

01/15/96
Page, Susan
USA Today

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

January 15, 1996

INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
BY SUSAN PAGE, USA TODAY

Q -- (In progress.) When I originally requested this interview I hoped it would turn on the book mostly. But there are other issues that -- (inaudible.) In the interview that you gave with the Los Angeles Times on Friday, they wrote that story to reflect that you did not intend to go to the Senate to testify before the D'Amato Committee. And in the interview I read this morning that you seemed to be considering that. Tell me what your view is on whether it would be a good idea for you to testify.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, we had a correction run on the L.A. Times story, and I think that was just a -- we have a transcript. I think the reporter just misunderstood it.

I am at the same place I have always been -- I will cooperate. I will do whatever it takes to get this matter resolved. I cannot wait for it to be ended. There's no one that wants that more than I. And that's what I have said; that's what I will continue to say. And the various forms of the cooperation and the outreach, trying to answer questions, I'll consider everything that could possibly help resolve this matter. That's what I want to try to do.

Q Do you think the very dramatic step of actually testifying before this Senate Whitewater Committee, could that be a step that would help you put this behind you, clear the air, move on?

MRS. CLINTON: I really don't want to speculate on it because this whole situation changes so much, it's hard to find stable ground. And I will continue to answer questions as I understand them whenever they are posed, but I don't want to speculate about what might happen in the future.

I would have thought that the RTC reports would have ended this. The original allegations about whether or not we lost money, were we passive investors, and did we get any money from Madison S&L -- those have all been answered, and they've been answered as we said they would be over the last four years. So I never quite know where it's going next. But I'll just keep cooperating.

Q Why do you think the RTC reports have not been released publicly?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know, Susan. I would really like to believe that this whole matter is motivated by a good-faith search for the facts. And we have a \$4-million, two-year study by an independent law firm with a Republican U.S. attorney, and there are no press conferences held about it. It is not the subject of front-page stories. So I don't know.

And I would hope that, for the sake of the American public so that they could make up their mind about all of this, they would get all the facts, not just somebody's version of them, not the allegation of the week, but the facts. And then I believe Americans are fundamentally fair and they'll make up their minds.

MORE

Q You said you'd like to believe that this whole matter is motivated by a good-faith search of the facts. Do you think, in fact, it is motivated by that?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, that's what I'm going to continue to assume. I do think there is increasing evidence of politics. This is the 1996 presidential year. But certainly, I hope that's what the motivation behind all of these investigations are.

Q You know, some people see kind of classic partisan political motivation, the desire to hurt your husband in his reelection prospects by -- (inaudible.) I wonder if you think there's also maybe an element of almost an ideological backlash to some of the things you've advocated, things you advocate in your book, that you talked about during the health care fight. Do you think that could be an element in the kind of ferocity of the attacks on you?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know. I think that some of what I have done in the last three years in speaking out on issues has certainly caused controversy and has been used by political opponents of my husband to stir up opposition. But I also believe that it's very important for people to speak out on behalf of what they care about. That's why I wrote this book. And so, for me, being able to talk about whether it's health care for children, or other issues affecting children's well-being is as natural to me as getting up in the morning. And if it causes controversy, then I guess that's just part of the price you pay in public life these days.

Q Do you think it's a piece of this whole thing?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know. But I think that it's possible that on the part of some people it could be.

Q Before we leave the whole issue of testifying which has become the subject of some enormous speculation, some people look at this -- some -- (inaudible) -- on the TV yesterday, on the Sunday show said that you ought to testify because you're very poised, you're very confident, you speak so well, that you would -- I don't want to use the word "win," because it's not -- but you would -- it would be a very effective forum for you before the Whitewater Committee, in the same way that Oliver North was very good when he testified before the Iran-Contra, or Anita Hill's testimony seemed so effective to many when she was testifying before the committee. What do you think about that, when you think about the pros and cons of considering such a forum?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think it would be like going to have your teeth drilled. (Laughter.) I can't imagine how it could be anything but an ordeal, especially because unlike other instances, apparently there's no ground rules or solid ground for the basis of questions. They dig so many dry holes that they keep digging more and my entire life is apparently fair game -- things that I can't ever even remember half the time.

So I don't think that it's some kind of game. I think this is very serious business and I think it's very sad that there have been more than 40 hearings on Whitewater and one on the Republicans' plan for Medicare. I don't think those priorities are appropriate. So I see this as very serious, I take it seriously, and I will continue to do what I can to get it resolved.

Q That would be -- the getting the teeth drilled would be the down side in going to testify, the fact that it is -- it's a political form, not a legal form so there's sort of no rules that you can count on. What would be the -- why then would you consider doing it? What would be the pros?

MRS. CLINTON: I'm not considering it or not considering it. I mean, it's just one of those things that people ask me about and I don't have an answer other than the one I've given you -- that I'm just going to continue to do whatever I can to get it resolved, and that along with every other possible route to try to get this matter wrapped up is going to be looked at.

Q Is there another way to go about it? A press conference, or is there another way to go about answering every question and so on?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think if we can ever get to a point where all the questions are out there, as opposed to trying the best I can to answer questions -- like at the press conference nearly two years ago I did the very best I could to answer questions. And then two years later I'm being told, well, that I didn't answer the question that I should have answered even though it wasn't asked. If we can ever get to a point where everybody's questions are out there, then I think the American people will know what the answers are in whatever forum that takes, or whether it just takes going down issue by issue, resolving it, whether it's through RTC reports or special counsel actions -- whatever it is, it will get resolved.

But it's very difficult when you think that you have done the best you can to answer questions and, in fact, your answers have remained the same, even though you couldn't answer every sub-category of the question, and then they shift ground. They say, that's not what we meant to ask you, here's what we meant to ask you. And so, let's just let this thing play out for a while and see where it leads.

Q Just one last question. David Kendall, on one of the shows yesterday, said that it was not clear whether the congressional committee had the power to compel you to testify. And I was wondering, is it possible that down the road you could see this -- (inaudible) -- this would not happen?

MRS. CLINTON: No, I mean, I don't -- again, I don't want to speculate. But we have cooperated, we have turned over 50,000 pages of documents. We will continue to cooperate.

Q One of the interesting things you said in the interview this morning with Diane Ream was that one way that -- how the Travelgate controversy possibly has developed is because you say you state your mind and aides interpret this as an order when you didn't intend it that way. Tell me about that. Do you think that's what has actually happened here with the Watkins's memo?

MRS. CLINTON: As to that particular instance, I don't know. I will have to let David speak for himself. But if you read the memo, he does not say that I told him to do anything, which is certainly my distinct memory of my involvement, which was to express concern about the reports of financial mismanagement. But he paints a picture of people, second, third and fourth hand, conveying my concern, which then was taken in his mind, apparently, according to this memo, to be not just a statement of concern, but something more.

So I thought a lot about this because I try as hard as I can to understand how things happen a certain way, and I do believe that in the first months -- and year, probably -- of being in the White House I had a lot to learn. I had never lived in Washington. I had never been part of the Washington political scene. And it's like moving into any new job, office, workplace, neighborhood -- there are expectations and mores built into the environment. And up until that point -- I had worked ever since I was 13, I've been in many different work environments, and I've always been an independent person. And if I expressed an opinion, say, when I was on one of the boards of directors I served on both in the corporate world and the

not-for-profit world, and I had said something like, you know, "I heard about some reports of financial mismanagement in our operation down there; we ought to look at that; that should be taken seriously, don't you think," nobody would have thought of that as an order or a direction. I certainly wouldn't have. I didn't have any authority to make such a direction to anybody.

I carried those same habits with me into the White House, so that I was very direct with people -- that's the way I'd always been -- stated my opinions, did not make decisions on 99.9 percent of things that I had opinions about because I had my own direct realm of operations. I might make a decision about what we're going to serve at the state dinner, but not other things.

But I now realize -- and this may sound naive, but if you have a long history of working and you've done so as an independent person, to all of a sudden find that the habits of a lifetime might be viewed differently, I think there's probably something to that. So that it's not just Hillary Clinton saying, hey, guys, I hear there's financial mismanagement in the Travel Office, this sounds like something that should be looked into, it's the wife of the President saying it. So maybe that's what he means by what he wrote in that memo.

I can only speak about what I did and who I spoke with. And I know that I did not direct anybody to go off and fire anybody. I didn't have the knowledge, I didn't have the authority. But I did express concern. And I think anyone who had heard about it and didn't express concern probably would have been asleep at the switch.

Q Did you express concern not only about the financial dealings of the Travel Office, but also the "we want to get those people out and get our people in" --

MRS. CLINTON: I don't remember that. And I've been consistent about that. But again, this was -- my entire involvement in this was limited to a few conversations on two days. The decision that was made later to replace the workers in that office was made days after my last comment about it to anybody. So I don't think there's a cause and effect here. There may be some atmospheric things that are out there. But it's like my husband one time made a passing comment that he liked bananas, and then, all of a sudden, everywhere he went, in the White House or on the road, there were bunches of bananas everywhere.

My favorite story about this, that this really started becoming clear to me when we went to France for the state dinner that the Mitterrands gave for us. Were you on that trip?

Q No.

MRS. CLINTON: And I had a meeting with Mrs. Mitterrand earlier that day. And we talked about many of her concerns. She is a very active human rights advocate. And at the end of the conversation she said, I must apologize for our dinner tonight. The tables are very bear because I know that you did not want any flowers. I said, what do you mean? She said, oh, we have been told that you forbid flowers at public events where your husband will be. I said, I've never done that, Madam. And she said, oh, yes, we know that he has allergies and you are very strict about what he can have around him.

I said, who told you this? And it was 18th hand that this message came across. So, of course, I said to her, is it too late to get flowers -- we have flowers in the White House. Please have flowers at the state dinner. At the Elysee Palace I can't imagine not having flowers.

So you just have to be aware that people might think of things that you don't at all intend.

Q On both these controversies -- Travelgate and Whitewater -- there was some sense that they were running out of steam and that they've gotten a new life because of latest discovery of the documents. And I was wondering if you are satisfied or if you've gotten a full explanation as to why the billing records had not been found in previous efforts to search for documents.

MRS. CLINTON: I totally removed myself from any search whatsoever so that no one could ever suggest that it had not been done as fully as it needed. So I did not conduct any searches. Everything was turned over to my lawyers and the White House lawyers. They, with people that they delegated as their agents, have searched diligently, and they have really tried. And the only explanation that makes any sense to me is that, with as many boxes and file cabinets and stacks of documents, plus computers and everything else that we have here in the White House, it's not inconceivable at all that something could be overlooked.

I think the more remarkable story is how we keep turning everything over once we find it. There is absolutely no desire on the part of anyone in the White House to keep any document that should be appropriately turned over to any of the investigators.

I was personally, except for the timing, delighted that the billing records had been found. I mean, I wish they'd been found two years ago, or at least six months ago, so that they wouldn't have overshadowed my book tour, because what I'd rather be talking about with you and everybody else is what I think we ought to do for America's children.

Q What is your understanding of why, after not being found for sometime, this document was found?

MRS. CLINTON: I don't know. I have no answer to that. And the people who have worked with the lawyers are going to be doing their best to figure that out. But I have no firsthand knowledge of that.

Q Or any explanation?

MRS. CLINTON: No, other than what I said to you about the situation with so many documents to be looked through.

Q When you think about the motives of those who are pursuing these investigations, I wonder if you think that Senator D'Amato, who is very close to Senator Dole and is the national cochairman of his campaign -- if Senator D'Amato may be acting in league with Senator Dole to keep this issue alive.

MRS. CLINTON: I don't have any opinion about that.

Q You have this wonderful nursery rhyme in the book -- (laughter.) I wonder if, when you think about the fact that you've been dogged by these issues now, if it is totally at the behest of some big, ugly man, -- (laughter) -- or whether in some ways you brought it on yourself.

MRS. CLINTON: I think that I have to bear certainly some of the responsibility. I wish I could have had every answer anybody ever asked me, starting in 1992, I think I have a pretty good memory. But I am not a total recall whiz, especially about events that were not very meaningful or important to me at the time. And so I have struggled to try to get the answers that people have asked me, and try to dredge up information.

Maybe if I had stopped my entire life in the middle of a presidential campaign, or moving a family to Washington, or the other things that we've done in the last three years, I could have been better equipped to answer questions. But I think the facts have shown that we didn't have access to a lot of the information that people wanted. So it took the RTC investigation to have subpoena power, for example, to answer all the questions.

But I'm sure there are things that I could have done that would have made the expeditedness or gotten more information to answer the questions. But I think the important thing is that everything we've said has been proven. You can take a different slice at it and ask it a different way, but eventually, the bottom line is that we lost money in a real estate deal, we did not get any money from a savings and loan channeled to us in any way. I did a minor amount of work for an S&L; there was no improper influence of any kind exercised by my law firm on the securities commission. And we keep going over the same ground, but the basic truth of what happened does not change.

So, of course, I wish that I could wave a magic wand and go back in time, knowing what I know now, and try to do a better job in answering people's questions and pointing out to them why I couldn't have complete answers to things. But some of it is just like -- I mean, I feel that nursery rhyme, "As I Was Standing In The Street, certainly, here I am looking forward to this book tour and these documents show up out of nowhere. It was just the possible worst timing for me. I mean, there are so many things I want to talk about and I can't answer your questions about those. I don't know where they were, but all I know is that people were acting in good faith and now they're out. And so we go from there.

Q Do you think the origin of much of the trouble may have been that there was an effort to avoid having things that might have been embarrassing like the perception that you wanted the people in the Travel Office fired, and there was an effort to minimize that at the time, and then it becomes guilty looking even if there's no original crime?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't know the answer to that because I think there are perfectly understandable explanations to everything. And if you look at the Travel Office, what's really important about that? What's important about it is that there was financial mismanagement, it was proven by a Big Six accounting firm, action was taken by the White House, and then, unlike many other White Houses, this White House conducted its own inquiry into what it had done right and what it could have done better. People were reprimanded. But the fact is that the financial mismanagement was cleaned up and the White House Travel Office is now operating according to appropriate accounting standards.

So we are the first to admit, having come into Washington without much experience IN everything that we, in retrospect, would have benefitted from knowing, that we made mistakes. But those were mistakes that were innocent mistakes in the sense that people were struggling to do the right thing. And in the bigger picture, the right thing was to clean up the financial mismanagement in the White House, which was done.

So -- could people -- I mean, if we had had more experience, yes, I'm sure we could have avoided mistakes. But I think it's the nature of this place, that it's such a high pressure place, there's so much going on, that even people that are doing their very best, that act appropriately, they're going to do something that might be perceived as not the smartest thing, or why did you do it that way, you could have done it another way. That's part of the learning process that -- I can only speak for myself --

that I certainly have gone through in watching all this from the inside.

It's a lot harder than it looks when you're on the outside looking in to make sure that you think of every possible thing that anybody might in the future ask you about, and try to always anticipate how to do what you believe is right, but to do it in a way that is not only right, but is perceived as being right, as well.

Q You've been respected for years as a political strategist, and I wonder what you think the political impact is of these kind of proceedings.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think, as I've said, that the American public is fundamentally fair, and that when the facts are out and it all sifts down, that what will be important to people this year is the job that the President has done. And I certainly hope that's how evaluate him, what he's done for the economy, and all these other issues that are important in people's lives. But that's what this election will be about.

Q Do you think this will be important factor in the election?

MRS. CLINTON: No, but I think that -- it will be an issue, but I think, ultimately, what matters is whether people think that the country is going in the right direction under the President's leadership here and abroad. And I think the answer to that is yes.

Q What's been the personal impact of these controversies on you?

MRS. CLINTON: It is hard to see people that you care about being questioned, harassed. So it makes me sad a lot of the time when I see this done. Sometimes it makes me angry and a little frustrated -- very difficult to kind of keep the whole matter in the proper context. But it goes with the territory. This is part of what's happened in American politics in the last several years. And so, along with the hard days and the challenges that we face, there are a lot of other good things that make you know that this is worth doing despite some of the difficulties.

So I kind of keep in balance over time. In fact, my book -- being able to write this book and hoping to be able to talk about it and to bring hope to people who don't see that we can actually solve our problems -- but I do see because I've got a broader view from here in the White House than a lot of people do. And I see that every problem that American families face has been solved somewhere in America. That's really important to me. So I like thinking about trying to help people.

The proceeds from this book are going to go to Children's Hospital. And that makes me feel like maybe I can help some of the kids whose parents are on -- fallen on hard times and they don't have the resources. So all of that is worth it.

Q When you get sad or angry or frustrated, what do you do to cope?

MRS. CLINTON: Try to have some fun, spend time with my family, with my friends. In the book I write a lot about how 1993 was a really, really hard year. It started off on such an enormous high with Bill's inauguration. And then shortly after that my father's illness and his death, and then Vince Foster's suicide, and my mother-in-law's deteriorating physical condition until her death shortly after the first of that year -- 1994. So it was a very trying year in every respect.

And I write about how my father used to say, whenever we faced a difficulty, "How are you going to dig yourself out of this one?" And I'm so grateful to both him and my mother for equipping me with what I call (inaudible), a strong sense of self-discipline, a lot of love and guidance from them, religious upbringing, a love of reading and learning to see how other people dealt with problems that they've face. So particularly during '93, but certainly ever since then as well, I have fallen back on my family, my friends. I have read a lot about what people have gone through.

In the book I write about this wonderful phrase that I've adopted, "the discipline of gratitude." So that no matter what happens to you, to remember that -- certainly, my husband and I are very lucky. And every life has difficulty, but if you have some sense of the real sanctity of the human experience, that it is so much bigger than we are, and to have some spiritual respect for your own life, some idea that you have obligations to other people. There's always something to be grateful for no matter how many great big ugly men tie their horses to you. I mean, that's kind of how I see my life.

Q I just want to ask one last question. In 1992 I interviewed you just before the New York primary and you said then that the controversies over -- the various controversies you were facing at that point, that whenever Bill starts to break through and make connections with people and get up a head of steam, then opponents fuel furors about things like this, controversies that are not, in your perspective, important, to derail that. Do you think that is still the dynamic that is at work here?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, it's not the total dynamic. I mean, not finding those documents is not anybody else's fault. That's the fault of the White House, and we take responsibility for that. But there is a pattern of -- if you go back and look over the last four years -- just constant issues being raised and all that. But I guess I've gotten used to it. I don't see it in quite the stark way I did in the beginning when I was sort of bewildered by the onslaught that we confronted. Now I just see it as part of the price and just keep going.

Q Well, I very much appreciate it.

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, sure.

END