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THE WHITE HOUSE

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INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY  
BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The Red Room

Q Every time I come into this house, I'm blown away by the kind of feeling you get in here. There's a buzz. I mean, I walk in today, and I think, wow, this place was torched. The British burned it to the ground. It was gutted. When you wake up in the morning, or when you, say, come back from a trip and you walk in, do you have the same feeling? I mean, do certain historical moments jump out at you and come alive?

THE PRESIDENT: I have the same feeling. I mean, I am always thrilled to come back here when I've been away. And depending on what room I'm in or what's going on at the time, you know, I'll think of some different moment in history. But I'm very aware every day I go to work about how this house carries the whole story of America, and how we're still creating that story, and what our obligations are.

Q Has there ever been a particular instance of any event. I mean, for me, it's the fact that, you know, the place was completely gutted twice -- once by the British, once by Truman. And that it's back, and you can actually walk through. Is there an instance or a -- I know I'm kind of pushing you to come up with some moment in history that sticks in your memory.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that does, you know. Upstairs on the Truman Balcony, we have one block that's unpainted. And I leave it there, and whenever we have people up there, I take them outside and I look at it, and I say, you remember this burned in 1814. And I look at that all the time. It reminds me of the importance of the President's first job -- to maintain the security of the country. I look at it all the time.

Every time we have any kind of international incident -- when Captain O'Grady was rescued out of Bosnia, I went out on the Truman Balcony, and I looked at the burn marks. And I was feeling very grateful for the success of our people in getting him out, and also grateful for his service and remembering the importance of the President's first job, to keep the country strong and secure.

Q Mrs. Clinton, do you have a similar reaction when you come in?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I do. I always am a little bit goose-bumpy, I guess is the best way to say it, coming in either the front door sometimes when I'm out, and I come in what we call the North Portico. I'm just amazed, and also, therefore, every visitor to the White House we have a part of the front of the house left unpainted so that everyone can see those burn marks, or coming in the back, which is the most famous view of the White House that all of the visitors who stand over on the Ellipse see.

But my husband and I have talked a lot about the events that have occurred in this house. And one that always that always makes a big impression on us, every time we're able to talk about it with anyone, is the idea that Abraham Lincoln sat upstairs and wrote the Emancipation Proclamation in what is now called the Treaty Room which was his office. And it is just an astonishing feeling. And oftentimes people are almost overcome when they walk into what is now the Lincoln Bedroom and they see the Gettysburg Address, and they see where the Emancipation Proclamation was written. It is an overwhelming experience.

Q We have a scene upstairs that we filmed during the Yeltsin visit, and that's the primary kind of story line through our film. It's that day, and we digress from that and tell the history. And in this one particular scene, which is really wonderful, we were upstairs, and you are basically showing the Yeltsins your home. And we only see you at a distance, but we're wondering, what are you talking to them about? What do you show guests? Are you showing them the house, are you showing them your personal things? If it is the house that dominates, what do you tell them about the house?

THE PRESIDENT: We told them the history of the house. And when we go upstairs, we describe how the house has changed over the last 200 years and what all has happened up there.

For example, after President Lincoln, as Hillary said, he signed the Emancipation Proclamation in his office. It was never used as an office again by anybody because no other President thought it was appropriate. But you can still see the Gettysburg Address there. You can still where he signed the Proclamation. There are still four chairs there that his Cabinet sat in when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

We show them the room next to it which was the War Room for the United States during World War I, a place where the first telephone and the first telegraph was there. And we just describe things. We describe how it looked when Roosevelt was President during the second world war. And it gives people a sense of the history of America seeing the history of the house.

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guests? Can you see a visible effect or --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think a lot of our guests are familiar with American history. They have favorite presidents, and they often know something about the presidents. And so the idea that they're in the same house where Lincoln lived, or Teddy Roosevelt, or Franklin Roosevelt, or Jack Kennedy is very exciting to a lot of people, as it is to us.

And they often ask questions about things they've heard, stories they've been told. You know, there's a great story about how, when Churchill would come and stay with the Roosevelts he would not stay in the room that is known as the Lincoln Bedroom, but in the room across the hallway, which is called the Queen's Bedroom.

And he would be up all night, and he would be practicing his speeches, and there's a story -- I don't know whether it's true or not -- that Roosevelt one time wheeled himself up in his wheelchair, knocked on the door of Churchill's bedroom, and Churchill yelled for him to come in. And so Roosevelt threw open the door, and there was Prime Minister Churchill standing stark nude. And Roosevelt looked quite embarrassed and started to back out, and Churchill said, no, no, Franklin, we have nothing to hide from one another. We're allies.

And, you know, people just love those stories. And whether they're true or not, they give you a flavor of the personalities. It is not just the events that occurred here, it's who lived here and what their lives were like while they lived here.

Q Exactly. A very interesting, very funny story. There are a couple of other scenes that I'd like to describe and ask you what you were thinking. A lot of them have to do with ceremony. And for me, a very important period in the history of the house is around the turn of the century when Teddy Roosevelt really started to transform the way -- the house so that it would reflect the nation as a kind of burgeoning giant.

And the first scene is, it's down in the Dip Room. It's right before you go out the door to greet the

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Yeltsins. And we're very fortunate to be in there. It's a wonderful moment, very intense. You're getting the last-minute briefing from Sarah. You go to the door and, you know, Andrew's tightening your tie, and you're about ready to go out and what can you possibly be thinking at a moment like that? It's -- they just unloaded book-loads of protocol on you, and can you get us inside your head there?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I remember clearly what I was thinking at that moment -- what I always think, particularly with President Yeltsin, and that is that at that moment, I become the United States and he becomes Russia and we stand for all of our people. And if this state visit goes well, then it's proof that the Cold War is really over, and we're making a newer and better world. And I don't want to mess it up. I want to do it right because it's the United States. When the President -- at these states visits, the President really becomes the head of state and not just the head of the government, not just a spokesman for the country, but the head of state.

And he feels that, too, coming in, just as I do when I go overseas. But at those moments you know that you are what the United States is at that moment, what it represents. And you have to do it right. And, particularly with Russia, if we get it right, we will prove that the end of the Cold War is the beginning of something good, not just the end of something bad.

MRS. CLINTON: It's also very exciting. I mean, the ceremony attached to a state visit is, to me, very important. I mean, the ritual of it, the routine, that we're doing what so many others have done before, the way that elements of our history, particularly the Revolutionary soldiers that represent our country's beginning participate -- all of it is so symbolic. And I don't think I would ever get tired of it.

And we've been very fortunate because the days on which we've had state arrivals have been glorious, and all the visits have gone well, and people seem to have really entered into the spirit that the President's trying to establish. So, for us, it's been a joy. And I love when the trumpets start to play as the visitor is pulling into the drive. There's just so much about it from

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beginning to end that is very moving.

And I wish that every American could attend such a state arrival because I think they would feel, as all of us feel, how important it is and how great the responsibility is to stand in the shoes of all these people who have gone before.

Q Excellent. The next scene is, we were standing just outside the elevator door on this floor. The door opens, you come out, and now you're about to greet the Yeltsins in the evening. And this, too, is an incredible scene because we follow you out, and as you make the turn in the Grand Foyer, all those lights from the North Portico from the press riser come blasting in. It's like -- well, it's almost like, you know, a spaceship has landed in your front yard, and it's a wonderful scene.

And, again, it makes me wonder, can you be conscious of the history of the moment when you're in a situation like that or are you just trying to get it done?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, no, I don't think so. I think both of us are very much conscious of the history of the moment and the importance of the moment. We also want to make our guests feel welcome. We don't like the stiffness that sometimes attaches to formal events. We think you can be formal and fulfill protocol and still give people a sense of joy and belonging with gracious hospitality. So all of those things are going through my mind, anyway.

THE PRESIDENT: Also, you have to -- the night when this occurs, it's a very different thing that what happens at the beginning of a state visit because then we will have worked all day long. And the visit will either have been a success, or a moderate success, or maybe not so successful. But what you want to do at night is to at least seal the best possible relationship you can between the leaders and the countries. And you genuinely want, as Hillary said, you want them to enjoy themselves.

Keep in mind, these people have come from a long way away. They may be suffering from jet lag. They've been under intense pressure. The concentration required to sustain these meetings for hours on end is

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quite extraordinary. So, at night, you really just want them to enjoy themselves. You want them to have a good time at the dinner, to say what they want to say at the toast.

President Yeltsin gave a great toast that night. He was relaxed and happy and kind of upbeat. And you want them to enjoy the entertainment and just be glad that they could be there. So the atmosphere is -- the feelings you have is quite different at night than they are in the beginning when you start and everybody's a little bit on pins and needles.

Q You mentioned ceremony a little bit earlier. And there's yet another scene when we were standing at the top of the stairs. The Honor Guard comes up to get you to bring you down. Now, this is a -- of all the things that I've seen at the White House, it's probably the most, kind of, regal feeling. And it comes from Teddy Roosevelt, again, around the turn of the century, and the Presidential March, for which he was roundly criticized as being the "imperial president." Nevertheless, that ceremony has endured. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how useful it is and what role it plays.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think it's quite useful. For one thing, it's very impressive to the other head of state. And, invariably, these young men and women from our services come in and there's someone from each of the uniformed services. They're invariably physically imposing, terribly impressive, and deeply dedicated. And it's obvious, and it carries with it the weight and majesty and strength of the United States. So I think that it's very much worth doing for the impact it has on the Head of State and the statement it makes about the best in our country.

Q Yet another scene -- during the day this time. We're downstairs, again, in the Diplomatic Room, and you, Mrs. Clinton, were with Mrs. Yeltsin. And I can't recall what you were going to have a little discussion about. I think it might have been health care. And, first, a photo op. So, in comes the caravan, and you're beset. And I went to a lecture that you gave at GW when you talked about the media being like having your

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mother-in-law for Thanksgiving and -- which I thought was very appropriate. And the question isn't really about the press, it's about the staff and whether the staff in this house -- and I'm talking about the resident staff -- in some way kind of salves or takes the edge off the rigors of life in a fishbowl.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think that's absolutely the case. They are so ready and committed to serving the President and the President's family. They have a real understanding of the pressures that anyone who lives in this house is subjected to and always want to try to make life a little easier and to get things done so that anything that could be an extra burden is hopefully removed. I see it all the time in a million small ways as they try to make life as pleasant and stress-free as is possible around here.

Q Mrs. Carter gave us an interesting anecdote about one of the maids who wanted to help her out. She was feeling chilly all the time; as you recall, the President had turned down the thermostats a little. And she knitted her or made her longjohns, shorts, so that she could wear it with a dress. And I wonder if there's anything like that that you can come up with, some thing that the staff has done that makes you feel at home. Makes you kind of, okay, I can live here.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, nobody's made us underwear yet. (Laughter.) We're not offended, though.

There are two or three things I can think of. The men who are in the Navy who work with me, help me every day and support me in a lot of ways. Sometimes when they think I'm beginning to look a little rag-tag in my casual attire, they'll buy me another shirt and sort of casually leave it out. You know, like it's time to put something on that makes you look a little decent when you're out playing golf or something. They've done it three or four times and it's so genuine and so nice and so real that I really appreciate it and I'll never forget it.

I don't know what I'm going to do when I'm gone. There won't be anybody there to put a new shirt in the way when I'm not paying attention to what it looks

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like.

Q Do you have any, Mrs. Clinton? You mentioned a thousand little things. Maybe I can jog your memory. The other day I was over here for some reason -- we were going to do some sort of shot or something and I was sitting in the Usher's Office. And I think Capricia came in with your watch and said, can John Muffler fix this. And it seems to me, this guy's amazing. Not only did he shake Truman's hand, he's still here and he's fixing watches.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I love Mr. Muffler. I mean Mr. Muffler is always around and he is such a cheerful, kind presence. I'm always glad to see him. And he does. He'll come by and say, is there anything you need done or any little thing I can do to fix something or help out. I can't do anything like program VCRs or set digital clocks, so I'm always needing his help to come to my rescue. But he's a perfect example of the kind of dedicated service that people have given to the White House and to the presidents and their families over 200-plus years.

Q Without sounding too, I don't know, smarmy, the idea of these people -- in his case 51, going on 51 years now -- and plenty of other staffers over 30 years, there's a legacy on that side of the house and there's a legacy on the presidential side of the house as well. Together, it seems to make a kind of -- create a kind of soul. But that's what I'm driving at. What do you think is the soul of the house? What gives it this quality?

THE PRESIDENT: The people who serve here a long time obviously do it because they love their country as well as loving their jobs. And they're able to be loyal to presidents, some of whom they voted for and some of whom they must not have; otherwise, just by definition if you look at the changes they go through over time. I think that somehow they have the idea and we have the idea that when you live here, you have to -- there is a sense in which you can put your politics behind and put your country first. And they kind of symbolize that. I think they try to do it and I know that we try to do it.

Q One other thing that I think is very challenging or must be challenging about living here is

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that a million people walk through your house every year. And it's not just that, things like this are taking place. How do you make this place feel like a home? How can you live here and really live here?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we've worked very hard at that up on the second and third floors of the residence. We have a lot of our own furniture and a lot of our own things around us to remind us of where else we've lived and the friends we've left behind. We have family and friends visit us all the time, which is a great source of joy to us.

We also do what we can to make sure our family life stays as normal as possible. And one of the small changes we've made was to make sure that there was a family kitchen upstairs so that we didn't eat every meal at a formal dining table, which is not natural to us. It's not the way we were raised, it's not the way we wanted to spend every mealtime with our daughter. So we have a little kitchen table and chairs in what used to be a butler's pantry where we have most of our family meals together.

We spend a lot of time upstairs playing games together. We play lots of cards. We use the whole house. We're in the solarium or we're on the Truman Balcony or, as my husband is sometimes out on the putting green that was started by President Eisenhower that has recently been refurbished. So we try to, as much as it's possible, to make this house not only the people's house and the formal place where state business is done, but our home -- a place that Chelsea can bring her friends to, have overnights, and where we feel very relaxed and comfortable.

Q We were just talking about things that you do to make it more of a home, and I've described going up onto the roof. Can you tell me a little bit about what you have?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, up on the roof we have a small garden that I wanted to have put in because both my husband and I are great lovers of summer vegetables. We couldn't figure out how we were going to do it. So we have tomatoes and peppers and cucumbers and herbs. And

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the tomatoes, I must say, are tremendous. So we're very happy with our small garden up there. And I can't imagine anyone living here and not having a garden because it's such a perfect spot.

THE PRESIDENT: It may be a new tradition. It's a good place for a garden.

Q We talked a little bit about the state dinner. And we talk about its importance. I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about what can be achieved at these dinners. Abigail Adams said, you know, look, this is really where the business gets done at the social functions. Could you comment a little bit about the usefulness of the dinners?

THE PRESIDENT: The big state dinners, now, it's more difficult to get business done for us because we all have some role to play. But keep in mind at the state dinners you also have all the Cabinet ministers from both countries, you have all the aids and you've got all these people -- they're sitting around here. And we try to place them strategically at the dinners so they can talk to people who share their interest, their area of influence or American private citizens who may be able to do something that's important to further our common objectives.

So I think at a lot of these tables at these dinners, friendships are made, problems are talked through opportunities emerge. I think those things happen a lot. For us I think we pretty much have to carry on our role and so it's more difficult.

Q Let's talk a little bit about security. Mrs. Taft said the Secret Service men, like the poor, we had with us always. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: She wouldn't believe what it's like today, would she?

Q No, absolutely not. I think that's a really interesting change. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that -- about, say, for example, how many hours per week you are in the presence of Secret Service agents and how it is to live in that

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kind of cocoon.

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know how many hours a week; from the time I get up until the time I go up to the residence. The second floor residence is the only place where they aren't. And my freedom of movement has been dramatically restricted, especially since the fellow shot up the front of the White House, you know. It made the Secret Service a little more nervous about the fact that I like to get out and roam among people and jog and do all those things.

But they have a hard job to do, and they do it well. I think, on balance, they serve the country well. And the system has worked. You know, when someone -- like when that fellow leapt over the fence at the White House the other day, people were alarmed. But the truth is, he never got close to any of us. The system worked.

So I think the American people ought to be basically quite comfortable that the Secret Service is a good, functioning, operating part of the presidency. I wish that it weren't as extensive as it is. Unfortunately, it's probably a part of the price we pay for being in public life today and the way things work. You know, it's just part of the deal. But I have learned to -- not only to live with it, but to appreciate it. I still argue with them sometimes about what we should do or shouldn't, but I appreciate them very much.

Q The theme running through our film is the house is the most open house in relative terms compared to any house of the world, really, of any leader. Yet, at the same time throughout our history, there has been this closing gate. There are wonderful stories in our film about people driving up to the North Portico during a rain storm just to put up the top in their convertible, and then drive --

THE PRESIDENT: That's the way it used to be done. When Roosevelt was President, I think, until the second world war, every weekend, Sunday afternoon, during the warm weather, people could picnic on the backyard here. And it's just different now. It's just gotten steadily more distant.

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The Capitol building has, too. I remember when I was a boy working at the Capitol, anybody could walk in any door. That's not possible anymore. That's because when people abuse their freedom, we have to live with more restrictions. And so it's regrettable.

But we still try to keep this house accessible. We've gone -- Hillary and I have gone out of our way to try to think of ways to make it more accessible to more people because, after all, we're just temporary residents here, and it belongs to the people of the United States. That's what a democracy is all about.

Q In fact, we filmed right after your inaugural, when you opened the house. I think it was the first time since 1933 when the Hoovers kind of did away with these big public receptions. It's a wonderful scene, and it's in the film. And it's got to take a lot out of you, though.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't know that it takes a lot out of us except physically. I mean, it is demanding just to stand and receive people for hours. But it is also rejuvenating. I mean, part of what happens when you live here is you have to really struggle against being isolated. And it is easy to understand, looking back at some of the mistakes previous presidents and probably we have made because you do get cut off from people.

And knowing that, you just have to work extra hard. And that means doing as much as is permissible within security constraints to be out, but also bringing as many people into the house, and seeing them and talking with them and listening to them. So we both really enjoy that. I mean, it's something that's really very important to us.

THE PRESIDENT: I know it sounds contrived, but sometimes those receiving lines are the only chances we have to have conversations with people who don't have official business with the President, who aren't coming to argue for something or against something, or to get something. You know, they just come through, and they speak their piece. And it's -- that human contact, it may take something out of you, but also gives something back. And I think it's very important.

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Q I think that's a really interesting idea about, you know, the give-and-take of strength in the White House. And Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, said, I didn't know what a steadying effect the beauty of the house and gardens, the dignity and serenity of the place would have on the souls of its inhabitants. And on the other side, you have people who have said, this place is a sepulchre -- Mrs. Lincoln, for obvious reasons. Does it give strength or take strength from you?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think it does both, but it certainly gives a lot of strength. I mean, that's what helps keep you in balance. I mean, when I go out and take a walk around the grounds, or I go over and sit and look at the sculpture that we've had installed in the First Lady's Garden, I find that immensely reassuring, enjoyable and relaxing. So I think we get so much out of the daily time we spend here. You can't walk by the Rose Garden and not have your spirits lifted. You just can't, I don't think.

And there are so many other places and settings here in the house that give each of us that kind of boost. And there are different places at different times of the year that are especially welcoming to us. So we love the house and the grounds and find it, I guess, more soul-satisfying and uplifting than anything else.

Q I guess one question I wanted to ask you. We've asked all the presidents what it's like to raise children here. I think it -- I can't imagine raising a teenager. I have a two-year-old, so it's a ways off. But raising a teenager in the White House --

THE PRESIDENT: Not as far as you think.  
(Laughter.)

Q Raising a kid in the White House, though, a teenager, has got to be very challenging. And a lot of families had rules -- like the Ford's wouldn't allow their kids to wear jeans on the State Floor. Teddy Roosevelt -- basically, no rules. Horses in the elevators. Stilts all over the place.

THE PRESIDENT: My kind of guy. (Laughter.)

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Q Does Chelsea have free run of the house and how do you, you know, how do you deal with that?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, she does because this is her house. This is where she lives. And we want her to have as normal a life as any American teenager could have. Luckily we haven't encountered horses in the elevators, but she's had her friends here. They have the complete run of the house. They're very respectful of the house and its contents and its historic significance, but they get to be teenagers. They have parties, they have sleepovers, they use the bowling alley, the movie theatre. They play outside.

It is something that we have worked very hard to give her because we did not want her to spend her early teenage years feeling like she was in a museum and she was one of the objects in the museum put up on a shelf somewhere to be looked at. That's no way for any child to live. So this is something that we've worked very hard to avoid and to give her as rich and full an experience because she gets to live here, but to do as much as we could to avoid it, kind of making it impossible for her to be just a normal kid.

THE PRESIDENT: It's actually been good for us, too, you know. Because we like her friends and when they come here we get to visit with them. Again, they're some of the few people we meet that aren't part of our official life. We see her friends, sometimes their families. We've had a great time with it.

And I will say this. The press has been generally quite respectful of her privacy, which is something I have appreciated very, very much. They have let her be a person and pursue her own life and not be a part of our public business, which I really respect. And that's made it easier for her to kind of have her school life and her friends and her other activities and then bring them all back here and do what they did. You know, it's all been very -- that part of it has been better than I had imagined it would be and I have been very well pleased with it.

Q That's pretty cool on their part.

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I think Mrs. Clinton once said at one of these lectures where you were talking about this idea of the common culture of the United States being fractured in many ways. And the White House seems to represent some kind of unifying thing.

THE PRESIDENT: That's what I like about it. It's one of the many things I like about it. I think this country is much more diverse racially, ethnically, religiously than it was when it started, but when we started it was a country with very strong-willed people of dramatically diverse opinions. So, throughout our whole history, we've been managing our diversity. And the whole genius of our Constitution was to set us up a set of rules which would encourage diversity of all kinds to flourish and then bring us together in critical ways so that we could go forward as one country.

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Now, that is one of our great challenges today. We've got all these new economic and social challenges. We have to make our way in a world and lead a world that doesn't have a single threat -- the Cold War, nuclear annihilation anymore, but has a lot of challenges out there. And how to manage our diversity so that it becomes a source of our lifeblood and strength instead of something that undoes us is a big thing. So when I'm in the White House I'm always thinking about unity and it always helps me to think about unity.

I realize -- you know, Lincoln started the Civil War more than anything else because the country had to hold together. Without the unity of the country, nothing else was possible. The power of the Constitution over all the states is what made it possible for him to free the slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation upstairs. But the unity of the country amidst all our differences, that is the great genius of America. And we can never lose it and we're fighting hard to maintain it today.

Q I think the house actually represents it. Bill Seale (ph) I think said, all of American history on the head of a pin. And everything about it is here.

Well, thank you very much. I sure appreciate it.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

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7:25 P.M. EDT