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INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT  
AND THE FIRST LADY  
BY  
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The Diplomatic Reception Room

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Q We're planning to do this in May and, of course, one of the themes for May is Mothers Day. So I wanted to talk a little bit about your own parents. And you've both suffered really bad years in that way and have obviously lots of thoughts about pretty remarkable people in your lives.

I've read a lot about your mom, and I know a lot about what I would see as being remarkable about her as a mom. But when you think about her, what's sort of some of the salient things that come to mind about what made her a great mother?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, people -- I guess, what's been written about her is mostly about her incredible resilience. She was always encouraging me to try new things, to keep going, and never be deterred by the defeat. But also, I think it's important to point out that she made it a lot of fun. I mean, there was never this sort of -- I never felt like I was under some burden to achieve. Our life was fun even in the difficult times.

The other thing I think that is important to point out is that she was remarkably constant. Especially in all those years when I was young, when she was getting up so early every morning, going to work, she always came home; she always made dinner; she was always there for me.

And so even in what was at that time a very unconventional life, with occasional difficulties at home, she provided a very stable and open and good environment as well as being an example of courage and good humor. So she was quite a good mother I think in every way.

Q It sounds that way. I mean, your mother, too, was obviously a constant, someone who -- what I was always remarking at as a working mom, and my mother very much like your mom was pretty much home full-time. She did a lot of volunteer work and still does at 82. But I wanted to also talk a little bit about your mom and your dad and just as parents -- when you look back, why and how did they make you who you are.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, they both started from not only a point of loving me and my brothers but of believing in us as people. And growing up as a girl in the '40s and '50s, to have both a mother and a father who basically said you can do or be whatever you choose, as long as you're willing to work for it, was an unusual message. And my parents were such a good combination of parenting skills, at least from my experience, because my mother was always there and we'd come home at lunch and we'd have lunch together; I'd come home after school, she was there; she would always be helping; she was always supportive and really provided that kind of unconditional love that every child needs.

And my father was kind of like the ambassador from the outside world. He would get us up in the morning, and then he'd go off to work, but he'd always be home for dinner. And he's always have tales about how hard the world was and how you better be prepared for it. So the combination of this unconditional love with this reality that combined to give us such a well-rounded view of both the good and the bad and the rough and the smooth was just a gift for me.

I just spoke at the National Prayer Luncheon, and I talked about Bill's mother because the other thing that I would say about her, which was really remarkable, is that she really was able to unconditionally love lots of people. And I even said at the lunch that sometimes I would say to her, how can you stand this person? And she'd say, oh, he's good to his mother; he's good to his dog. I mean, there was always a capacity with her to find something good about people.

THE PRESIDENT: That's really true.

MRS. CLINTON: And just watching it -- even though I found sometimes it hard to believe because she was so loving to so many people, oftentimes people who the outside world would say were not "deserving," but that love enabled her to reach so many people and to give them the gift of her spirit.

And then, I would just add, about my mother that she had a social conscience in a time when that was not even fashionable. She was always trying to make sure that we understood what was fair and what was just. And it was very encouraging of us to speak out and not worry about what anybody thought and to just be ourselves.

I think those two things -- Bill's mother's capacity for unconditional love and my mother's encouragement to go against the

grain, to do what was right for you -- I mean, I think are two of the greatest gifts any children could get.

Q Do you see that in Chelsea? Do you see qualities of your parents in her?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes, all of them. I must tell you, I miss -- I really -- I love Hillary's parents, too. They've been wonderful to me. I miss her father a lot. And I think her mother's a terrific person. And that's been one of the great blessings of our life together as the way we can kind of get to know and -- and the parents of one, I think, are always skeptical of the other in a marriage. (Laughter.)

Q -- always that competition --

THE PRESIDENT: I used to mark -- I used to sort of write mental marks in my mind when I knew I was making progress with Hillary's father. Sort of my marks to worthiness, you know. (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, his mother just could not believe that he would be interested in any woman who didn't wear makeup and and didn't sort of hue to the image of what you'd expect from a girl in those days. And so we used to have some real run-arounds about it, because she just would roll her eyes. But I think that there was so much more we had in common that we grew to appreciate and love each other.

Q What qualities of her do you see in your daughter? Or of any of your parents? That's always one of the great things about having kids, actually, is to see your parents in them.

MRS. CLINTON: I think Bill's right. I see qualities, and really good qualities, from all three of her grandparents in Chelsea. She is a wonderful friend, just like her grandmother, Virginia -- or Ginger, as we called her. She loves her friends and she defends them, and she supports them and goes out of her way for them.

A couple of months ago, she had a friend who was in a youth group at church who was doing something on a program that was at 6:00 a.m. in the morning on a school day, which meant Chelsea, if she were to go, had to get up at 4:00 a.m., because it was an hour -- it was like a 40-minute drive. And I said to her, "Honey, you know, I think she'd understand if you didn't go." She said, "Well, but I wouldn't because I need to be there for her."

And then I think she's got the kind of careful look at reality that her grandfather had. She doesn't get hoodwinked --

THE PRESIDENT: Suckered very much.

MRS. CLINTON: -- or suckered. She's got a real good sort of --

Q She doesn't suffer fools lightly.

MRS. CLINTON: No. She's willing to say, that doesn't make any sense. There was an event at school in the last year or two where everybody was doing one thing, and she just wouldn't do it. She said, I don't believe in that. I don't think that's a good idea.

Q Well, that sounds like you. I mean, do you see -- what qualities of Mrs. Clinton do you see in Chelsea?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, she has an extraordinary social conscience, which both her mother and grandmother have. And she is very -- she's disciplined. And she's a very strong character. She's extremely ethical, deeply religious. And she's sort of no-nonsense in a lot of ways. And I like that about her. I mean, she really has her mother's character.

Q What do you see?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, she certainly has his math ability, which she didn't get from me. (Laughter.) She has inherited that wonderfully. She has -- you're always biased about your own children, but she has the same remarkable big mind and big heart that her father has. And I watch the way she's taken from both of us, and it helps me. And I think that's one of the things you learn from your children. It helps me to be a better person and to work on some things that I'd like to improve by watching how she's absorbed the strengths of her family.

Q If someone said to you, why have kids, what would you say? I mean, thinking back when Chelsea was born and thinking back to those early months -- and everybody goes through just changes that you can't ever anticipate, and it's different for everyone. I mean, I know from our readers because of a birth experience poll, and 72,000 of our readers answered it because it is the seminal event in someone's life. And a dad poll, we got an unprecedented number of responses from dads, something like 15,000 answered that poll. And so everyone has a different take on that. But when you think back on what it was like when she was a baby and you thought, boy, this baby has changed my life, in what ways would you say, sort of, first come to mind?

MRS. CLINTON: We really were anxious to have children. And so when I was pregnant we were just thrilled. And from the very beginning, he was so committed to being involved. And those were the early days of Lamaze -- we'd go to these Lamaze classes on Saturday morning, and all these men would look around like, what am I doing here. We would have all dragged them -- but then by about the fourth or fifth month they kind of got into it.

Q Until they showed the tape. My husband --

MRS. CLINTON: Did he faint? (Laughter.)

Q He wasn't really eager to go back for the next class.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we ended up having a Cesarean. And he was the first father they ever let into the operating room. And he, I think, finally convinced them -- they weren't going to let him in because they were afraid he'd get in their way or he'd faint or something. And he kept saying, "My mother is a nurse. I have been --

THE PRESIDENT: I've been in surgery.

MRS. CLINTON: "I've been in surgery. I've been in lots of operating rooms, so I promise you I won't faint on you." So they finally let him in, which, of course, I was really grateful for, because I was --

THE PRESIDENT: She'd never been in the hospital before.

MRS. CLINTON: I'd never been --

THE PRESIDENT: And she didn't know she was going to have to have a Cesarean until right then.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Until we got there.

Q Were you awake?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, yes, I was awake, and he was holding my hand. And then he starts talking to all the doctors and nurses. (Laughter.) And so it was just this real kind of group experience. But we were so happy from the very beginning. We would have loved to have had more children. So for us there were adjustments and I think we all -- I think we both learned -- I've told this story before -- when Chelsea was just a tiny baby, just a few weeks old, and I was rocking her one night because she was crying, I just looked at her and I said, Chelsea, you've never been a baby before, and I've never been a mother before, and we're just going to have to help each other get through this. And I think that our willingness to just learn from her and respect who she is, the person that she was meant to be, has helped me a lot.

THE PRESIDENT: I think -- the question you asked is why would you tell people to have children. Apart from the fact that is keeps civilization going -- somebody's got to do it -- I think it makes you a better person, a fuller person, more whole. Putting someone else first constantly in a way that is full of joy even in the tough times. I mean, I can't imagine what my life would have

been like if I'd never become a father. I just -- and I'm certain that I would have been a better, maybe a better person, a better governor, a better president, better husband -- just better. I mean, I just think that. The more you just -- it ties you to the rest of life in a way, and makes you less self-absorbed.

MRS. CLINTON: One of the things that Bill used to talk a lot when Chelsea was first born is how he never saw his own father, and his own father was killed before the age that Bill was when we had Chelsea. So this was something that he really had to be dedicated to because he had to learn how to be a father. He didn't have a model about fathering and he certainly didn't have a model for fathering a daughter.

Q Who was your biggest teacher?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I don't know. I had a lot of --when I was a boy I had a lot of older men who were good to me. But I wanted to spend -- I wanted to be much more involved in my child's life than my stepfather was with me on a constant basis. A lot of men, I think -- at least fathers of boys who grew up in my generation often kind of left a lot of the basic child-rearing to the mothers and weren't as involved with them maybe until they got older. I became involved with my stepfather when I got older, and we actually, by the time he died, had quite an important relationship.

But I had -- I was in band, I was in Scouting, I was active in my church. A lot of older men were good to me, and I saw how they were with their kids. And a lot of my friends -- I would spend time in their homes and --

Q So you didn't have a sort of expert/dumb apprentice trap that everybody falls into that --

THE PRESIDENT: No. I didn't read -- (laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: We used to read the magazine, though.

Q Well, that's great.

THE PRESIDENT: I did read a lot of magazine articles.

Q Well, that's great. Now you're obviously -- you're extremely, still involved in Chelsea's life, and I just wondered what's it like? What are sort of the best and worse parts of being presidential parents, of living the life you're living now with a 12-year-old?

MRS. CLINTON: Nearly a 14-year-old.

Q Oh, she's 13?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, she's 13 now, so that by the time this piece comes out she'll be 14. And, I mean, the best part is

being her parents because she's an absolute wonderful person. And there's some good parts about having her father work near where he lives because she can run over there after school or call him up and they can see each other. And he's usually home for dinner about the same time. So there's some good kind of routines that can be established that are important to us.

And the worse part is just the lack of privacy and the inability to move easily, to do the things that we took for granted. I used to get in the car with her every Saturday and I'd take her to ballet and then I'd pick her up and we'd go to lunch and we'd go run errands or we'd go grocery shopping. Things that I like to do. The kind of time that you need with your child -- just walking, pushing a cart up and down a grocery lane.

So that I miss a lot. And we have to work at finding those times together. And we do. We play a lot of games together. We do puzzles together. We watch TV together, especially sporting events. So we try to steal a --

Q You do try, you do carve out a schedule?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q I just know that with my husband and myself, and I know from our readers this the number-one issue, which leads directly to the child care issue, which I know that you've done a lot of --

THE PRESIDENT: But believe it or not, it's funny because in our situation now, even though we work very long hours because we're right here and because I don't have to travel as much, as many days as I did when I was Governor. We actually have access to her. We can spend good time together.

MRS. CLINTON: We usually have dinner, then we usually do something for a little while after dinner. And then she goes and does her homework, and then if she finishes, she might come in and visit with us some more. We've had good times.

THE PRESIDENT: It's kind of nice.

MRS. CLINTON: We watch a lot of movies.

THE PRESIDENT: She's been a teenager for a whole year and we haven't become completely irrelevant to her yet. (Laughter.) It's great.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, except it's going by too fast.

THE PRESIDENT: It's one whole year and we're still in it. We still seem to matter. (Laughter.)

Q When you're not around, though, and even when you're on the campaign trail, I know that you kept in touch with her. I remember reading that you faxed homework back and forth. But you've had to struggle with the same thing and your mother certainly had to struggle with having to basically keep two jobs going.

And I don't have to tell you, but I will tell you that if you ask the 11 million readers of Parents Magazine what is the most difficult issue for them, it is child care. And health care certainly is in many ways related to that. Is that something -- I know, I remember reading a speech you did on the op ed page of The Times when you went France. It was a trip I was supposed to go on, but I couldn't go at the last minute. And I really felt then that you had a very clear understanding that this is not an isolated issue, that it is intimately linked to everything -- the economy and you get more people off welfare and back into work, but who's taking care of the kids? What are your thoughts about the child care issue as a challenge?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think we've made a little progress over the last several years. We've got some funding going under the Child Care Act of the states and more states, I think, have done more to try to help support families. But I still think we make it much too hard on parents today trying to juggle all their responsibilities. And so many families now are working longer hours at any time since World War II. And their incomes are holding even. And even -- in some families today with both the mother and the father working, they are together only making as much as a father of an earlier time would have made in the '50s or the '60s in real income terms.

So we have just made it so economically challenging for families. And we also, by the way we construct our lives together, with the distances between people, the separation of families from their extended families, we've just imposed lots of burdens that I think we're paying a big price for. So I'm hoping that businesses will be sensitive, that government will be more supportive and that more families will be able to figure out how to balance work with their child care responsibilities better. And that means we've got to have a better supply and we've got to pay people a living wage so that they stay in child care and they do right by our children.

You mentioned when I was in France. One of the things that struck me there was they had much higher numbers of children in these child care facilities. But because the child care providers were so well-educated and were paid on the level of elementary school teachers, they could handle many more children. They were trained and educated to be able to keep different activities going and keep the children engaged.

Q It is a more respected work, not only in terms of compensation, but in terms of the value that was placed on that job.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, that's right.

Q I think that the thing that struck me that was so moving in your State of the Union message and, in fact, was why it is so thrilling for me to come is that the notion that we've got to build community back. And that what you sensed when you were in California which was people do want to reach out to their neighbors, but basically there's, I think, a basic goodness in people that would certainly -- where children are concerned, everybody wants to help children.

But what I see as parents working -- we get to parents that are from inside their home and you're getting at them from outside and that the challenge, I feel, that I is a big one is when you have baby your view is very myopic. You are focused on that kid. And although you are sensitized to the needs of other children, if your life is also as you've described it, incredibly tough, how do you get people to look over their backyard fence and begin to embrace some of these issues which, frankly, until they do, until they see it as their agenda, I don't -- I'm never been more hopeful now that you're here.

THE PRESIDENT: I think people do -- they really are -- there is an awareness in this country, though, that we're tied together in a common destiny. I really believe this. And I think people know instinctively that if anybody can lose their health insurance, they could; or that if people can succeed as parents and workers, then society is going to suffer either economically or socially.

I think the people know our diversity of race and religion and ethnicity is either going to be a source of enormous strength or division or discord and weakness for us. And we have to make up our mind which it's going to be.

So I think the people at least in intuitive ways are ahead of the politicians on this. I think they want us to find ways for folks at the grass-roots level to come together and work together and deal with the problems instead of just be divided by a bunch of hot air political rhetoric in Washington.

Q Right. Well, I thought -- the comment you made about governments don't raise children, parents do -- it was sort of electrifying to me because I felt that's at the core of what I feel in terms of thinking about in going through the civil rights movement, if we use it as a model, that there are a lot of laws that needed to get passed, but, frankly, until people felt it in their hearts and believed it, it wasn't going to happen. And what, in fact, needed to happen was that at the civil level, if that's the right word, kind of de Tocqueville mode -- the institutions, frankly that I think may be the bridge between the kitchen table and the White House table is what's key.

MRS. CLINTON: I think you're absolutely right, because it's what they call the intermediary institutions in civil society --

the family, the church, the neighborhood association -- that have really broken down in the last decades. And trying to rebuild those people need to feel supported and they need to feel that there is somebody out there who understands what they're going through and can be there for them.

And one of the stories that came out of the Los Angeles earthquake is that neighbors were talking to neighbors for the very first time.

Q And you don't see people -- the swish of the garage door is how you know they're home.

MRS. CLINTON: And, of course, what we have to acknowledge is that much of the inwardness is also driven by fear of crime and violence and the way it affects our families and undermines our security.

One of the things that has just struck me in my daughter's growing up is that -- Bill and I have talked about this a lot -- I mean, we'd leave home in the sunny morning with our friends, and our parents would say, be back in time for dinner. And we'd get on our bikes and we'd all go off and do whatever it was we wanted to do that day. And I remember a couple of years ago we were in Little Rock, Chelsea saying to me that she and a friend wanted to ride their bikes to the library, which was about six or seven blocks away. And I wouldn't let them do it.

What we've done to deprive children and families of the freedom to be out and around and to feel that they're part of a larger safe community, that adults can watch after other people's children. So we've got a lot to work on.

Q We do, because in those days -- I mean, when I was growing up, if I was out of line, Mrs. Stern two doors down knew it and there was a support network, which as you've talked about, is gone. And I think for a lot of parents this is a major problem. We say about the magazine that we are the woman who lives a few doors down, who is there if you need her but she's not calling on the phone to impose her ideas. And that's missing.

But we've seen when we do editorial research that issues -- the articles like teaching kids right from wrong, which used to be popular, are now sort of off the charts in terms of popularity.

You talked a little bit about Chelsea's faith and your own faith. It clearly has been important to her, but can you talk a little bit about why you feel it's important -- it was important to you for her to have a spiritual --

MRS. CLINTON: From the time she was a baby we did two things every night -- we read to her and we prayed with her. And we would take turns reading, and sometimes one of the other of us would be so tired, but we'd still always read to her. And we might fall

asleep and have to be woken up by the other. But we would also pray with her every night.

And now that she's a teenager she still prays every night, but it's kind of her domain. We sometimes will come in and pray with her. But from the very beginning we knew how much our faith meant to us, and when she was a little girl -- every child goes through these stages, which I call kind of theological stage of development around four or five, and they start asking all the eternal questions, like where is heaven and who gets to go there and why does God let mean people be mean. All the things that are at the root of human existence.

I remember Bill and I used to just be stunned if we'd put her to bed and she'd ask one of these zinger questions.

THE PRESIDENT: Did God ever make a mistake.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes -- did God --

THE PRESIDENT: Who gets in heaven, and who goes to hell, and did God ever make a mistake? (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: That's right. So, for us, we thought that was an important part of helping her grow. It was something that was so natural for us to do and which she was very hungry for, as I think most children are.

I think children are intensely spiritual beings, and anything a parent can do to help nurture and respect that is important. So, for us, it was just kind of a natural part of how we spent time with her.

Q Let me just ask you really quickly what -- the health care issue, which you've embraced with such passion and have done such a remarkable job on, are there, in terms of your priorities -- especially if they would affect parents or the readers of our magazine --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the things that will affect children this year are -- first, we have all these education bills moving through the Congress right now, which will enshrine the national education goals, give schools ways of measuring whether their kids are measuring up to world-class standards, and foster a lot of local reforms of all kinds -- grass-roots efforts to change.

Then we're going to have this school to work bill which will provide training after high school for people who don't go to college. And we have reordered the whole student loan bill to give lower interest, longer-term repayments. Our national service is an option to repay loans. So that's a big part of what we're doing this year.

Then the welfare reform initiative is a really big

family issue that enables -- the whole idea is enabling people on welfare to succeed as workers and parents. And the crime bill is hugely important because it has a safe school initiative, to try to improve security around schools and to try to help kids in schools learn how to resolve their disputes without resorting to violence. So all these things are very important, as well as putting more police officers on the streets, stiffening -- the three strikes and you're out for violent offenders.

So those are all in there. If we get all that done this year, this will be the biggest year in congressional history probably. But if we do, then looking down the road, I think what we have to do is to work more on rebuilding the families and reconnecting them to communities. A lot of that is going to have to be done community by community, but the President and the First Lady can be voices for it.

We will have to do more on child care -- or some help for middle class families so they can pay that. We'll have to -- there are lots of other things to do that I expect all four years will be quite full.

But the family has been under stress for 30 years and family income has been stagnant for 20 years. And violence has been really gripping kids for 15 years. More violence -- even in places where the crime rate has gone down, violence among children has gone up. So these things -- we're not going to turn them around overnight. We just have to know that we're all committed as a people to doing it, and we have to understand very clearly what the stakes are. And the stakes are, literally, the future of our families and our children.

Q I can't thank you enough. This really was wonderful, this was great. I hope we can do it again.

END4:22 P.M. EST