

08/05/94
MAER, PETER

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Internal Use Only

August 5, 1994

INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
CONDUCTED BY
PETER MAER, MUTUAL RADIO

MR. MAER: Mrs. Clinton, welcome to Mutual Weekly Headliner. Thanks for inviting us into your White House office.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you for being here with me today.

Q If nothing else, I hope we can clear up some of the confusion on where things stand on your issue, your and the President's issue, health care reform.

With the President's plan now replaced by the separate House and Senate Democratic proposals, I think, based on travelling around with the President and with you, as recently as last weekend in Independence, Missouri, there is some confusion in the public out there as you continue your campaign for reform.

The President's plan, as I said, has gone by the wayside. Just what is it that you are pushing now that there is no Clinton plan?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, Peter, I am glad you asked that because we are pushing what we have always pushed. and I think there's a fundamental misunderstanding about how legislation gets passed in America.

I don't know of any bill -- unless, maybe, it was the bill to establish Mother's Day -- that goes through the Congress without it being modified.

And when the President presented his plan, he said the details should be left to the Congress; that he stood for certain principles: universal coverage, ending abusive insurance practices, guaranteeing choice of doctor, and quality, preserving and strengthening Medicare, and paying for universal health care coverage with shared responsibility

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between employers and employees.

But he said, and I said that the details had to be left to the Congress. So it would be astonishing -- and I have never yet seen it happen -- that any proposal by a president is not modified by the Congress.

It is the President's leadership that has brought this issue to where it is today. It is the President that has campaigned hard for universal health care coverage. And that is what we continue to campaign for.

And I am pleased that both houses of Congress will have bills before them that we think meet the objectives of the President's call for reform and will do so in ways that both are similar to what the President originally proposed and modified from that.

But that's the way legislation is passed in America. And I don't think people should be surprised. Because what's important is what is the final result of all of this effort. And the final result has to be universal health care coverage.

Q Which of the two plans do you prefer, the House plan or Senator Mitchell's plan?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I am not going to get into the business of being a handicapper. Both plans meet the President's objectives and bottom line of universal coverage.

And I think that the President and all the people who worked very hard on this issue, getting it to this point, should be very proud of the Democrats in both the House and the Senate for taking this issue on and having bills that would guarantee universal coverage.

Q So are we correct in saying there is no Clinton plan now? Can we at least agree on that?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you could say that, but I don't know what that means. Because, as the President said, it was really Clinton principles that guided what he tried to do.

We were asked by the Congress to give them a piece of legislation off of which they could work, which we worked

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very hard to do in order to get the process moving.

We have never, despite presidents from both parties, had a piece of legislation on the floor. And other presidents sent legislation. President Truman sent it three times. President Nixon sent it. President Carter sent it. It never even got out of a committee.

I don't think the President cares what it's called, or who gets the credit for it, or whose name is front of the word "plan." If the bottom line is that Americans win, because we guarantee health care coverage, that's what he is fighting for.

Q So basically, then, what you are pitching for, when you are there, is the bottom line, guaranteed coverage?

MRS. CLINTON: And that's what I have been for the last year.

Q Right.

Now, the President has spoken quite favorably, at his news conference this past week, of Senator Mitchell's plan. How, by any stretch, can that be considered guaranteed coverage -- I think so many people took this guaranteed coverage literally to mean 100 percent -- when he talks about 95 percent by the year 2000?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that the guarantee is that there will be legislation in America that for the first time will make health care a right.

And that health care will be delivered to people, under Senator Mitchell's approach, initially through voluntary efforts that will be supplemented by government subsidies for working people who cannot afford even insurance in a reformed market, help for small businesses. But that the result will be, through these voluntary efforts, that we will move from 83 percent of our citizens insured to 95. But that's not where the legislation stops.

The legislation says if we achieve that, then there will be additional steps taken to make sure we cover everybody else, which is what Hawaii had to do. Hawaii has legislation that guarantees insurance to all working people by sharing the responsibility between the employer and the

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employee.

But people always fall between the cracks. No system that we have in America actually ever reaches 100 percent implementation even if they are universal systems.

There are still people who, unfortunately, several percentages, who are eligible for Social Security, who don't somehow end up in the system.

If you had universal compulsory education in a state, there are still youngsters who somehow don't end up in the school system.

So if we reach that level that the Senator has targeted, then we will find ways to get everyone else.

Now, if the voluntary market approach that both Democrats and Republicans urged be tried first -- and that's one of the great beauties of Senator Mitchell's approach, is, he is basically saying to Republicans, if you believe that the voluntary market reforms will work, then we will reach the coverage we have promised.

But if not, we owe more to the American people than to walk away from this issue one more time. So if the voluntary approach does not work, then we will trigger a mandate that will require employers and employees to share responsibility 50/50 unless the Congress, based on a commission's recommendation, has another sure way of guaranteeing universal coverage.

I think it's a very smart approach because it basically calls the bluff of all these people throughout the country who have said, "Oh, we believe in universal coverage." I have heard it a million times.

And then when you ask the follow-up question, "Well, how will you get there?" "Well, we want the private market and the voluntary's effort to work." Well, I do, too. And I will be the happiest woman in America if that does achieve the goal that has been set.

But I cannot in good conscience -- and I don't see how members of the Congress can -- say, yes, but if it doesn't, we have to start over. We know what we need to do.

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Q As you look back on the early strategy -- and I know you probably want to look more ahead than back -- do you regret becoming such a lightning rod yourself for the opponents of health care reform?

MRS. CLINTON: If it hadn't been me, it would have been either someone else or some other kind of target that was set up as a way of diverting attention from what's really at stake.

You know, it is not pleasant, ever, to be in a position where people attack you and criticize you and call you names. I find it kind of sad and childish. But, you know, it's unpleasant.

But you know what gets me up every day is my commitment to doing what I can to help my husband try to deliver for ordinary Americans. And I see every single day what guaranteed health care coverage would mean in the lives of Americans.

People could change jobs, who cannot now, because they are locked in because of benefits. People could get off welfare and go to work because they wouldn't have to worry about taking a job that didn't have benefits.

People could stop worrying that next year their employer would say, "We have got a big surprise for you. Because of cost we are raising your deductible, and we are telling you you can't see your doctor anymore." All the things I hear day in and day out.

So all of the attacks and the ridicule, my goodness, they said that about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. They went after Harry Truman. They attacked Jack Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson for Medicaid and Medicare.

What's surprising is, they haven't come up with any new slogans or attacks. It's the same old stuff. I think most people see through that. And I am just grateful for a chance to try to help people.

Q I want to talk to you a little bit about some of those slogans and attacks when we come back.

MR. MAER: Mutual's Weekend Headliner with our special guest, First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, will

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continue after this.

Q What's your daughter doing this summer?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, she has had a great summer.
She--

Q I know she is on a trip.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, and she stayed after we left.

Q Yes, with your mom?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. And had, I think, about ten days, wonderful days.

Then she got home. And I made her clean up her room, which was -- you know, it just had to be done. We got it pretty well organized.

And then she went to Arkansas to spend a week with (inaudible) --

Q Oh, good.

MRS. CLINTON: -- and she is back now.

We are going to Camp David today. She has had a really --

Well, beginning of summer, she worked a week at Martha's Table as a volunteer with the children, and preparing food.

And then she went out to the NIH for a week and worked --

Q Oh, yes, I read about that.

MRS. CLINTON: -- as a volunteer, kind of gopher, because she is very interested in science. So she has had a great summer.

Q We are having a hard time keeping up our 14-year-old girl occupied. She is busy, but --

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MRS. CLINTON: Have you made her clean up her room yet?

Q Oh, yes. Never busy -- she is at gymnastic camp now.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, good for her.

Q Oh, yes.

Are we back in business?

A PARTICIPANT: Just a second. I know how it is. I've got a seven and a nine-year-old boys.

MRS. CLINTON: What do they do all summer?

A PARTICIPANT: One just got put out of camp.

MR. MAER: He ran away, he told me.

MRS. CLINTON: Was it overnight or day camp?

A PARTICIPANT: Day camp.

MRS. CLINTON: Did he hate being there?

A PARTICIPANT: No. He enjoyed being there. The problem was the kids wouldn't let him play. He got mad (inaudible).

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, bless his heart.

A PARTICIPANT: And the counselors had to go look for him.

MR. MAER: Weekend Headliner continues now with First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton. I am Peter Maer, Mutual News, the White House.

Q Mrs. Clinton, you were mentioning some of the slogans and demonstrations. When you were in Independence just last weekend, we talked to a lot of people in the crowd. And a lot of them are still talking about big government, socialized medicine, buzz words like that.

What do you tell them?

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MRS. CLINTON: Well, I was pleased, frankly, that the people who were concerned about that were a relatively small number. And I know there were a lot of efforts made to whip them up and get them out there.

Every time we have a chance to talk one on one, we really are able to cut through the misinformation that a lot of these people are being fed.

Q Who is doing the feeding?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, the interests that are against health care reform and all of their allies. There are people who are right-wing radical ideologues who don't think people should have health care in America. They never supported Social Security or Medicare.

And there are people who for political, or partisan, or financial advantage don't want this president to help people.

There is a million different reasons. But I hope that everyone listening will just stop a minute and ask themselves: How can guaranteeing private insurance be socialized medicine or big government?

And for all who are listening, who are on Medicare, or who, like me, have a mother eligible for Medicare, my mother is not told what doctor what she has to go to. The government doesn't stand between her and the medical care.

What the government does is to help her pay her doctor. And Medicare is a government-financed system to help older Americans.

And so we want to help people afford private insurance and have a safety net for the very poor who cannot afford it at all.

But the President has always advocated what he wanted was guaranteed private insurance which is one of the strong feelings he had, which is in both of these plans.

Q Getting back to some of the critics. The President has unloaded his feelings about certain conservative talk shows, people also like Pat Robertson; Jerry Falwell, who marketed videotapes and other material

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with all sorts of rumors.

What are your thoughts about their influence? What do you make of it?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think they appeal to a minority of people. But I think it's very sad that they do so in a way that sows misinformation and really untruths.

I was raised to believe that you were not supposed to bear false witness against your neighbor. You were not supposed to indulge in gossip and rumor. And you certainly were not supposed to use your religion on behalf of political issues that especially seem to be issues that will help people such as providing health care.

I think it's regrettable that there are a lot of people making a lot of money, very frankly, using our airwaves, using our mails, to spread hate. And I hope that they will, perhaps, have a change of heart.

I don't mind if people disagree with my husband, I don't mind if they disagree with me. If they think there are reasons why we should not provide health care, or there are better ways of doing it, I think that's the kind of debate the American people need to hear.

But I think it's very regrettable when they don't really have any good arguments. And so what they resort to is character assassination and misstatements and the kind of sensationalism that we heard from.

But America has been through periods like that before. We survived it. We will survive this. And we will get things done for the American people because all of these attacks have not stopped my husband. He gets up every day and goes to work.

He said the other night that he wants the White House to be the home office of the American Association of Ordinary Citizens. And that's what he believes.

Q To what extent do you think the critics on the right, and even the Whitewater hearings that have been going on, have detracted from your health care fight?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think they have been

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deliberately intended to be a distraction. But I don't think they have accomplished their purpose. Because most Americans see through all of that.

And they wonder why people are spending all this time and money talking about or worrying about things that nobody did anything wrong -- and there is no evidence that anybody intended to do anything wrong -- instead of spending our time up in Washington taking care of the people who sent all these folks here. I think that most Americans want the Congress to be productive.

And I think most Americans now see that a year ago, when the President said his economic plan would lead to an economic recovery, and all of the opponents said, oh, my goodness, it will be the end of the American economy as we know it, unemployment will rise, it will be terrible, they were no more right then than they are now about health care.

And if we have the same level of courage, and if the Democrats who truly know that the economic plan led to this recovery, that we have created nearly four million new jobs, bring the same level of courage to voting for health care for Americans, they will have done the right thing. And I think that's what Americans expect Members of Congress to do.

Q We have just got two minutes left. I don't need to tell you, of all people, how much abortion is a hot button issue in this health care reform debate. We see those signs wherever you go, too.

Can you envision the President signing any measure that does not include women's health coverage, abortion coverage?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that this is an issue on which there are such strong and deeply held feelings on both sides that the Congress is going to thrash it out, and we are going to see what that outcome is. I don't think of any of us know exactly where the Congress will end up. So we want to wait and see what happens.

Q Well, it sounds like there is nothing equivocal there. It sounds like you are leaving the door open to possibly having a measure that does not have that kind of coverage.

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MRS. CLINTON: I'm not leaving the door open or shutting it. We just don't know what's going to happen in the Congress on any of these issues that are difficult for people to decide.

Q With the political clock ticking away, along with our own, in this mid-term election year, what realistically do you right now think the prospects are for health care reform this year?

MRS. CLINTON: I think that the prospects are very good. I do believe that, unfortunately, the Republicans don't want to pass health care reform because they don't want this president to fulfil yet another of his promises.

Because if you look at what he has already done on the economy, national service, trade expansion, education, I could go on and on, he is ticking off every promise he made and fulfilling it. And I don't think, unfortunately, Republicans want to give a victory to the American people.

Because my husband has said over and over again he doesn't care who gets the credit. He said the same when he got Republicans to support NAFTA, and had to work very hard on that.

So I think what will happen is that once again, even Republicans who know better, who have said to me personally they would like to support real health care reform, will be intimidated by their party leadership to fall in line and do what they did on the budget, which is to vote solidly, no, despite the fact it worked and is working.

And I think the American people will hold them accountable. This is going to be a very interesting fall. Because if, after all this effort, after more than 60 years of trying, we fail to provide real health care reform because one party wants partisan political advantage, I think the American people will hold them accountable.

Q Finally, to the extent that you can look beyond health care reform, what issue would you like to tackle next?

And looking way off in the future, do you ever think of returning to a normal life, practicing law again?

MRS. CLINTON: I think about normalcy all the time.

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I can't wait.

You know, I want to go back to working on issues that I spent a lot of time on concerning children and families for many years.

I am particularly concerned about violence and the impact that our culture and the media, and the messages we send, the incredible amount of violence both at home and in our streets and communities, that we put up with, and the impact that has on children, and the role that drugs and alcohol so many things play in undermining the strong families that children need.

I believe that children are the result and responsibility of both their families and society. And families that are struggling to raise their children and let them know the difference between right and wrong, can't let their children ride their bikes safely through the streets or walk to school alone, have to cower behind triple locks, are not getting the help they need from the larger society.

I think we need to tackle this problem of violence and all of its meaning, and try to stand up on behalf of our children who deserve to have their childhoods back.

MR. MAER: Mrs. Clinton, thanks for joining us on Weekend Headliner.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much for asking me.

End of interview

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