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Interview

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INTERVIEW WITH FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

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tape transcript

AMS: I KNOW THAT THESE [CHILDREN AND FAMILY ISSUES] ARE ISSUES THAT ARE VERY DEAR TO YOUR HEART. AND LISSA WAS TELLING ME THAT THIS GOES BACK TO YOUR COLLEGE DAYS, WHICH I DIDN'T KNOW. HOW DID YOU STUMBLE UPON THIS IN COLLEGE?

HRC: I started being interested in caring for children and children's needs just because in college I tutored some children in the inner city of Boston, I studied child psychology and I read widely. And when I went to law school, I decided I would specialize in children's rights and the needs of children.

AMS: IT WAS A VERY NEW FIELD AT THAT TIME.

HRC: It was very new.

AMS: AND CONTROVERSIAL, RIGHT?

HRC: Yes, yes. But it was also the beginning of our awareness of things like child abuse. It was really the beginning of such an explosion of two-parent working families that we're still living with today. So, all of a sudden, the needs of children for some kind of nurturing care, both in the family and out of the family, became an issue. So I worked at the Yale Child Study Center with some very well-known child psychiatrists and child psychologists who had done pioneering work in the way you have to communicate with a child, and how you can discern the needs of a very small infant or toddler. There was a woman who was a great role model to me named Dr. Sally Provence, who had a capacity for scoping out what was wrong with very little preverbal children, and coming up with ways of helping change their caretaking.

Then I worked at the Yale New Haven Hospital on the new issue of child abuse. Now, it's been around forever, but we didn't recognize it as an issue until the 1960s, as well as the legal, social and family ramifications. So I used to make the rounds at the hospital with these doctors and nurses, talking about these cases that would come in that nobody really knew what to do with. And through my activity as a young law student and a lawyer, I became involved with all kinds of groups on the national level that were--the American Bar Association or the Children's Defense Fund, and other people who were really focused on this. I

remember very well in 1970, I was an intern at what was then the Washington Research Project, but which became the Children's Defense Fund.

AMS: I DIDN'T REALIZE YOU WENT BACK THAT FAR WITH THAT ORGANIZATION.

HRC: Oh, yes. I was an intern after my first year in law school. I had a scholarship that--because I couldn't get any pay for my work--so I had a scholarship from something called the Law Students' Civil Rights Research Council, which gave me a stipend to do this work. And, in 1970, the Congress passed a very far-reaching child care bill that would have put into place that I think, over time, would have provided the kind of quality child care we want for all of our children. And under intense pressure from [pause] the more, um [pause], right-wing elements in the Republican Party, President Nixon vetoed it, and sent a veto message to Congress which you might find of interest, basically claiming that he couldn't sign the bill because it would lead to the collectivization or the communization of children. Now, this had been a bill that his administration had supported, because many people forget that Richard Nixon had quite a progressive domestic policy agenda.

AMS: HE SURELY DID.

HRC: But in this one area, he gave in to those who made the argument that mothers shouldn't work and, therefore, there should be no out-of-home care because children shouldn't be out of the home, of course ignoring the fact that women have always worked outside of the home--not in the numbers, perhaps, that we do now, but there've always been working mothers.

AMS: WELL, ALSO, YOU KNOW, WHEN WE WERE AN AGRARIAN SOCIETY, I MEAN, WOMEN WERE WORKING ON THE FARM.

HRC: That's right; but there was an extended family. Changes in--

AMS: --IT WAS ECONOMIC CHANGE THAT KIND OF BLEW THAT UP, RIGHT?

HRC: That's right. You had people leaving those kinds of settings, moving to cities, becoming more mobile.

AMS: SO, WHY DO WOMEN GET BLAMED, AND IT'S NEVER ADDRESSED IN TERMS OF THE ECONOMY--ECONOMIC CHANGE. AND IT'S JUST A SIMPLE FACT OF CHANGE, JUST AS WE'RE GOING THROUGH ANOTHER ONE RIGHT NOW.

HRC: Right. Well, I think that people always romanticize the past, no matter what the past was. And we also have a tendency to wish that we could take all of the advantages of change with none of the disadvantages. And there certainly have been wonderful advantages for those of us living in today's world to enjoy. But it has, you know, caused some real dislocation among families. You know, the dinner hour that I used to enjoy in my home every night at the same time is very difficult now for many families [to maintain]. So we do want the best of what progress brings us, without any of the challenges. And I think that it's the role of people in public leadership to try to work for ways to support families, and to enable people to feel that they are both doing their best at home, and also, you know, fulfilling their responsibilities at work.

AMS: WELL, ISN'T IT A LITTLE--THE THING IS, I DON'T KNOW IF I'VE GOT THIS RIGHT, BUT IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THERE'S A TRICKINESS TO ALL OF THESE SORTS OF ISSUES IN THAT ONE OF OUR FINER QUALITIES AS AMERICANS IS OUR INDIVIDUALISM. IT'S LED TO GREAT CREATIVITY IN OUR CULTURE, AND ALL OF THIS. BUT IT ALSO, THERE'S THIS SORT OF THING--AND YOU MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED THIS WITH THE CHILD ABUSE WORK YOU DID--WHERE WE TEND TO BE PRIVATE ABOUT WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE HOME, AND HOW CHILDREN ARE BEING RAISED IS ONLY THE BUSINESS OF THE PARENTS, AND SO ON. SO HOW DOES A SOCIETY KEEP THAT BALANCE IN TERMS OF LEAVING THE PARENTS IN CHARGE, AND YET GIVING THE CHILDREN THE CARE THAT, AT THIS POINT IN THE WAY OUR ECONOMIC STRUCTURE IS, PARENTS CAN'T BE THERE EVERY SINGLE MOMENT. HOW DO WE NEGOTIATE THIS?

HRC: Well, we're still doing that. You know, I wrote an article back in 1973 in the *Harvard Educational Review* in which I wrote about this new concept of children's rights. And it was a provocative article--meant to be so, to raise a lot of these questions. But, clearly, based on what I had seen in the time I had spent working on child abuse, there were families that could not and should not continue having authority over children because of the damage that they'd already imposed on children. But those are the exceptions, and part of what frustrates me is that we don't do enough to support and strengthen all families, so that rather than allowing a family to disintegrate under economic pressures or the kind of need for mental health treatment or substance abuse treatment--instead, we wait 'til a family's in total crisis, and then we often take the children away instead of providing more support so that a family can try to work through some difficult times. So, I think that your question is the right question. I mean, how do we strike the balance between our respect for parental authority, our belief in strong families, and our understanding that, as far as I'm aware, no family does it totally on its own.

There's always some delegation of authority at some point in the rearing of a child. There's always some need for intervention, whether it's medical

intervention or educational, or health, welfare--whatever it might be. So I think that part of our challenge is to continue to recognize that we have done a lot in terms of rhetoric about family values, but we haven't done as much to actually value families, particularly families at risk. And until we really own up to that, we're going to have a lot of confusion about what the appropriate role might be. For example, when it comes to child care, I think we should do everything possible to give families real choices about whether or when one or both parents should work during a child's young years, because there isn't any doubt in my mind that the most important job any of us have is caring for children. But many people, and particularly many women, work out of necessity, as well as choice. Well, how can we make it a fairer decision. Well, I think we should do more to support the choice of staying home if that is something that--

AMS: --WHAT COULD GOVERNMENT DO TO SUPPORT THAT CHOICE?

HRC: Well, we could increase the tax credits; we could apply the child care deductions for the care that a mother gives at home. You know, we could really take a hard look at how we've made it financially more feasible for more families to make that choice. At the same time--

AMS: --BUT WE NEED NOT TO PENALIZE THE WOMEN WHO WANT TO STAY IN THE WORK FORCE.

HRC: At the same time, we have to have a clear understanding that for women who either must or choose to work, they should not be in a position of penalizing their children. They should be able to have access to high-quality, affordable, accessible health care--I mean, child care. So I hope that that's where we're beginning to work out this dilemma that we always face in America. You, in my book, *It Takes a Village*, I think I start out by saying that, you know, children are not rugged individualists. You don't just say, 'OK,' to an infant, 'you're on your own. Get out there and fend for yourself.' We shouldn't say that to a six-year-old or a 16-year-old. You have to have an understanding of what the ingredients are for a child to develop in a mature and effective way. And in order to do that, child care is an integral part of it. And even if don't believe that, for whatever reason, it's appropriate for a mother to work outside that home--which is still an argument that some people put in the way of providing funding for child care--then face the reality that, in this society, that is what's going to happen. So, let's do the best job we can to take care of those children.

AMS: ONE OF THINGS THAT I HAVE NOTICED ABOUT YOU--I WAS ON THE OPENING LEG OF YOUR LISTENING TOUR--AND ONE OF THE THINGS THAT I HAVE REALLY TAKE NOTE OF IN THE WAY YOU APPROACH ISSUES IS THAT YOU SEEM TO HAVE A VERY INTERDISCIPLINARY, A VERY INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THINGS. AND THAT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY TO ARTICULATE, I THINK, OR IT DOESN'T FIT THE BOXES WE'RE

USED TO ANALYZING THINGS FROM--ESPECIALLY POLITICAL WRITERS. BUT I WAS WONDERING, WHEN WE TALK ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN, WHETHER IT'S CHILD CARE OR AFTER CARE OR THE SORT OF EDUCATION THEY GET--CAN YOU ADDRESS THIS FOR ME AS AN ECONOMIC ISSUE? BECAUSE WE NEED TO MAKE THIS ARGUMENT IN TERMS OF SELF-INTEREST, IT SEEMS, WHETHER OR NOT THAT'S WHAT SHOULD MOTIVATE US. I THINK THAT OUR READERS WOULD BE VERY INTERESTED TO HEAR AN ECONOMIC ARGUMENT FOR THIS.

HRC: I think we can make an economic argument on several grounds. First, let's start at the level of the working mother. We know from a lot of different studies, including one that was done here at the White House under the direction of former Secretary Bob Rubin, that providing quality, affordable child care and after-school care, does promote greater productivity, less absenteeism and more loyalty among employees. So, on the micro level of an individual family and an individual employer, there are economic benefits in ensuring that the child care needs of your employees are well taken care of. I've talked with many employers who know that the level of absenteeism that comes from broken-down child care arrangements often bites into their bottom line. And so creating a system that supports both the worker *and* the employer leads to increased productivity and, I would argue, saves money.

Then, on the more macro level, when you have a good child care system that is developmentally appropriate for children, you're aiding those children in their eventual academic enterprise. You're better preparing them for formal schooling. In after-school programs, you are helping them either keep up or get up to speed in their studies. That is good for our bottom line as a society. You know, the governor of California, Grey Davis, a friend of mine, is fond of saying it used to be that there were four workers for every person on Social Security. Now with the baby boomers aging, there are going to be two workers for everybody on Social Security. And I want to pick my two. And I want two well-nurtured, well cared-for, academically successful, productive citizens. So investing in strong families and good services for children does have a pay-off down the road.

And then, finally, we know that, for example, in after-school care, that providing safe places for young people to go and be taken care of in the hours between the end of school and the time their parents return home, is a much better way of investing in them than permitting the kind of criminal activity, experimentation with drugs, early sexual activity and other kinds of behavior to occur during those hours, which has costs for the society, as well. You know, better to invest a dollar in a child care program than seven dollars in a juvenile justice correctional institute. And all of this is related. And people need to take a step back and look at the kind of trade-offs that we're making all the time. You know, when I talk about issues like child care, like home visiting, like encouraging parents to read

to their children, like lowering the adult-child ratio in child care settings, I'm not just talking about it in terms of child development, as important as that is, or in terms of our social ethic, or our humanity; to me, it *is* an economic issue. It goes right into our individual and our collective bottom line. And so I would hope more people would understand the economic consequences of not providing support for families to have access to good child care.

AMS: WELL, YOU KNOW, ON THE LISTENING TOUR SOMETHING [CAME UP] THAT I HAD NEVER SPENT A LOT OF TIME THINKING ABOUT; ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CAME UP A LOT, ESPECIALLY IN THE MOHAWK VALLEY AREA AND UTICA AND ALL THAT. AND I HAD BEEN DOING RESEARCH FOR THE PIECE FOR WHICH I [WAS ON THE TOUR. AND I FOUND THAT THE CENTER FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES, LINDA TARR-WHELAN'S GROUP, HAD DONE A LOT OF RESEARCH THAT SHOWED HOW WHEN WOMEN SAY THAT EDUCATION IS ONE OF THEIR TOP ISSUES, THEY'RE NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT EDUCATION FOR THEIR KIDS. THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT TRAINING, THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT EDUCATION FOR THEMSELVES, THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT EDUCATION FOR THEIR NEIGHBORS--

HRC: --Life-long learning--

AMS: RIGHT--AND THAT IT'S RELATED TO THE ECONOMY. AND YOU WERE RAISING THAT IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. PEOPLE WERE TALKING THE BRAIN DRAIN OF THAT AREA, SO THERE WAS A LACK OF EDUCATED PEOPLE TO BE THE WORKFORCE THAT WOULD SUSTAIN THE ECONOMY. SEE, I DON'T KNOW THAT THIS BECOMES PART OF THE POLITICAL DIALOGUE VERY OFTEN BECAUSE PEOPLE THINK: WOMEN, EDUCATION. OH, IT'S ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN.

HRC: Now that I've spent even more time in upstate New York, and I've been in and out of communities that have lost a lot of jobs and have seen their children leave for lack of opportunity, I see even more clearly how you have to take an integrated approach to these issues. And that's why I talk a lot about life-long learning. You know, a child's first school is that child's family. So how do we equip that family to provide the best teaching, the best discipline and guidance that child needs, before he or she enters formal schooling? And then you get into formal schooling: well, how do you take account of the fact that we have a very different society today than we had in the agrarian years, or even than when I went to school in the 1950s? You don't have mothers at home. You don't have the same kind of schedule that people are on; people don't go to work at the same time, come home at the same time. You have to have more flexibility. You have to be more adaptable to the needs of your families and their children.

I was struck--I was in California a few years ago with a member of Congress there. They were doing a forum about child care there and after-school care, and I was in a community that had actually realized that they were short-changing their children because there weren't any places for their children to be taken care of. So, they'd come up with a lot of private contributions and they've done some public funding. But one of the points they made was that in the absence of a seamless system that goes from family to school to after-school to recreation--the kind of experience that we want for all of our children--in the absence of that, there are many children who are falling between the cracks. You know, they have parents who commute long distances for work, which we know is a very common experience. They don't have adequate nutrition because they're eating on the run. They therefore are not really developing as well as they should. They don't get enough sleep, so they are not prepared for school when they should be.

There are so many issues that are related to how we are living and working today, that we have to look at not through the lens of a past time, but through the reality of today. What is it we should do today? Not just point fingers at women or men, and say, 'You need to live like your parents and grandparents did, and then everything would be fine'--overlooking the fact that our parents and grandparents went through a lot of deprivation and went through a great depression, went through a world war, had a lot of very difficult and challenging times. So let's look at reality now. How do we do more to support families? How do we do a better job with this concept of life-long learning, because your skills are not going to end at today's economy. What you learn in school today, or the first job you have tomorrow, is probably not going to be a stopping point. You're gonna have to keep upgrading your skills, whether it's how to do new equipment or a new responsibility, or you have a job that is no longer available and you have to be retrained for another job.

AMS: EVEN MULTICULTURALISM. I ACTUALLY WAS GIVEN MULTICULTURALISM TRAINING ON A JOB. IF YOU'RE DEALING IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY, YOU'RE DEALING WITH PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

HRC: Well, for example, in our schools, we have so many children from different backgrounds in our schools. A lot of our teachers don't have that kind of multicultural sensitivity. You know, in some cultures, a child is taught not to look into the face of an adult, not to look into the eyes of an adult. So, to a teacher, that child might look shy, retiring, maybe slow, maybe uncooperative, whereas the way that the child was taught in the culture where his home is, is that that's a sign of respect. Well, how do we make sure that in this multicultural, diverse society in which we now live in America, that we are more sensitive to the cues that children bring from home? That we're more supportive of the kind of desires that families have to prepare their children in a certain way? And that goes back

to the question of authority and respect for parents and other people in positions of authority.

I think we've done a real disservice to our children in the last several decades because we have really retreated as adults from being authority figures, and from demonstrating clearly how children are expected to behave, and holding our children accountable. And we also are fighting a very difficult battle against the culture, which sends so many other messages to children. So, for many parents, they feel that they've ceded control of their children to the larger media culture or to other forces at work in society.

AMS: BUT DO THINK THAT MIGHT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT PEOPLE MIGHT FEEL MORE POWERLESS IN THE WORKPLACE THAN THEY DID BEFORE?

HRC: Yes, I do.

AMS: AND I'M WONDERING--YOU KNOW, WE HAD THE PROGRESSIVE ERA AT THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY.

HRC: --Right--

AMS: --BECAUSE THE ECONOMY HAD GONE THROUGH THIS MAJOR RESHAPING. NOW WE'RE GOING THROUGH ANOTHER RESHAPING. BUT THE BOOM IS BASED, ONCE AGAIN, ON A VERY CAPITALISTIC OUTLOOK. IT'S THRIVING AND IT'S DONE GREAT THINGS FOR OUR COUNTRY. HOW DO YOU, AND WHAT SHOULD BE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EMPLOYERS TO CREATE A LIVABLE WORKDAY OR WHATEVER WITHOUT IMPEDING THE STRIDES WE'VE MADE IN THE ECONOMY? WHAT WOULD YOU SEE AS THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE?

HRC: Well, I think the government can be a good partner with the private sector, and that's what the president has tried to do for the last seven years. You know, the very first bill that the president signed was the Family and Medical Leave Act. It had been vetoed twice before and it was a real values statement. Our country had never done anything like this. Now, I would like to see it expanded.

Government could expand the Family and Medical Leave Act, which would send a very clear signal that we want employers to be sensitive and understanding of their employees' needs to be strong family members. I would like to see us drop the threshold from employees of 50 to employees of 25. I would like to see us give days off for teacher conferences, for medical appointments. I think there's a lot we can do in government as a partner with the private sector. We can also encourage our labor laws to recognize different forms of working, so that there's more flexibility, there's more job-sharing, more telecommuting. You know, we shouldn't make having a home office as difficult as sometimes it is under

government regulations. We should be much more open to trying to create situations in which, now with technology, more people can, if they choose, work at home.

I was in a meeting in Bath, New York, with two teachers, both of whom had taken maternity leave, neither of whom wanted to come back full-time. And I was very impressed that their local school district had basically employed two teachers half-time for one class. And they not only benefited from it, but they felt like the children did, because in a classroom of 25 or so diverse children, some children will react and relate better to one teacher than to another. So, having two caring adults working during the week--one working Monday 'til Wednesday noon, the other, Wednesday noon 'til Friday afternoon--was really an added benefit for the children. So, I just think we have to break a lot of these old paradigms about how we work and how we live, so that we can begin to think more freshly and clearly about what our situation is today.

[Press secretary signals one more question.]

HRC: [laughing] I could talk about this stuff all day. I love talking about this stuff.

AMS: I REMEMBER--IT'S A SCENE THAT IS VERY CLEAR IN MY MIND [FROM] WHEN THE POPE LAST CAME TO THIS COUNTRY, AND YOU AND THE PRESIDENT MET HIM AT NEWARK AIRPORT, AND I'M FROM NEW JERSEY AND THE LOCAL TELEVISION COVERED IT END TO END. AND A SCENE THAT TRULY IMPRESSED ME--AND THE FOCUS WAS SO ON THE PONTIFF THAT I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH IT WAS REMARKED UPON-- WAS WHEN I WATCHED YOU WALK UP THE TARMAC. AND ON THE SIDE ON WHICH YOU WERE WALKING, THERE WAS A WHOLE CLASS OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL GIRLS, LITTLE GIRLS. AND AS YOU WALKED UP, THEY WENT WILD, AND THEY WERE CLIMBING THE FENCE. THEY WERE THESE LITTLE GIRLS IN THEIR PLAID JUMPERS AND THEY WERE CLIMBING THE FENCE AND THE NUNS COULDN'T KEEP THEM DOWN. AND IT WAS JUST SUCH A STUNNING SCENE TO ME. AND IT SPEAKS TO NOT ONLY YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO KIDS, BUT, YOU KNOW, YOU ARE AN ICONIC FIGURE. AND I WOULD BE REMISS IF I DIDN'T ASK YOU--I MEAN YOU'RE A WOMAN IS LIVING YOUR LIFE IN A TRANSITION BEFORE THE WORLD AT A TRANSITIONAL TIME, AT A TIME WHEN WE ALL HAVE ONE FOOT IN ONE WAY OF DOING THINGS, AND THE OTHER FOOT IN THE OTHER WAY OF DOING THINGS. AND I JUST WONDER, DOES THAT GET TO BE A HEAVY BURDEN, TO DO THAT IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE WORLD?

HRC: You know, I stopped thinking about it very much because I want to live my own life the best way I can. And if I think too much about how other people may be perceiving it, that becomes burdensome. You're absolutely right.

AMS: YOUR EVERY MOTION HAS MEANING TO PEOPLE.

HRC: Right. So I wanted to be as grounded, as centered as I can be, in who I am and what I believe and what I want to help make happen for people, particularly children in our country. But I can't be worried about the interpretations because we're living, as you so rightly point out, in a time of transition, especially for women's roles--I would argue also for men. But I know women's lives better than men's. So, you therefore have all kinds of wants, desires, concerns, fears placed upon you that you may or may not have any knowledge of, and certainly don't have any intention toward creating. And I have found that I can do the very same thing and produce opposite reactions. And so, I can't really worry too much about what any one person or any group of people see in me. I can only keep doing the best I can. And if that provides support or it provides some example to others about not the way I'm living my life, but about the way I'm trying to make choices that are right for me, then I will be very happy about that. Because I have lived my entire adult life believing that we should create more opportunity and space for women to make the choices that are right for them. And so I have friends who have made very different choices in their lives from me, but for them it was the right choice. I have other friends who try to be something that they're not, who deny their desires to be at home because they feel they have to be at work. Or who, you know--

AMS: THE MACHISMA CULTURE.

HRC: Right. Who feel they have to fit some social role. You know, we only have one life to live. This is not a dress rehearsal, as someone very memorably said. And so, for me, I just want, in my own life, to do what I believe in, and I want by example to send a message to other women that your choices may not be my choices, but I will respect your choices. And I will support you. And I will do what I can, in a public way, to give you the public support you need for those responsible choices. I think often about some of the brave women I've met, women who struggle against the odds, who hold down two jobs, who live in housing projects, who try to keep their children safe, who are really just breaking down barriers but who will never appear on the front page of anything. But they navigate their children safely to adulthood; and that in itself is a great, great accomplishment. And I think of other women who have broken glass ceilings, who have been so courageous, year after year, standing up to prejudice and stereotyping. And, again, they may or may not get a notice somewhere, but they have led the way for so many others.

So I think all of us, in our own way, as long as we're trying to live our own lives with integrity and courage, we can all be examples to somebody else who sees us and says, you know, 'I'm going to have the courage to make the choice that's right for me.' And that's all we can hope for as we kind of wend our way through this life together.

AMS: WELL, THANK YOU, MRS. CLINTON.