

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of The Press Secretary

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AN INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY  
BRIDGET KENDALL, BBC  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

MS. KENDALL: I want to talk to you (inaudible) two years in the White House and what's it been like to you? How hard has it been in respect to (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: I think even if you're involved in American politics and follow what happens in the presidency, until you get here, you cannot (inaudible) what it's like. It is an extraordinary opportunity, just living in this house, which is a museum of American history, getting to know people from all over the world, having a chance to make a contribution to our country. All of those are extremely positive.

There are down sides, and there are many exciting experiences (inaudible), and included among those is the total loss of privacy, and the fact that you can't go anywhere without being surrounded by people and having people watching over us. But those are outweighed by all of the wonderful parts of the experience so far.

MS. KENDALL: Do you (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: In fact, I just came back from a walk with my friend Tipper Gore -- went over to one of our art museums for lunch. And we were both remarking about how we were walk -- and it was just wonderful to be out and feeling like people are back to the way we used to be, the way we have grown up and lived.

So it is difficult to get used to all of the

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pressures and the circumstances of our life. But there's another aspect of (inaudible). I walk around this house, and I see the portrait of Lincoln in the dining room and the portrait of Washington in the East Room, and there's a sense of which you can never believe you were here, because it is so -- overwhelming experience.

MS. KENDALL: How (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: We have worked very hard on that, and probably the best part of our lives here so far is the fact that our daughter has had a very normal adjustment. The press in America has cooperated with our request that we were not going to turn her into a public person, and she should be given the opportunity to be a normal teenager. And so she has some friends here, she comes and goes.

We spend a lot of time together. A friend of mine said that being the President is like living above the store, because of the office and the home so close together. So we actually have dinner together nearly every night, the three of us. Even if we have to go out, we often eat with Chelsea before we go. We spend a lot of time playing games together. We're great card players or puzzle people.

So we have really worked hard at the time we have together as a couple and as a family. And our house is filled with friends and family members all the time, so --

MS. KENDALL: Have you ever been (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: I do. I don't want to give all my secrets away, but I put on a baseball cap and put sunglasses. Tipper and I were laughing today. We were walking, we were not dressed in our uniform. We did not look like the wives of the President and Vice President, and we were pretty much left alone, which we both like to do a lot.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible) very much a partnership (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: I think it is somewhat harder, although we have been partners for so long, we are just connected to each other in so many ways, that our partnership, in some respects, is even stronger than it ever has been, although it is different.

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There are certain expectations that go along with the goal that I (inaudible), which I take very seriously, and feel that I have an obligation to fulfill -- hostess and some of the other related roles that go with being First Lady.

But my husband and I have always worked together, we've always confided in each other. We use each other as sounding boards, and that has continued. So I feel very lucky to be a part of his presidency, because I believe so much in what he's trying to do, and to have a small role in trying to help him.

MS. KENDALL: You said the rules (inaudible).

MRS. CLINTON: Well, no. In the last 20 months, we have suffered the loss of my father and my mother-in-law, and the tragic death of our friend Liz Foster (phonetic), and it puts things into somewhat of a perspective. Those were very deep personal losses to the President.

And stacked against those, the adverse publicity, the partisanship, the name-calling -- seems, unfortunately, to be a part of American politics today -- seems somewhat insignificant. It is, on occasion, hurtful. It always is when someone says something that's not true or uses myself or my husband as a (inaudible). But I just try to remember that they often do it for their own personal reasons, (inaudible) or political or financial advancement.

And the important -- the really important part to us is to keep our own priorities straight. And the only (inaudible) that have really been difficult (inaudible) the ones that I mentioned, and the rest of it, we have learned to adjust to and cope with and work through.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible) administration (inaudible). (Inaudible) very, very well (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I always think it's a risk. Everything that I ever did to help my husband when he was governor, working on educational health care there, was also a risk, although on a much less visible level, and certainly here at the White House.

But my husband, when he asked me to do this, I think came at it with what has always been his attitude, is that he wants the people around him (inaudible) to be part of

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his work. No one has been elected by the people of America besides my husband and the Vice President.

So all of us, in fact, are working to fulfill his agenda for America. And I was very honored to be asked to work on what is one of the most important issues facing our country. And it was a very exciting, difficult challenge that we took on, but I'm very grateful that I had a chance, and will continue to work on it, because our problems will not go away.

We know that we're going to have to continue to try to provide quality health care at affordable cost to every American, as you do in your country. And there are things that people have to face up to, and so yes, it's a risk, but it's a risk worth taking.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: It was, because the problems are big, and the feelings people have are so deep about what should or should not be done in our system, but I had excellent help from literally hundreds of people from around the country, probably thousands. I received over a million letters from people who wrote with advice about what should be done. I felt very supported.

I just regret that, as the debates keyed up, it became partisan, special interests spent hundreds of millions of dollars against what the President was trying to do, and we were unable to overcome that this time. But no president has been able to get as far in this issue as my husband has, and so I think we accomplished a great deal.

We put this issue on the forefront of the American agenda, we raised people's awareness, and we pointed out some of the changes that would work. So we'll be back, and this will be an issue that my husband will continue (inaudible).

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know that there was any moment. I always knew that it was a very big task to try to take on. I went back and read President Roosevelt's, President Truman's, and all of the other Presidents' efforts, and how they all ran up against very strong opposition. So I had no illusions about how difficult it would be.

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I did not bank, I guess, on the partisanship that, unfortunately, we have had in the last session of Congress, which really changed the atmosphere dramatically within the Congress, but I think I always knew it was going to be difficult. But I believe that if we kept working on it, kept trying to bring people together, that we would come out with something.

But toward the end of our Congress, partisan lines were drawn so strongly, and we had this midterm election that was at the end of the congressional time, and so there was little ground for cooperation, which I thought was very regrettable. But we will take up where we left off, and I don't get discouraged very easily. I think that it is something that is a part of our obligation to continue to raise, and eventually we will be successful.

You know, I was watching our television meeting the last weekend or so, and I saw some of the conferences of the Tory party and the labor party, and their commitment to your national service cut across partisan lines.

They were all talking about how they would maintain a new strength, and we will eventually get to the point in our country where we will do a better job providing health care at a more affordable cost for every American, and this President will deserve a lot of the credit.

MS. KENDALL: It must very difficult to (inaudible) talking about. (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: No, because I think that I saw it coming, and I realized what the forces aligned against us had been able to do. But there is a lot of historical precedent for that. The same thing happened to President Truman. He tried on national health care three times after the second world war.

So it's not something new, it was just that I had not thought it would be quite as strong as it turned out to be. But I couldn't get angry because that takes too much energy. What I wanted to understand is why it happened, what we did wrong. I mean, I think we made mistakes, and we learned a lot about how to present this issue and what the American people were ready for and what they were not ready for.

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So it was more of a learning experience, and of course it was frustrating and disappointing, but it is something that I feel so strongly about that I don't want to be angry, I want to try to help people think through how we can do it better.

MS. KENDALL: What would you like (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think when the attacks on the President's plan first came, we should have been more prepared to answer, in the forms in which the attacks were made. The frustrating in our country is that, if the President makes a speech, it has a huge effect for a few days.

But if that speech is undercut by paid advertising and by direct mail campaigns, day in and day out, combined with very effective opposition of the other party and many of their news outlets, then the particular points that the President or anyone makes get buried by the just relentless wave of the opposition. And I think we were not prepared for that. It came early, and it was very persistent, very well funded.

So I would have anticipated that we should have answered it more effectively instead of assuming that the debate in the Congress would answer people's questions, because, in effect, what they heard on their TV and radio and what they received in their mailboxes had much more impact than the debate, which came and went with the news coverage, but didn't have a repetitiveness (inaudible) of opposition.

MS. KENDALL: Do you think it would be possible (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: No. I don't think there's any evidence of that. I think I became the target, but I think that the real target was preventing the changes that would have made some of the interest groups have to change their ways, would have directed more of our dollars into actually delivering health care, instead of into the financing of health care, which is a huge paperwork -- or a bureaucracy that no other advanced country has to sustain.

So the real issues were ones that the opposition recognized. I might have been used as a particular target, but I wasn't the objective. The objective was to stop the

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reform, because the reform would have cost these interests money that I think would have been better spent actually providing doctors and nurses instead of feeding the paperwork health care system we have in this country.

MS. KENDALL: What next?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we're going to continue working on health care, but I'm also going to be speaking out more often on the issues that I've worked on for more than 20 years, children's issues and family issues in our country, because for me, health care was an extension of that. Much of what motivated me was to try to make sure that every family had access to health care the same way that my husband and I do, for our daughter.

But we have a lot of problems that are all too urgent. We have this terrible problem with violence in our country that is out of control in many neighborhoods which really strips children of their childhood, both the victims and the perpetrators. We have a lot of issues surrounding economic security that the President is working on, so that families can stay together and support themselves.

We have the welfare reform program that the President has introduced that he and I have talked about and he's worked on for many years. So I want to talk, maybe more often than I have in the last 20 months, about how we all bear a dual responsibility for our children and our families.

On the one hand, families and parents in our country have to become more responsible, at every level of society. We are not, I think, giving our children the appropriate mix of love, attention and discipline that children need.

On the other hand, every family needs conditions in which to raise children that help foster good parenting. And there are things that society and the government can do better than they have in the past. So it's that combination that I'd like to talk about, because in our country we have this false debate.

There those of the rights who say "The family is totally responsible, society has no obligations," and there are those on the left who say "Everything's the fault of society and the government, and absolve neglectful

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parenting," and they are both inadequate explanations for what's going on. And I think we ought to be more sensible about how do we support both parents and families, and try to do a better job of it.

MS. KENDALL: So those who say you are going to retreat into another issue (inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: No, no. They've never been right. It gave me a good laugh every time I read it, especially given my schedule, which is as busy as ever, particularly in election season like this, taking the message of change that the President has out to the country.

MS. KENDALL: But are you going to be less involved in politics?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't think so. I think that I will be involved in doing what I can on those issues that I have both an interest in and an expertise and that the President asks me to work on. I mean, those are issues that I have a traditional interest in, education issues, family issues, health care, that I will continue to work on.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I would never compare myself to Mrs. Roosevelt. I think she was an extraordinary American original. She broke the barriers that were there that I don't think anyone will ever be able to (inaudible) understand how she did it with such grace.

But she did encounter a lot of the same criticism and opposition that seems to pop up around me from time to time. And she was the first woman in this position to do anything, the first press conference, the first to testify before the Congress, the first to have a job in a policy area. And also she did so many things to publicize her views and her husband's views through a daily column, through a radio program.

So I have taken a lot of guidance from what she did, and also a lot of comfort from the fact that the most important way to fulfill this role is to do what you believe in, do the best you can to support your husband, take care of your family, and to make your contribution, because no matter what you do, you'll be criticized.

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So better to have done what you believed in, and accept whatever criticism comes from that, than to have tried to twist yourself into some image of yourself that doesn't bear any resemblance to the reality. I feel very strongly about that.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)? (Inaudible)  
professional around the world. What did you feel  
(inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I was nervous because it was such a big undertaking. I had, I think, five committees that I appeared before, and I had to do quite a bit of preparation. And I felt prepared, but I never knew what would happen in the context of those hearings. So I was nervous going into them, but once I was there, I felt perfectly at home because I felt so strongly about what I was expressing.

So it was a great experience, and I hope that it did give many people the feeling that they too could speak out on issues that concerned them, because I was really there as a citizen. I was not there in any -- I don't get paid for what I do. I have no official position. But there are many Americans who want to make a contribution that I think sometimes hold back, and perhaps they could be encouraged because of what I've done.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible).

(Laughter)

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I had a wonderful upbringing. I -- my parents and my school and my church life that opened my eyes to a much broader world than the one just within my own suburb of Chicago. So although my father had very strong beliefs, they were of a Republican party that unfortunately seems to be vanishing in many parts of our country.

He was conservative, and essentially he believed in conserving and investing the (inaudible). He moved his family when he got out of the navy to a suburb that had high school taxes, because he believed in the best education for his children and didn't begrudge his responsibilities to the larger community.

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So although he was a Republican and conservative, those were values that I still feel that I hold. I believe strongly in the responsibility of individuals. I happen to think that government can either impede that or assist individuals in becoming more self-sufficient. And I don't see any contradiction between that and the way that I was raised.

And certainly during the late '60s when I was in college, I was opposed to the Vietnam war, I thought it was a mistake for our country. I have favored other military actions, such as the Gulf war, but certainly in that time and on that occasion, I thought that was a mistake.

So although I was becoming a Democrat, I did not fully subscribe to Democrat policies, either. And I think the important point that my husband has made, which I believe very strongly, is that a lot of the problems today do not give themselves easily to the answers labelled Republican or Democrat, or conservative or liberal. That's often an excuse for not thinking through and coming up with pragmatic problem solving approaches.

So I am a Democrat, and I believe strongly in the fundamental values of the Democratic party, but I am one who believes that our party also must change, and that many of the old ways are no longer adequate. So, in my husband's phrase, I want to get beyond brain dead politics. And that's a constant evolution. And I think that's appropriate, because the problems have changed and we have learned a lot.

My goodness, if we haven't learned from the last 50 years what worked -- didn't work, we would be just petrified, and I think it's important to the political system to stay dynamic, which is what my husband is trying to do.

MS. KENDALL: (Inaudible)?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that there are so many different ways to serve. I don't think you have to be in the elected office to serve. I think that's one of the great beauties of our political system that (inaudible) talked about when he first came to America, that we are a nation, and always have been, of citizen activists, people who serve in many different ways. And that has been my tradition.

I have always been involved in public service, ever

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since I was a young girl. So for me, it is perfectly natural to continue to work on issues that are of personal concern to me, and not seek elective office.

Besides, I'm married to the greatest political person of our generation, I think. He has such enormous capacity for understanding the problems facing America, and I've often said, has the wonderful marriage in head and heart that I think is not often found in political leaders. So any way that I can assist him in his elective office, while I continue to work in both my professional life and my public service life, is very satisfying to me.

MS. KENDALL: Okay.

(The interview was concluded.)

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