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BILL BILL CLINTON INTERVIEW  
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**BILL CLINTON**

**U.S. President**

**Interviewed by Hugh Sidey**

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Interview with Bill Clinton for

“The American President”

**Bill Clinton**

**42nd U.S. President**

00:00:11:00

HUGH SIDEY:

Mr. President let's start at the beginning. What was the most valuable experience in your life that helped prepare you for the presidency?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I think I would have to say, being governor for a dozen years – because it's an executive job, you have to get along with people who differ from you, you have to pass legislation through a legislature that may be contentious. You have to set an agenda, cast a vision and then try to lead the people toward it. – and yet it's

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smaller than the presidency. You don't have the Secret Service, you're not in the – a long way from most of your constituents, you're not as isolated. So, you have a feeling for the human impact of what you do. So, I think that in any given time that's very valuable experience for the presidency, and in this time I think it was especially important because of the moment in history where we are, you know, moving into this global information age and there is a lot of upheaval in the society and a lot of what we need in terms of reform of our systems, whether it was economic, or educational or welfare, is work that governors have been doing for quite a long while. So, I think my service as governor in the 1980's, starting in the late 1970's was very valuable.

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SIDEY:

What, just moving ahead briefly here. Was there one special moment when the enormity of being President hit you?

BILL CLINTON:

I could give a number of answers to that, I think, but you know I – the thing that springs to mind most readily was early in my term – my national security advisor and my military advisors came to me with evidence that – there was an attempt planned on President Bush's life –

HUGH SIDEY:

Ah, yes. I remember that.

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BILL CLINTON:

-- in the Middle East when he went back – after the Gulf War and that the evidence was conclusive that it had been ordered and supported by the Iraqi government. So, I took an appropriate retaliatory action against Iraq and the enormity of it struck me there because I knew it was something that had to be done. I did my best to have the targets against military operations that were involved in the plans against President Bush, and yet I knew that there could be mistakes and other people could die as well. It was a difficult but important moment, and I think from then on I had a – I really understood and felt what it was like to have the power that the Constitution and the people give to the person who holds this office.

HUGH SIDEY:

We have kind of book ends on that. Let's go back now and start where we were again and fill that out. There was a story about your second grade teacher. Did she really tell your mother that you would be president someday? And then add to that if you can? What was it in your early years that shaped your interest in politics? Is that a true story?

BILL CLINTON:

I don't know – I, you know – She's still around, my second grade teacher, you could ask her.

HUGH SIDEY:

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Ask her

00:03:48:00

BILL CLINTON:

She – She was always chiding me about talking too much in class, and I think that she said I would either have a great career in politics or wind up in a whole lot of trouble because I didn't know when to shut up. I think that's basically what she said, but– but... I think what shaped my early interest in politics were a couple of things. First of all, I was always, always interested in civil rights. And it was the defining political issue of my childhood, starting when I was quite young, you know, in the 50s. And I think the other thing that really had a lot to do with it was the fact that we got a television when I was 9 years old.

HUGH SIDEY:

I see.

BILL CLINTON:

See I was 9 before we ever had a television and I got to watch, in 1956, the Republican and Democratic conventions on television. I'm not sure how many 9 and 10 year old kids were watching it, but I watched it. You know, I watched the whole thing and – I was utterly fascinated by it and I think probably those two things, more than anything else, sparked my early interest.

HUGH SIDEY:

Did you watch that Kennedy move for the vice presidency?

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BILL CLINTON:

I did, I remember it.

SIDEY:

I wanted to tell you, you know I was in the Rose Garden when you met him

BILL CLINTON:

In '63?

HUGH SIDEY:

Oh, yes. I was covering out there and I remember when Boys Nation came and that picture has become so famous of you. What'd you feel?

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BILL CLINTON:

Oh, I was elated. I admired Kennedy a lot and I very much wanted him to be re-elected. And there was, at the time, there was a lot of support in our crowd, our group, for Goldwater.

HUGH SIDEY:

Oh, I see.

BILL CLINTON:

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Who later became a friend of mine and he recently had passed away as you know, but I felt very strongly that Kennedy was good for the country, that what he was doing was right, -- and I wanted him to be reelected and I believed in the fact that he was sticking up for civil rights. So that when I had a chance to meet him, I really wanted to and thankfully we were lined up in alphabetical order by state. So, I was from Arkansas and I also was bigger than most of the people around me so I sort of elbowed my way up to make sure that if he didn't shake hands with everyone, I'd get to shake hands with him. And since then, I believe every year since I've been president, I've met with the Boys Nation and the Girls Nation groups, and I've arranged it so that I could shake hands with all of them because I didn't want anyone to feel left out.

HUGH SIDEY:

Can't remember that when he shook your hand, you know, people tend to improve their memories but I can't remember it, but your concept that there was something special there is true. I fight this battle all the time when they say it was all myth and that there was something very special.

BILL CLINTON:

It was very special to me. It meant a great deal to me. I'm sure to him he was just having another interesting day as president, but for me it was quite important. It's not true, there's all this sort of myth that's grown up around it, you know, that I came back from there determined to be president. I don't know that that's true. But I did have, in that week I spent here, and this is something I feel very

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indebted to the American Legion for, I did have in that week, an enormous sense that the people who wound up in the Congress, the people who wound up in the cabinet, the people who wound up serving the president, you know, most of them were, were ordinary citizens who had a chance to do extraordinary things and –

00:07:05:00

BILL CLINTON:

So, when I went home I had the feeling that if I worked hard and prepared myself and I continued to care about these matters that I could have an impact. I did think that. And that was a gift I got out of that week.

HUGH SIDEY:

I see. What were the crucial lessons about life and politics that you learned from your mother? Can you boil that down to a couple, three?

BILL CLINTON:

Hmm – Oh, yeah I can boil it down easily. She – she taught me these things; never give up, never forget where you came from, and never lose your compassion for people who are less fortunate than you are.

HUGH SIDEY

That's pretty – that's engraved on your mind, you know that. I see. Now you were governor at age 32, that's awfully young.

BILL CLINTON:

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[laughing] Very young, maybe too young.

HUGH SIDEY:

Well, what was it like to be so successful in politics at that age?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I was thrilled you know because I had just – four years earlier I had actually lost a race. I ran for Congress in 1974 and was defeated and then in '76 I was attorney general, and I loved that job, but the vacancy occurred in the governor's race and I ran and I won, and it was exhilarating, I loved it, I had so much fun. I brought in all these smart people, and we went to work and we did a lot of things for the state and -- I just, I really – I loved doing it. Now, 1980 was a very difficult year and I was defeated for reelection, but it was also a hard year for my state. It was a bad year for the farmers, it was a bad year because we had the Cuban refugees from –

HUGH SIDEY:

Oh, yes –

BILL CLINTON:

Who rioted. We had all kinds of – we even had a missile silo explosion, a missile silo exploded and the warhead flew out in the cow pasture. So, about everything that could go wrong in my state, went wrong in 1980.

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HUGH SIDEY:

What about that '80 defeat though, how'd you steal yourself? What did you do?

BILL CLINTON:

I think it was – first of all, I think it was good for me. It's like every other adversity in life, if you do survive it, you normally come out ahead. I think what happened to me was that I tried to do – a great deal as governor and we had only two year terms then and I think I – I tried to do so much in so many areas and some things I did were unpopular and I didn't sell them before I did them or as I was doing them. And when you run every two years you have to make sure you do that. So, I think the people of my state had the opinion that I was a smart person who cared about them, but I was too bullheaded and I didn't listen to them enough. And I also believe that, frankly, I was – less mature than I am now. I think I didn't know as much about how to do things and how to deal with people. Particularly, under great adversity and particularly when difficult decisions had to be made that involved maybe moving people out of the positions they were in or things of that kind. So, I think that getting defeated – losing the election and then going out – back across my state – see I was very fortunate to be from a small rural state with a lot of small towns where people were very forthright for – 'cause what I did after the election, after a few months I went out across the state and I'd give a little talk somewhere and then afterward I'd go over to someone's house or meet in a high school gym and I'd ask people what I'd done wrong and they would tell me. [laughing] In great, stunning, brutal detail, in a good natured way. And -- So, I established, in a way, deeper bonds than I would have otherwise

because I went through the defeat, they told me what I'd done wrong, they then gave me a second chance to serve, and I think the service was – I know it was good for me and my family, I believe it was good for my state.

HUGH SIDEY:

There's a wonderful quote from out a year back, you once said, "The god that I believe in, is the god of second chances." Tell me a little more about that.

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BILL CLINTON:

Well its – it is a – first of all a statement of theology but also a statement of my philosophy of life. I think that – as a Christian, I believe in what the bible says that all people have sin and fallen short of god's glory, and the whole meaning of Christianity, what we are celebrating at Easter time, the time you and I are doing this interview, is the idea of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as an act of – of salvation, to give people a second chance. And I believe that life is a lot like that. That people should – make mistakes, but not be defeated by them. They should learn from them, they should acknowledge them and they should go on. And that the rest of us should always be willing to forgive other people's mistakes once acknowledged and – and once moved beyond. And, I have – I'm a living example of that. I mean, you know, I – in just pure political terms. I've lost two elections and the people of my state gave me another chance. I have made all kinds of mistakes in my life, but I tried to keep going and the people that I love and the people within my work, the people from who I learn, they gave me a second chance, and I think if we think about life as getting second chances, as

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long as you learn from your mistakes and you at least don't try to make the same ones again, you try to make new mistakes. I think it's a helpful way to look at life and so I do believe in a god of second chances.

HUGH SIDEY:

Mr. President, you're the ninth President I've covered and I've talked to all of them a little bit about religion and everyone of them, the experience has intensified as they've been in this office.

BILL CLINTON:

Absolutely.

HUGH SIDEY:

Has that happened to you?

BILL CLINTON:

Absolutely. I spent far more time in these last years since I've been president – reading the Bible – discussing religion and matters of faith with – theologians, with ministers, with ordinary citizens, than I ever have before in my life. I have devoted more time to it. I take – organize more time in my daily schedule for reflection, to read daily devotionals, to do things like that, than I ever did before. And – I think that when a person gets this office, you feel – always never quite adequate on your own horse power to do the work. No one is smart enough, or wise enough, or strong enough. Everyone will have a fair share of frailty and

disappointment, and I think it just deepens your sense of both the presence and the need of god.

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HUGH SIDEY:

When you ran in 1992, you said, “You may only be fit to be president when you are not obsessed with it.” Can you expand on that a little?

BILL CLINTON:

Yes, I think that you – If you want to serve the people well, you should care a great deal about public opinion. Because you should want to be sensitive to how Americans feel, but the nature of the presidency requires –first of all the making of decisions, which may be quite unpopular in the moments and also requires a focus on the future, which will require a whole series of decisions which will go against the established grain of organized interest in your country. And if you’re totally obsessed with being president and totally obsessed with being elected -- it’s okay to be very interested in it, they’re not giving this job away, you gotta care about it. But if you’re totally obsessed with it, it may disable you from trying to look to the future and disable you from being willing to take on some of these organized interest groups. So, I really did feel that by 1992 because of various things that happened in my personal and work life, I was able to run with great passion, but with less obsession than would have been the case, for example, if I had been a candidate in 1988.

HUGH SIDEY:

I see. How did it feel the moment you realized that you won the election in November of 1992? Can you describe that a little?

BILL CLINTON:

Well I felt – At the one hand, I felt elated. I felt profound gratitude to the American people, but there was a little bit of me that felt like the dog that was chasing the pickup, you know, and finally caught it and said now what do I do, you know? I felt very— I felt very grateful and I was ecstatic and I was eager to get to work, but I was also humbled by it. I think, you know, any person who is not a little humbled by being given this responsibility, doesn't understand what he or she has got a hold of.

HUGH SIDNEY:

Now, describe a little when you first entered the White House as president. Where you first went, and perhaps what you thought as you really—

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BILL CLINTON:

Well, when I first came here to look around, you know, I was – I had only been upstairs at the White House, I think, twice before. Once under President Carter and once under President Bush I had come upstairs at the White House. But I had been downstairs many, many times as governor and – I re – I kind of wanted to get up here and look around and kind of get a feel for what, you know, kind of imagine what it would be like, but I have to tell you that even today after all these years as president, I still feel a sense of awe every time I come in this place. Every

time the helicopter lands on the back lawn. I feel the weight of history here. I go into every room and try to imagine and when I can know, I try to know what it is that has happened in this room over time that was most important and – So – Living in the White House has been a great blessing for me, and I think it's helped me to be a better president because I feel that I'm carrying on a continuous conversation with all my predecessors and with all the great dramas of American history, you know, I know what happened in the room that I use as my office up here. You know, and I've spent a lot of time in the –

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HUGH SIDNEY:

What did happen?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, that was the -- that's the room where Andrew Johnson moved the Office of the President after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and it was the principal office until 1902 when Theodore Roosevelt built the West Wing, but in 1898 the treaty ending the Spanish-American War was signed there on a table brought there by General Grant when he became president. And now for 100 years, every peace treaty has been signed there. So, I've been so involved in peace making in Ireland, and the Middle East, and the Balkans, and other places. To me to live – to work every night and on the weekends in a room called the Treaty Room, on a table now called the Treaty Table that Ulysses Grant brought here in 1869 is incredible to me. Even now it gives me a – just a great feeling.

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HUGH SIDEY:

Have you changed your mind about any of those, those presidents?

BILL CLINTON:

Quite a number of presidents I've changed my mind about, actually.

HUGH SIDEY:

As you have seen, felt it –

BILL CLINTON:

I think— I think the conventional wisdom about quite a number of our presidents is wrong. I think that Grant was a better president than most people believe he was. He had one corrupt problem – problem of corruption in the cabinet and he had one brother that tried to take advantage of him, but he basically was a better president than he got credit for and he was a phenomenal General. And – I think he basically gets the worse press than he deserves. He also wrote the best presidential memoirs ever written by a good long stretch. Rutherford Hayes is an interesting guy that's mostly dismissed in history that was actually made a pretty good president and I think – disabled himself by promising on the front end that he wouldn't run for re-election. So, normally when someone doesn't run for reelection, we don't think as much of them. Now, President Polk is normally thought of as a good president because of the territorial advances we made during his tenure. And he only served one term. But –

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BILL CLINTON:

But, I've gone back. I've read biographies of John Adams and John Quincy Adams. I reread Remini's famous biography of Abraham – I mean of Andrew Jackson and I've read about a lot of the lesser-known presidents, so my assessment of all of my predecessors is, to some extent, altered. But, mostly, ratcheting up some that are not as highly regarded as I think they should be.

HUGH SIDEY:

How hard is it to exercise presidential power in an era of divided government and intense partisanship?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I think that it requires a great deal more discipline and thought and a keen sense of timing, if by the exercise of power you mean implementing an agenda that the president has that may or may not be shared by a congress headed by the opposite party.

HUGH SIDEY:

Special interests or –

BILL CLINTON:

Plus, special interests may be against you. Plus, you may have – you have a media environment today that's much more competitive than ever before. You know, with many -- coming at you from many different sources and having to, in effect,



fill the news with every day, with new events. I would say that – it – clear communication with the public and with the congress is more important than ever before. Putting a specific proposal in terms of a larger vision is more important, and then I think that insi – if what you wish to do requires you to pass a bill through Congress, you either have to look for a moment where you can make a principal compromise on that bill, or you have to look for a moment, normally at the end of every year, when the congress wants to get out of town and has to pass budgets and you try to make an agreement then, so you do some of what they want so they'll do what you want. And normally, you have to have a strong sense of timing when that occurs and then a very clear sense of resolve when you have that moment because Congress normally won't give you anything unless they have to to get what they want. And so I – if the other party's in control.

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BILL CLINTON:

Now in addition to that, I strongly believe that presidents should not minimize the other tools of the presidency. The bully pulpit, the ability to make executive orders that can achieve many of your objectives, and the ability to enlist others, not in the Federal Government, in partnership. For example, one of the most important things we've done since I signed the Welfare Reform Act in 1996, was to – is to enlist literally thousands of companies in a partnership with us to hire people from welfare to work. So, there are lots of things you can do that don't directly require that Congress is assent. Clearly in foreign policy, but in other areas as well. And I think that if you invest time with the congress and try to

establish some kind of report you can at least get some things done even with your philosophical adversary.

SIDEY:

Did the end of the Cold War really intensify this whole partisanship business?

BILL CLINTON:

Oh, I think it might have. I think the – Although, you know, we had some pretty partisan times. I remember, I don't remember, but I've read. I just read this new biography of Dean Acheson about how, you know, there were people in the congress who treated first, Acheson and Truman and later even Eisenhower and Acheson and General Marshall as if they were soft on Communism. So, there's always been periods of more intense partisanship followed by periods of lesser intensity, and I think what happened here was the — in our case, if you look at what happened, the parties sort of switched positions where the Democrats had had the majority in Congress for quite a long time and almost never had the presidency. So, then I got the presidency and then the Republicans got the congress, but they thought there never really would be a Democratic president, I believe. I think they thought it would take a third term – third party to get, to get the presidency and I think that those circumstances plus the divergence in our agendas on the domestic level led to – and maybe some other factors as well – led to a more intense level of partisanship than you would normally see. And – something I'm not used to, didn't

cultivate, don't believe in, and would like to see diminished. I think maybe it will diminish now.

HUGH SIDNEY:

1998 was a difficult year for you Mr. President, both professionally and personally. During the impeachment process the issue of character was raised. A hard one to define by anybody's measure, but—from your old experience how important is that issue of character for a President.

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BILL CLINTON:

I think it's very important. But I think a lot of the people who talk about it do so in ways that give it a very limited definition, normally for purposes that are quite self-serving. That is—most of the people I've known who've demonstrated great character didn't go around talking about it. Uh— Now— I made a personal mistake, which became a matter of public debate. Although the details were not really known or fully— or accurately important, that much was true and acknowledge— but I think the real question is how do you handle that kind of adversity? I tried to acknowledge my wrong doings—say that I was sorry about it. But I also have tried to demonstrate presidential character by standing up for the interest of the country and doing what I told the American people I would do when I ran for office.

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BILL CLINTON:

And being very strong when the interest of values of the American people were at stake. I will leave it to historians to judge whether I demonstrated that sort of character or not. I also tried to deal with this whole impeachment controversy in a way that showed genuine devotion to the constitution and the history of the country. I'll leave it to others to determine whether I did that. But—one of the most gratifying things, to me, that's happened in terms of an assessment of the administration was that, um—the distinguished student of the presidency wrote me—a few years ago now—and said that just a few years into my presidency, I had already kept a higher percentage of my campaign promises to the American people than five—my five predecessors, even though I had made more promises. I—I thought a lot about what I would do if I became president. I've tried to be faithful to the American people and I've tried to always put them first, and I hope that is a form of presidential character that counts for something. I also tried to think about the future and fight for that. But it is important that—I think it's important for us to remember that there is also a difference between character and reputation. And that under the guise of elevating character there are a large number of people in our country today that believe the way they can get what they want in life is by destroying someone else's reputation. None of us is ever a complete judge of another's character, only God can fully judge that.

HUGH SIDEY:

The American people spoke out loud and clear throughout 1998, you know that better than anybody.

BILL CLINTON:

They were very good to me.

HUGH SIDNEY:

[Chuckles]. Well what did you learn about the power of the people and the role the public plays in exercising political power from here?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I learned that—I learned several things in 1998, and I hope the American people did. I learned that – that—all over again the same lesson I learned as a child, that there are certain rules of human conduct that apply to all of us and when you make a mistake, whether you’re president or a great journalist, or anything else, you have to live with consequences of your actions whether they’re public or not. You always—we always pay—nobody gets out for free. The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing I learned is that the framers were smart, they designed the Constitution to prevent partisan passions from overriding common sense, and they turned out to be real smart. But the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing was that the American people almost always get it right if they have enough time and enough information. They have this uncanny sixth sense about kind of where things ought to be, and I think it’s –I’m very grateful to them for the way they made their views known. But I think there’s a 4<sup>th</sup> point that ought to be made about this, which is that the American people were saying something besides, “We don’t think the president should be impeached, and if you do impeach him we certainly don’t think you should convict him.” Overwhelming majority said that, but what they were also really saying was,

“Okay we know what happened to this guy, he said he made a mistake, he apologized to the American people. This is not what this whole impeachment thing is about and oh by the way, you people are working for us, we hired you to work for us, not to work on each other.” And I tried to remember that. So, I tried all during this whole process to let others make their judgments about me and the facts and everything.

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BILL CLINTON:

And to make others—let others make their defense of me. But that I would everyday—since I was the only president the country had, would get up and try to talk about things concerning the American people. You know, how are we going to improve education? How are we gonna save Social Security? How are we going to save Medicare? How are we going to keep the economy going? How are we going to be a force for peace in the world? That I would focus on these substantive issues and let the American people know that I thought I was up here as their representative, as their elected official, not just to defend myself or attack someone else.

HUGH SIDNEY:

Mr. President, how do you think the media has altered presidential power, this huge kind of communications industry that—

BILL CLINTON:

Well I think -- I think it's been -- first of all it has altered the nature of the presidency and how it relates to both the American people at large and the other players in this political problem, in ways that I think are good and bad. What are the good ways? The good ways are that the president now can instantaneously communicate with the whole country not just over television, but even over the internet. Not just in one way communications but two way communications, whether it's a C-SPAN call in or inviting people in the internet to write--email questions to you. So I think the pervasiveness and speed of communications is a great gift the media have given to the presidency because it enables you to take the American people into your confidence and to take them along on whatever journey the country has embarked on. I think there is some negative, one of which is that there is a -- with this proliferation of networks and programs you have increasing competition to fill the air waves with news whether for 24 hours even if there is only 24 minutes of news a day. Secondly, there is enormous pressure, since there's so much information to put in there, enormous pressure on journalists to keep saying new things and the people—you know 30 years younger than you, 40 years younger than you that are trying to come up in a different environment, they don't have the opportunity that you might have had to take a week to think about what column are you going to write that will distill all these things --

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BILL CLINTON:

-- you know into a considered opinion, that will help others, whether they agree with you or not, to focus their own thinking -- and come to a reasoned judgment. You don't have as much of that anymore. Instead of the people, like you now, reading your column, although there are still people who do these columns, you know you have people on these talk shows, and there's always somebody on the other side on the talk show and every day they're supposed to talk about something else so that the argument becomes more import -- the argument itself becomes more important than the weight of the argument and the power of the reasoning. And one of the things that I find is that people are hungry, both for information and for understanding. So that in a funny way I think that this explosion of information has made it even more important that we try to find some role on all these television networks and on all these new magazines, for people to do what -- and I'm not just saying this because you're sitting here, because --

HUGH SIDEY:

It's all right.

CLINTON:

I didn't always agree with what you wrote, but I mean, with what you did in your columns that is that the media needs not only just to bathe people in information, but it needs to give people some way of organizing the information and thinking about it and testing their own feeling against someone else's argument. And these -- Most of these daily political talk shows don't do that 'cause you know you got



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everybody's up there and they T up, one on this side and one on the other side, and they talk at each other, and by and large instead of having a conversation.

HUGH SIDEY:

Well a lot of it is show business, isn't it?

CLINTON:

Yea. Yea, and, and the people get that figured out and a lot of people do it and they're entertained by it. I'm not sure there's anything necessarily negative about it, but it doesn't advance the larger purposes of elevating the country's understanding of the issues and helping the president mobilize the people for civic purposes.

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HUGH SIDEY:

What do you want the historians to write about your presidency?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I hope they will say that I prepared our country and led it into a new century full of new challenges, and that I fulfilled the historic mission of every president to pursue, with energy, the expansion of opportunity and the deepening of the binds of our community to maintain the leadership of America for peace and freedom and prosperity. I hope they will say that – I was a person of new ideas, rooted in old values and we got great results. We gave the American people a great economy. We gave the American people new strategies, which mended the

social fabric by lowering crime and welfare. That we dealt with all these challenges, the aging of America, the balancing of work and family, the explosion of technology, and the need to universalize education more. I hope they will say that I was a good president for my time and that I met the challenge of the moment with energy and effectiveness, and that I helped to bring the American people together and move them forward.

HUGH SIDEY:

Given the increased restraints on the office, do you think that our Madisonian system of checks and balances is still working? And follow that up with where do you think the presidency is headed? Is it going to be more influential, a little more power? Or is it going to split up between the other groups?

BILL CLINTON:

Well, I think it will – I think that – the presidency can still be a place of great influence and power and it's still the central office in the country. Particularly, in times of adversity or crisis, but it can be in good times as well but it requires a greater deal of energy than – in other words, there's not an automatic difference to the presidency.

HUGH SIDEY:

Too many checks –

00:36:39:00

BILL CLINTON:

There's a lot of checks and – and not just in the Congress and not just when the Congress is of the opposite party, although that certainly complicates, but in the proliferation of press sources and the, the fact that we no longer have as big of percentage of the world wealth as we did and the end of the Cold War, all these things means that the – the energy level of the president and the degree to which the president has thought about what the real challenges facing the country are. What ought to be done about them and specifically what the president should do about them. This is more important than ever before because the president can still be very, very effective, but it requires more discipline and more care, and a real plan to do that. But I still think it's the greatest job in the world and I still think it's very, very important to the American people.

HUG SIDNEY:

Is it significant that you are the first member of the 60's generation to have gotten the Oval Office?

BILL CLINTON:

Yes.

HUGH SIDNEY:

It's a new world, is it not?

BILL CLINTON:

Yes. I think it's significant for several reasons. I think – first of all, whatever anyone wants to say about our generation, and we may get overly generalized about, because of the civil rights movement and because of the debate on the war in Vietnam, there is a sense of mission that most of us who grew up in the 60's feel as citizens. That is that it's not enough for us just to pursue our own private lives, that we have a larger obligation to our community and to our country. That includes people who are different from us. And that I think is a very good legacy of the 60's.

00:38:30:00

BILL CLINTON:

Secondly, I think it's important to realize that, that at least for me as a child of the 60s, I am the oldest of the baby boomers. I was born in '46 and the war ended in '45, so in a literal sense, those of us in my age group are the oldest of the baby boomers and that for the next 18 years, which more than takes in all the children of the 60's, we have this baby boom generation moving toward retirement in ways that will fundamentally alter America. And I think, -- I think we feel an enormous responsibility not to permit our retirement to lower the standard of living of our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren. So, those are the two things that I would say, domestically at least, are the biggest legacies of the 60's manifested in my presidency and my generation of people.

HUGH SIDEY:

What were the disadvantages of coming out of that age?

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BILL CLINTON:

Well, I think we tended to take our economic – for too long. I think we tended to take – we took our economic success and our social cohesion for granted and therefore thought that we could, perhaps, be more personally indulged in it because of some of the experimentation that went on in the 60's than anyone can be. I think that... that is true, that's a fair criticism of our generation and I think most of us have spent a fair number of years trying to make up for that and get over it.

HUGH SIDNEY:

How important has Mrs. Clinton been to your presidency? And tell me a little about your role here in the White House, in your words.

00:40:19:00

BILL CLINTON:

Well, she's been profoundly important to it, both to the work of the presidency and to the life that we shared here. But we have been, ever since we've been together, which will be 24 years of marriage this year, most everything we've done has been a partnership to a greater or lesser degree depending on what the issue was. But she's been profoundly important to what I've done. She has, first of all, become perhaps the most traveled First Lady in history. She's represented the United States around the world. She has done an enormous amount to make our policies reach ordinary real people in other countries too -- whether it was promoting the education of children or the economic empowerment of women, or standing up for human rights generally. Here at home she's had a great deal to do

with our family policies and our children's policies. Whether it was making adoption easier and dramatically increasing the opportunities for adoption and taking the barriers down, or trying to make healthcare more accessible, or trying to advance education, or pass family leave laws, or celebrate – and now her main project celebrating the millennium in a way that actually does both honor our history and throw our vision into the future. Something that she and I are totally obsessed by always. We always say, Americans should know more history and should think about the future more and be – see the present in its context and not just as the end all and be all. And so, you know, she's just done – she's got a lot of energy and she's got a, she's just I think made a huge contribution. She's – I can't say enough about it. And –it's made it a lot more fun, for me, you know, seeing her do these things and seeing that she's been good for our country and it's made our lives more interesting here.

HUGH SIDEY:

Do a little self-analysis, how's the presidency changed you?

00:42:32:00

BILL CLINTON:

I think it has taught me a great deal, even more than I knew when I got here, about the importance of focusing on the interest and values of the American people. Not just today, but over the long run. It has– it has reaffirmed the importance of concentrated, determined effort to advance the public interest that's one thing. The second thing it's done is, and I think that's why we've got the economy we've got and the other results, I think this administration has achieved a lot because we just

kept working at the plan we had. I think sometimes people believe that the presidency is just something where they have no, they just have to wait and see what happens and hope they react well, and it's really not all that different from a lot of other jobs, it really matters if you got a plan and you try and execute it and everybody shows up for work everyday and they worry more about their work than where somebody else is sitting at a table in a meeting or what someone else is saying about them in the morning paper. If they show up for work and work at it. But I think it's also really taught me the importance of being — personally generous and humble. I mean, I think that – you know, I've had to ask for forgiveness in a way that most people never do in public, although nearly everybody does in private at some point during a lifetime. But it has also taught me to be less aggravated at other people, less agitated, less upset about some criticism I get or some slight that I endure, some bad thing that's done. I think it's really— I've learned a lot about giving up the little things in life so you can focus on the big things and I don't— I think I learned it in a way I never would have if I hadn't been president. If I had only felt I was doing it for myself, I'm not sure I would have had the strength to learn these things, but knowing that I was doing it for the American people helped me, and I'm very grateful for that 'cause I think it's something I can carry with me for the rest of my life.

HUGH SIDEY:

Last question Mr. President. It's been great and we've kind of touched on this before, but is there one thing, you feel, you left a mark on the office of the president, just the presidency itself. Can you sum it up in a sentence or a phrase?

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0:45:15:00

BILL CLINTON:

Yea. I think, I believe... that the people will say, in history, that he took on the new challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The challenges brought on by globalization, by the explosion of technology, by the phenomenal increase in diversity of America, and he did it with great energy and a good result. That's what I hope they will say.

HUGH SIDNEY:

That sounds fine. Thank you.

END TC: 00:46:03