it gave me a lot of time alone, as you have written a lot books, you know. And a lot of time when I would be

staring at the blank page trying to figure out how I was going to put into readable English what I was feeling. So I had a lot of time to think. And there's a chapter in there that -- and it came to me, I remembered my father talking about how are you going to shovel your way out of this. And I realized that 1993 was a personally very challenging and difficult year with my father and Vince and my mother-in-law. Just kind of moving to Washington, all the things you do to get settled in and doing it all on the world stage. And so I really did have to kind of sum it up a lot of my own resources and work through many of the feelings that I had, not only on my own behalf, but for my daughter, my husband and family members, and then friends and colleagues who were likewise suffering because of their own friendship with Vince, as one example.

And so I do think that it was a very helpful experience for me to really spend time alone, which I hadn't, because I'd been pretty much on the road traveling and doing official duties and the like. And just kind of take some time to reflect and to write about something that I've cared about a long time, which helped to sort of focus me.

Q Do you think of yourself as more of a pragmatist or an idealist?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I've always thought about myself as a pragmatist, because I think a lot of what I believe we should do for one another is very practical. Some may claim it's idealistic, but I think in both medium- and long-term, it's the most practical kind of approach to living. I believe that it makes good sense if I'm trying to be very self-interested about the future my daughter has to try to make sure as many kids as possible have as good a shot as possible, because I don't want her living behind a brick wall with broken glass on top. I don't want her to be afraid to walk down a street or go to a city park with her kids when she gets older.

So I believe a lot of what I think of as pragmatic approaches to solving people's problems as ones that go beyond ideology or certainly politics. And I regret that our country has kind of gotten caught up in this label game that we've played for the last couple of years where if somebody presents an idea it's immediately labeled, and that means only one-half or one-third of the people will even listen to it, instead of trying to come together, find some common ground, build a village, to use my metaphor, with ideas in mind about what is in our best interest for everybody.

Now, there will always be people on the extremes who will not want to engage in that exercise. They have a world view that is not mainstream or centered about

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nurturing the next generation or whatever. But I think those people are in the minority. And part of what I'm trying to do with this book, and then certainly with the talking about it that I'll be doing, is to summon people out of their preexisting stereotypes and labels so that we can begin to talk sensibly about what works and what doesn't work.

I view that as one of our real challenges right now in our country. And I really regret the polarization that has taken place because it has most dramatically affected young people. I was looking at some research that a political scientist has done showing that young people are by far, in her words, more misanthropic than people our age and older. They don't trust anybody. They don't -- they have more emotional stress in their lives.

And the explanations for that have to do with everything from the breakdown of the family and divorce, to the steady diet of what they see on television, to the way that they're treated by adults in their lives. And I just think we've got to take a step back here and say what are we creating? What are we doing to our children? And if we do that, then -- there aren't any simple answers. You can't say, oh, it's the government's fault. Or you can't say, oh, it's just these irresponsible parents living in the inner city. The responsibility is spread all the way across society.

But the good news is there are things we could do right now that are not big macro changes that could make a difference -- if we would start having that kind of conversation.

Q What should the government's role be in this stuff?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that the government should be a partner to all the other institutions in society. The government should be a safety net of last resort for the vulnerable and the poor. The government should be actively engaged in research and development, of new ways of solving problems, whether they're medical problems of any others that we're confronting. The government should have an active posture with respect to asserting the common American interest, both here at home and abroad. It's the only institution that we have. And, my goodness, we've invested more than 200 years in our ideals and our values. And they should be articulated. And there should be a consensus that hopefully could be nonpartisan about what the United States stands for. There's much for government to do.

But there's also a lot for business to do. There's a lot for the media to do. Religious institutions,

I think, could have a bigger social role -- civic groups. I mean, you could go down the list. So any time one talks about the government and the government's role, I want to marry that with everybody else's role, too, because it's too easy just to either blame the government and say we have to take our futures back into our own lives and we have to be compassionate and caring, and that's what we should do. And it's too easy to just say the government should do it. Neither of those is, to me, an adequate answer.

Q I think we're done, right? Well, peer into the silver ball and tell us whether we're going to get a budget deal. (Laughter.)

Q Are we on the record or off the record? (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: I think we'll eventually get a budget deal. I think there's too much at stake not to.

Q As the noise level is getting higher again today -- I mean, my reporters were saying, oh -- the public, I'm not talking about the private, but the public noise -- the House is talking about going away for three weeks, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah.

MRS. CLINTON: I hope we do. I think we need to.
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