

ABC News Interview

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WILLIAM J. CLINTON,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON,
FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES

DOWNS: Well, tonight, the president and the first lady. An exclusive, provocative, and sometimes funny interview with the most powerful couple in the world.

Last Friday, we spotlighted Bob Dole and his wife Elizabeth, giving you, we believe, new insights into his character and thinking. And tonight, Barbara hopes to do the same thing with the man who wants the White House again -- President Clinton, joined by Hillary Clinton.

WALTERS: Well, two years ago, with the Republican landslide in Congress, Bill Clinton's chances for re-election were in doubt. But today, he's come a long way.

What made the change? Indeed, what circumstances made him the man he is today? Later, we'll bring you a rare interview with both Clintons.

But first, the president -- calm before the storm.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

CLINTON: Well, we've got atmosphere.

WALTERS: Look at -- look at this. Thunder and lightning. Did you plan this?

CLINTON: No, but we had good timing, didn't we?

WALTERS: Perfect timing.

Even at the end of a long day -- a day in which he wrestled with budget issues, made campaign plans, met with members of the Black Caucus, and then greeted the Olympic torch on its trip through Washington, Bill Clinton seems to thoroughly enjoy the White House, no matter the weather.

Are you all right, Mr. President? I don't want you to get wet.

CLINTON: Oh, yeah. I'm fine. I can get a little wet. The Rose Garden even looks good in the rain, doesn't it?

WALTERS: Bill Clinton is no stranger to stormy weather in his political life and his personal life. His father was killed in an auto accident before he was born. His mother later married an alcoholic, and the family life was often turbulent.

But Clinton was a survivor. He left Arkansas to go away to school but returned to become its governor -- a job he lost after his first term and then won again.

He's lived in this White House now for three years and eight months.

Do you ever totally get used to it?

CLINTON: I never have a time when I'm not proud to be here and I don't feel a certain sense of awe about it.

WALTERS: For our formal interview, we talked in the Blue Room of the White House.

CLINTON: This is a great room. I love this room.

WALTERS: The Blue Room is often used for state occasions. But in this conversation, we started with personal matters.

Mr. President, let's begin at the beginning. You came from a home in which your true father had died, your mother married, divorced, remarried a man who was an alcoholic and abused her. It was a turbulent childhood.

What are the effects of that kind of childhood on the man today?

CLINTON: I think I, first of all, maybe had a little better childhood than it looks like in retrospect. My stepfather who raised me was an alcoholic, and he had some very bad periods. But he was basically a good man. I think it probably made me a little more of a private person in some ways, ironically, a little...

WALTERS: People don't think of you that way.

CLINTON: I know they don't. But I think it did. I think it makes you -- because it was something -- you know, you have a big part of your life you couldn't discuss with anybody. I mean, I never discussed it with anybody.

WALTERS: It is said sometimes that the children of alcoholics try very hard to please. Do you see that in yourself?

CLINTON: I think that the children of alcoholics, at least some of them, try to be -- if not try to please, try to minimize conflict.

Sometimes I think I've left the impression that -- that I didn't have a clear position, and I wouldn't stick to it.

CLINTON: And of course, that's what happened in the budget fight we had last year when the Republican congressional leaders shut the government down twice. But I think they believed, based on all the press coverage about how easy-going I was and like to get along with people, that somehow I would and...

WALTERS: So they don't think, Oh, he's a pushover, or he's a...

CLINTON: Yes, a pushover, doesn't really believe anything.

WALTERS: Gee, he's so pleasant and he smiles, so he's not really going to stick to it.

CLINTON: Yes, he's so interested in avoiding people being mad at each other, and...

WALTERS: Yeah.

CLINTON: See, I think a lot of people said, well, he just doesn't want anybody to be mad at him, but that's not really what it is. I'm kind of used to people being mad at me now after all these years in public life.

WALTERS: Why don't we talk about some of the more difficult times. Two years into your presidency, the whole Congress, both houses, became Republican. And it was said and written then that you felt that you had lost your way. Had you?

CLINTON: No. But I felt that I would -- I was in danger of losing my ability to get a majority of the people to support me.

WALTERS: It must have been a dark time for you as president. What did you decide to do differently?

CLINTON: Well, I decided, first of all, that I needed to make a clear assessment of what had happened and why and understand what people felt. And I decided I needed to "dance with what brung me," as we say at home.

I basically went back to the elemental message that I had developed in 1991 and 1992 that I -- that I was trying to create opportunity for everybody that would be responsible so we could be prosperous and free and safe and trying to manage this vast transformation into the 21st century.

WALTERS: Would you grade yourself for us your first two years -- A, B, C, or D?

CLINTON: Well, I think on performance in ways that affect the American people, I get a very good grade. On politics and on appearance and on things that really matter a lot to people that write about it, I don't think I did very well.

WALTERS: So, OK, let's say maybe you got a C. C, C minus, C plus. What would you...

CLINTON: On the politics, not on the substance.

WALTERS: OK.

CLINTON: But the politics of it, I did -- I don't know if I'd even give myself a C, you know, because you ought to look at the congressional elections.

WALTERS: Mr. President, character is said to be a major issue in this campaign. How important is it for the president to be a role model?

CLINTON: I think it's important for the president to be a role model as a leader for the country, to stick up for the things that the country ought to believe in and be for. But I don't think that means that we should turn our politics into one long, endless, dark night of demeaning, mean-spirited personal attacks.

I've been in a lot of tough races in my life and have been subject to my series -- share of personal attacks, but nothing, nothing like what happened until I started running for president.

And the American people have now had an adequate opportunity to judge me as president, to see my work, to make a judgment about whether I have the character to do this job, and they will do that.

WALTERS: If you were a reporter, how far would you delve into someone's personal life?

CLINTON: Well, I would want to know anything about a person's personal life that I thought might materially affect their capacity to serve.

But I would certainly be very careful about giving a lot of credence to what other people said about a candidate and saying that the charge enough -- charge alone was enough to blow something up, especially if people were paid to make the charge.

So I would be -- I would have a more restrained view, I think, than many do today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

CLINTON: You know, it's just all a bunch of bull.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

WALTERS: The biggest shadow over the Clinton presidency is, of course, Whitewater -- a name that has become a synonym for scandal.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

D'AMATO: We get a pattern of deception, deceit and memory loss.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

WALTERS: What began as an obscure investment with developer Jim McDougal and his wife, Susan, ballooned into a full-fledged political nightmare and several felony trials. The McDougals and others have been convicted. But to hear the president tell it, he barely knew the McDougals.

You know, you have had to testify in two criminal cases now involving friends and former associates. And we should say, as everyone has said, that you have never been accused of anything in these trials.

But there are those who ask -- and I will ask -- should an elected official be judged in part by his friends and associates? There have been problems with these people. Some of them have been found guilty.

CLINTON: But if you judge, you should be judged by all your friends and associates, and you should judge -- be judged by the degree and nature of your association with them.

It is true that there were two criminal trials in which people with whom I had had associations in the past were put on trial. I might say in the second trial the people were acquitted, as you know, of the charges against them. And in one trial, a man with whom I made one business deal in 1978 and who hosted one fundraiser for me in 1984 and his wife were convicted.

So you can practice guilt by association, but I think that would be wrong. I think it would be wrong to say that of anyone, you know -- of Senator Dole because his chief financial adviser went to prison. I don't think that -- does that mean anything that Senator Dole did wrong? I'm not sure.

I don't think it does. I'm, frankly, very proud of my associates.

WALTERS: If you will finish this sentence for me, which is, "I, William Clinton, want to be president because..."

CLINTON: Because we are in the process of moving America into the 21st century with the vision that I have being made real, where there's opportunity for everybody who's responsible enough to work for it.

And my goal for the next four years will be to improve the educational and the job opportunities for all Americans and to implement this welfare reform bill in a humane and constructive way so that we've actually got jobs that -- for these people to attend.

WALTERS: Mr. President, at the end of this term or at the end of a next, what would you like the mark you leave to be?

CLINTON: I would like to be the second president in the history of the country -- the first was Theodore Roosevelt with some help from Woodrow Wilson at the end -- to lead this country through a period of dramatic change within America and in the world without a major war.

It's only happened once before in our country's history, and I'd like that to be my legacy.

WALTERS: Well, the future is, of course, uncertain, but one thing is clear now. The Clinton years have changed our view of the first lady.

When we come back, Bill and Hillary Clinton. How has their marriage survived? What would be her role in a second Clinton term? Personal and political revelations, next.

(BREAK)

DOWNES: She is perhaps the most criticized, the most scrutinized first lady in history. Everyone has an opinion about Hillary Clinton, and Mrs. Clinton has heard them all.

How has her marriage changed in these four years? What are her concerns now, both personal and political? Barbara continues now with the president and the first lady -- the world's most powerful couple.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WALTERS: Hillary Rodham Clinton is a walking lightning rod. In most polls, her negative ratings are worse than those of her husband and Bob Dole.

She met Bill Clinton at Yale Law School and returned with him to Arkansas as his wife. Their only child, Chelsea, was born in 1980. Hillary Clinton practiced law while her husband was governor. And when he ran for president, she defended him against all comers.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

H. CLINTON: Listen, the harder they hit, the more encouraged I get.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

WALTERS: As the Clinton administration got under way, she was given responsibility for the crucial drive to reform health care.

After that effort failed, her public profile changed.

She has traveled extensively overseas and has been especially active in programs to help children. She wrote a best-selling book about the raising of children called, "It Takes a Village."

The president turned 50 years old last month. Mrs. Clinton will be 49 in October. They've been married for 20 years, and, by their own admission, some of those years before they came to Washington were rocky.

I wonder, what have the White House years meant to your marriage?

CLINTON: You want to go first? You go first.

H. CLINTON: Actually, I think it's been a great time for us personally for little reasons, like the fact that he works above the store, so to speak. And so, he's able to come home in the middle of the afternoon if I'm there or Chelsea's there, and we eat dinner together most nights.

So it's, for me, been a really great four years.

WALTERS: For you?

CLINTON: I agree with that. We...

WALTERS: Say something romantic.

CLINTON: Well, I'm -- I'm getting to it. It's harder for me. I'm a man, you know. It's harder for me.

(LAUGHTER)

The -- the thing -- when we started out together, we were together all the time.

H. CLINTON: A long time ago.

CLINTON: All the time. You know, and I thought when we married, you know, maybe someday we'd, you know, practice law together. The first jobs we had, we had the same job when we started out. We were both teachers in the law school at the University of Arkansas.

And since I've been here, you know, we do have more time together, and some of it is quite romantic in spite of all the pressures of the moments. And, you know, like -- I know this may sound hokey, but my happiest times here are when we go down alone to the movie theater with two boxes of popcorn.

We don't just show movies when there's a crowd here. Lots of times we just go down alone and watch the movies, you know. Or we'll get up in the bed and watch whatever's on television, or we'll play games together -- we play a lot of games.

And these things, you know, they sort of keep your life human. They add a -- they remind you that you're still a person, which is pretty easy to forget around here sometimes.

WALTERS: Mrs. Clinton, you told Time magazine at one point that you and the president might be thinking of adopting a child. Are you still?

H. CLINTON: Well, we have talked about it. I think they might have leapt to some conclusions merely because we have considered it. We always wanted more children.

CLINTON: I think...

WALTERS: Do you have something to say on this?

CLINTON: Yeah, I do. You know, you really have to think about whether it's a good thing for a child, particularly depending on the age of the child, to be brought into this environment.

CLINTON: And we have thought about it, and we will continue to think about it. But I don't want to talk about it a lot because I don't want it to be a political issue.

WALTERS: Have you talked about it with Chelsea?

CLINTON: A little bit. No, I think she thinks it'd be fine, you know. But she probably wishes we'd done it 10 or 12 years ago. You know, why did you wait so long? It's time for her to leave.

WALTERS: Daughter Chelsea, who came to Washington as an awkward 12-year-old, has blossomed into sweet 16 in the White House. Her father taught her to drive this year, and her mother took her on a tour of potential colleges.

Well, Chelsea's going to be going away to college next year.

H. CLINTON: We don't want to talk about that.

CLINTON: I wish you hadn't said that.

H. CLINTON: That's very hard.

WALTERS: What is going to happen when she really starts to date if it's so tough for her just to go away to college? What are you going to be like?

CLINTON: Well, we've done a good job, as good a job as we could as parents, and we trust her. She's a fine young woman, I think. And we like her friends. I even like some of these boys.

WALTERS: OK, tell me the truth.

CLINTON: Once in a while, she even lets me talk to the boys that come around here, and I like that. So we're dealing with it the best we can.

H. CLINTON: This is -- this is probably the hardest challenge facing him next year, I think. The fact that she's going away to school.

CLINTON: You know, most of her dating so far has been like a lot of young people today. Most of the kids run around in kind of a crowd all the time.

WALTERS: But what if there's one who takes her out?

CLINTON: Well, I hope someday there will be one.

H. CLINTON: In about 10 or 20 years.

CLINTON: I told her she could get married at 30, leave home at

25. That would suit me fine.

But we're going to miss her terribly when she leaves. That's really what we're worried about because we're all -- we're such a small family, you know. We're kind of grafted to one another. It will be hard for us. I think it'll be quite easy for her. I think she'll be raring to go.

WALTERS: She'll say, at last, at last. Mrs. Clinton, when you came here and hoped to do something in the health program, and we don't have to review it all, except to say, did you misperceive the role of first lady? Was that part of the problem?

CLINTON: Well, I think that when Bill asked me to work on health care, both of us knew it was a risk, because certainly any time you take on an assignment like that that is bound to be controversial, that could lead to my being a target or his being one.

So I know there are people, many of them, who thought that my taking on that assignment was perhaps not appropriate. But I think we thought it was a risk worth taking, and I have no regrets about that.

WALTERS: If your husband's re-elected, is there one project that would occupy you most?

H. CLINTON: No, not one. I want to continue working on behalf of the issues I've worked on for more than 25 years, particularly on behalf of children.

CLINTON: I have a slight -- slightly different opinion, and only slightly. According to every public opinion survey for five or 10 years, 80-some percent of the American people wanted to see the welfare system reformed so that it has more work, less welfare. When I signed the bill, I said it was the beginning, not the end.

And I think the real advocates of children, including the first lady, have to weigh in here. And I think the business people will listen to her. I think child advocates will listen to her. I think people at the state level will.

WALTERS: So now you have your work cut out for you.

H. CLINTON: You heard it first.

WALTERS: I haven't heard you say, "Yes, dear."

H. CLINTON: That's the first I've heard of it. Sounds like an exciting...

CLINTON: It's not a formal role. It's not a formal role.

WALTERS: Your husband talked a little bit about what he might do in the future. Can you imagine yourself, because you will be young even after a second term, having any elected position?

H. CLINTON: No, not...

WALTERS: Why not? You've said that, but I wonder why not.

H. CLINTON: Well, I just can't imagine it at this point in my life. There are a lot of things I want to do, but I just don't see that it's necessary to be in elected office to do that.

WALTERS: Would your wife make a good president?

CLINTON: She'd make a good anything. I've never seen a job that I didn't think she could do well. She'd be good at anything.

H. CLINTON: Yeah, but he's very biased, you know.
(END VIDEOTAPE)

WALTERS: Well, he's biased, and he's the incumbent, holding a comfortable lead in the polls. With just six weeks left till election day, President Clinton must have his fingers crossed.

He certainly couldn't want another brush with controversy. In recent weeks, we've seen a close friend led from jail in shackles, a close adviser exposed as a flagrant adulterer, and an MTV interview has surfaced in which the president says he's sorry he didn't inhale marijuana.

In addition, there are the policy decisions that have drawn fire, sometimes from his own camp. We began with those questions in our final meeting just three days ago.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WALTERS: The president, the candidate, was all over the country this week. We caught up with him aboard Air Force One as it touched down for a campaign stop in Ypsilanti, Michigan, just outside Detroit. The questions were about the issues and events in the news since our last meeting.

Mr. President, Iraq. Can you tell us exactly what your policy towards Iraq is? Are we trying to get rid of him, or are we just going to keep hitting him again and again?

CLINTON: No, we're not trying to get rid of him. We're trying to make sure that he complies with the United Nations resolutions that bind him and that he does nothing to threaten his neighbors. What we've learned in dealing with Saddam Hussein is he's constantly pushing the limits, always pushing the limits. That's why we increased the no-fly zone in the south because now he has a tighter room for maneuver and it's harder for him to threaten his neighbors.

WALTERS: You know, though, you keep reading from your critics. We need to know exactly what his policy is. Is it a policy of containment? Is that how you would describe it?

CLINTON: Yes. Keeping him in the box imposed by the United Nations resolution, and that's the policy I believe that's been followed by our country since the end of the Gulf War. That's what President Bush committed to do, and that's what I have tried to do, and I think we've been largely successful.

WALTERS: And do we recognize that he's there to stay?

CLINTON: Well, we recognize that we're not in the business of overthrowing foreign governments. If someone within his country wants to do it, they have the perfect right to try.

WALTERS: Mr. President, in your new book "Between Hope and History," you write of your hope for the new welfare bill. But even your own aides, many of them, and advisers, feel that the bill is too extreme. Two of your advisers recently quit.

Under the new bill, a 60-year-old federal guarantee of aid to

needy families will end. It's been estimated that as many as a million children may go hungry. What are you going to do about that?

CLINTON: Well, I don't believe that will happen. And if it does happen, I will do something about it. But let's talk about what the bill does.

CLINTON: The national government will continue to guarantee to poor children and their parents on welfare nutrition, food and medicine, and if the parent goes to work, even more for child care than we were spending before.

But what used to be the welfare check itself, our share of that will now go to the states, and the states will have two years to design a system that will move able-bodied people into the workplace using that welfare check.

It gives us the chance to dramatically change the 30 years of developing dependency. Now, if everybody walks away from it, could it be worse than the present system? Yes, it could be, if everybody just -- if all these states just lay down on the job.

WALTERS: So why did advisers quit?

CLINTON: Because I think...

WALTERS: It sounds logical to me. Why didn't it sound logical to them?

CLINTON: Because I think they honestly disagreed. They believed that -- the people who quit, in good conscience -- and I respect their right to do it's -- it's an honorable thing to do when you disagree, to leave.

WALTERS: Drugs. Just after taking office, you cut the drug policy program from 146 employees to just 25. It took you three years to rebuild it and to name a new drug czar. Yet during that time, drug use among young people -- it's been so publicized -- has doubled. Do you bear any responsibility for that?

CLINTON: Well, I think all of us in positions of responsibility are somewhat responsible for the fact that we've not turned around the increase in teen drug use.

We have to tell the whole story. We did reduce the size of the drug czar's office because when we got there we found that the mission that was being pursued then we didn't think was a very good expenditure of money. We asked for more money for prevention and other ways. We asked for more money for treatment, and we did a lot more to try to stop drugs at the source.

So we've done a lot to try to deal with the drug problem. But what we now know is that sometime around 1990, public opinion surveys showed that children started believing, for some reason, that drugs

weren't as dangerous as they had previously believed. So there seems to be this sort of tide that we have got to turn back where the young people don't believe it's dangerous.

WALTERS: Did you really say you were sorry you didn't inhale?

CLINTON: What I've said -- what I said was that -- I was trying

to say that I actually tried. I was not trying to exonerate myself when I said I didn't inhale, that I had an allergy and couldn't do it.

And so -- but I still believe that the important message is that these things are dangerous, that I wish I'd never done any of that, although I did such a little bit. But it was wrong. I mean, it's not only illegal, but the most important thing is they will either kill you or can destroy your life.

WALTERS: Richard Morris was forced to resign as your chief political adviser because of a personal scandal. What are your feelings about him now that we all know so much -- the prostitute, the illegitimate child, the fact that he was writing a -- planning to do a book even while he was at the White House?

CLINTON: Well, the only...

WALTERS: Does that change your feelings?

CLINTON: The only thing I can say is, for him and for his wife -- and I've known them a long time -- I wish them well. I hope that they can deal with whatever they have to deal with and that they go on with their lives, and that they're good, successful, happy lives. That's all I can wish them.

WALTERS: I want to ask you a question about President Kennedy. Recently there have been a whole rash of new books about the Kennedys. You've always said that he was your hero.

WALTERS: Knowing what we do today about his personal lifestyle, did that change any of your feelings or opinions?

CLINTON: Well, I think it made me -- I think I have, you know, a much different perspective of him now than I did when I was 17 or 16. But he inspired a whole generation of young people to believe that public service was an honorable, good thing, that America was a great country and that we could make it better, and that was very important.

You know, if you look at the whole history of America, many presidents have had different kinds of personal problems. I wonder if Abraham Lincoln could get elected today if it were known how severe his depressions were before he took office. But I'm awful glad he got elected. He made -- he probably was our greatest president. Certainly in some ways, he was our greatest president.

WALTERS: Susan McDougal has chosen jail over cooperation with the Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr, who wants her to testify to a grand jury and specifically wants to ask her if you testified truthfully in the McDougal trial.

Do you think she's just being loyal to you? Are you touched by that?

CLINTON: Oh, no.

WALTERS: No.

CLINTON: I think we should rely on what her lawyers say. The only thing we know is what her lawyer has said. Her lawyer has said that she knows of nothing that either I or Hillary did wrong and that the reason she's reluctant to testify is that she believes that they don't want her to tell the truth. They only -- they just want

her to say something bad about me. And Americans should be very troubled about that.

WALTERS: Those medical records. You released summaries. Bob Dole released his primary medical records. So some people still feel you're hiding something. Why didn't you or why don't you just release the whole thing?

CLINTON: Well, first of all, I've released more information than my predecessors did -- President Bush and President Reagan and anyone before.

And I believe I've released more information than Senator Dole has.

WALTERS: Well, he says he just laid everything out.

CLINTON: Well, I can say my law -- my doctor says that we have given more information on more issues even than he did.

WALTERS: But wouldn't it just clear everything up if you just gave it all?

CLINTON: No, it wouldn't.

WALTERS: Why not?

CLINTON: Well, I don't really care myself. But I've been heavily influenced on this by what my doctor says. And, I mean, the inference that the president's doctors or that Senator Dole's doctors or anybody else's doctors would lie or cover up, I think, is really totally unwarranted.

It's just an issue made up out of thin air. Unfortunately, for the people trying to make something out of this, apparently I'm healthy as a horse, and I'm going to try to stay that way.

WALTERS: Mr. President, if you are re-elected, will you have Republicans in your Cabinet? If so, would you name them?

CLINTON: Well, let me say, I certainly wouldn't rule it out. You know, I very much like to operate in a bipartisan fashion, and I like to get people together and work together and practice the principle of compromise.

WALTERS: If you are re-elected, would you have a place in your administration for Bob Dole?

CLINTON: Well, I wonder if he'd like to serve. I certainly wouldn't rule that out. It would depend on what it was.

WALTERS: Really? Any idea what position he could have?

CLINTON: No. But you know, there are some things we agree on. I wouldn't rule that out. I've told you, I like Senator Dole. I liked working with him.

CLINTON: We just have very different views about what our country should be doing.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

DOWNES: He handles tough questions very well.

WALTERS: Yes, he does.

END