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INTERVIEW OF
THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY
BY CARL ANTHONY OF AMERICAN HERITAGE MAGAZINE
The Oval Office

Q It's a great honor, a really great honor to have this interview with both of you, and particularly at a time when things are very busy and people want to go on vacation and so forth. So I greatly appreciate it, and, of course, this will be for the 40th anniversary issue of American Heritage Magazine.

And in talking with the editors there and thinking about this article, we wanted to sort of look at the larger forces of history that may have influenced both of you; that may nourish both of you now; that may provide support; and that in some sense provide also a sense of comfort and a sense of direction that you have in seeing that other Presidents and First Ladies have gone through difficult times, that there have been other moments in history when presidents have wanted to initiate great improvement, great change for the country and have had sometimes difficulty in doing that, but have forged ahead with the long view for the good of the country and not a short view.

So I'm thinking particularly this week, the first question I might ask you is, have you looked at other Presidents' legislation, Presidents who have had difficulty sometimes getting it through Congress, Presidents like Woodrow Wilson, for example, who had a particular dream with the League of Nations? And have you drawn some comfort and inspiration from that?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, and of course, if you look at what -- Wilson didn't actually live to see his dream fulfilled because we mismanaged our affairs, the United States and the world did after World War I. But after World War II, we did have the United Nations. And for all of its limitations and all of its problems, it's played a major

role, I think, in making the world a more peaceful and more humane place. Sometimes you can be too far ahead of your time.

I think the period in modern American history most comparable to this is probably the period right after World War II, because at the end of any era, people are called upon to sort of look to the future. And yet there's a tendency to look inward, to relax, to just be thankful that the old order is gone away without thinking about what the new world must look like.

At the end of World War I, we made the wrong choice. You know, we wound up with all kinds of problems, not only the Depression and World War II and all of that, but just a lot of -- we gave in to some of our darker impulses. So at the end of World War I we had the first big Red Scare, we had the first big -- the Ku Klux Klan was doing well.

And at the end of World War II, Truman took a terrible beating and didn't get everything done he tried to do. He never did pass health care, for example, for all Americans. But he did lay the foundations for economic recovery at home and for a more -- a commitment to more racial equality and for the institutions which led to the recovery of Europe and Japan and the system which permitted us to win the Cold War ultimately.

But when you're challenging people to make changes, changes that have a long-term future benefit against entrenched forces, you have to expect to be stoutly opposed, often misunderstood and sometimes defeated. You just have to accept that. That's part of history. And you have to govern in the times in which you live and deal with it the best you can.

Q And do you ever look to Truman and what Truman went through as inspiration to try and go --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, because I'm from Arkansas and Truman was from Missouri, and because a lot of the political people of my youth were big Truman supporters -- you know our state voted for him in 1948 when a lot of the South abandoned him -- I've always had an awareness of Truman's legacy. And he's always been one of my four or five favorite presidents.

But I think that I must say, I was never so aware of the similarities in our situation until I actually became President, and I realized that the sort of deep ambivalence the American people have now -- wanting us to take charge and move forward into the future and still be easily diverted because of their deep-seated suspicions and concerns about government and whether there's anybody in Washington who can do

anything right.

Q And one sees, I suppose, that history does in a sense repeat itself when you look at the 1920s and the Red Scare, and the rise in the Ku Klux Klan and look back to the more turn-of-the-century, Victorian, McKinley's America, you go through that. Is there a way to redirect history? Or do you think there are just general cycles? There's a theory that the American people go through general historical cycles in their response to change.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, they do, but leaders and people can make a difference; and not just the President, but the other institutions, great institutions of society. What kind of leaders are in Congress? What do they do and say? What is the role of the American press? What does it do and say? Does it feed on the fears and cynicisms of the American people? Or does it basically proceed in a challenging mode to do better?

If you look throughout the history of the country, you see that a lot of the major actors in the American scene have played different roles at different times. And history proceeds in cycles to some extent, but also every time is different and the outcome is not foreordained. I mean, it really does make a difference who's there and what they do.

Q In mentioning Wilson earlier, thinking about his fight for the League of Nations. Of course, he had suffered a stroke when the vote came up in the Senate and was a little bit more removed from the situation. He absolutely would not accept any compromises whatsoever. His wife, Senator Hitchcock, Democratic leadership came to him and tried to accept some even minor compromise, and he wouldn't. And, of course, his dream essentially went down the drain.

And many people feel, of course, the events leading up to World War II might not have happened had there been a League of Nations in place. Do you think -- I'm not asking you to fill those shoes of Woodrow Wilson, but do you think an example like that, that inflexibility -- have you looked ever back to Presidents like Wilson or others who have remained so inflexible that nothing of theirs was passed, none of their initiatives?

THE PRESIDENT: The trick is to be firm on your principles and direction and to be flexible in dealing with people who have the power to either help you further that direction or derail it. I mean, it's interesting, compromise is very often given a bad name in popular circles today. And yet our system was set up to mandate compromise in ways that most governmental democracies aren't.

I mean, we don't have a parliamentary system, for example. So the president is not guaranteed, even -- no matter how much a majority his party has in Congress, because there is no parliamentary system, that is, where the President is the leader of the party in Congress. And if they want to stay in the party and have positions, then they have to vote party line -- there's always got to be compromise.

I was reading the other day a biography of George Washington. I never knew this -- I guess he came to the presidency with the greatest amount of leverage, personal leverage and prestige of anybody in history -- and the Congress, the Senate rejected one of his Cabinet nominees, which is something I didn't know. I just read this biography that said that. But the point is there is an honorable way to work through compromises.

You also have to know when not to do it, when more harm than good would be done by giving in to the objective you're seeking then you can't do it. Or sometimes you just don't have to do it because you've got the votes and you can prevail, so you can go for the very best from your point of view. But the whole essence of democracy is that people are given limited power, others have power, you have to work together to get something done. And the idea is that nobody is the sole repository of complete wisdom.

And, you know, we just went through this interesting exercise in the House with the crime bill where the Republicans --the moderate Republicans -- were willing to steer a path where they moved away from some of their more strident leaders who didn't want them to do anything to compromise on the crime bill. And they brought some of the Democrats with them, and they said, well, look, let's see how we can make this better from our point of view.

And ironically, a lot of the changes that they were advocating were the same things that I had advocated when the bill went through the first time. It came out better. So I don't think anyone looked on that set of compromises as dishonorable. It furthered all the basic objectives of the crime bill and more people felt that they had had a say in it and that it came out better. So in the world we're living in, in sort of instantaneous news coverage, snap judgments, everybody is looking for the angle, sometimes principle compromise is more difficult because the minute you begin serious negotiations, there's this sort of the sky is falling effect that sometimes takes over the reporting of it to imply that something dishonorable is going on.

So one of the great challenges of a President in this time -- this sort of instantaneous, drenching media age -- is to lay out the

path for the country, say what the objectives are, hold firm to them and be very strong about them, and still be flexible enough to actually make progress and get something done. But in our Constitution, compromise is written in as a virtue, not a vice.

Q When you both look back on your early years, you look back on your educations as very young people, and then later as high school and college and law students, are there moments in history that particularly fascinated you? Are there individuals, men or women in American history who perhaps in some way were inspirations to you?

And I ask that more in the sense of those that were long past because I'd also like to ask you both about the historical forces in your own lives that helped to change your perspective and perhaps serve as inspiration.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, when I grew up in the South in the beginning of the civil rights movement, all Southerners were still obsessed with the Civil War. I mean, really, it was amazing. People talked about it.

I remember when I first ran for office and I was in the mountains of north Arkansas, which was the dividing line in the war in the west between the North and the South. A lot of the hill people in the South became Republicans because they supported Abraham Lincoln, they opposed secession, and they either opposed slavery or didn't care about it. It wasn't part of their life.

And there were families up there that literally had family books -- I mean poor people or people of modest incomes that had family books that traced their genealogy back to the Civil War and they knew who fought for the North, who fought for the South. So I grew up in a time when people were thinking a lot about the whole issue of race because civil rights had come in, but still obsessed historically with the Civil War or the War Between the States as the diehards always called it in the South.

So I had always, I think, even from childhood, captured by the figure of Lincoln; not only the historic significance of what he did, but what kind of person he was and how he was able, under enormous pressure and frequent ridicule, to hold on to the simple idea that the Union had to be preserved; and then how he was able to move the country to the point where he could break his most famous campaign promise, which was not to free the slaves, and instead issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which obviously set in motion the processes which later led to the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments. He was, from the time of my early childhood, I was always just captivated with what he did, how he

did it, what kind of person he was.

Q Did you read a lot of biographies of him? Did you ever visit his home and either his birthplace in Kentucky?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I never did that. But I read a lot of books as a child about him. And I was also -- I liked Jefferson a lot when I was a child because I felt -- in fact, another thing that Southerners were often obsessed with was the poverty of the South at the end of the Second World War and the whole idea that the only way out of it individually and collectively was to dramatically increase the level of education. And since Jefferson had founded the University of Virginia and had advocated basically free public education, that was something that, when I was very young, captivated me. So he had a big hold on my imagination from my childhood, and I read a lot of books about him.

But they were the two historic figures in American life that had the biggest influence on my childhood.

Q Mrs. Clinton?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I grew up on Illinois, the land of Lincoln, and spent enormous amounts of time as a child studying Illinois and American history, reading biographies that were age-appropriate of Lincoln, making field trips to Springfield and other places that had some association with Lincoln.

We had very significant celebrations of Lincoln's birthday all during the time I was a child. So Lincoln had a very big place in my historic imagination. And I had no idea of any of the things that ever happened in the South. I mean, it was just an open and shut case that Abraham Lincoln was by far the greatest President because he had saved the Union and he came from Illinois.

And I remember so clearly one time traveling with my family -- a trip to Florida when I was probably nine, I think. And we got to Vincennes, Indiana, which is very southern Indiana and checked into a little motel that had a little tiny t.v. And we turned it on, and for the first time saw a t.v. series called "The Gray Ghost," which was about a Confederate soldier. And I was just astonished that anybody would have a television series in which the hero was a Confederate soldier. So my whole experience was so focused on Lincoln as a savior of the Union. And then as we traveled further south, I remember being in Alabama and stopping at gas stations where they sold Confederate flags and things like this. And this was in the middle, late 1950s.

So I always had just such a strong personal feeling about

Lincoln. But I also felt the same way to a lesser extent about Washington. And again, it was somebody who had a very large part in our imaginations because of the way the schools treated Washington. I mean, every year I was in school, we had skits about Washington's lives; we wrote little books about Washington; we celebrated Washington's birthday . Both of those two presidential birthdays were how we spent February. And both of them had a very strong appeal, as the father of the country and the savior of the country, to me as a little girl.

THE PRESIDENT: You know, it's interesting, I confess that I think I underappreciated Washington until I became President.

Q Really?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I did, I did. And I read Gary Wills' book on Washington and a book called "Patriarch," by, I think, a man named Smith --

Q Richard Norton Smith.

THE PRESIDENT: Richard Norton Smith, who's at the Hoover --

Q Yes, he was a director of Hoover Library.

THE PRESIDENT: In Iowa.

Q? Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: I read that book not very long ago. And Wills is a person I greatly admire, and I'm very -- and he's written a book called "Leaders" now -- "Certain Trumpets" --something like that. And then he wrote that book "Cincinnatis" (phonetic) on Washington, which I have read.

I see now in a fundamental way that what Washington did, and what he refused to do, in seeking a third term and giving up power and overseeing orderly transition, and how he kind of kept things together, really, he was very important to this country. But I don't think as a child I appreciated him.

Hillary mentioned about seeing the t.v. series. The flip side was true in our case. I mean, if you were a Southerner growing up, you had to be a big admirer of Robert E. Lee, and you had to know a lot about Robert E. Lee. I mean, you just did, you know? And all of his qualities were something that -- he was really sort of still a folk figure in the South, all during the 50s and early 60s.

And it was interesting because I remember I was in a minority among young whites. I was in all public school integration. I thought Martin Luther King was great, even when I was a kid, very young. But to me, it was all part of the natural flow of history. I mean, I never thought whether there was a contradiction between admiring Robert E. Lee and admiring Abraham Lincoln, if you see what I mean.

Q Right. It was just the march of time.

THE PRESIDENT: I'll tell you one little story to give you and idea of what she said.

Like I said, in the mountains of north Arkansas, we had five of our little counties tried to secede from Arkansas when Arkansas voted to secede from the Union. The people were split right down the middle. And I remember in 1975, maybe, or '76, something like that, I was up in one of these beautiful little mountain towns giving the high school commencement address on a gorgeous June night, and the Ozark mountains were breathtaking. The sky was clear and I was exhorting these kids to overcome adversity, and I was telling them about all the terrible things Lincoln had been through in his life. And after it was over, all the guys who ran the county for me, all these great hill country guys took me out and we were looking at the mountains. And they said, that was a very good speech, and you can give it down in Little Rock any time, but don't you ever come up here and brag on that Republican President again; if he'd been that good a President, we would have never had the Civil War. (Laughter.)

So these people were still replaying it in their minds over 100 years later.

Q That was very much part of the heritage, of the culture. It's interesting to hear you both also speak about, in school, Robert E. Lee, Lincoln, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the pageants in February, which I remember; I was born in '59.

But education -- a lot of American history has sort of shifted in recent year, maybe, I think, to more of a balance, where we've looked at social history, we've looked at the history of the everyday American. And perhaps in some time, in some way debunked or taken down a notch or two, the heroes that we had -- those of us who grew up with a sense of people to emulate or people to admire, individuals, for doing things.

Do you think there's been too much, in terms of history being recently recorded -- say in the last 10, 15 years -- there are less heroes?

MRS. CLINTON: I do. And I think it's a great loss for everyone, but particularly for children. It is just easier as a child to relate to individuals than it is social movements or historical trends or even large groups of people who remain ordinary and faceless in the experience that you have with them.

I think it's been important in the last few years that we have pulled out other heroes. I mean, I think it is important that people know about Sojourner Truth and not just the white men that were available as heroes when we were much younger.

But I think it's a shame that we lose sight of the heroic qualities of those people who have made major impacts on our history; and that we don't use them more as examples and symbols for children.

I mean, I remember when I read the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and I discovered things about Franklin's personal life that, at the age of 14, I was shocked by. And I remember going to see my English teacher and saying, I just can't believe it. I felt like I had been disillusioned about Benjamin Franklin. And I'll never forget him saying, but why would you be disillusioned? He was a great man; he wasn't a statue somewhere. He was a great man, and men have faults as well as virtues; and the real challenge is to see people in their humanity but them admire them even more because of what they were able to accomplish historically.

And that was one of those little lessons that you go through as a person who cares about history and keeps encountering new information about people as you go through life.

But I would like to see something of a return to the emphasis on individuals, with a broader range of individuals; with children being able to see a much more diverse and representative grouping of Americans who made their contributions, but recognizing that there are certain people who stand above the others because of their role in American history, and giving those people the attention again that I think they are due.

And even in mythology -- I mean, it may not be true that George Washington cut down a cherry tree and said then he couldn't tell a lie. But there's a lesson in that, and that lesson is one of the ways you convey values to children. And you do it in the context of a historic figure, who is on his own great, and you use it as a teaching example. And I think that a lot of that has been lost.

THE PRESIDENT: In terms of what happens to people in the present or recent past -- whether they're always being taken down --

historically, that changes from time to time. I mean, Jefferson was treated in an outrageous and vicious way when he was President. Roosevelt had a reasonably rough time, but not too bad. I noticed there was a journalist that wrote an article in the New Republic, I think she's about 80 years old, but she covered the Roosevelts. She said that Franklin and Eleanor would not have done so well if they would have had to deal with all the stuff that's present today. And she was speculating about whether they could have served the country as they did.

When I was a child -- we talked about -- you asked me to talk about -- when I was a child, my grandfather who raised me until I was four, and was a great figure in my life until he died when I was quite young -- he just loved Roosevelt because he symbolized to him that the government of the United States cared about ordinary people like him and would try to help them.

It was only kind of in the last 20 or 30 years that we've gotten these sort of extreme views of government really, I think, where neither of which is very helpful. One is that government is evil and incompetent and always messes up. Well, the National Institute of Health, the National Park Services, the Social Security, Medicare are evidence that that's not necessarily true, right?

Q Exactly.

THE PRESIDENT: And then the other view is that government can solve all people's problems. Well, if you look at the breakdown of the social fabric in America in the last 30 years, it's obvious that no government program can fix all that.

But the idea that the government was somehow the partner of the American people and its servant and that its role would change throughout time was sort of reached its apotheosis under Roosevelt and the people -- when the unemployment rate in the country was 25 percent and per capita income in a lot of the places in the South was one-half the national average. My grandfather was a person -- I don't guess he -- until he just got too sick to do it -- he never did take vacations. He worked 40, 50, 60, 70 sometimes more hours a week when I knew him, even when he already had a grandchild, I saw him work a lot.

But maybe it was mythology, but it was a positive thing that he thought that his President and his country cared about him and his small existence in a small town in Arkansas when he was slaving away doing the best he could for his family. There's a very important linkage, and it's something that we need to be able to reestablish today to some extent, under conditions where it is far more difficult to do.

Q . Well, I want to ask both of you, following that --I want to ask you about the Roosevelts, but following with your grandfather's experience and feelings about Roosevelt -- about both of your own experiences as young people in meeting historic figures and how that may have changed the course, at the very least inspired and directed the course of your lives and careers.

Of course, we know the great clip -- the picture of you right here in the Rose Garden, meeting President Kennedy. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that day and what you were feeling and coming here from Arkansas to the White House and on the White House lawn and meeting John F. Kennedy. And what did you feel inside of you as you were leaving the gate? What did you tell yourself?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know what I told myself when I was leaving the gate. I just -- there were a hundred of us here and we were having a big time. But I remember very distinctly where I was standing out there and what I did, because the fellow we elected president of Boys Nation gave him -- they did what they always do -- they gave him a t-shirt and something else, and he gave his little talk. And then he just came down in the crowd and he started shaking hands and I was afraid he would just shake one or two hands and quit. And I was at the head of the alphabet anyway, and I was bigger than anybody around me so I just made sure I was there so I got to shake hands with him.

Because, to me, he represented the country's sort of caring about my generation. You know, he was a very future-oriented person. He said he would get the country moving again. I had the feeling that we were going to have a good future because he was seeking all these new frontiers. And he gave us a sense of possibility that we could deal with things. And he finally began to deal with the civil rights issue in the somewhat more open way than President Eisenhower had. Although President Eisenhower sent the troops to integrate Little Rock Central High School, which I strongly supported. I thought it was a good thing. I was what, 11 or something at the time. And I was in a decided minority in high school but I thought it was good.

And Eisenhower was a very important person for his time because we went through all this unsettling stuff. And he settled the country down, and he gave the people a fairly high level of confidence, and he was willing to let some things happen. And so I think that history will judge him pretty kindly.

But I think when Kennedy came in, even though he won by the narrowest of victories, showing how -- if you look at it --showing the fear that the American people have of change. We basically -- we always

say we want it; we're for it in general, but we're against it in particular very often.

But to me, I thought it was great. I mean, I saw him up there, he just was happy and loose and relaxed. And he seemed interested in these kids, and he seemed to relate well to young people. And it made a big impression on people my age that the Kennedy administration, that the President and the people that were working for him were trying to throw us into the future in a positive way.

Q Your mother said, though, when you came back home after that experience, she knew that you were going to go into some form of public service. She could just tell.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, what I decided -- actually it was before I came up here, I remember very clearly. I was a junior in high school and had been interested in being a physician. I had been interested in being a musician and a couple of other things. And I just made a decision that I would try to go into public service because I thought I'd be good at it and I thought it would be interesting. I thought it would be something that I'd never have to worry about getting up and going to work every day because it would always be something different. I was interested in people and human nature and the dimensions of the problems.

And I must say, that was one -- a lot of times what you think when you're a kid is wrong, but that was one insight I had when I was 16 I was right about. I mean that it is a fascinating life in its diversity and challenge. It can be a pain from time to time, but it's still fascinating.

Q Mrs. Clinton, I know that as a youth you had met Martin Luther King. And then I know that in 1968 during the Democratic Convention in Chicago, you went down with a friend to look at some of the protests.

I also think about the fact -- I just realized this the other day -- you're the first presidential couple born after that long period of time when so many people just knew Roosevelt as their President; but that Mrs. Roosevelt lived, of course, until 1962. And I know you were active in school government and so forth. I don't know if she was a particular interest or inspiration at that point, but how about that meeting Martin Luther King -- similar to the President's experience in meeting President Kennedy?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I came from a very different point of view. I came from a very Republican family that was not particularly fond of

the Roosevelts and not particularly fond of the Kennedys, really were strong supporters of President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon.

And so the feelings I had about the 1960 election were ones of great disappointment because all of the excitement about change that seemed to sweep the country, at least where I grew up, were viewed as quite threatening -- which gives me some insight as to how people feel today when they view much of what this President is trying to do, because I came from the kind of family that was very skeptical about government doing anything right and about the specifics of change as the President was just talking about.

But starting when I was in high school, I had a series of experiences that at least began to pose different world views as possible ideas for me to consider. And my involvement with my church, which led to my going to a speech that Martin Luther King gave, was one of those real eye-opening experiences. And I was very impressed by him.

I mean, I was very intellectually resistant in many respects to what you could view as the Kennedy administration's agenda. But I was very sympathetic and supportive of civil rights. I mean, I can remember watching and having my mother explain what happened when President Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock. I mean, I thought it was just ridiculous that people wouldn't go to school with different kinds of children.

And so I saw what Dr. King was doing as something that went beyond politics. I mean, it shouldn't be Republican or Democrat or conservative or Republican; it was just the right thing to do --much of that because of my strong feelings about Lincoln and my family's feelings about what being a Republican really meant. So that was an important part of my sense of political identity as it began to develop.

But in 1964, I was a very strong supporter of Barry Goldwater. Again, because I liked what I saw as his real conservatism. I mean, I really did come from a background that was highly suspicious of government, but also very supportive of the individual and individual responsibility; and Goldwater seemed to stand for that. And I got to meet Barry Goldwater. I went to a rally and met him and enjoyed just being introduced to him. That's all that occurred.

But I also remember in 1965 being as impressed as I think I've ever been by a presidential speech when President Johnson gave his speech on the Voting Rights Act. I though that was one of the most extraordinary public statements I had ever seen a President give; and from that time on became very supportive of a lot of the goals of the Johnson administration domestically, even though over time I became very

concerned about the Vietnam War and very much opposed to the Vietnam War.

So there was a lot going on in that time period that came from many different directions, which is why I always resist political labeling, because I think we are all much more complex in our political thoughts than the easy categories described.

Q When we also talk about Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt as you mentioned before, Mr. President, thinking about the Roosevelts and some of the things hey went through. Now, of course, that was a very unique situation -- the Great Depression, World War II, he was physically incapacitated with polio, he ran for 12 years, communications was so different -- but there was a great whirlwind of change with the New Deal and much resistance to it as well. In some of the battles that you've been through in the last year and a half -- congressional battles and some of the criticism -- do you ever look back at the Roosevelts? And do you ever take inspiration from them as they worked together on the New Deal?

Of course, Mrs. Roosevelt took certain components of the New Deal that were central to the Roosevelt domestic agenda, and the President oversaw the whole picture, and in some ways perhaps parallels the way you have both worked together for change.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think there are parallels. I think the difference is obviously that people knew they were in more desperate straits back then. People want changes made now, but they're less willing for the government to do so much, which I think is a good thing. That is, after all, what I ran on -- sort of trying to find a way to strike a new balance between the government and the private sector, not just to have the government solve these problems.

But I think that in terms of the dimensions of the change we're trying to effect and the fact that we have a good working relationship -- and a lot of other Presidents did, too, by the way: Bess Truman was very influential, and Mrs. Wilson was actually virtually running the country when Woodrow Wilson was impaired. But we've been more upfront about our relationship and our partnership than anybody, I think, since Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. So I do, I take that to heart.

The only thing that I find frustrating today is that several surveys have shown of recent political history that last year we had a greater success in pushing changes through Congress than any President since the end of World War II except for Eisenhower in '53, who had a more limited agenda, and Johnson in '65, who had a more supportive Congress. And the American people don't know that.

That's the new element in this, the new element and challenge in public life today is that the President has to try to reach the American people through an environment, a reporting, a press environment that is more negative and more editorial, and sometimes less accurate. I mean, those aren't my conclusions; those are conclusions that have been repeatedly drawn by independent students of this who don't have an axe to grind.

That is what makes it so hard because when you're doing what people hired you to do, and when you're making changes and they still don't know it, and you're not sure you have a way to make sure they find out, that is a troubling thing. And I'd say that's the biggest new challenge of governing, and it really rewards those who don't want to change. Basically this kind of environment is good for the status quo because there's no premium, there's no penalty to be paid for irresponsibility. You just say, well, you don't like this, you don't like that, you don't like the other thing. And people are so skeptical and they don't know what's going on that they're prepared, they're predisposed to believe whatever bad thing they hear So that makes it even more difficult. So I think in that sense, the environment is more challenging.

But there are times in the past when it has been so. Jefferson faced a very hostile environment in a narrower sense. And Truman in a totally different way did. So these are -- that's why there's no historical period or characters that are exactly parallel.

Q And you also have a press -- I being a freelance member of it -- who is not always particularly well-informed in history and very frequently make statements that are inaccurate.

MRS. CLINTON: That's one of the things that has been very interesting to me is, particularly with respect to the Roosevelts. I had always admired the accomplishments of Mrs. Roosevelt, and I had remembered her from her days at the United Nations and particularly the 1960 convention with the role that she played there.

So I always knew that she was a remarkable and accomplished person. But until I really began reading a lot about her and by her, I did not fully grasp what she was up against, both in terms of her individual obstacles that had to be overcome in order to establish her own identity as a partner in political change, but also the institutional obstacles that she confronted. And the more that I have read about and by her, the greater my admiration has grown because she truly was not only the first of her kind, but probably one of a kind in the way she approached her responsibilities after her husband was

stricken with polio; and how she worked so hard to overcome all kinds of personal restraints such as her shyness and her lack of public speaking and all of those efforts that she put into making herself an effective spokesperson for what she believed; and then facing the ridicule on a personal level as well as a policy level as to what she believed and how she pursued her beliefs and the role she played and on and on. I have just been so admiring.

And years ago, I was asked to join the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, which I did. And I've never had a chance personally to visit Hyde Park or Valk Hill (phonetic), but I was able to keep up to date with a lot of the publications.

And what we are still finding out about how Mrs. Roosevelt influenced what went on, and how she stood up against her critics, I think should be much more broadly known. And you have done a good job in trying to set the historical record straight, both about Mrs. Roosevelt and others who have been here.

Q It must also be very frustrating when -- (GAP IN TAPE) -- and you sometimes see an expression you've used sometimes --lightning rod -- when you see images or caricatures that are wholly inaccurate.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh yes, I watch the news sometimes or read a paper and I think -- they'd say something about me, and I say, well, I wouldn't be for that guy either. (Laughter.) You know what I mean? You feel like you're sort of a cardboard cutout, a cartoon character. But it's part of the challenge of the time in which we live. It's just -- it requires a whole different set of strategies for trying to get through it.

Q Let me ask you, are there any particular objects, any particular portraits in the White House, any particular rooms that have come to mean something particularly special or important to both of you?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, there's so many. One of the best parts about living here is feeling that every day you encounter another piece of American history. And when we first came, we just searched every nook and cranny to find memorabilia and portraits and other things that we could put on display, and learned a lot about how the house had been used in the past and how the house had been really modified over time to fill its many functions. I mean, it is a museum. It is the house of the head of state. It is a public building. And it is a residence. There are so many aspects.

And we have a lot of the artwork now that was formerly in storage on display in the White House. And we are in the process of

making sure we have somewhere depicted in the West Wing or in the house every President and First Lady that's every lived here, so that we have some kind of memory of their presence.

And when the President's office was done up on the second floor of the Residence, which is the Treaty Room, we paid special attention to making sure we could get back into that room a lot of the pieces of art and furniture and other memorabilia that meant something to the house. And then he particularly enjoys looking at all that is there and knowing the history of it and understanding where it came from and what it depicts.

THE PRESIDENT: The picture of Lincoln which you --you've seen it -- that's in the Lincoln Bedroom, with his military advisers planning the peace, which was done not long before he was killed. And they're on a ship and they're there with an admiral and with, as I remember, General Grant and maybe General Sheridan or Sherman -- maybe it's Sherman -- and the admiral, and there's a rainbow in the background. And it was such a clear -- Lincoln had a very clear idea of what he wanted to do to heal the country after the war.

And when he died and then when President Johnson came in and he was weakened, and the reconstruction took a far more draconian turn, I've often thought that that was a sort of an unexplored tragedy in American history because I think it hardened attitudes in the South and made it more difficult for us to work through the issues of race; and also kind of ratified the economic backwardness of the place for a long time.

And a lot of that stuff is just still being played out today, sadly enough, in southern politics -- still being played out. But anyway, that picture's very good.

There's a picture in here in my dining room that I brought down from the Lincoln Bedroom so I could see it every day, because I don't go back to the Lincoln room everyday, called "Waiting for the Hour." And it's a bunch of slaves sitting in a dark room five minutes before midnight before the effective date of the Emancipation Proclamation, which arguably the most important document ever signed in the White House.

And just seeing that every day reminds me of the enormous importance of the presidency and trying to get it right at whatever point in history you happen to serve. Those two pictures really mean a lot to me.

Q Are there particular Presidents and First Ladies -- a

question I would ask to both of you -- are there particular Presidents and First Ladies whom you both admire or find particular inspiration from? I know you mentioned Lincoln and Truman. I was wondering, Mrs. Clinton, if there were both Presidents and First Ladies that you sort of emulated or took hope from.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, there's so many of them. I mean, there are aspects of personalities of so many, as well as their accomplishments that I find very important and supportive. I have become a great admirer of both Roosevelts, much to the dismay of my father. (Laughter.) And I've become a great admirer of both Trumans. And we were particularly pleased to have Margaret Truman Daniels visit us and spend time with us, which I had found a great joy. I am a great admirer of the Kennedys. And my friendship and time with Jackie Kennedy Onassis was one of the most extraordinary opportunities of my life. I am a great admirer of President Johnson's domestic accomplishments. And I think Mrs. Johnson is one of the most effective women who has ever lived here.

I admire greatly Betty Ford's personal bravery and outspokenness on women's issues and particularly the ERA and breast cancer when it was not at all easy. I think that both President and Mrs. Carter made a great contribution to a lot of the difficult issues that confronted the country. And I think that Mrs. Carter's work on behalf of mental health and President Carter's continuing example after he left the White House is a great legacy.

I really appreciated a lot of the struggles that confronted Nancy Reagan when she was attempting to define herself and not be defined and try to live her life and support her husband as she thought was best for her. And I always enjoyed being around both President and Mrs. Bush, whom we had some acquaintance with because of her husband's time as governor. And I've always found them very easy to talk to and very gracious and hospitable.

And I think that you can look at the people that I have personally met, or at least have had some acquaintance with as a more grown-up person, and see admirable characteristics in them. And I must say that I only met President Nixon once -- when he came to the White House to speak with the President about Russia prior to the meeting with Yeltsin. And he came to the second floor where my daughter and I were waiting to greet him, and he had prepared what he was going to say to both of us. So when he met Chelsea, he immediately began talking about her school, which is a school both of his daughters attended, and his memories of that school and his time there.

And when he met me, he immediately talked about health care, and

said you are attempting to now do what I tried to do, because President Nixon had proposed a national health care plan. And I was very impressed by his intellectual capacity and his discipline in the way he had prepared just to say hello to us.

So although I have grave political disagreements with many of the people who have been here, I think you do not get to this position without a lot of admirable personal characteristics that oftentimes get either overlooked or overshadowed by the pressures of the time. And it's very important, and I must say one of the great things I admire about my husband is his humility in the face of this responsibility and his willingness to understand that even though you are elected President, you are really a servant leader. And that is sometimes misunderstood because people are more comfortable with authoritarian symbols, if you will. But I think we are all better served if, despite whatever impressive credentials and strong personal characteristics a person brings to the position of the presidency, that they also bring a real dose of humility as well, because these problems are for any time ones that demand often answers that are not easy and certainly not easily explained except by some historical perspective.

THE PRESIDENT: I've got to go pass the crime bill. (Laughter.)

Q Well, thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Q I really appreciate this.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you for all your hard work at trying to make history relevant to people.

THE PRESIDENT: We would be so much better off -- you said a very perceptive thing. If the people -- I find that the reporters who tend to be the most, from my perspective, most effective and tend to be the most fair in balance are those that have the deepest historical sense.

Q They have a greater sense, too, of what it is you both are going through and trying to accomplish. I told my -- I said, it's not just change, it's improvement.

MRS. CLINTON: That's a good way of putting it.

THE PRESIDENT: Good line.

Q Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Good-bye.

END 12:00 P.M. EDT