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INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
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IN FLORIDA

Q We can go anywhere you guys want to go. Take one question around the table and start. We have about 20, 25 minutes.

Q Okay. Oh, good. I was going to ask if we could maybe combine minutes since we're all together.

Q Yes.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. We thought we could actually get more questions in this way.

Q Oh, good. Well, I know I have just been dying to ask you, rumor has it and I've read a few places that you're thinking of playing more of a traditional First Lady role. Say it ain't so, Hillary.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, let me say this, that I have always done the traditional First Lady role since I got to Washington, just as when my husband was the governor of Arkansas. I enjoy that. I like --

Q The ceremonial events?

MRS. CLINTON: -- the ceremonial events, being part of history. I love the entertaining. We just had President and Mrs. Yeltsin. We're about to have President Mandela. I pick the menus. I approve the flowers. I do everything that fits into what might be viewed as the traditional duties because they are important.

But I also am going to continue doing what I have always done, which is to speak out on behalf of issues that are important to the President and to me and to the country. I'm going to continue to work on issues, including health care, and do what I can to make a contribution to providing the kind of changes that the President campaigned on and that he's worked on for the first 20 months.

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they are very active in the community and maybe on the front lines of some controversial issues.

I have friends who are full-time career women but rush home to put on a dinner party and, you know, take their niece or nephew to the ballet, and then I have friends who are like me and most women these days, balancing work and family responsibilities and kind of keeping all the balls in the air at one time. And that is a challenge, but it's exciting, and that's what I'm going to continue doing to the best of my ability.

Q. Good.

Q. Interesting. Ellen Goodman had a column (inaudible) on that question about, I guess, the take in Washington at least seems to be that you have been relegated more to a ceremonial role, christening a ship in Connecticut and planning the (inaudible).

MRS. CLINTON: You know, Tom, it's so funny because I was thrilled to be asked to christen a ship. I mean, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Six months ago, seven months ago that was on my calendar. But I also gave the keynote speech at the christening, which is a rather unusual occurrence. And my speech was about what we do at the end of the cold war to maintain our defense but also to support those workers who made our military might so formidable.

Then I went from there to the Coast Guard Academy at the invitation of the Coast Guard. I was the first First Lady ever to review the regimental troops and then addressed the Coast Guard Academy about their challenge as the what's called humanitarian service of our military. It was a very full day. And apparently, as often happens, the picture of me christening the submarine was used to draw all kinds of conclusions that had no basis in what I had actually done.

So that is something that I regret, but I go out and do it day in and day out. We're happy to provide information to anyone who is interested about what I'm saying, where I'm going. It reminds me a little bit about what happened at a comparable time in the campaign when all of a sudden people -- I think they're like cycles in some of the national press. It's like they roll the wheel and they say, "Okay, this week it's Hillary's back-in-the-house week",

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and, you know, they write the story, and then they move on to something else.

Well, during the campaign when the wheel hit there I had been just out campaigning nonstop, coming to places like Miami, or Hollywood, or Fort Lauderdale, where I always had press avails, where I often did one-on-ones just as I've done here today.

So I had this huge amount of press out in local and regional press, but I wasn't doing it in Washington, so it didn't count, which, for me, coming from a background of state politics, where I see what happens at the grass roots level, has been hard to adjust to because it's really almost schizophrenic. I mean, if you don't do something in front of the national press corps it doesn't count, even if you've done it in Hollywood and it's got its own press coverage there which is significant. But you just have to live with that and keep doing what you're doing.

Q You said you regretted that. Does it bother you?

MRS. CLINTON: No. I regret that somehow we can't get on the same wavelength so that, you know, if I'm going to go christen a ship and make a couple of speeches and everything, I mean, let people draw their conclusions from the actual occurrence instead of taking a tiny little piece and then jumping to a conclusion that's not necessarily supported.

Q Going back to -- someone mentioned health care. Do you think at all that people were critical of your health care plan because you're a woman, because you're the First Lady? Do you think that everything that you've tried to do has been under scrutiny because of that and they just can't separate those two?

MRS. CLINTON: You know, for some people that might be the case. And I'm sure that it is, that people still have a hard time with women in all kinds of positions. I don't know if you two still run into that, but, you know, it seems to be still occurring. But I think that more than that, the health care debate unleashed all kinds of strong emotions and very strong opposition, which is always what has happened in the last 60 years any time any President has tried to take on health care.

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The same kinds of interests who opposed health care reform this year opposed it when President Truman introduced it. And he had excellent people working for him, mostly, as I recall, men, but still very able people, but the same arguments were made. It's just an extremely complicated political task to overcome the opposition of many of the interest groups and rebut a lot of their attacks on a health care proposal. And they are just very powerful in making those attacks.

I went back and read some of President Truman's speeches in the last couple of weeks, because he presented national health care in '45, '47, and '49. And somebody from an archive source had gathered up for me some of the opposition that was used against President Truman. My goodness. They called him all kinds of names. There was a very personal attack on him as well as on the idea of national health care. So I don't take that personally. I view that as just part of the tactics of the opposition.

Q Are you bitter about that at all?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I'm not, because I think that what happens is you have to know going into something as difficult as health care reform that you are really trying to go uphill. And this time, you know, we made mistakes. We didn't do everything in retrospect that we might have done to explain more clearly to the public what was really at stake in health care reform or what was really in the President's proposal.

But, you know, that's a kind of live and learn experience. It hadn't been tried in so long. I mean, President Nixon introduced comprehensive health care reform, and then it just died. So for more than 20 years this debate had not really been carried out in the American body politic. And so we had to kind of figure out where we were and how we needed to proceed.

And I actually feel very good about where we ended up. We got a bill for the first time ever in our history out of several committees. We got it to the floor of both Houses. We really ignited a national conversation about health care reform. All today, everywhere I've been people have said "Don't give up". And they've been giving me their ideas, how about this or how about that? So I find that very exciting and gratifying.

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Q Absolutely. I remember the remarks you made to the graduating class at the University of Texas last year. It was shortly after your father passed. And I still remember your remarks, because you said that the nation was in a crisis of meaning and a spiritual vacuum. And I thought that was so interesting. It is rare that you hear political people talking about that spiritual or inner life. I just wanted you to elaborate that. I mean, obviously it's a big part of your life.

MRS. CLINTON: Right. It is. It's hard to talk about because it's not something that is easily discussed in public forums. And a lot of people, as we know from our history, use religion or their own particular beliefs for political or other agendas.

But I was quoting from Albert Schweitzer in that speech where he really was talking about something that's been going on in the world a lot longer than just in the last few years in America, where we're all trying to make sure that we have some values that we can count on, that stand the test of time, that don't just blow with the winds of change.

And I think that that's part of what is going on in our country right now, and it is both very exciting that people are asking themselves some tough questions about what their beliefs are and what their values are. And it's also a little bit worrisome because part of the genius of the American political system is that those kinds of discussions are to inform our public life but not to dictate political or public decisions.

And trying to strike that line in today's times is a tough one. I mean, when people come out and say that their religious beliefs say they should be opposed to GATT, which is a trade treaty, I say to myself, "Wait a minute. Now, how did we get to this point?" So you've got to be very careful in talking about these issues not to go in the wrong direction. But they do need to be talked about.

My husband often says that our Constitution guarantees each of us freedom of religion but not freedom from religion. And religion is an important part of the lives of probably the vast majority of Americans, however they define it. So we don't want to have such a separation that it's illegitimate, but we also don't want to go over the line that the Founders and the Constitution laid out for us.

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So it's going to be a fascinating back and forth over the next few years.

Q Are you hoping that AmeriCorps will kind of pick up some of that and get young people involved? You know, it reminds me of the old Peace Corps and Vista and has me thinking maybe Generation X will take that up as their cause.

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. They certainly have been responsive. I mean, hundreds of thousands of calls came in to that 800 number, and something well over 100,000 actually completed the applications for the first summer of service. So the response has been intense. I think young people want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

When I think about my own life, I think that faith, family, work, service, those are the four pillars on which I kind of judge my own life and how I spend my time. And being of service to other people is immensely gratifying. And I think young people want to serve if they are given the opportunity, which we're going to try to give them.

Q Speaking as a member of Generation X, I graduated from college last year. And I went to the University of Maryland at College Park, so I was right there. I had an exam so I didn't get to go to the Inauguration, but I was right there. And my generation and my parents' generation -- my parents are your age -- that was kind of something that we all agreed on. It was the first time, I guess, our generations had something to talk about. And everyone talked about the change that was happening, and that there was just a mood, and we all could walk around and just be happy.

At the halfway point of the Administration, do you think that people are still feeling that way, that there is still a hope there?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think there is. I think there is a tremendous amount of hope. But I also think that the work of change is never easy, and many people who were frustrated or disappointed about the way their lives or the world were going and hoped for almost an immediate change can't help but be disappointed. That's not the way it happens in your individual life, and it's certainly not the way it happens in the life of a nation.

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Any time you are confronting change, whether it's moving from Maryland to Florida to take a job, or having a baby, or deciding whether to get married, or taking some leap of faith in your work life, it's scary, and a lot of people really have a lot of anxiety in the face of change.

Well, when you take a political system and country as complex as ours and begin to change direction, you can't snap your fingers and make it happen. So people get frustrated. And with all of the arguing back and forth it looks kind of discouraging to some people. But that's why I said in my remarks that the two things you should never watch being made are sausage and legislation, because they are both very messy processes.

But if you look at what we've actually seen accomplished in the last 20 months, there are many reasons for hope and optimism. The President has reversed trickle-down economics, which was undermining the future of Generation X very quickly. And we got the economy back on a better track, more fiscal responsibility, which is not a sexy issue maybe for young people but is really critical as to what kind of opportunities will be available in the future.

You know, 4.3 million new jobs, a lot of the accomplishments in addition to things like national service. And expanded college loans by taking the middleman out, which was a huge fight, got very little coverage because basically the President was cutting out the people who took their piece of the college loan dollar as it came down the conveyor belt, so that we now have many more billions of dollars available at lower interest rates for 20 million more eligible recipients.

So, I mean, all of these things, and I could name many others, will begin to be felt in the lives of people, so that the kind of constant daily barrage of arguing and partisan bickering and the negativism that goes on in Washington, that will give way to the reality of how people are seeing improvements.

But we did not get into the problems that the President ran against overnight. We're not going to get out of them overnight. And any time you raise expectations because you want people to feel hopeful about what they can do, there is a natural frustration when it doesn't happen

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immediately. But it's happening, and people are going to be seeing more and more of what's been accomplished.

This President and this Congress working together have actually achieved more than any Congress in decades. And the Congressional Quarterly did an analysis of the first year of the Congress and said it was the most productive since 1965. They are now in the midst of analyzing the second year, and there are so many things that will make a difference that have never broken through.

I talked about one today which is a boring little thing about procurement revision. I mean, Al Gore and Bill Clinton love stuff like that, because they really got down into it and figured out how you could change the way people were ripping off the Defense Department, particularly, for decades. And the bill got through Congress. It is going to be signed into law. And it will do away with the era of the \$900 toilet seat.

That may not be big, but it was those \$900 toilet seats and \$500 screwdrivers that year after year undermined people's faith in the common sense of the government in Washington. So it's slow and steady but it's on a forward movement, which is what I think is the most important thing.

Q When you spoke this morning at the temple you cited Nelson Mandela for inspiration. Maybe I was reading more into it than I should have. My sense was when you were saying to people -- you talked about the cycles in history post-World War One, World War Two, and now we're in another cycle of change. There is this anxiety, but you look at people like Nelson Mandela and you say, what we're going through is nowhere near as tough as what he went through. Is that, in a way, the way you talk yourself up and say --

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it's not even the way I have to talk myself up. It's a reality check. You know, there are real people of courage in this country and around the world who get up every day and move us a step closer toward a better future. It might be the teacher who goes into the inner city and takes care of those kids. It might be the nurse who shows up at the emergency room. I mean, there's so much good that goes on. And we just keep getting overwhelmed by all the negative stories.

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I mean, most people who live in inner cities of our major cities are law-abiding, decent, hard-working people struggling against great odds. And yet they are stereotyped and painted in a way that does them and the rest of us a great disservice.

We are not talking ourselves up as Americans enough I guess is what my feeling is. I don't need to be talked up. I get up every day and my husband gets up every day and we are exhilarated by what can be done.

I mean, yesterday my husband signed the appropriations bills. For the first time in 30 years they got done on time. Now, nobody in America may care about that. But it's a little tiny step for making the government work better for people. He does things like that every single day which he takes personal satisfaction in whether anybody else knows about it.

On the big stage of history, writ large, look at what has happened in the last 20 months. We have stabilized our relationship with Russia, which a lot of people forget was under great stress when the President came in. We have seen incredible breakthroughs in the Middle East, again because of people with courage and vision who never gave up, never let the cynics get the better of them. It didn't matter how hopeless it seemed. They kept struggling toward peace.

And then South Africa, where, under most normal analyses, how could that have ever happened? And it happened because of individuals. I mean, DeKlerk and Mandela basically decided they were going to change the way their country operated.

And so for me the glass is half full, not half empty. And it does a great disservice to the values of this country and to what made America the optimistic, positive place it's always been for people to get so down on themselves and on each other. There is no basis for it. Yes, we've got problems. My goodness, we have. Let's not deny that like we have in the past. Let's not talk about it being wonderful and all that when we know we've got problems.

But those are problems that are solvable if people work together and get themselves willing to make some tough decisions. So, I mean, I'm a very old-fashioned American. I

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think that whatever is wrong with us can be fixed by what's right with us as long as we have a positive attitude about what we can get done.

Q When you encounter things like that, you tell that joke about the Pope walking on water (inaudible). And in the headlines every day you find that part that will give Rush Limbaugh three hours worth of material to talk about. Doesn't that at times make you just want to curl up in a fetal position or something?

MRS. CLINTON: Never. No, never that. I mean, I'm not going to say that it's pleasant to hear people say untrue things about you or to belittle the accomplishments of your husband. That certainly is not pleasant. But I take those people for what they are. I mean, this is being done for commercial and political reasons. It is not very complicated. I mean, it's just as old as politics and as old as this country.

I mean, the kinds of things that used to be said about Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln or anybody else were just as vicious. They just weren't as constant. We now have 24-hour constant media barrage. And so you can never escape it. It's not wait until you see what nasty thing is written in the newspaper about Falla, the dog, that, you know, President Roosevelt had to respond to. It's 24 hours. It's constant. And I think that that has changed the way people react almost like there's just too much of it.

Anybody can be free to criticize. That is all part of the political system. But when it's relentless and never-ending because it sparks controversy and, therefore, it gets attention and, therefore, you have a commercial of political advantage, it gets to be a little bit much. And it does begin to infect the political atmosphere. I'm well aware of that.

But I also have a very strongly held belief that results count for something, that you can only make up reality for so long, and people who rant and rave about the President, eventually they're going to have to say, "Well, wait a minute. You know, unemployment dropped two points." I mean, eventually that just catches up. The facts do eventually catch up.

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It's like that old saying that, you know, a lie can be around the world before the truth can be spoken. That's always been the case. But you just have to keep counting on the intelligence and decency of the American people, which I think is worth counting on.

Q We can take one more question before we go.

Q In light of that, how do you combat stress? Where do you find the energy to go on, to keep going?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I'm very lucky, because I have a wonderful family, including my brothers.

Q You are very family-oriented, aren't you?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. They make me laugh and keep me down to earth. My husband and I spend a lot of time together. We watch movies together. We play cards together. We just have a lot of fun.

Q What kind of games do you like?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, my husband is a fanatic card player. We play pinochle, which is the card game that my father taught us all to play. We then taught Bill. And we then taught Chelsea. So we play card games. We put puzzles together. We watch sports on TV because my husband is a fanatic about sports.

We just spend a lot of time with each other, and we enjoy it. And it's just fun to yell and scream at some sporting event or yell and scream about a card game or whatever it is we're doing.

And then I have great friends that are always there for me, and I try to be there for them, too. That's one of the things that's very important for me is that when I have a friend who is sick or having a problem I want to be available to them, too. And then I read a lot. I exercise. I pray. I do the things that I think help give you a sense of balance in your life so that it doesn't just get totally wrought up and carried away.

Q I know you're an avid reader. What is the last good book you've read, or what are you reading now?

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MRS. CLINTON: Oh, my gosh. I'm reading Doris Kerns Goodwin's book about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, which is marvelous.

Q Is it?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, it is brilliantly written. You feel like you're actually there with them, the way she uses little details about the way the White House was arranged, and who would come to spend the night, and what they would eat, and what the people would wear, as well as the much bigger issues about what was at stake, and marvelous parts of it with things that Mrs. Roosevelt would say to Winston Churchill or that Franklin Roosevelt would say about somebody. It's really great reading.

Q Does she remain your role model?

MRS. CLINTON: I admire her so much. I mean, there are many women who have been in this position whom I think did a remarkable job under challenging circumstances, but probably no one ever did what she did or will ever do it again, because she did it at a time when it was so totally unexpected and when women just didn't do what she did.

It wasn't just being involved in policy, which she was. She even had a job for a time. She was the first to give press conferences. She traveled extensively. But she really took stands on a whole range of issues. That I admire greatly. So I just don't think there will be anyone ever quite like her.

Q Ellen Goodman's column mentioned that. I think she mentioned that it had been reported that Doris Kerns Goodwin's book was on your night-side table.

MRS. CLINTON: It is. It is. It is. Yes.

Q And she mentioned that Eleanor Roosevelt's first job was to head up, I think, the Office of Civil Defense at the beginning of World War Two.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you know, she had been involved in so many things. Let me just say most First Ladies have been. I mean, there is this great myth that women were never involved in what their husbands did in the

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White House, and all one has to do is go back and look at the historical record to know that that is not true.

And Mrs. Roosevelt had been involved in many areas of the government. She had personnel suggestions. She had policy changes that she wanted done, on and on. But she had never had a job. So she did. She took this job. And it caused a huge uproar. I mean, she was roundly criticized and all kinds of things.

She probably, for her time, if you could just go maybe print the print medium inch by inch, since we didn't ave television - and I don't think radio was really a political document or a political medium in those days -- I'm not sure she probably didn't even have more print criticism than I have just on a, you know, year-by-year sort of a basis.

But she didn't have as much of it, because you have television and radio and all the rest of it. But, my goodness, they said terrible things about her. And they just made fun of her, and ridiculed what she believed in, and just gave her a terrible time. And she kept going. And she did what she thought was right. And I think that's what you have to do in your life. You know, you get up every day, and you can make a choice whether you are going to do what you think is right or get pushed around by whatever the latest winds are that are blowing.

Q So you take solace in that?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I admire her greatly. And I think that if you're going to do anything in this position you're going to be criticized, and so you might as well do what you believe in.

Q (Inaudible) Miami Times is a black community newspaper. We're right down the street.

Q She has been to Mohammed's office.

Q Oh, really?

MRS. CLINTON: Yeah, I sure have, in '92.

Q Absolutely, 1991.

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MRS. CLINTON: Oh, you weren't here. You were still in college.

Q No, I was still in college.

Q I told him I had brought the mountain to Mohammed.

Q And we are like right down the street from Little Haiti on 54th Street and it turns into Little Haiti. I also do a thing called Street Talk. We go around and we ask questions like a man-on-the-street interview.

So we are right in the community, and we are talking to people. And the people that I knew in college and the people I know there, everyone seemed to have been behind the administration in a way that I don't think that black people were involved or behind politics since the civil rights movement, since Kennedy.

I grew up with grandmothers with the pictures of Kennedy and King and Jesus. They are all there together. And people were saying the same things, my grandmother and my great aunts, you know, about -- and the ladies down here their age and younger. This is the same thing I was asking about, hope and all that.

Do you think about that? The black community -- not to speak for the black community, because, you know, we can't, but that a considerable part of the black community seemed or seems to be so behind the administration?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we are very grateful for that support, because the President is firmly committed to making opportunities available and giving every American the chance to live up to his or her God-given potential.

And it is something that he personally cares so much about, having grow up in the south and remembering legal segregation, that he thinks our country must continue to make progress on the issues like race which have been throughout our entire history contentious and divisive, and we will continue to do that.

(End of interview.)

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