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TELEPHONE INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
BY DAVID MARANISS OF THE WASHINGTON POST
CAMP DAVID

Q Thank you for calling me. It must be a beautiful day up there.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it's getting that way. It was really foggy this morning. Very, very deep fog. But it's beautiful no matter what the weather is up here.

Q Well, I won't take long. I appreciate the follow-up conversation. There were a couple of questions I wanted to ask you, which Maggie obviously wanted me to ask, so...

MRS. CLINTON: Okay.

Q And that has to do with the future. You were talking about how you don't think anyone can be defined, but you can define yourself by substance...

MRS. CLINTON: By what you do. I agree with that.

Q And I wanted to end my story with how you hope to define yourself by substance in the next two years, please. What you are doing and plan to do, and where you'll concentrate.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I plan to continue doing what I have done for many years. I plan to try to be a voice for children and speak out on behalf of children, particularly as so many decisions are going to be made that directly affect the future welfare of children. And I want to use my experience to help frame that debate, as I attempted to do in that Newsweek piece. And to help bring people together who have a lot of experience and expertise so that their voices could be amplified. And I've been meeting for some months with a number of groups and individuals who are really experts in what works and what is important for children. So that is one of my real goals for the next year.

Q Does that have a legislative component to it, or...

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MRS. CLINTON: No. I think it may not have any direct legislative component, but it is important that people who are making decisions about what to do with children, whether they be children whose mothers are on public assistance, or children who are in the families of working men and women who are not getting the economic resources to constitute a family wage, that people know what we know about children. You know, the Carnegie Foundation issued a brilliant report last year about what children need to develop, between prenatal and three years of age. And all too often, we have these public debates and policy discussions that are not well informed. I certainly found that during the health care debate. And there are many people in this country with a wealth of experience that needs to be part of our public discourse if we're going to make important decisions about the future of children. And so that is something that I feel very personally involved in. And I hope that I can play some role in making sure that the body of knowledge that we have is at least understood. Whether it is accepted or not isn't something I can predict.

Q How do you raise that discussion above the level of private conversations, which the general public wouldn't know anything about.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I've already started. I wrote that piece for Newsweek. And I think that that's one of the ways that I can perhaps participate. I've been doing lots of...

Q So you think you might write some more?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I intend to. I also have been doing a lot of radio around the country, talking about these issues. You know, and all kinds of radio shows where people are willing to talk instead of yell I've been talking about what we know about children and what we can expect from children. So, I'm going to do a lot of public writing and speaking, but I also see my opportunity to bring together people who are very experienced.

You know, yesterday, I met with people from Covenant House in New York who have a program called Rites of Passage, which takes teenage mothers and their babies and puts them into structured settings and helps the young mothers get on to their feet, learn how to be good parents, get their education, get job skills, help them get their first job, stays in touch with them, and based on their record so far, it's a successful program, as it well would be, since you're helping the mother, who in most instances is motivated because she has a baby, to take more authority over her own life and responsibility for her baby.

And I have long advocated, that instead of breaking up families over poverty or welfare or illegitimacy, accepting the fact that we can do a lot of we get the mothers and the babies

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into some structured setting. So, for example, that is a policy alternative that ought to be considered in this debate. And the idea that teenage mothers wouldn't get their welfare payments unless they went home to their own families may not be a very good idea since a lot of those girls are fleeing abusive and neglectful situations and the families themselves are inadequate to support them. But it would be a good idea if the welfare payment went directly to a private or public not-for-profit setting where caring adults could help to nurture those young mothers and they could become good parents for their own children.

I've also long advocated that the welfare payment ought to be conditioned on the young mother taking steps that secure the well-being of their child. You know, if you don't get your child immunized, or you don't take your child to the well-baby check-up, or you don't take your child to the pre-school program available, you don't get the welfare payment. So there are lots of things that people I know, who have been working in the area of teenage pregnancy and problems associated with illegitimacy, are aware of could make a difference.

So, there's that whole voice for children that I have tried to do for 25 years and that I said during the '92 campaign that I wanted to continue to be and which I saw health care as a part of, really, because to me what I was trying to do was to make sure that health care was available to everybody, and particularly to children, no matter who they were and no matter where their parents were employed.

Q It sounds like...I'm sorry to interrupt for just a second...it sounds like...it's obviously a very large subject and part of it does have a legislative component in the sense of what happens with the welfare initiatives over the next year.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it will. I hope that people whom I perhaps introduced to public awareness or ideas that I bring to public debate will have an influence. I would be disappointed if it didn't. But I'm not going to be writing legislation or spearheading the Administration's welfare legislation. There will be other people who have worked very hard on this for many years and know a lot about it who will be speaking for the Administration. But I do want what is known about children, for example, in the Carnegie report, there is a lot that we now know about the brain development of infants that is very important. We didn't know that ten years ago. We do know it now.

It would be tragic to make sweeping changes in federal policy without people who are making those changes in the Congress at least knowing that there is a lot of information that may be available to them, but might otherwise be overlooked

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because the debate is being played out on rhetorical bases, so that certain groups with certain points of views that are ideologically are really squaring off against one another and the hard work of sifting through the data, both from the medical point of view and the social point of view, has got to be done as well.

So, those are some of the key issues that I hope I can raise, and then, I continue to be involved in health care. And the fact that I couldn't feel good about the outcome of the health care reform debate doesn't mean that we shouldn't do anything to try to improve health care for people in our country. And I want to work on solving problems in the existing health care system so we can achieve some limited goals. You know, as I've said to you, I never was First Lady before. And it reminded me of one night when Chelsea was crying as an infant and I was rocking her late into the night and I sort of looked at her and I said, "You know, you've never been a baby before and I've never been mother before, but we'll figure out how to do this." And I feel now, I mean, I never was a First Lady before, and I see so many opportunities to make some really positive changes in the health care system. And I've learned so much about how the system works.

So now I'm asking myself, what can I do to try to help to achieve some of those goals. And the first one I'm going to be focussing on after doing a lot of spade work over the last months, is the curious problem caused by the existence of the mammogram benefit for women on Medicare. But the under-utilization of that benefit, so that you have an existing population of women over 65 who are guaranteed a benefit which doesn't exist as a guarantee for women under 65 in our country, and fewer than 30 percent take advantage of the benefit, and in certain population groups fewer than 20 percent. And certainly we know that the risk of breast cancer increases with age, since nearly 80 percent of breast cancers occur in women over 50, and yet we don't know much about why women who are guaranteed this screening will not do it. And of course this is a personal issue for me since my mother died of breast cancer last year, but it's also one that was brought to me in the letters I received from women during the health care reform work that I did.

Q So what do you do?

MRS. CLINTON: So what we're doing is, we've been working with representatives from the government that are responsible for implementing Medicare and the Office of Women's Health and the various cancer institutes and some of the advocacy organizations about breast cancer. And what I going to do is, as I travel around the country, and I've got some travel already set for other reasons this month, I'm going to have some sessions with older women, probably, you know, in senior centers and hospitals

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to talk about what is the problem here. I mean, is it just a matter of it not being well-known to them? Do their doctors not tell them about them? Has the advocacy about breast cancer and the need for screening been delivered in ways that women over 65 think doesn't apply to them?

Because I believe that we need a national public education effort, probably later this spring. And it's something the government can do that would target women over 65, and really begin to educate them about the importance of mammograms and the availability of the Medicare benefit. And then there are related issues that the government can solve in their day, but because some of the letters that I have received have just been clear that even though under Medicare a woman is entitled to a mammogram every other year, that for some women that is not enough, and they need -- that's called a screening mammogram -- and they need what's called a diagnostic mammogram, but their doctors don't know that if they prescribe it, then Medicare will pay for it.

So, I have letters from women who on their own got a mammogram, maybe they got some information, and found that they had lumps, which then were operated on. They received chemotherapy or radiation, and Medicare paid for the entire treatment but refused to pay for the mammogram, because the rules hadn't been followed that the doctor needed to prescribe it. Now that to me is something that we ought to be able to solve.

And then of course this whole debate about when mammograms should be available for women younger than 65, and particularly women under 50. I hope I can play some role in getting good clear information out. But my first goal is to take what I see as a definable problem that the government can address effectively and try to help find out what it is that the government can do to better educate women and doctors so that this benefit, already available, will be utilized, which will save lives and will save money if it is done correctly. So that is something that we are kicking off publicly, and I think it will be a relatively confined issue. We do a lot of those.

Q And you're starting it this month?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, yeah, we're starting it this week. But I do...I mean, we're kicking it off publicly, after...

Q You've been working on it.

MRS. CLINTON: Yeah, we've been working on it. But we're kicking it off, like, Wednesday or something.

Q Where? Do you know?

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MRS. CLINTON: New York. Yeah, so that to me is one of the ways I can continue to try to make some changes in the health care system that we already have and continue to learn about what works and what doesn't work. Because certainly preventive health care was one of my big goals in health care reform, and why is it that this group of women won't utilize preventive health care. I think the more we learn about all of this, the more effective we can be with whatever reforms come next.

And I have continued to be involved in taking through what reforms the President and the Administration should be promoting, and looking for ways to make the changes that will make the system work better for people and continue to move us toward the goal of quality, affordable, universally available health care, which I think has to continue to be the ultimate goal, both for matters of quality health care and for issues of cost.

And then I guess, I don't want to rattle on, but there are a lot of things that we've been working on. And we do a lot of work that never breaks through the surface, and this whole...I want to do what I can to reinforce the President's message about the Middle Class Bill of Rights, and I liked it when he spoke in Galesburg, Illinois, and he called it the Middle Class Bill of Rights and Responsibilities, because that's something he talked about for the last ten years. And I'm going to refer to it in that way, and I hope others will as well. And certainly key to that is creating economic opportunity for working Americans. And among those working Americans I have a particular concern about working women. And trying to help highlight some of the problems that working families have, especially those headed by women, is something that I feel very strongly about, and we have a lot of information. You know, this Administration has really revitalized the Women's Bureau...

Q In the Department of Labor?

MRS. CLINTON: In the Department of Labor, yeah. And has very good leadership over there. And it did a massive survey of working women which gave us lots of information about their feelings and attitudes and needs in the workplace that I think we could do more with if we focussed on what women are telling us, by listening to them and trying to make sure that the government is effective in helping to support women and that the private sector understands some of the concerns that women have. And this whole question of a family wage that families can feel secure about, that continues to raise their incomes, giving them the resources to care for their own children, is key to our economic and political future.

And that's what the President's been saying and it's what I feel so strongly about. And focussing on trying to do what I can to make clear that you cannot disinvest in people when you still

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don't have their incomes rising in the private sector without making some of our problems even worse. You know, I was shocked to learn, as I've travelled around visiting military bases, that we have members of our military eligible for food stamps. And so, I just think that those kinds of facts about people working in America need to be made public, and I'm going to try to do that as well.

Q When you said you cannot disinvest in people, what did you mean by that?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, for example, take food stamps. I mean, the vast majority of people eligible for food stamps are working Americans. Even people who work in our military, for goodness sakes, full-time military families. So as we think about getting rid of the programs that help support the incomes, both in the public and private sectors, of these families, we had better be very careful to know exactly who we are impacting.

Then, I also want to do what I can to support national service, because I have personally seen the positive work that the Americorps is doing, and the positive impact that the Americorps experience has on a lot of the people who are signed up for it.

And we will continue to work to strengthen the ties we have through the international outreach that I've tried to do, both through things like the Miami Summit and also on the visits I've made with the President, we've tried to create opportunities for public/private partnerships with some of these other countries so that people, especially in health, which is what I'm focussed on, in the countries I've visited where I've seen children's hospitals and medical care under so much stress and basically falling apart in the former Soviet Union because of their financial situation, trying to link them up with people in our country who can give them technical assistance and some resources. So those are just a few of the things that we work on.

And I'm trying to be guided by working to make sure that government action is more effective and can be implemented better. And trying to make sure that factual information about the impact of public decisions, particularly on children, is well known. And listening to people like the women who responded to the survey, or the literally hundreds of thousands who have written me, to use their letters, as I'm trying to do, as a guide to what is out there happening to people that I might have some positive effect on by shining attention on it or quietly solving a problem.

Q Without being superficial, it sounds like kind of being a national ombudsman to some degree.

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MRS. CLINTON: Well, I can't take all that on. I wouldn't want to be called that. But I do think there is a lot of work my staff does every single day which keeps me in touch with what people are feeling. And we just have quietly gone about, in the last two years, solving a lot of problems and even getting some changes in government policy, that nobody knew about. And I don't really personally care whether anybody knows about it, except that I do think, in terms of, you know, what people might think about what we are doing, except that I think it's significant that there are ways to make government more effective. And I want people to know that because I want people to feel some confidence that those services which either government is now providing, or which we conclude that only government can provide, are being delivered cost-effectively and with a human understanding about the impact of such decisions on people.

So I see a lot of opportunity for that because one of the conclusions that is inevitable from the whole health care issue is that people didn't know a lot about the way our health care system operated. I was stunned at one of the very earliest large meetings that I had to realize that the people I was speaking to, most of whom were health care professionals, didn't know how Medicare was financed. And I actually asked for a show of hands, when I began to get questions that demonstrated this lack of basic understanding, and out of an audience of maybe four thousand people, maybe a hundred raised their hands.

Q And this was doctors and so on?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, yes. And this happened to me continually, David, because I began to ask the Medicare question. Lisa, are you there on the phone?

Lisa: I'm here, I'm here.

MRS. CLINTON: And oftentimes the person asking me the question was a physician. And frequently the response to my question was, what does that have to do with it? Or a person would come up and say they didn't want the government messing with the health care system, and I'd say, well you look like you might be, if I could mention, eligible for Medicare. Are you? And he'd say, yes, but what does that have to do with it? So, I began to ask in every audience because I wanted to explain to people something basic to them, but it became clear that we have not in our country done a good job in our public discourse on important issues, which puts those who yell the loudest and inflame people and send enough money at a huge advantage. So clearly, I don't have a lot of strong feelings about the matters that are being debated, except that I want the debates to be well informed. And I think that trying to play some role in doing that and trying to break through a lot of the back-and-forth that

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substitutes for informed conversation, would be helpful, I would think.

So, it's those kinds of experiences that I've had the last two years, both in terms of learning about what's out there and how people perceive the government and how they perceive each other and the concerns they have about what is being done to them, as well as my individual experiences on actually seeing problems that are solvable that has kind of pointed me in this direction for the next year or so.

Lisa: David, David? Okay, all right.

Q ...feel about getting your message across and intelligently received, given the difficulty you had with that in the health care process and also the public mood.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I have a lot of confidence in that, David, because I think people really want to have a more informed public discussion. And I think there are ways that - I'm not saying that people are going to agree with each other - but there are ways at least that we can get information into that discussion. And I think for me, doing things like writing the piece for Newsweek, so it's my words, and it's not an 8 second sound-bite out of a two hour speech, or, what usually happens when you're trying to participate in the public arena these days, at least gives me a different way of thinking about how to get my point of view across and then listen to people who respond more to what I'm saying than somebody's perception or mediation of what I'm trying to say. And I don't know that it will be any easier to do that in today's current climate, but I think that that's what people are interested in, on both sides of the aisle.

I mean, the effort that the Republicans have made to talk about historical issues and place some of their points of view into historic context. I think that's very good. And you know, there will certainly be disagreements, but at least it's trying to elevate the debate to some extent. And I think that's what most Americans want, because even those of us who get inflamed by the give and take and the entertainment that now passes for information, know better, and know that we've got to listen to each other and work to solve problems together. Otherwise, this whole political system is going to appear to the average voter to be irrelevant, and in a Democracy that is a surefire recipe for significant undermining of the democratic processes and the future of democracy. So, there's a lot at stake, and I hope that a lot of the people that are now engaging in the conversations on both sides of the political agenda believe that. And that's what I think they're trying to help accomplish.

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Q Have you been able to talk to Newt Gingrich about any of that at all?

Lisa: Okay, we...

MRS. CLINTON: Very briefly. And, you know, I look forward to working with him or with anyone else about these issues concerning children and families and health care and working Americans that I think are so important.

Q Okay, Lisa...

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