

03/12/94
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NEWSWEEK

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

March 12, 1994

INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
BY
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Q You came to Washington, I guess a generation ago now as a member of the Watergate committee. And now we have a --your counterparts 20 years later coming to work for the Fiske committee. Do you a similarity in that or --

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I don't think there's any comparison. And I think that the idea that there is is way overblown and should be debunked easily if anybody looks at history and what's at stake in -- what was at stake in the whole Watergate investigation and this matter concerning Whitewater. They're just not comparable. So I don't even see any basis for comparison.

Q I guess the only thing I see comparable is that a lot of people want to launch careers based on finding something --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I mean, you can't control that. I happen to think that the special counsel has been a used device over the past years; and in some instances like with Jimmy Carter's peanut warehouse they found nothing. In other instances they found something, but not anything major. There is too many instances where it has worked effectively over the past to worry about what the outcome will be. And we don't worry about the outcome anyway. We want the special counsel to do its job as soon as possible so that we can get this off the country's radar screen and get on with what my husband is trying to do for the country.

Q Sometimes those investigations do take on a life of their own. And he's taken out a lease for three years in Little Rock.

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know what he's going to be doing for three years, but obviously we want him to do his work and do it as expeditiously as possible.

Q I think you have said in some forums that, you know, where are our friends? When people are underfire they sometimes do find out just who their friends are. Have you -- what have you learned about that?

MRS. CLINTON: That we have wonderful friends. (Laughter.) That is not a problem for us. In fact, I've been spending my time trying to calm our friends down and cheer them up as much as anything because people who know my husband and me are outraged by this. But we now have this special counsel. We want that to work. We want that process to be as complete as soon as possible. And so what we're doing is cooperating fully. And our friends who are out there defending us and writing letters to the editor, we want them to do that, too, because they know what kind of people we are. And many of them have been around here a long time and can see that this is a matter that's been blown way out of proportion. But, you know, I understand that journalism is a business; and there's a bottom line; and there's a lot of competition in the journalistic marketplace now; and people are scared to death that they're going to lose out to a competitor if they don't get more and more sensational. So I understand what's driving this. And we're just going to wait for the special counsel to do his work.

Q Have you had as many defenders as you might have thought, I mean, considering it's the first Democratic administration in a dozen years?

MRS. CLINTON: Sure. I mean, I have no --

Q On the Hill and that sort of thing?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, I feel very good about it. I think that a lot of times what our friends on the Hill say in defense of us isn't covered, and so the full extent of their efforts have not been perhaps fully appreciated because I'm very grateful for all the help that we're getting from people who are standing up for us and against some of the outrageous claims that are being made.

Q You present a smiling, very rational face to the world -

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. (Laughter.)

Q How angry are you, though, about the way this has mushroomed from a little land scandal -- not even a scandal --

MRS. CLINTON: Not a scandal, Eleanor. (Laughter.)

Q Land transaction --

MRS. CLINTON: A failed land transaction.

Q Right, into some sort of an allegation that somehow you and your husband are corrupt -- especially you? I mean, that's the way it seems --

MRS. CLINTON: I'm very sad about it. Lots of days it makes me feel terrible to have people saying things that aren't true about me and having those people be given any credence at all. So I do feel bad about it. But I also have a full life to live. I mean, it doesn't matter what anybody says about me -- I'm still my husband's wife; I'm still Chelsea's mother; I'm still involved in a lot of other activities that are important to me and my family. So I don't really get the luxury of expending too much energy being angry with people who are being unfair and untruthful.

Q And you're still a very high policymaker in this administration. And that -- I've been struck by it's not only the right it's the left have come out this week saying that you can't have it both ways; that if you're going to chair health care that you can't then retreat to a traditional role when you're faced with other ethical questions, and you have --

MRS. CLINTON: I don't think I have. I don't feel that I've done that at all. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing on health care. And we are fully cooperating with the special counsel, which is what I thought we were supposed to do and what our primary obligation is. And as I think it's been reported publicly, we are giving everything we can and have not claimed any kind of privilege. We are fully in line with the President's belief that we have nothing to hide and want to give everything we can to the special counsel. So I don't know where all that talk comes from.

Q Well, as these interviews today -- and I guess you're going to be doing more -- seems to be now that you've realized that you're losing in the court of public opinion. You may be cooperating with the special counsel, but I guess you have to disclose more to the media beast or you're going to get crucified. I mean, has there been a change in your thinking about you handle --

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know how to answer that because -- I've done a lot of traveling around the country in the last several weeks and have seen literally thousands of people; and have also been very involved in talking with people these past two weeks on the Hill particularly about health care and what's going on. And I think that the public wants this President to do what he came to do in Washington, and that is solve problems. And from my perspective, I can only tell people that we are cooperating; we are doing everything we can to get

this matter resolved. And I think most people are very receptive to that. That's what they think should be done.

Q Right. Well, there is some sense that the media may be obsessed with this and that -- I think you have expressed some feelings in private that the media makes it very hard to change things in this country because of the things we focus on.

MRS. CLINTON: As I said, I know that -- the media is now big business. And I think that because of that, matters get blown out of proportion and treated in a way which is not related to their significance. And not just on this matter, but on many matters. But that's not for me to judge. I mean, that's for those of you in the business to decide.

Q Speaking to some of your friends -- (inaudible). Talking to some of your friends, they suggest that when this is over, that, you know, it might be payback time.

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know what that could be. I'm more interested in getting health care over. I want the payback to be the payback for this country. I have this sense of obligation, which is what keeps me going a lot of days, that is rooted in all of these people that I've met all over the country. It's like I have this movie going in my head with all these faces and these stories. And the only payback I want is to be part of solving these problems, like providing health insurance to everybody. That's what I'm interested in.

I thought the President said it better than anybody could last week when he said, you know, we don't have time to be bitter. We don't have time to be angry. We can get hurt -- we're human beings and it's painful when your family and friends are subjected to stories that are not true; and that even when discovered to be untrue are never recanted or corrected as though it's alright to continue to throw stones at these people because they are so-called public figures. You know, that hurts. But nobody that I care about believes it or is any way affected by it.

So, what I'm hoping is that the President and I and everybody associated with him can just keep doing what he was elected to do. And that's the payback. That's the gratification. And that's all that I'm really working towards.

Q In trying to look how this mess reached this level, it seems as though Vince Foster's death has a lot to do with it. Do you see a connection there?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know, Eleanor. I think that mistakes were made along the way in handling this. I mean, I have learned a lot about the needs of the media and how they kind of make stories

important. And I think I've learned more about how to be responsive and try to deal with their business and other requirements than I ever knew before. There were lots of missteps along the way. I'd be the first to say that, and obviously, wish there weren't because this thing has gotten so blown out of proportion.

But, I suppose, also, that in today's atmosphere, any unanswered questions are going to be grist for the mill. And I've tried to learn a lot about suicide and particularly about depression ever since Vince's death. A lot of us here in the White House have. We've passed around Bill Styron's book. We've passed around books that we've gotten from the people doing the mental health work for the health care task force - all of us reading about this disease and trying to understand it. We don't have any answers either. But we don't presume to try to make up answers. There are some things about life, and particularly as I've learned about what depression makes people feel and think, especially when it leads to suicide, that we're not going to know anymore than we know now.

And I will predict to you that when all the wild stories and rumors and stories and innuendo are finished making their rounds, we are going to be left as we were with Edward Arlington Robinson's poem, Richard Cory, with an unanswered, very tragic question. I just want this to be put to rest for his family's sake and for the sake of all of us who were his friends. It is extremely painful to have this used as a political football by people. It is really unfair to his family particularly. But, I guess, I now I understand why, in the face of a tragedy, some people will want to make up their own answer because they can't deal with what are often life's unanswerable mysteries.

Q So, to those who wonder whether he really committed suicide, you would say. . .

MRS. CLINTON: I'd say, there's no doubt about it based on what everyone knows. And it is difficult to understand how, in the absence of any credible evidence, people are permitted to say anything to the contrary.

Q Are you in touch with Mrs. Foster?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, yes, all the time. You know, we saw Lisa when we were home for Bill's mother's funeral. And we all went to the Razorback basketball game together. We wanted to get her out and kind of back with her friends. She is a wonderful, strong woman; but she does not deserve this kind of constant misuse of what happened to her husband.

Q You uttered the magic phrase. "mistakes were made." Do you regard yourself as having been responsible for any of those?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, sure. I mean, hindsight is always 20/20. If I had known in the past some of the things that I now think I understand better about the way modern journalism works, I would have been more appreciative of the pressures, the business pressures on a lot of these different media outlets and would have had an earlier understanding as to why they were pursuing what, to me, seemed so insignificant. And, of course, I never would have participated in the investment in the first place. And I would've, you know, tried to get everybody to focus on it sooner and earlier to try to deal with it.

So, I think that, of course, I made mistakes. And that's part of the learning process that you go through when you've never been accused of doing anything wrong before in your life; and people start accusing you, and you are stunned by the accusations and don't take it seriously enough to deal with it, to try to get rid of it because it is so outrageous that you can't believe it.

Q There is a widely-accepted theory that what this could well show at the end is that you did some things that were maybe personally or professionally -- it could be personally and professionally embarrassing if subjected to standards 10 years later in Washington that you weren't attentive enough to the conflicts of interest of being a governor's wife and a high-powered attorney in a state where a lot of relationships intertwined. And so, I guess a lot of people have been saying that maybe you should have just said, I made some mistakes in judgment early on, and just moved on and that would have been enough.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't know of any claim that has been made other than the one arising out of my signing letters to the Securities Commissioner which, in retrospect looking back on it, obviously I wouldn't have done if I had known people were going to get so out of joint about it years later. But I tried very hard always to be as careful as I could; and in retrospect, that was something I would not do again. But, there is no evidence whatsoever that it was either a conflict or that it had any impact on the decisions that were made.

So, yes, I would be happy to say I wish I hadn't done it and wouldn't do it again. But there was nothing wrong about it. It was just -- now, in retrospect, the appearance of it that I obviously wish were not present. But there wasn't anything wrong with what was done.

Q Okay, so then, if there was nothing wrong, why were you so resistant to making records public? My theory is that you sort of have a thing about privacy.

MRS. CLINTON: I have a big thing about it. And that's one of the things I've learned, Eleanor. I mean, I really have been pulled

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kicking and screaming to the conclusion that if you choose to run for public office, you give up any zone of privacy at all. Not even that you have anything that the whole world couldn't look at, but it's just the idea of it. That does get to me.

And I'm not comfortable even with the recognition of what is clearly the fact that there is no such thing as privacy left because I believe strongly in giving everybody, including people in public life, the benefit of the doubt, a zone of privacy in which to act out your own life. And I think it's very destructive to people in public life not to have that freedom to be who they are. So, you're right. And I look on that -- in the past, I would never mislead anybody or say something that I did not think was absolutely true, but I get my back up every so often about even having to answer questions that I don't think are in any way connected with the fact that my husband is in public life. And that's what's going to be concluded about all of this.

I mean, people are going to spend millions and millions of dollars and they are going to conclude we made a bad land investment and we didn't make decisions that were involved with the land deal and we did our best to try to work through it. And we didn't do anything wrong.

So, my attitude is, now, well, maybe that should have been something we got to earlier instead of later, but now we've got a special counsel, so let him do his work. And that way there is a standard of evidence, there is a standard of proof. It's not rumor and innuendo and gossip and political hatchet jobs. It is the facts.

Q Do you wish maybe that you hadn't resisted disclosure earlier in the year? I guess the White House seemed to be moving to the release this stuff, and I think you underestimated where this would go if you maintained your zone of privacy.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think I did. I really -- I think I was probably acting as my father would have advised had he been here which is, you know, these people don't deserve anything. Don't deal with them. That's his attitude about all of this intrusiveness. And I think probably I just did not understand what I now do which is how, especially in this town, you just have to bend over backwards. You can't stand on what you think of as principle. So, you know, you live and learn and you go on.

Q? The attacks against you are, of course, are really about more than Whitewater. And they really do go to the whole role that you've taken on. And, you know, whether you can be the spouse of a president and a policymaker and if there isn't some conflict here. What -- it feels as though people are trying to use this as a springboard to question the whole way that you've established yourself in this White

House.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, some people have been trying to do that for more than a year. And people have been doing that to women in this position since Martha Washington. There's an attitude that is historically wrong that is behind those charges which suggest that I am the first woman in this position who has ever exercised influence. And certainly, in private, women have done it from the beginning of our democracy -- and in public.

I was the not the first to testify before a congressional committee. I was not the first to be criticized by the press. I was not the first to have issues that I was involved in questioned or attacked. And I look at what was said about Eleanor Roosevelt or a lot of her predecessors, and I know that there's always the possibility that no matter what you do, you are going to be criticized. And, so I take that as part of what happens with women who are in my position who have any kind of public role.

But I just think that every one of us who is here working for the President is doing the best job we can that he has asked us to do. We are all here because of him. I mean, nobody is here on his or her own. And I think that what's important is that we all make the best efforts we can to try to fulfill the trust he put in us. And that's what I'm doing with respect to health care.

Now, I do think the fact that I am involved in an issue of such magnitude with so many interests at stake has raised the visibility of my role and has caused some to question it for their own purposes as to what the policies are to try to discredit me as a way of discrediting the policies. But that's also been done before. So --

Q Do you think you're being treated, quote, "like any other public figure?"

MRS. CLINTON: I think I'm being treated like any other First Lady. I think that if you go back and read what was said about most of the predecessors in this position, often in their own times, they were subjected to extremely critical attacks. There were those who loved them and those who were critical of them. And I don't think that's any different for me as it was for anybody else.

Q I'm supposed to ask about the chef, too, if I can -- I mean, not the chef --

MRS. CLINTON: I don't comment on any personnel matters.

Q Okay. All right, fine. (Laughter.)

(gap)

(in progress) two-column piece on David (inaudible); and one of the stories has been that he sort of ran afoul of you and your staff because he was an incrementalist and he --

MRS. CLINTON: It is just untrue. David has been invaluable in the whole health care planning process over the past months. He has raised all the right issues. He has given great political advice. And I think sometimes people misunderstand the dynamics when two people as involved and intense as David and I are have a conversation about a matter that we both care about, namely, health care for America. And they say, Oh, my goodness, look how intense their conversation is. Well, it's intense because we both care and we both respect each other and like each other so much.

And that's what this President wants everybody in his White House to do. He wants everybody to bring their best ideas and to go back and forth, and then he makes the final decision. And David and I are two people who participate in those conversations and love doing it. And then the President decides what he is going to do. And then we all go on and have another conversation.

Q It's a different style than what this city is used to. I mean, there was much more backbiting in other White Houses --

MRS. CLINTON: See, that's the problem. And I wish somebody could say that because I think we have one of the most collegial -- I don't want to overstate it and say loving -- but certainly, supportive White House environments I have ever read about. Now, does that mean everybody agrees with everybody else 100 percent? Absolutely not. And in fact, the President wouldn't want us around if that were the case.

It also doesn't mean that we are not full of energy about our particular point of view and push it as far as it will go as a way of giving the President the best possible advice we can give him. We find that exhilarating. And it is a little bit surprising when people who are used to yes men, not many women, but a lot of yes men, and people who are always trying to promote their own agenda at somebody else's expense, see it as different models that we are trying to work with.

And all I can say is that I hope that the political culture in Washington catches on to it because it really is a lot closer to the kind of teamwork model that is working in American industry now and that will work better as we put different groups of people together from different backgrounds to reach consensus than the old top-down, cover-yourself approach to making decisions that got a lot of people in trouble.

The other thing about this White House, which I am very proud

of, is we admit mistakes when we make them. You know, obviously, nobody wants to make mistakes, and we all wish we didn't, myself included; but when they are made, we say, look, we made a mistake. And I think that is so healthy for the country.

Q Edward Bennett Williams used to say that Washington likes to burn a witch every three months --

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think that's right.

Q Right.

MRS. CLINTON: I think that's right.

Q -- and there is that --. Bernie, poor Bernie, wasn't enough. Anyway --

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you.

END