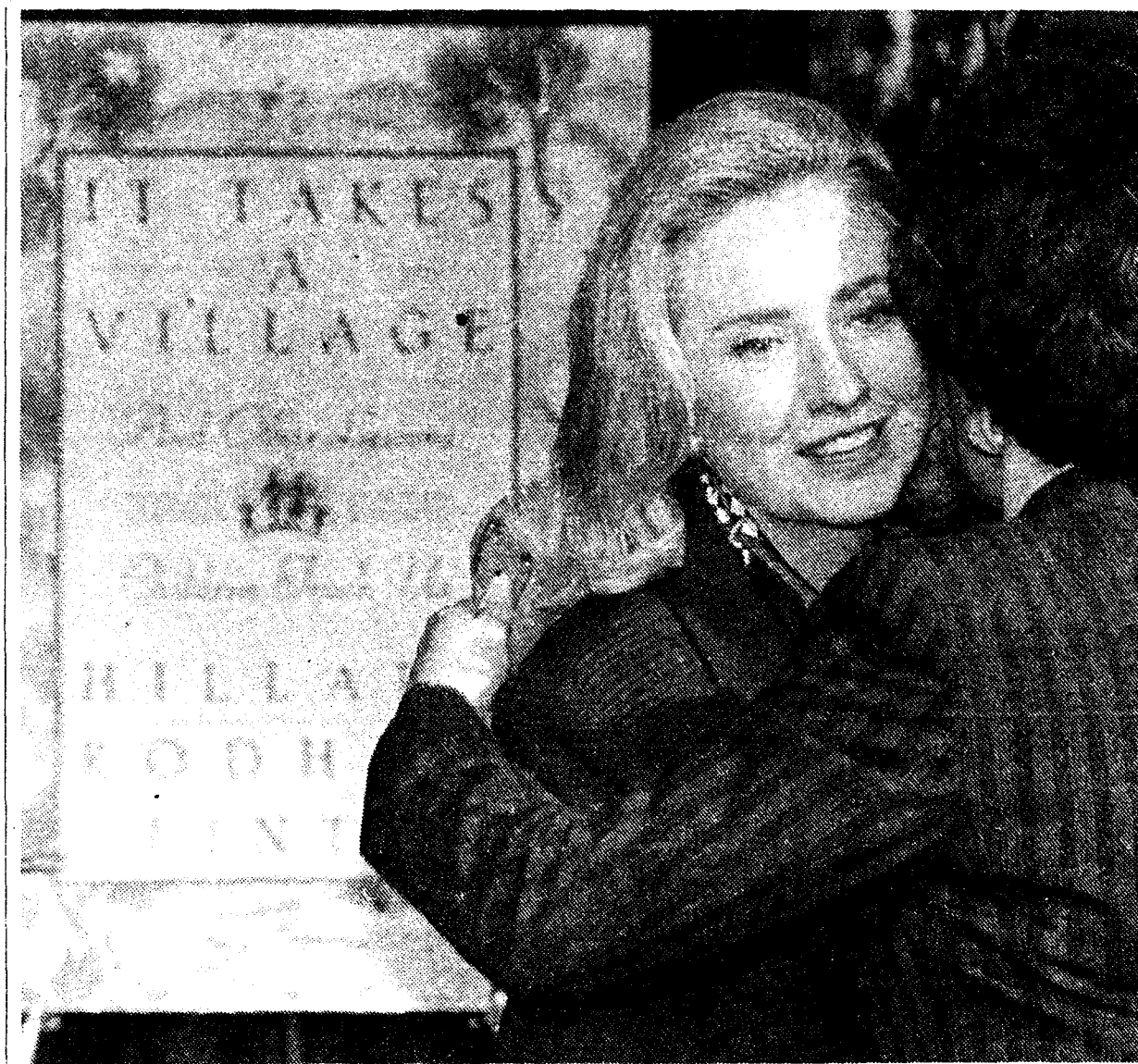


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## Defense, and Promotion, by Hillary Clinton

Hillary Rodham Clinton is defending her roles in the Whitewater and White House travel office affairs while promoting her new book, "It Takes a Village." She was greeted yesterday in Little Rock, Ark. Page A10.

# First Lady Carefully Lays Out Her Defense

By TODD S. PURDUM

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16 — With lawyerly precision, flashes of humor and a determined resolve, Hillary Rodham Clinton has popped up all over the news in the last week, once again rebutting, dismissing, explaining and defending her role in the Whitewater and White House travel office affairs.

On "20-20" and the "Today" program, on National Public Radio and in interviews with prominent newspapers, Mrs. Clinton has repeatedly vowed to "do whatever it takes" to put to rest lingering questions and controversies about her candor, including testifying before the Senate committee investigating Whitewater.

Mrs. Clinton has long been a lightning rod for criticism, and it is impossible to gauge the results of her latest efforts to reintroduce herself to the American public as her husband's re-election campaign heats up and her ratings slide. But the short-term effect has been to lay out the First Lady's side of the story in prominent, prime-time detail after weeks of mounting Republican criticism and embarrassing disclosures.

"I will look at anything," the First Lady said on "Today" this morning, echoing comments in recent days in which she has edged closer to offering to testify before the Senate Whitewater committee. "Nobody wants this over with more than I do." But she added, "I think it would be like having your teeth drilled."

"I mean, I can't imagine anything worse, you know, especially since you have no idea what the questions are. I mean, if I knew that they were going to ask me about x and y, that would be fine. But these people think they can come out of left field, or more likely right field, and ask me anything. So it's not going to be a very easy experience for anyone, but I will do whatever it takes."

Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, the New York Republican who heads the committee, has so far been notably reluctant to compel Mrs. Clinton's testimony, and the White House says she has not yet volunteered it, much less sought to negotiate terms.

But Mrs. Clinton has given a spate of recent interviews, carefully granted to reporters who do not regularly cover the White House or Whitewater and intended to promote her new book on children's issues, "It Takes a Village." She visited Little Rock, Ark., today on the book tour.

In the interviews, Mrs. Clinton has gone out of her way to put her spin on a few x's and y's of her own. Her arguments remain at some variance with the past accounts of other Administration officials and Government investigators.

Over and over, Mrs. Clinton has said she cannot understand why copies of long-sought billing records from her old Little Rock law firm were only discovered recently in a storage area of the White House residence by an assistant. But she insists she is glad the files were found because they prove the truth of her earlier assertions that her work in the 1980's for the failing Madison Guaranty savings and loan was limited in time and scope. Congressional investigators dispute this, suggesting the records show that Mrs. Clinton's work for Madison, which was owned by the Clintons' partner in the Whitewater land venture, was substantial.

Again and again, Mrs. Clinton has said that she never urged that employees of the travel office be dismissed or that any particular action be taken, only that she had shared with White House officials her concerns about reports of financial mismanagement in the office. Seven employees were abruptly dismissed in 1993 and were replaced with Clinton associates from Arkansas.

She explains a 1993 memo from David Watkins, a former White

House aide, that asserts that Mrs. Clinton "desired action" on the travel office by saying that she has always "dealt with people in a very direct way" and that "the mere expression of concern could be, I guess, taken to mean something more."

Finally, Mrs. Clinton has repeatedly suggested that a report prepared for the Resolution Trust Corporation, whose findings were made public last month, had vindicated the Clintons by supporting their assertion that they were passive investors who lost money in the Whitewater investment and that "we never, ever took any kind of money whatsoever from Madison Savings and Loan."

In fact, the report, which states that it was not meant to exonerate or charge anyone, concluded that it was impossible to determine whether money from Madison had gone to

**'Nobody wants this over with more than I do.'**

support the Whitewater venture because a number of records were missing. It recommended against pursuing a civil suit against the Clintons to recover Madison funds on the grounds that the litigation would cost more than it was likely to recover.

In the first week of this month, her favorability ratings dropped 12 percentage points, according to the latest CBS News poll. In a poll conducted Jan. 2-3, 59 percent of the 619 people who responded said they held a favorable opinion of the First Lady. When the same people were surveyed again on Jan. 10, only 47 percent said they had the same opinion. Those who had a change of mind attributed it to articles on Whitewater or said they were not quite sure why.

On Monday, Diane Rehm, a radio interviewer on WAMU-FM in Washington, asked Mrs. Clinton if she would be willing to testify before Congress, and Mrs. Clinton answered with several variants of "I will do whatever it takes to continue to try to get this matter resolved."

Ms. Rehm interjected: "With all

due respect, it would seem to me that listeners hearing that comment might say, 'Well, there's Hillary Clinton being a lawyer again.'"

Without missing a beat, Mrs. Clinton responded: "That's one of my problems, Diane. You know, I was a lawyer for 20 years. I think like a lawyer. That is not often the best thing for somebody in my position. I recognize that."

Mrs. Clinton went on to insist that she "in no way directed any particular action to be taken" in the travel office dismissals and said she saw no real contradiction between her account and a recently released memorandum by a former Presidential aide saying said she demanded the dismissals.

The memorandum written in the fall of 1993 by Mr. Watkins, the former administrative head of the White House, said the "First Lady desired action — the action desired was the firing of the travel office staff." Mr. Watkins, whose avowed purpose in writing the memo was to rebut criticisms of his own actions, said that he would have resisted taking quick action but that he was afraid that he would be dismissed if he thwarted the First Lady.

Referring to an earlier incident in which Mrs. Clinton had reportedly become furious over Mr. Watkins's failure to transfer Secret Service agents she blamed for disclosing an unflattering gossip item to a news magazine, Mr. Watkins wrote to Thomas F. McLarty, who was then the White House chief of staff: "We both knew that there would be hell to pay if, after our failure in the Secret Service situation earlier, we failed to take swift and decisive action in conformity with the First Lady's wishes."

In a separate interview last week on the ABC program "20-20" with Barbara Walters, Mrs. Clinton proved that she could poke fun at herself about the original gossip item, which, as Ms. Walters reminded her, suggested that she "had thrown a lamp or a Bible at your husband."

"A Bible or a Mercedes-Benz, or, you know, there were many variations on it," Mrs. Clinton replied, adding: "I mean, you know, I have a pretty good arm. If I'd thrown a lamp at somebody, I think you would have known about it."