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Interview With Jann Wenner of Rolling Stone Magazine
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Situation in the Middle East

Mr. Wenner. Last time I sat down with you here in the White House and had a long conversation, it was just right after Wye, and you were feeling real good and real happy and really accomplished and, today, considerably different. How are you feeling? You must be exhausted.

The President. Well, one night about 3—when did I stay up all night?

Press Secretary Jake Siewert. It was Friday night.

The President. Yes, Friday night I was up all night talking to them. That's not quite true. I slept an hour, and then maybe I slept another 30 or 40 minutes in different snippets. I'd just fall asleep. But I've been working this hard now.

Today I feel pretty good because the violence has gone down considerably. Prime Minister Barak had a Cabinet meeting that lasted almost all night last night. It did last all night. It broke up about 5 a.m. this morning. And in the middle of it, he came out and announced that the Israelis would suspend their ultimatum, because they had some encouragement and there was so much effort being made by the world diplomatic community.

Mr. Wenner. What are you doing from here, in Washington, at your desk talking on the phone with these guys? I mean, how are you able to effect this, and what do you see your role as now?

The President. Well, I've spent so much time with both of them, and I know quite a bit about what makes them tick. And I think I understand the pressures they're both under, and I believe I understand what happened here, how they both came to see themselves and their people as victims in this. So I've tried to do what I could to help.

I think that they both became concerned about 24 hours ago, maybe a little more, that this thing could really slide into a much deeper conflict. So at least today we've pulled back from the precipice. Kofi Annan is out there, and I think he's doing some good work there. And of course, there are any number of other people out there trying to make diplomatic efforts to kind of end the violence.

So I feel good today, as compared with yesterday. And I'm sorry that the peace process has been temporarily derailed. Although, if we can end the violence and if we can get agreement between the two sides on some sort of fact-finding commission to figure out how this happened and how to keep it from happening again—which was the thing that the U.N. resolution called for, that, in fact, Barak and Arafat had agreed to in Paris. Although they hadn't agreed to the composition of the commission, they had agreed that it ought to be done. If we can do that, the next big step is to begin the negotiations, the peace negotiations, as immediately as possible, because otherwise the sort of public pressures, both within the Middle East and beyond, will get worse.

Mr. Wenner. Were you shocked by what happened? Were you surprised?

The President. Yes, a little bit. I was surprised it spread as quickly as it did. I was surprised that the feelings on both sides could be stripped to the core as quickly as they did, because they've made so much progress and they got so close.

But in a funny way, I think that from the Israeli point of view, Camp David made them feel even more vulnerable because Barak, at Camp David and since, went further by far than any Israeli Prime Minister had gone before. And I think the Palestinians, number one, really thought it wasn't enough to make a peace agreement but also have a different strategy since basically the physical concessions have to be made by Israel—except for what the Palestinians have to agree on security, in terms of joint security presence in what would become a Palestinian area in the West Bank. They have to make agreements on the West Bank territory, on the right-of-return language in the U.N. resolutions, who gets to come back, and if they don't come back, what is their compensation. They have to resolve Jerusalem, and they have to deal with security.

Interestingly enough, because it was the most concrete with the fewest number of unpredictable consequences in the future, they made more progress at Camp David on security than anything else. They also had a habit of working

together on security and getting along. But I think that the Israelis sort of felt aggrieved that they didn't get more done, because they offered so much. Then the Palestinians felt provoked by what happened on the Temple Mount with——

Mr. Wenner. Sharon?

The President. Yes.

Mr. Wenner. Let's not get too far into this——

The President. We don't have to get into the weeds, but the point is that then a whole series of events happened where each side began—with each successive event it seemed that each side misunderstood the other more.

Mr. Wenner. Does any of it tend to piss you off about the relationships that you formed with—you formed a very strong relationship with Arafat and also Barak. Did it change your mind any, when you get into this—goddammit, Yasser—you have the same interpreter, right, that you used to share?

The President. Yes.

Mr. Wenner. So you've got a close relationship. Doesn't that——

The President. Well, it's frustrating.

Mr. Wenner. This will all be settled by the time this comes out, so just speak your mind. [*Laughter*]

The President. It will all be settled, or it won't by the time this comes out.

The whole thing is frustrating, but you've got to realize we're dealing with fundamental questions of identity. What Jack Lew was saying at Rosh Hashanah, though—the Jews go back and read the story of Abraham and Sarah giving birth to Isaac. I was thinking it's interesting how the circumstances under which the sons of Abraham were born and became separated. And it sounds like sort of epic family tragedy, and they just sort of keep replaying it down through the years.

That's the thing that bothers me. I just hope that somehow, you know, at this moment, however long it takes, we'll get beyond that. To the outsider who cares about them both, it seems so self-evident that the only acceptable answer is for them to find a way to live together in peace.

President's Future Plans

Mr. Wenner. Changing the subject a little bit. When you're out of office, what are the three or four issues you think you're going to want to most focus on and be most concerned with?

The President. Well, first of all, I haven't quite figured out what to do and how to do it, because I'm so into what I've been doing. I've laid the basic plans for my library and policy center. And I know I'm going to have an office in New York, because I'll be there, as well. And I've talked to a lot of people in general terms about it.

But I decided that I would try to be effective in this job right up until the end. And in order to do it, I can't be spending vast amounts of time kind of planning out my next step. I also think I probably need a couple months to kind of just rest, relax, sleep—rest, get a little perspective.

I've thought a lot about ex-Presidencies. There have been two really great ones in history, John Quincy Adams and Jimmy Carter, and they were very different. Quincy Adams went back to the House of Representatives and became the leading spokesman for abolition. *

You see the Washington Monument right behind us that actually, in his last term in Congress, was Abraham Lincoln's only term in the House, and they stood together on that mound when the Washington Monument was dedicated.

But Jimmy Carter used the Carter Center to do very specific things. He works on human rights, election monitoring, getting rid of river blindness in Africa, agricultural self-sufficiency. From time to time, he's engaged in various peace issues, primarily in Africa. And he works here at home on Habitat for Humanity, which is now, by the way, the third-biggest homebuilder in America—stunning thing—and also involved all over the world. I've been to Habitat sites in Africa, or one in Africa, but there are more than one. There are lots of them over there.

So the challenge is to trade power and authority broadly spread for influence and impact tightly concentrated. That's basically the challenge. And I'm sure I'll be interested; I'll try to do a lot on the areas that I've always been involved in, this whole area of racial and religious reconciliation at home and around the world, economic empowerment of poor people, something I'm very interested in here and around the world.

* White House correction.

As we speak, I still don't know for sure whether the new markets initiative that the Speaker of the House and I have built such a broad bipartisan coalition for will pass. We've got 300-some votes for it in the House. It's really got a chance to be one of the signature achievements of this Congress, and it is something that Republicans ought to like, because it basically involves getting private capital into poor areas in America.

And then I've got a big initiative to relieve the debt of the world's poorest countries that will put the money into education, health care, and development back home, if they get the debt relief. So that's something that I've always been very interested in. We make 2 million microcredit loans a year around the world, under AID in my administration. We set up——

Mr. Wenner. The Grameen Bank model.

The President. The what?

Mr. Wenner. The model of the Grameen Bank.

The President. Grameen Bank—Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and in America, the South Shore Bank. We set up a community development financial institution program here in America, and we fund those here in America, as well. So we've done a lot of work on that.

And I'm very interested in this whole idea of the relationship of energy to economic growth and the challenge of global warming, which I believe is real. And I believe we can break the iron link between how nations get rich and how they deal with the environment. I don't think—I think the energy realities of the world have changed drastically in the last 10 years, and they're about to really change with the development of fuel cell engines, alternative fuels. And there's also—we've funded a lot of research on biofuels—not just ethanol from corn, but you can make biofuels out of grass. You can cut the grass out here and make fuel out of it.

But the conversion is not good. It takes about 7 gallons of gasoline to make about 8 gallons of biofuel. But they're working on research which would lead to one gallon of gasoline making 8 gallons. So I'm interested in all that.

I'm interested in the breakdown of public health systems around the world. AIDS, TB, and malaria kill one in every four people that die every year now, those three diseases.

Mr. Wenner. So you would set up something like—you're very mindful of the Carter Center.

The President. I don't know. I don't know how I'm going to do it. I'm thinking about it. I've explored a lot of ideas, but I'm going to take some time when I get out to think about it. I also want to make sure that whatever I do, I give the next President time to be President, and whatever I do, I don't get in the way of the next President, because a country can only have one President at a time, and I want to be supportive of that.

Theodore Roosevelt

Mr. Wenner. Well, you must have obviously thought a lot about Teddy Roosevelt. I mean, you are—or he—are the youngest—you're the youngest President since Teddy Roosevelt, to come out of a successful Presidency, and be in your midfifties, because of your powers, really, and energy. Do you compare yourself much to him? Have you thought much about him?

The President. Well, I think the time in which I served was very much like the time in which he served. And I think the job I had to do was quite a lot like—there are some interesting historical parallels with the job he had to do, because he basically was—his job was to manage the transition of America from an agricultural to an industrial power, and from essentially an isolationist to an international nation. In my time, we were managing the transition from an industrial to an information age, and from a cold-war world to a multipolar, more interdependent world. And so I've always thought these periods had a lot in common.

But when Teddy Roosevelt left, he served almost 8 full years, because McKinley was killed in 1901, shortly after he was inaugurated. But he thought he really should observe the two-term tradition that George Washington had established—that his cousin would later break in the war—before, the election was right before the war. But World War II was already going on when Franklin Roosevelt was—but anyway, Roosevelt, when he got out, then he felt Taft had betrayed his progressive legacy. So he spent a lot of the rest of his life—he built a whole third-party-new-political movement and promoted what he called the New Nationalism around America. And he was a very important political force.

But I think in some ways the impact he might have had was a little tempered by his evident disappointment at not being President anymore.

And I think—that's not an option for me, because I can't run again, because now there's the 22d amendment. Roosevelt didn't have the 22d amendment. So it's not a real issue for me. So I've got to try to use whatever influence and networks and friendships and support I've built up around the world and here at home just to have a positive impact, to be an effective citizen. And I think I'll find a way to do it.

22d Amendment

Mr. Wenner. If there wasn't the 22d amendment, would you run again?

The President. Oh, I probably would have run again.

Mr. Wenner. Do you think you would have won?

The President. Yes. I do.

Press Secretary Siewert. That was an "if." [*Laughter*]

The President. But it's hard to say because it's entirely academic. It's such a——

Mr. Wenner. On the other hand, you've got the advantages of the incumbency; you've got the highest popularity rating of any President; the economy is doing good. It looks like you would have won in a walk. Do you think the 22d amendment is such a good idea? Is it really consistent with democracy, to have this kind of term limit on a President?

The President. I think the arguments for executive term limits are better than the arguments for——

Mr. Wenner. Congressional?

The President. ——all legislative term limits. I've never supported legislative term limits. I don't think they're good ideas. But I think the arguments for executive term limits, on balance, are pretty compelling. I mean, I have an extra amount of energy, and I love this job, and I love the nature of this work. But maybe it's better to leave when you're in pretty good shape, too. Better to leave when you're in good shape.

I think maybe they should—maybe they should put "consecutive" there. Maybe they should limit it to two consecutive terms. Because now what's going to happen is—see, Teddy Roosevelt was young but not so young for his time. He was the youngest person to have been President, but he died at 61. Now, anybody that lives to be 65 has a life expectancy of 82. So you're going to see people who—most people mature, politically—and it's like all different activities have—gymnasts are tops at 14 or 15, basketball players at 25 or 28.

Mr. Wenner. Presidents?

The President. Presidents normally about 50, 51. Roosevelt was 51 when he was elected. Lincoln was 51 when he was elected. In their early fifties, most Presidents do their best.

Mr. Wenner. Retirement is functionally the early fifties.

The President. Yes. And now you're going to have more and more people, particularly that come after me, living much longer lives. So we might decide——

Mr. Wenner. Is that enough time to repeal the 22d amendment, get that through?

The President. No. This is not really about me, because my time is up. But I think that if—you can't predict all the challenges the country will face in the future and whether someone uniquely suited to a given moment will be there. So maybe they should—but I'm just saying, you may have people operating at a very high level of efficiency, in politics, from age 50 to age 80 in the future, because of the changes in the human life cycle that are going to come about as a result of the human genome and pharmaceutical developments and all kind of other things we're learning. We may be able to reverse Parkinson's. We may be able to reverse Alzheimer's. So there's going to be a lot of things that are different about aging in the future. We're going to have to totally rethink it in ways we can't imagine.

And if it seems appropriate, then I think some future Congress may give the States a chance to at least limit the President to two consecutive terms, and then if the people need a person, a man or a woman, to come back in the future, they can bring them back. That might happen. It may take decades, but it wouldn't surprise me if it happened simply because of the lifestyle, the length of life we're looking at.

Mr. Wenner. Not to drag this out—people say that you love campaigning. I mean, that you don't stop campaigning in all aspects. I mean, how are you going to sort of withdraw from that in the next couple of years? How do you stop campaigning?

The President. I don't know. I do like politics. But I like governance, too. I like policy. I liked it all. That's one of the reasons why I've been so fortunate in my life; I got to do something that was basically about politics and policy and governing, and in executive positions, being a

Governor for a dozen years and President for 8. I got to deal with politics, policy, and governing, the three things that I really loved. And I think I got better at it all as I went along.

I'm very interested—I think I'll spend a lot of time helping other people. I'm thrilled about Hillary running as we do this interview. I believe she will win. I hope she will, and I believe she will. I have worked very hard with Tony Blair to try to build this network around the world of kind of likeminded political leaders, and if I can be helpful to them, I want to be. So I'm sure that, from time to time, I'll get a chance to do a little politics after I leave here.

But I'm also looking forward to a different chapter in my life. I mean, this is an interesting challenge. I'm still young enough to learn how to do new and different things. And it's exciting to me. There's never been a period in my life that I didn't enjoy and find challenging and rewarding. And so I just need a little time to get my bearings and hope I'm not too old to change.

Gays in the Military

Mr. Wenner. Going back to the beginning, one of the first things you did in your earlier term was trying to overthrow the military ban on gay people. Why did this backfire, and what did you learn from that?

The President. Well, I think it backfired partly because the people that were against it were clever enough to force it, force the pace of it. I tried to slow it down, but the first week I was President, Senator Dole, who saw it as, I think, an opportunity, pushed a vote in the Senate disapproving of it. And I tried to put it off for 6 months, and the Joint Chiefs came down and raised hell about it. And I wanted to do it the way Harry Truman—Harry Truman issued an order saying, "Integrate the military. Come back in 3 years or 2 years, whatever, and tell me how you're going to do it." And a lot of the gay groups wanted it done right away and had no earthly idea of what kind of—I think they were shocked by the amount of congressional opposition.

So a lot of people think I just sort of compromised with the military because they asked me to. That's not what happened. A lot of people have forgotten that. We knew that there were—at least 75 percent of the House would vote against my policy. So if I were going to sustain a different policy and have it withstand congressional action, I had to have a veto-proof minority in one House or another. But what happened was, the Senate voted 68–32 against my policy, which meant that I could not sustain my policy in either House, which meant they were going to enact it over my—they were going to, in a sense, ratify the status quo in law.

And it was only at that time that I worked out with Colin Powell this "don't ask, don't tell" thing, went to the War College, and explained what the policy was going to be based on, what we had agreed—the agreement we had reached together. And then they wrote that into law. And then we had several years of problems where it was not being implemented in any way consistent with my speech at the War College, which General Powell agreed with every word of, which we'd worked out.

So Bill Cohen has now changed the training and a lot of the other elements that contributed to the fact that this policy continued to have a lot of abuse in it, and I think it's better now. But I still don't think it's the right policy. I think the policy I implemented originally, that I wanted to implement was the right policy.

Mr. Wenner. Would you do it any differently? Do you wish you could have done it differently?

The President. I don't know. I think that what I would like to do, what I wish I had been able to do, is to get an agreement on the part of everybody involved to take this out of politics and look at it.

But the Republicans decided that they didn't want me to have a honeymoon, that they wanted to make me the first President without one, that we were living in a 24-hour news cycle, and that the press would happily go along with my not getting a honeymoon and that they would make this the opening salvo.

And they understood—and I didn't understand exactly what I know now about how what we do here plays out in the country. Because they've added up, first—but because it was one of my campaign commitments and I refused to back off of it, the message out in the country was, "We elected this guy to turn the economy around, and his top priority is gays in the military." That's not true. It was Bob Dole's top priority.

Bob Dole's top priority was making this the controversy that would consume the early days of my Presidency, and it was a brilliant political move by him, because at the time I was not

experienced enough in the ways of Washington to know how to explain to the American people what was going on. If it happened to me again, I would say, "Why is this the Republicans' top priority? I don't want to deal with this now. This is their top priority. We can deal with this in 6 months when the study is done; let's take care of the American people now."

And if it happened now, all the gay groups, who are now much more sophisticated about dealing in Washington than they were then, would come in and say, "That's absolutely right. Why is he doing this? We don't want this dealt with now. We want to deal with—" and we would put it back on them. They would be in the hot box, and we could win it.

But the country has come a long way on gay rights issues since '93. Because keep in mind, we did drop the ban on gays in security positions, national security positions. We had done a whole lot of other things to advance a lot of the causes that the gay rights community wanted. So we have made a lot of progress there—plus all the people I've appointed.

And I think the country has moved on that issue. The country is overwhelmingly for hate crimes legislation. The country supports employment nondiscrimination legislation. The only reason that we can't get those through the Congress is that the leadership of the Republican Party is way to the right of the country.

Mr. Wenner. You know, historically, politicians have never, ever done much for gay rights. But gay issues are in the mainstream—certainly, for instance, Reagan, who was very funny with gay people and had lots of experience in Hollywood. Why did you take it upon yourself, particularly in light of the political heat, to advance the causes of gay people?

The President. I believed in it. It's not very complicated. I just said, from the time I was a kid, I had known people who were gay, and I believed that their lives were hard enough without having to be hassled about it. I saw it as a civil rights issue.

I also didn't buy the kind of conservative attack on them, that this was sort of a conscious choice to have a depraved lifestyle. I had had enough gay friends since I was a young man to know that—to believe, at least, that that's not the case. So I saw it as a civil rights issue. I believed in it.

I also thought that as a white southern Protestant, who could obviously talk to a lot of the so-called Reagan Democrats, the people we had lost that came back, that I was in a unique position to do it. And Al Gore, I must say, reinforced that, because he felt it at least as strongly as I did, and he wanted to do something about it. And we thought that we could do that for the same reason we thought we ought to take on the NRA. You know, that if we couldn't do it, coming from where we came from with our backgrounds and kind of out of the culture we came from, and understanding that opposing elements, who could do it? When would it ever get done? And so we did.

Mr. Wenner. Congratulations. The climate is 1,000 percent different than it was.

The President. You know, if that whole gays-in-the-military thing came up today, I don't think it would be handled in the same way. It might not be that we could win it today, but today we would get a civilized response, and we'd have a long study. There would be hearings. People would handle this straight. It wouldn't just be a—it would be handled in a whole different way today. The climate has changed, I think, rather dramatically.

Boy Scouts

Mr. Wenner. What about what's going on with the Boy Scouts? Were you disappointed with the Supreme Court decision, and what do you think you, as President, can do about that?

The President. Well, I can't do anything as President about the Supreme Court decision.

Mr. Wenner. Were you disappointed with it—not about the decision but about the Boy Scouts?

The President. I think the Boy Scouts were wrong. I think what the Boy Scouts were reacting to was one of these stereotypes for which there is no evidence whatever, which is that adult—gay adults are more likely to abuse children than straight adults, sexually. I think that's what was going on. It's a stereotype. It's not true. There is no evidence to support it. But I think that—I think that's what was behind that. The Scouts were scared. Now, apparently, the Girl Scouts have no such prohibitions and have had no known problems.

Mr. Wenner. Well, there are less gay girls than there are gay guys—Girl Scouts.

The President. I'm not sure about that.

Mr. Wenner. I don't know. I'm just bullshitting. [*Laughter*]

The President. I doubt that. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Wenner. You're smart. You are smart, Mr. President. [*Laughter*]

Is there something—doesn't the President have an official capacity with the Boy Scouts as, like, an honorary chairperson or something like that?

The President. Oh, yes. And the gay groups asked me—not the gay groups, the press asked me if I would—whether I should resign from that. The President is always the honorary chairman of the Boy Scouts. And it's going to be interesting when we have our first woman President, if they make her the honorary chair of the Girl Scouts, or she gets to be the honorary chair of the Boy Scouts. [*Laughter*] That will be a kick. [*Laughter*]

Anyway, and I decided I shouldn't, and I think that's right. Because I think that—first, I think the Scouts do a world of good, and in our time they have begun to be more active in the cities, which I think is really important, to go into a lot of these places where the kids don't have a lot of family or community support. And I think that it's near the end of my term, so it would just be like a symbolic thing that would, in my view, probably cause more harm than good.

And I think it's better for me to say I disagree with the position they took and try to persuade them to change their position, which I hope they will do, because I think——

Mr. Wenner. It seems like there are so many States and communities that are moving to pressure them.

The President. To change?

Mr. Wenner. Yes.

The President. Yes, I think there should be a lot of grassroots pressure on them to change. But that's where they will change.

Mr. Wenner. That's a surprise.

The President. That's where they'll change. They'll change at the grassroots level. But what's happening is—look, the overwhelming thing which changes people's attitudes on these issues is personal contact, personal experience.

I'll tell you a little story. When we did the gays-in-the-military thing, I got—not my pollster, another guy that I knew sent me a poll he had done saying this is a political disaster for you, and here's why—but that's not the reason, the point I'm telling you. The polls showed by 48 to 45, people agreed with my position in 1993.

But when asked, do you strongly—so I won it, 48–45. But among those who felt intensely, I lost it 36–18 or 15—36–15.

Mr. Wenner. Not a single-cause vote at all.

The President. No, but for the antis, it was a single-issue vote. For the pros, it was, "You know, I'm broadminded; I've got a lot of other things on my mind."

Press Secretary Siewert. They're still mad at Cheney for what he said the other day.

The President. Yes. What did Cheney say?

Press Secretary Siewert. He wasn't hard over against—he wasn't hard enough over against gay marriage or civil unions.

The President. Let me make the larger point. But in this poll, interestingly enough—now, again, this was '93—there was not a huge gender gap; there was not even a huge regional gap, as you might expect with the South being way bigger than anyplace else. There were only two big gaps. People who identified themselves as evangelical Christians were 72–22 against my position. People who said yes to the question, "Have you personally known a gay person?" were 66–33 for my position.

So this is a matter of personal experience, and the country will come to this. They will come to the right place on this. Most gay people kept their sexual preference secret for a long time. A lot of venerable institutions in society that worry about their respectability and impact—and the Boy Scouts is such a venerable institution—what they're really dealing with is people coming out much more than affirmative prejudice.

It's like, "Hey, let's go back to the way it used to be where people didn't say and I didn't have to deal with this." That's what I believe, anyway. Because I remember—I grew up in a southern town. One of my teachers was gay. There was a gay doctor in my hometown that some people knew and didn't talk about.

So we're dealing with a huge kind of—and this goes to the core of how people think about themselves and how you work through all this. We'll get there. We'll get there. But it's a matter of personal contact.

Richard Nixon

Mr. Wenner. In your first year in office, you regularly talked with Richard Nixon. What did you two talk about, and what were your impressions?

The President. He came up here. Do you remember that?

Mr. Wenner. Vaguely.

The President. He came to the White House. I had Nixon back at the White House. I've got a letter that I treasure that Nixon wrote me about Russia a month to the day before he died. And it was—how old was he then, 80, 81?

Mr. Wenner. Yes.

The President. It was really a lucid, eloquent letter. Have you ever seen that letter, Jake?

Press Secretary Siewert. No.

The President. You know, it was sort of his take on where Russia was and—the early part of my Presidency.

Press Secretary Siewert. He went to Russia right before he died.

The President. That's correct. He went there. He came back. He wrote me a letter about where he thought things were, and a month later he was gone.

Well, I had him back here. I just thought that I ought to do it. He lived kind of in the—he had lived what I thought was a fundamentally constructive life in his years out of the White House. He had written all these books. He tried to—and he tried to be a constructive force in world affairs. And I thought that he had paid quite a high price for what he did, and I just thought it would be a good thing for the country to invite him back.

Mr. Wenner. So when he came up, what was it like when he came here? Was that the first time you had met him, in a way that—spend any time?

The President. Actually it's funny, because I had had two other chances in my life to meet him. We were somewhere in 1969—we were at a dinner. I was working here in the summer—1970—and there was a dinner where he was, and I didn't go shake hands with him, because I was young and mad about the Vietnam war.

And then in the 1980's sometime, we were in the same hotel in Hong Kong. We were staying in the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong. I was there on a trade mission, and I was supposed to meet him, and somehow or another it got messed up. I can't remember what happened.

Mr. Wenner. But when he came here, what was that like? What was he like? He was kind of a stiff guy, right?

The President. Yes. He met my daughter, who was then going to Sidwell, and his mother was a Quaker, and I think his children went there, or at least had some association with Quaker schools. So he had this long talk with Chelsea about—who was then 13—about Sidwell and Quaker schools. But it was rather touching, because he seemed still, after all this time, somewhat ill at ease in personal conversations with people he didn't know. But it was obvious to me that he had thought about what he would say when he met my daughter.

Mr. Wenner. How was he like to you? I mean, did he treat you like the young man, or was he nervous?

The President. He sort of identified—it's interesting, he told me he identified with me because he thought the press had been too hard on me in '92 and that I had refused to die, and he liked that. He said a lot of life was just hanging on. So we had a good talk about that. [*Laughter*]

But I found it interesting—I always thought that he could have been—he did some good things, and I always thought he could have been a great President if he had been more, somehow, trusting of the American people, you know. I thought that somewhere way back there, his—something happened in terms of his ability to just feel at home, at ease with the ebb and flow of human life and popular opinion.

And I think also, some of his weaknesses were reinforced by the way he rose to national prominence, because he got elected to Congress by convincing people Jerry Voorhees was soft on communism, and he got elected to the Senate by convincing people that Helen Gahagan Douglas was soft on communism. Then he busted Alger Hiss and got to be Vice President when he was, I don't know, 38 years old—37. He was just a kid. Because he was only—Kennedy was 43 and Nixon was 46, I think. Nixon was my age. Nixon would have been, had he won in '60, would have been as young as I was when he got elected.

So I think all of a sudden, boom, one term in the Congress, a couple years as a Senator, boom, you're Vice President, 8 years as Vice President, and how did you do this? You did this by sort of whipping popular opinion up into this frenzy by demonizing your opponent as being a little pink.

And I think that kind of reinforced some of his weaknesses. Whereas, if he had had to run

like I did, in a little State, where you had to go to every country crossroads, people expect you to run the Governor's office like a country store, and you were used to brutal campaigns and used to trusting people to sort of see through them, if you fought them out hard enough, I think it might have rounded him in a different way. I think it might have prepared him a little.

Mr. Wenner. By all accounts, he was a nicer guy before the Jerry Voorhees campaign—and that there is something in that. And it wasn't even an idea he liked.

The President. Well, look, when he ran for President, he got 35 percent of the black vote. If he had a good record on civil rights—and for a Republican, he had a good record in the House and the Senate. And you know, there is no—when he got to be President, he signed the EPA and OSHA and a lot of other stuff. The guy had some—and he had a very fertile policy mind. He could get out of his ideological box. Remember, it was Nixon that imposed wage and price controls in 1971.

Mr. Wenner. And effectively.

The President. He understood that. He understood that only a Republican could go to China.

Nation-Building Presidents

Mr. Wenner. Which Presidents do you feel the most affinity for, in terms of the way—the problems they faced and the way they've handled them? We spoke a little bit about the similarity with Teddy Roosevelt. Are there any others that you feel a particular kinship to?

The President. Well, I think Roosevelt and Wilson—except I didn't have a war, thank God. But Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had the same—during that whole period, they were dealing with the kinds of challenges that I have dealt with, both at home and around the world. And so I identified with them a lot.

There are a lot of others that I like, but I think Harry Truman, in a funny way—even though most of the ideas, like the U.N. and the international institutions, a lot of them were hatched and germinated when Roosevelt was still alive—Truman also had to create a new era, had to organize a world where our commitment to the world was not an option after the Second World War. But we had to create a set of international institutions where we could be leaders, but in which we were also interdependent. And that's what not only the U.N. but also NATO, the Marshall plan, and the Bretton Woods institutions that have been—that we've tried so hard to modify in my time.

And Truman—I liked Truman a lot. I'm from Arkansas, and we border Missouri. I was raised on Harry Truman.

Mr. Wenner. The McCulloch book made him look just great.

The President. Yes, it did. David McCulloch did a great job on that book. But I think he was pretty great. If you read Merle Miller's "Plain Speaking"—it's a much earlier book—it also made him look pretty good, and he was an old man when he did a lot of that talking. But he was pretty great.

Mr. Wenner. ——across the street from his house, in the Hay Adams Hotel, walk across the street and come to work.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Wenner. I mean, those are the—the modern Presidents. And you just gave a speech about sort of identifying a progressive tradition of which you feel that you are a part of and trying to sort of consciously come to terms with the idea of——

The President. Have you read—Wilson and FDR, and it ends in Johnson—I can't remember if he put Truman or Kennedy in it or not—but this whole sort of tradition of progressivism, of using Government as an instrument of social justice and economic progress. And so they were—Princeton, where obviously—where Woodrow Wilson was president, did a seminar, or a 2-day symposium, excuse me, on the Progressive Era, on the Presidencies of Roosevelt and Wilson. So they asked me to come and speak about that and about the relevance of that for the work I had done. So I talked about that. But I also said that they were part of a larger tradition that I also felt that this time was a part of, which was defining the Union, defining what America was.

In the beginning of this country, there was a big debate. When we started the—after we ratified the Constitution, there was a huge debate early on between George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Marshall on the one hand, and Thomas Jefferson and all his allies on the other, about whether we would have a strong nation and what did that mean. And you know, John Marshall subsequently became Chief Justice, and wrote all the great nation-building decisions of the first 20 years of the 19th century.

But even before that—and Alexander Hamilton you remember, wanted to build a great, strong national financial system. George Washington supported him. That's what the Federalists were. They wanted a Federal Government that was strong. The Republicans wanted more than the Articles of Confederation, but not all that much more. Now, as I said, when Thomas Jefferson got elected President, he was glad the other side won, because he used that to buy Louisiana and send Lewis and Clark out, which are two of the most important things in the first half of the 19th century that were done.

And Louisiana cost only $15 million, but that was one year's Federal budget at that time. Can you imagine what the Congress would say if I said, "Hey, I've got a deal for you, and it just costs $1.9 trillion. Let's go do this"? So that was the first battle.

The second battle was the battle to define the Union in terms of who was part of it. That's what Abraham Lincoln, you know, lived and died for. Gary Wills has argued brilliantly that he, in effect, rewrote the Constitution, the common meaning of the Constitution, for the Gettysburg Address, and brought it closer to the natural meaning of the words—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. So that was the second time.

Then the third time we had to redefine the Union was under Woodrow Wilson—Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, whom we had—one, we moved into an industrial era, and we had this huge wave of immigrants coming into our cities, into our factories. And we had to define, number one, what the role of the Nation was in incorporating all these people and defining the conditions of civilized life—child labor, minimum work week, all that stuff. And number two, what the role of the Government was in mediating between the industrial society and the civil society, which was the antitrust laws, in an economic sense, and in a larger sense, all that land Teddy Roosevelt set aside, when people first began to worry about pollution and using natural resources and all that. Teddy Roosevelt partly was able to be our first great conservation President, because people could see that growth in pollution could take away some of our natural resources.

And then, of course, Wilson built on that with a social agenda and then defining our responsibilities in the world in terms of World War I and his argument for the League of Nations, which ultimately prevailed, even though he lost it. So that was the second great time.

And then the third great time was Roosevelt in the Depression and in World War II, and afterward, Roosevelt and Truman had this—excuse me, the fourth time. You had the beginning, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. Then you had the fourth great period, was this period, because what they were doing is, they had first to essentially bring the Government into the heart of the management of the economy. That's what—the Federal Reserve and all that had been created, but we didn't really manage the economy until the Depression. Then there was this whole idea that the responsibility of the Government was to help build and sustain a middle class society, everything from Social Security to the GI bill.

Then, after the war, what they had to do was create the conditions of permanent involvement of America in the world, because Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson got us involved in the world in a leadership way, and then we just walked away from it and paid the consequences. So the cold war was on us after the war. So basically Roosevelt and Harry Truman built the structures within which America could lead and operate in an interdependent world.

And I would argue that this period is the fifth great period of nation-defining. Because we have to define what the role of Government is in an information global society, both in terms of empowering people to make the most of their own lives, dealing with a far greater array of racial and religious and social diversity than we've ever had before, and dealing with a world that is very different than the world of the cold war, or the world before that that we used to move in and out of.

So we had to have the permanence of involvement that we had in the cold war, with a greater degree of interdependence than we had in the cold war, because it's not a bipolar world. So we have a different set of challenges. And my election spawned a reaction in the Gingrich revolution, or the Gingrich counterrevolution, where if you go back and look at all their arguments for weakening the Federal Government, for toughening stands against immigrants, for turning away from the civil rights claims of gays, for refusing to strictly enforce the civil rights laws and strengthen laws protecting women, the whole social and economic agenda they had—

and Government is bad; the private sector is good—basically, they were trying to rewrite the Progressive Era that we built up over this time, and we, I think, essentially defeated them in three stages.

One was when they shut the Government down, and we beat their budget back. Then we went on to get a bipartisan welfare reform and Balanced Budget Act and the biggest expansion in child health—under the Gingrich Congress, the biggest expansion in child health since Medicaid. Two was impeachment. And three was when, after Gingrich was gone, I vetoed their big tax cut last year, and the public stuck with me.

Now, I don't know if you saw it, but earlier this week Al Hunt had a piece on Rick Santorum saying, "Where have all the conservatives gone?", in pointing out that all these guys with these rightwing records were out there running away from what they did, running as the new moderates. And in a way, that's a form of flattery.

But the point is, every forward progress in this country has always sparked a reaction. And they won some of their reactions. I didn't prevail on health care. I didn't prevail on gays in the military. I haven't won every fight I've been in. But the big things that would have taken us down and taken the country in a different direction—the budget and Government shutdown, impeachment, and the big tax cut—those three things were the seminal battles, and we prevailed.

And if you look at it, if you look at the arguments that we're having, you can go all the way back to the beginning, and it's the same sort of thing that you saw in the fight that Washington and Marshall and Hamilton had with Jefferson and his crowd; that Lincoln had with the people that were against him, and you know, divided the country; that Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson had with the people against them; that FDR and Truman had with the people against them.

Interestingly enough, little piece of anecdotal evidence, there was a fabulous article in a paper the other day about all the people, Republicans all over America giving money to this Rick Lazio, running against Hillary. And there's a story about him going to—did I tell you this? In the New York Times, in the story about it, about how everybody that hates me or hates her or hates us both, this is their big deal, so they want to give money to Lazio.

So he's at a fundraiser in Alabama—Alabama. And there's a guy that says, "I just can't stand him." He says, "She's a carpetbagger"—and he didn't mean to New York; he meant to Arkansas—"and he is a scalawag." Now, the scalawags were the Southerners who supported the Union in the Civil War. And after the Civil War, all the Southerners who fought for the Confederacy were disenfranchised. So the only people that could vote were the scalawags, the carpetbaggers, and the blacks.

So that guy was actually exhibit A of my argument that I'm making. He was absolutely right. If I'd been there then, that's exactly what I would have been.

And one of the reasons they dislike me so intensely, that crowd, is they think I betrayed—they worked very hard, under the cover of Reagan, being quite nice, to basically have the old, conservative, white southern male culture dominate the political life of America. And they see me as an apostate, which I welcome. I mean, we have this—so when I take on the NRA or do something for gay rights, to them it's worse if I do it. It's like a Catholic being pro-choice. That's sort of that deal.

So when he said I was a scalawag, the guy knew exactly what he was saying, and he did—for anybody that read it, did a great service, because he was absolutely accurate. I have no quarrel with what he said. That's basically the great faultline we've been fighting through.

Mr. Wenner. Like Roosevelt, you're a traitor to your class?

The President. Yes.

Mr. Wenner. Like FDR?

The President. Yes. A traitor to my caste. [*Laughter*] But it's very interesting, when you see sometime—when an adversary of yours says something that you 100 percent agree with, the guy is absolutely right. That's why he's against me, and that's what I've tried to be in my whole life. I mean, I had a grandfather with a fourth grade education, fifth grade education, who was for integration of the schools. I mean, that's who we are.

And we were still having the Lincoln fight in the South, when I was a boy in school.

Mr. Wenner. They're trying to drag you out of here.

The President. I know. We'll finish.

Mr. Wenner. We've got two and a half pages done. [*Laughter*]

The President. It's good, though. Just set up another time. I owe it to him. We'll do one more. I just love Rolling Stone. They've been so good to me.

Mr. Wenner. I'd just like the long view and your philosophy about where we're going, what you've seen, and what you think about America. I want to ask you questions about, you know, what have you learned about the American people. You've had a unique exposure to them that nobody else has ever had.

The President. I'll tell you this. When I leave office, on January 20th, I will leave even more idealistic than I was the day I took the oath of office, 8 years earlier.

Mr. Wenner. Why?

The President. Because the American people almost—they are fundamentally good, and they almost always get it right if they have enough time and enough information. Now, they've got to have enough information. They've got to have enough time. They have to have a way to access it.

But the biggest problem we have in public discourse today is, there's plenty of information out there, but you don't know what's true and what's not, and it's hard to access it. It's all kind of flying at you at once. It's hard to have time to digest it. But if people have the information, they have time to digest it, they nearly always get it right. And if that weren't the case, we wouldn't be around here after 226 years.

I'm glad to see you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:10 p.m. in the Solarium at the White House, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 7. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel; United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; Republican Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney; historian and author Gary Wills; and journalist Al Hunt. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Jann Wenner of Rolling Stone Magazine

November 2, 2000

Mr. Wenner. Thank you for your time; I appreciate it. It takes time to do something like this.

The President. Good.

2000 Presidential Election

Mr. Wenner. Why do you think the race is so tight, given the economy, the issues, the incumbency? How could it get to be this close?

The President. Well, I think for one thing, things have been good for a long time, and I think a lot of people may take it for granted and may not have—they may not be as clear as they should be, which I hope we can use the last week to do, on what specific policies contributed to it and what could undermine it. I think that's one issue.

I also think that, you know, there's not as much general awareness as there might be about the differences between the two parties on health care, education, the environment, and crime, where I believe that the things we've done over the last 8 years had a measurable impact on all those things going in the right direction.

And a lot of—most Presidential races are fairly close, you know, because a lot of Presidential voting is cultural.

Mr. Wenner. The way you were raised.

The President. Well, the way you were raised and sort of the neighborhood you live in, your socioeconomic and ethnic background. I mean, a lot of it's cultural. So I think there are a lot of reasons it's close.

Also, keep in mind, in the history of our Republic, only two Vice Presidents have ever been directly elected President. One of them—when Martin Van Buren succeeded Andrew Jackson, we were effectively a one-party country then. And the other, when George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis, the country was not in as good a shape as it is now, but it was in pretty good shape, and Bush basically destroyed Dukakis.