

INTERVIEWS DONE BY
FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
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NBC Today Show

Aired on JANUARY 27, 1998

Interview with HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

LAUER: On ``Close Up'' this morning, the first lady of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton. Mrs. Clinton, good morning.

CLINTON: Good morning, Matt.

Matt, before we get into your questions, I just want to express again, Bill's and my condolences to Katie and her children and Jay's entire family. And I know that everybody who watches this show feels as we all do. We're with her and want to help her in any way.

LAUER: And I spent some time with her yesterday, and I know she appreciated your call. Thank you very much.

We appreciate you being here. This interview had been scheduled several weeks ago to talk about the subject of child care, which we will talk about this morning.

CLINTON: Right. Yes.

LAUER: But we appreciate you honoring the commitment, even in light of recent events. So thank you very much.

There has been one question on the minds of people in this country, Mrs. Clinton, lately, and that is what is the exact nature of the relationship between your husband and Monica Lewinsky. Has he described that relationship in detail to you?

CLINTON: Well, we've talked at great length, and I think as this matter unfolds, the entire country will have more information. But we're right in the middle of a rather vigorous feeding frenzy right now. And people are saying all kinds of things, and putting out rumor and innuendo. And I have learned over the last many years, being involved in politics, and especially since my husband first started running for president, that the best thing to do in these cases is just to be patient, take a deep breath and the truth will come out. But there's nothing we can do to fight this fire storm of allegations that are out there.

LAUER: But he has described to the American people what this relationship was not in his words.

CLINTON: Right.

LAUER: Has he described to you what it was?

CLINTON: Yes. And we'll find that out as time goes by, Matt.

But I think the important thing now is to stand as firmly as I can and say that, you know, the president has denied these allegations on all counts, unequivocally. And we'll see how this plays out.

I guess everybody says to me, how can you be so calm? Or how can you just, you know, look like you're not up set? And I guess I've just been through it so many times.

I mean, Bill and I have been accused of everything, including murder, by some of the very same people who are behind these allegations. So from my perspective, this is part of the continuing political campaign against my husband.

LAUER: To the best of your knowledge, Mrs. Clinton, has your husband ever given or received gifts from or to Monica Lewinsky?

CLINTON: I'm not going to comment on any specific allegation, because I've

learned we need to put all of this into context. And it will be put into context. And anyone who knows my husband knows that

he is an extremely generous person to people he knows, to strangers, to anybody who is around him. And I think that, you know, his behavior, his treatment of people will certainly explain all of this.

LAUER: When you say he's a generous person, so it is possible that he has given gifts to Monica Lewinsky?

CLINTON: I think it's possible, of course, because if you know my husband, you know that he is somebody who will, you know, say, how would you like this. I mean, I've seen him take his tie off and hand it to somebody.

LAUER: So that wouldn't be a behavior that would be unusual for him dealing with an intern at the White House?

CLINTON: Dealing with anybody, Matt. I mean, seriously, I have known my husband for more than 25 years, and we've been married for 22 years. And the one thing I always kid him about is that he never meets a stranger. He is kind. He is friendly. He tries to help people who need help, who ask for help.

So I think that everybody ought to just stop a minute here and think about what we're doing. And it's not just what we're doing in terms of making these accusations against my husband. But I'm very concerned about the tactics being used and the kind of intense political agenda at work here.

LAUER: I want to talk about Kenneth Starr in a second. Before I get to him, let me just ask you, do you know Monica Lewinsky?

CLINTON: No.

LAUER: You've never met her?

CLINTON: I may have. You know, there are hundreds and hundreds of young people who serve as interns, and we have big events for them. We take pictures with them. But unless they work directly in my office, I'm not likely to meet them.

LAUER: Did Evelyn Lieberman, the former deputy chief of staff, or any other White House staffers, Mrs. Clinton, ever come to you and say, we may have a problem with one of the interns at the White House, and mention Monica Lewinsky by name?

CLINTON: No, that never happened.

LAUER: So these charges came as big a shock to you as anyone?

CLINTON: And to my husband. I mean, he woke me up Wednesday morning and said, you're not going to believe this, but -- and I said, ``What is this?" So yes, it came as a very big surprise.

LAUER: When he said ``but," he said ``but" what?

CLINTON: But I want to tell you what's in the newspapers.

LAUER: I think the part of this that makes certain people across the country uneasy is that we have a 21-year-old intern at the White House who moves to the Pentagon, who then gets a job interview at the UN with Bill Richardson himself. And then a very dear friend of your husband, Vernon Jordan, recommends her for two jobs in this city here in New York and then drives her personally to a lawyer's office when she's subpoenaed by Kenneth Starr.

Does it not appear, though, that this intern had more clout in Washington than most others do?

CLINTON: I don't know the circumstances of any of that, Matt. I think that -- you know, I just can't describe to you how outgoing and friendly Vernon Jordan is. I mean, when he stood up and said what I believe to be the absolute truth, that he has helped literally hundreds of people -- and it doesn't matter who they are. And if he were asked to help somebody, he would help that person. I've seen him do it countless times.

So I guess I know the people involved. I know them personally. I know them

well. I've known Vernon longer than I've known my husband.

LAUER: So when people say there's a lot of smoke here, your message is where there's smoke...

CLINTON: There isn't any fire, because think of what we've been through for the last six years and think of everything we've been accused of. And you know, initially, when this first started, and I would be accused of something or my husband would be accused of

something, I would be really upset. And I would want to rush out, and I'd say, that's not true. And then somebody would nit pick and say, well, what about this? I would say, well, I hadn't thought about that. And then I'd rush around, I'd say, well, that's not true.

LAUER: Are you saying that you no longer -- this doesn't upset you anymore? You're almost numb to it?

CLINTON: It's not being numb so much as just being very experienced in the unfortunate, mean-spirited give-and-take of American politics right now. So having seen so many of these accusations come and go, having seen people profit, you know, like Jerry Falwell, with videos, accusing my husband of murder, of drug running, seeing some of the things that are written and said about him, my attitude is, you know, we've been there before, we have seen this before. And I am just going to wait patiently until the truth comes out.

LAUER: So if what you have heard is something you can believe and if what the president has told the nation is the whole truth and nothing but the truth, then you'd have to agree that this is the worst and most damaging smear of the 20th century?

CLINTON: Well, I don't know. There have been a lot of smears in the 20th century. But it's a pretty bad one.

LAUER: Pretty devastating.

CLINTON: Well, just think about it, and this is what concerns me: This started out as an investigation of a failed land deal. I told everybody in 1992, we lost money. People said, it's not true. You know, they made money. They have money in a Swiss bank account.

Well, it was true. It's taken years, but it was true. We get a politically motivated prosecutor who is allied with the right-wing opponents of my husband, who has literally spent four years looking at every telephone...

LAUER: And thirty million dollars.

CLINTON: More than that now. But looking at every telephone call we've made, every check we've ever written, scratching for dirt, intimidating witnesses, doing everything possible to try to make some kind of accusation against my husband.

LAUER: We're talking about Kenneth Starr, so let's use his name, because he is the independent counsel.

CLINTON: Well, we're talking about -- but it's the whole operation. It's not just one person. It's an entire operation.

LAUER: Did he go outside his rights, in your opinion, to expand this investigation? After all, he got permission to expand the investigation from a three-judge panel?

CLINTON: The same three-judge panel that removed Robert Fisk and appointed him, the same three-judge panel that is headed by someone who was appointed by Jesse Helms and Lauch Faircloth.

LAUER: Also Janet Reno approved this expansion of an investigation?

CLINTON: Well, of course, she is, because she doesn't want to appear as though she's interfering with the investigation.

I don't -- look, I'm not going to take all that on, because I've learned that we just have to ride this out. It's just a very unfortunate turn of events

that we are using the criminal justice system to try to achieve political ends in this country.

And you know, when I'm here today, I'm not only here because I love and believe my husband. I'm also here because I love and believe in my country. And if I were just a citizen out there, maybe because I know about the law and I have some idea of some of the motivations here, I would be very disturbed by this turn of events.

LAUER: When -- the last time we visited a subject like this involving your family was 1992, and the name Gennifer Flowers was in the news. And you said at that time in an interview a very famous quote, ``I'm not some Tammy Wynette standing by my man."

In the same interview your husband admitted that he had, quote, ``caused pain in your marriage." Six years later you are still standing by this man, your husband, through some difficult charges.

If he were to be asked today, Mrs. Clinton, do you think he would admit that he again has caused pain in this marriage?

CLINTON: No, absolutely not. And he shouldn't.

You know, we've been married for 22 years, Matt. And I have learned a long time ago that the only people who count in any marriage are the two that are in it.

We know everything there is to know about each other, and we understand and accept and love each other. And I just think that a lot of this is deliberately designed to sensationalize charges against my husband, because everything else they've tried has failed. And I also believe that it's part of an effort, very frankly, to undo the results of two elections.

LAUER: Let me talk about your role. There have been reports that you've taken charge at the White House and decided to be the chief defender of your husband, of the president, and deflect these charges. How much of a role are you taking in this and do you think you should take?

CLINTON: Well, I certainly am going to defend my husband. And I'm certainly going to offer advice. But I am by no means running any kind of strategy or being his chief defender. He's got very capable lawyers and very capable people inside the White House, and a lot of very good friends outside the White House.

LAUER: But you're probably the most credible defender of the president at this time?

CLINTON: Well, I probably know him better than anybody alive in the world. So I would hope I'd be the most credible defender.

LAUER: James Carville, who you know...

CLINTON: Great human being...

(LAUGHTER)

LAUER: I'm sure you like him, especially at this time. He has said this is war between the president and Kenneth Starr.

You have said, I understand, to some close friends that this is the last great battle and that one side or the other is going down here.

CLINTON: Well, I don't know if I've been that dramatic. That would sound like a good line from a movie. But I do believe that this is a battle.

I mean, look at the very people who are involved in this. They have popped up in other settings.

This is -- the great story here for anybody willing to find it and write about it and explain it is this vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president. A few journalists have kind of caught on to it and explained it. But it has not yet been fully revealed to the American public. And actually, you know, in a

bizarre sort of way, this may do it.

LAUER: Has your husband, though, through some of his actions possibly made it easier for those people to attack him?

CLINTON: You know, Matt, that's a tough question, because I can remember in Bill's very first race in 1974, there was a great effort against him then. One of the funniest things that ever happened, although at the time it wasn't funny, is that the people who were against him claim he had been up in a tree demonstrating against President Nixon during a Texas-Arkansas football game in 1969. It didn't matter that he was in England at the very day listening to the game on short-wave radio.

They took a picture out of a newspaper. They cut the head off the man who was in the tree. They put Bill Clinton's head on it. They printed thousands of them. They passed them out in every country church and every country store so you had hundreds and thousands of people believing this.

Now, I have to say, I don't know what it is about my husband that generates such hostility, but I have seen it for 25 years.

LAUER: Let me take you and your husband out of this for a second. Bill and Hillary Clinton aren't involved in this story. If an American president had an adulterous liaison in the White House and lied to cover it up, should the American people ask for his resignation?

CLINTON: Well, they should certainly be concerned about it.

LAUER: Should they ask for his resignation?

CLINTON: Well, I think that -- if all that were proven true, I think that would be a very serious offense. That is not going to be proven true. I think we're going to find some other things. And I think that when all of this is put into context, and we really look at the people involved here, look at their motivations and look at their backgrounds, look at their past behavior, some folks are going to have a lot to answer for.

LAUER: One more subject before I get to child care. I've talked to a lot of people about this story. It's certainly a topic of conversation...

CLINTON: It's a big story. I know, I know.

LAUER: One of the comments I hear a lot, Mrs. Clinton, is how's Chelsea handling this. It's not easy being a freshman in college, anyway. How's she doing?

CLINTON: Right. Well, she's all right. And I really want to thank people for just letting her continue to be a freshman, because any time accusations of any kind, but especially like this, with such publicity around the world, are made, it really does affect your whole family. I mean, it's not only my daughter. It's my mother. It's Bill's stepfather. It's our brothers, our sisters-in-law. It's all of us.

LAUER: How often do you talk to Chelsea about it, or have you?

CLINTON: We've talked a lot. Both Bill and I have talked a lot.

LAUER: Does she offer any advice to you? It's usually the other way around. But has she offered you any advice?

CLINTON: Not advice so much, but, you know, since she was 6-years-old, I have know, both because -- I think my husband's personality and his kind of gregariousness and his -- as well as his political ideas really do engender very deep hostility.

So I was telling Chelsea when she was a child that this is going to happen, and it's very unfortunate. I honestly wish if people had political differences, if you don't like his stand on something, fight it out on that. Don't try to destroy somebody personally.

So I have told her that this is the kind of things that would happen, and she has seen many, many examples of it in her very short life. So it's not a

pleasant experience, but it's given her sort of the grounding to be able to see what this is and get through it.

LAUER: Want to talk a little child care?

CLINTON: Yes, I'd like to talk about the State of the Union, and not only child care, which I'm very excited about, but also some of the possible programs for the millennium the president will be announcing tonight.

LAUER: Go ahead. I'll give you an opportunity.

CLINTON: Thank you.

Well, you know, the child care proposal has been, I think, well put out there, and we're getting a fabulous response from around the country. And you know, we had an announcement yesterday at the White House, and I was here in New York talking about it again yesterday. I think it's going to make a big difference in the lives of a lot working people. So I hope there is going to be support for that, and I have a sense that we're going to have bipartisan support.

LAUER: You talk about bipartisan -- I heard one critic say that this was more of a Republican plan than the one you first possibly talked about when you came to Washington five years ago. It deals with tax credits and grant blocks to the states, which takes some power away from the federal government. How do you respond to that?

CLINTON: Well, I think it's a good plan, and I have no problem in taking good Republican ideas and mixing them with good Democratic ideas to get good ideas for Americans. And I think that you'll see that some of the Republican members of the conference are coming up with some other ideas. And I hope that at the end of the day we'll have the best mix we can possibly have.

But I did want to mention one other thing about what the president will talk about tonight, and that is, you know, we are going to be celebrating the millennium and the turn of the century. And I've been working very hard with the president to come up with

a way we could honor the past and imagine the future, and I've learned in my studies a lot of what we value as Americans is in real disrepair, like the Star-Spangled Banner is in danger of disintegrating. And our constitution, our bill of rights have to be, you know, really better taken care of. And there are many examples of that around the country.

So we're going to launch a public-private partnership -- some money in the federal budget, but I hope raising some private money -- to go out and save these precious parts of our past.

LAUER: It's interesting in listening to you talk, though, when you deal with the allegations against the president you refer to him as your husband.

CLINTON: Right.

LAUER: And when you deal with issues in the State of the Union address, you talk and refer to him as "the president."

CLINTON: You know, this has been so hard for me, because, you know, I remember reading one time that when President Kennedy became president, even his brother said, I can no longer call you Jack. I have to call you Mr. President.

Well, obviously, I call my husband Bill, and I refer to him as my husband. But when he's acting in his official capacity, like he will tonight when he stands up and talks about where we are as a nation, I guess I feel that he's my president as well as my husband.

LAUER: Just a few seconds left.

Based on what you know now, five years after coming to Washington -- the personal attacks, the political attacks -- do you sit home at night and think it's worth it, it has been worth it?

CLINTON: I do, Matt. And I'll tell you why.

Obviously, I've thought a lot about that, because this has been a grueling ordeal, and it has required every bit of religious faith and spiritual resources Bill and I have. It has been an incredible personal challenge. But I think about it in two ways.

I believe the country is better off because my husband has been president. I think the economy, the crime rate, a lot of the social problems were finally addressed with a smart strategy. And we've seen the results.

Just yesterday in New York, I mean, in elevators, in a hotel, you know, waiters, other people came up to me, grabbed my hands, and said, you tell the president to stand firm, we need him, he is on our side. He is, he is on the side of the American people.

So when I balance what he's accomplished and the hope he's given to people and the way the economy has created opportunities for people against all of the challenges we've been through personally, it is worth it. Now, do I wish that we didn't live in a time where people were so malicious and evil-minded? Of course. But you know, that's human nature.

So you take the good with the bad, and the good has far, far outweighed any bad at all.

LAUER: Mrs. Clinton, we certainly appreciate your time and your candor this morning. Thank you very much.

CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you, Matt.

END

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