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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

May 26, 1993

INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
WITH KATIE COURIC

Q Let me ask you some questions about your tenure so far at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. There's been an awful lot of talk, I'm sure you know -- there's been an awful lot written about your redefining the role of the First Lady. Do you feel like you're doing that?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I really don't. I have said so many times that I think every woman who has been in this position has redefined it to fit her. And I have been so impressed by what I have learned about the women who have been here before and what they've done and the contributions they've made. And I'm trying to do what I think is right for me and my family and to help my husband and to try to help the country. And I think every woman has done that, and has done it in a way that was right for her at the time.

Q But certainly you must feel like you're doing things that no First Lady before you has done.

MRS. CLINTON: I think I'm doing it in maybe a more public way or with more attention, but if you go back and you think about somebody like Dolly Madison, who has become one of my most favorite First Ladies because of all that she did, she was the hostess here for a number of years, not just for her husband. And during those years, she did things like start homes for children, lobby Congress on issues that were of concern to her, save treasures in the White House when the British were burning Washington. You know, you go all the way through history. And I suppose if there had been television in the early 1800s, people would have had very different impressions of Dolly Madison, because they would have seen so much more of her, they would have known so much more about what she was doing every day. But I'm not so sure her days weren't even more filled than mine based on what I know about her.

Q I know that you have spent some time visiting with former First Ladies. What kind of things do they tell you? What advice did they give you that was particularly useful?

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MRS. CLINTON: Okay. It's been one of the best parts of this -- (inaudible). I have visited with all of them about how to keep your privacy and how to keep your family intact within this great gigantic fishbowl. I had such wonderful times talking with them. You know, just to run through the people I've visited with, I Margaret Truman Daniels, President Truman's daughter. What a terrific person. I mean, she's just so down to earth and so rooted and talks about what went on when she was here. I had a wonderful couple of lunches with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Q What did she tell you?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I just am crazy about her. And she talked about raising children, because I think she's done such a magnificent job with her children under the most extraordinary of circumstances probably anybody has had to face in our lifetime. And she talked about how it's so important to give your children responsibility, give them as normal a life as you can, despite everything that's going on around them. Don't let them have too much attention or be exposed too much, because they deserve a chance to grow up to be who they're going to be.

Q In fact, you have one extremely protective of Chelsea. We've asked if we could get some videos -- (inaudible) -- and felt uncomfortable with that. Why are you so guarded when it comes to your daughter?

MRS. CLINTON: Because I want her to have as normal a life as she can and be the person that God meant her to be. And I think that the only way that I can do that is to give her a chance to grow up as she would nearly as possible if her father were not the President. And that was one of the great pieces of advice that Mrs. Onassis gave me. Just to try and have your child be as normal as you can. And she gave me examples from John and Caroline's life where somebody would want to do something for them and she would say, no, they can do that themselves. They're going to take care of themselves and make those decisions for themselves.

And I think that the way that she handled her children and keeping them as shielded as she could from the unnecessary, unwarranted attention that is only given to children because of who their parents are, not because of anything they do in their own right, was a great example for me and I've been very grateful for that advice.

Q It's probably been hard, though, to keep things normal for Chelsea, hasn't it?

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MRS. CLINTON: Sure. Yes, it is hard. And I suppose you in your position, with as many people who know you and find it difficult as well -- it's always a struggle when you're in the public eye, but it's a really worthwhile struggle. I love the fact that -- you know, our time is our time and that if she does something, if something that she would do with her father like go to a bookstore or go to a school picnic, because she's a child and that's her father, not because he's the President. And that's what we try to do.

Q And you all actually are able to get out to see old friends and attend her soccer game without too much --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I am. I try to do that.

Q She's 13 years old. Gosh, when are you going to let her pierce her ears? (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I made a promise. When she --

Q What -- does she have to go to college?

MRS. CLINTON: No, no. I promised her when she was like five and I thought 13 was 100 years from then -- I said, well, all right, if you want to think about doing this after -- the summer after your 13th birthday. So I guess it will be this summer if she still wants to do it, because that's what we told her.

Q Well, these days she'll probably want to pierce her nose.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, please! Oh, please! (Laughter.) That was not in the original deal. That's one of those things that Bill and I said, after you're 21 and you're on your own and you're out of our house, but not before.

Q Millions of people see you as a role model, and millions of other people see you as a very threatening person. Why do you think you are such a role model?

MRS. CLINTON: Because I think women's roles right now are lightening rods every day, in so many different ways. In work places and kitchens and places all over America, people are struggling to find what it means to be a woman, a mother, a wife, all of the different roles that we play. And because my husband is the first of our generation to be elected President, it is the first time that a lot of those private discussions have really been played out at such a very high and visible point in our public lives.

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Q What about the comparisons to Lady MacBeth? Do you think it's because you're a powerful woman, or where does that come from?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think somebody, somewhere thinks it makes a good line, and he's more likely to give his piece in print. I think it's just part of the speculation and the stuff that goes on by people in the press, trying to figure out something to say different to get the attention.

You know, I've learned a lot about the pressures on the press because of all of the commercial competition and everything. So, you know, somebody said, hmmm, what can I say that will really break through and give me some particular point of view. Ah, I've got an idea.

Q You don't walk around the White House saying, "Out damn spot." (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: No. Only when I'm trying to wash something. (Laughter.)

Q Do you still wash?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, not as often as I did. But, sometimes, we've got some chores that I still try to do around the house. But I do not want to feel like I'm living in a bubble, just like I don't want my daughter and my husband to feel like that. I think it's not good for you.

So we do things. We clean up after ourselves on occasion and we try to do some things that I think are a little surprising to the staff.

Q Like what else?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, you know, cook a meal, clean up, sort things out and decide where things will be moved and what'll be done with them.

Q I have a hard time picturing you with Spray N' Wash or --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, yes, that's been a while since I've had Spray N' Wash. Now, -- (inaudible) -- it's funny because we were in the kitchen -- there are two kitchens here. There's the ground-floor kitchen, which is the main kitchen which does all the work for all of the formal and public things. Then, Mrs. Kennedy Onassis put in a kitchen on the second floor which enabled people to

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be served up in what then became a family dining room, which was a wonderful addition for a family. Because, otherwise you'd have to go downstairs all the time to eat every meal.

And so, when we moved in, we asked that they remove a big island in the middle of it and put a table in so that when it's just the three of us, we could actually eat together, you know, like most families in America do and that we often did in the Governor's Mansion.

So we were in there the other day, and we got what Bill and I thought was a wonderful meal, but 13-year-old kids don't eat everything that their parents think is wonderful. So Chelsea started rolling her eyes. And I said, well, okay, we're going to have to piece something together. So we started opening refrigerators and opening cabinets and coming up with something for her to -- that was more to her liking. We do stuff like that all the time.

Q Let's get back to the Lady MacBeth image. You do have considerable influence. And some people say that there are Americans who don't feel totally comfortable with that, because they're not sure how much influence you have. And, after all, you were not elected. How much influence do you have?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know that I have any more influence than anybody else who is an advisor to the President. And there are dozens of people (tape flipped over) -- and particularly the marriages that live inside this house knows that husbands and wives influence each other. That's just our common, everyday experience. And I have tried to be very straightforward in saying there are certain issues that I will try to learn about and to try to help on, and particularly when my husband asked me to do health care, that was obvious he wanted me to work with him on that. So there's nothing secret about it. There's nothing behind the scenes. It's something that he wants me to help him with and that I'm honored to try to help him with, and I'll do the best job I can.

Q (inaudible) -- health care. Do you think your role as health care czar inhibits free and open discussions because people don't want to -- (inaudible) -- the President's wife?

MRS. CLINTON: I haven't seen that yet.

Q Really?

MRS. CLINTON: Not at all. In fact, both the President and all of us around here feel strongly that we need to encourage debate and vigorous conversations about these important issues, not

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just in the White House, but in the government, in Congress, in the whole country.

We had some terrific discussions where people were taking very different points of view. And lots of times, I don't have any set opinion going into a conversation. I want to hear from everybody on every side. If people have been inhibited, they certainly haven't shown it around me, because I've not only encouraged everybody to disagree when they felt it was worth disagreeing about, but to be constructively critical.

Everybody, including me -- I called up a man who was at a speech that I gave just the other day, because I heard -- he said that he thought I said something a little bit differently to somebody else, who then told somebody who told me. I called him up and I said, "Gosh, I want to hear that. What would you -- he said, oh, I'm I'm a little embarrassed to tell you what I think, and I said, "Well, I'm not embarrassed to hear it." And that's the way I feel about it.

I think that if you have an honest opinion, and even if it's an honest difference, then you've got a chance to reach agreement or to know where to agree to disagree.

Q Let me read you a quote from a senior White House aide -- quote, "She intimidates the hell out of people. She dominates by silence and when she wants you to shut up, you have to be incredibly sick not to get it."

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I mean, I think it's pretty remarkable that I dominate both by talking and by silence at the same time. Well, I'm sure there are people who don't know how to work with somebody who may be the President's wife or is a woman. I understand that. And I'm very respectful of that. And I try as hard as I know how to involve everyone. But I can't get inside everybody's mind and tell you what they're really thinking. I just hope that most people will appreciate that what I view my role as is a kind of a citizen, facilitator, not an expert, not the person who is going to make the policies, but the person who's trying to give the President the best possible information so he can make the policy. I think that's an important role --

Q So if they feel uncomfortable speaking their mind, that's their problem and not yours?

MRS. CLINTON: I think so. At this point, I really hope that everyone would feel comfortable saying whatever is on their mind. That doesn't mean I will agree with everything everybody tells me, but if we don't start out being honest with each other, I don't

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know where we'll end up. And I would much rather have somebody say on the front end, I don't think that's a good idea or I don't think that will work, than to sit silently and then later say, well, I could have said this, but -- that's not going to help the American people and it's certainly not going to help solve the health care problem in this country.

Q In terms of your influence, some people say that you have the final say on all high-level appointees -- you're shaking your head no.

MRS. CLINTON: That's such nonsense. You know, I pick up the paper and I read that I'm backing somebody that I've never met, don't have any interest in, don't even know was looking for a job. That is just not true. I think that there are a number of people who both my husband and I have known over our lives together that we are enthusiastic about seeing join the government. But that is not something I'm involved in on a day-to-day basis or even very frequently.

Q What about accusations you're trying to stack the administration with your -- (inaudible.)

MRS. CLINTON: Gee, I haven't done a very good job if that's what I'm trying to do. You know, I think all those labels are again part of somebody else's effort to try to put me or the President in a box -- you know, liberal, conservative, right, left. Those are labels that to me just don't mean very much. I think the President is looking for people who want to help solve American problems and change the country. And the solution to our problems fall all over the political landscape.

I am a big supporter, for example, and have been for years of substantial welfare reform. Now, to some people that's conservative. To me, it's pragmatic. It's responsible. It makes sense. I'm a big supporter of reforming our health care system so that everybody has health care coverage. To some, I suppose that sounds liberal. To me, it's economic common sense, because if we don't provide health insurance for everybody and get everybody in the system, we will never control costs and weed out our problems. So I don't really have any predisposition on a lot of these issues people seem to suggest that I do.

Q I want to get into your political philosophy more in just a moment, but in terms of your influence on high-level appointment, I think some suspicions were raised, or at least it got a lot of press attention when you spent 50 minutes talking with Kimba Wood when she was being considered for attorney general. That is unusual, isn't it?

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MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't think so. First of all, I didn't spent that length of time. But she was someone whom I admired. She had done a terrific job in a very controversial case that she presided over in New York. I had known her husband from the campaign; he had been one of the reporters I had met. I wanted to meet her. I didn't interview her. I just wanted to meet her. She was there meeting the President, so I had a few minutes to spend with her, and I was glad I got a chance to meet her.

(Gap in tape.)

you portrayed yourself in the campaign, that after that infamous "I could have stayed home and had tea and made cookies" comment that you sort of -- I don't know, you went into the background a little bit. And you started portraying yourself as someone who's really warm, that you became much more sort of Nancy Reagan-esque in terms of your -- (inaudible) -- her husband, and you actually participated in cookie-baking contests, things that really weren't Hillary Clinton. Did you feel that you had to do that in order to get your husband elected? Or did you feel that there was a change, sort of, in your philosophy in terms of how you behave on the campaign trail?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I don't. I mean, anybody who ever knew me before we burst into the national consciousness in that campaign would have known that I baked cookies, I nodded adoringly at my husband from time to time. (Laughter). I think that's somebody else's perception. I think it gets back to how women are perceived. I mean, we so often are put into one box or another so people can deal with who we are. And they define it.

And I think that what happened is that perhaps more of who I am and what I have done over my life began to be known, because there wasn't very much known about either Bill or me when he started that presidential campaign. So I don't know why people would say that, except that that was the particular perception they had from a particular moment in time, and they had no context. They had never met me before. And also, there I was in their living room, and so they drew conclusions about me that were not whole. And I think if they saw more of me and what I care about and who I am revealed, then they wonder, well, wait, did I get it wrong the first time; or did she somehow get it wrong.

Q But wasn't that really a political determination on the part of the campaign staff, I mean, that -- (inaudible) -- reported on, saying the voters worried about a -- quote -- "empowered Nancy Reagan," that you really had to very consciously show people this other side?

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MRS. CLINTON: But I do want people to see me as a whole person. I mean, if someone is going to draw judgment about you and say they don't like you or whatever they might say about you, I hope that they do it based on as much information as possible. And the thing that really struck me -- I don't know the number you're talking about, but I was told by somebody that voters didn't even know we had a child, because we are very protective of our daughter. And I don't go around talking about her, or trying very hard not to use her or anything like that.

Well, that's a huge part of who I am. So I think it's fair for people to know more about me. So then if they want to make a judgment about they, it's based on more information instead of just a partial kind of distorted view of who I am that at some point that doesn't reflect who I think I am anyway.

Q So you think the complaint by people that they didn't get what was advertised in the campaign has any validity?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't think so, because they didn't know me. I mean, how can they know who I am when they didn't know anything about me? And so from my perspective, I want people to get to know more about who I really am and then draw their conclusions. I mean, I have lived long enough to know that you cannot possibly please everybody. Not everybody's going to like you or speak well of you. But I hope that being in a public position, enough people will know enough about me to make fair and accurate judgments about who I am and what I care about.

Q Let's get to one of the burning issues of our time, and that is why you went back to using Hillary Rodham Clinton?

MRS. CLINTON: (Laughter.) I never stopped. That's another one of those things. You know, ever since -- gosh, 12 years, 13 years, a long time, I've always used Hillary Rodham Clinton. And this is one of those things, again, somebody made up or decided to make up because every autograph I signed -- I mean, it was getting awfully long -- Hillary Rodham Clinton, I mean, all through the campaign. And then I started going H.R. Clinton because I just couldn't write that much when I was signing autographs. I never stopped using it.

Q A little bit?

MRS. CLINTON: No, never. I mean, every resume, every press release, every schedule that ever came out in that campaign had Hillary Rodham Clinton on it.

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MRS. CLINTON: Nope. Not unless they go after a family member or my daughter, people who I don't think deserve to be in that kind of public arena. It doesn't bother me. I consider it to be part of the great American tradition of poking fun and making sure we don't take ourselves too seriously.

Q Wow, you're a good sport.

MRS. CLINTON: What's the alternative? I mean, part of it is that I grew up playing sports with boys all the time and learned early on it was one of the great lessons, you win some, you lose some and you just do the best you can every day.

Q Were you the last picked?

MRS. CLINTON: No. I was a pretty good softball player. But, you know, this is kind of a little aside, but I've thought about this a lot because so many women didn't play team sports who are about my age or older. And there is something about team sports that I think better prepares you for the give and take of daily life, particularly in the political arena; because, you know, you get out on the field and maybe your best friend's on the other side, but all during the game he or she is razzing you and making fun of you and saying terrible things about you, because that's part of what you do. And then it's over and you go home and you're friends again. So I have maybe a little better understand than some other women might have because of all the stuff I did when I was growing up with boys and girls who liked play hard and have a good time.

Q But you did get furious when Saturday Night Live poked fun at Chelsea, didn't you?

MRS. CLINTON: I didn't get furious, I got sad. And I've had some communication from them. And I really appreciate what I think is an appropriate response to me.

Q I'm getting the (hook) --

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