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"Change is hard. There's still a lot of people who want something for nothing. . . . That's where leadership comes in." — Hillary Rodham Clinton

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First lady: On health care, hopes

White House life is 'very positive'

By Mimi Hall
USA TODAY

PHILADELPHIA — Figuring all eyes were on The Hair, Hillary Rodham Clinton offered her just-cut colfure as yet another symbol of idealism and sacrifice in the White House.

"I know it's been on all of your minds," the first lady quipped Monday at her University of Pennsylvania commencement address. "It is, after all, the No. 1 issue. I had a friend call me from Japan.

"I told him the truth — that when the president called for sacrifice and asked everybody at the White House to give him a 25% cut, I decided to go for a 50% cut and do my part."

After that brush-off, the first lady turned her commencement talk to idealism — a theme she urged the graduates to hold on to throughout their lives.

But in an interview after her speech here, Clinton confessed that the idealism she preaches and gritty reality of politics can be a complex and sometimes painful balancing act.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the administration's attempt to sell a massive and costly health-care plan to the nation.

"Change is hard. . . . There's still a lot of people who want something for nothing," Clinton said. "I think a lot of people are either unwilling to change or afraid to change or don't know how. . . . That's where leadership comes in."

Four months into Bill Clinton's presidency, critics complain that he and his wife are trying to do too much too fast: taking on the deficit, the military, turmoil in Bosnia, and a massive health-care system overhaul all at once.

Hillary Clinton bristles at the notion that she and her husband came to Washington as 1960s idealists, naive about the political obstacles they face.

And she discounts those who say her husband's first 100 days in office were marked by a lack of focus.

"I don't understand making judgments about anything that's happened on a minute-by-minute, day-to-day basis," she said. "It just doesn't make any sense to me. I see my husband's goals as being very long-term for this country."

She added: "You can't do it overnight. You can't snap your finger and you can't wave a magic wand. And there's going to be setbacks.

"If you wake up in the morning and you say, 'I want to quit smoking, I want to start exercising, I want to treat my kids better, I want to make my marriage work, I want to be better to my employees' — whatever. . . . If you don't get it right the first day, if you quit, that's the attitude of a loser as far as I'm concerned.

"You've got to stay with things if they're hard."

Things didn't seem that hard 24 years ago, when Clinton became the first student ever to deliver a commencement address at Wellesley College.

It was 1969, and the young idealist admonished a Republican senator who shared the podium. "For too long, our leaders have practiced politics as the art of the possible," she told then-Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts.

Now when she re-reads her Wellesley speech, she said, "I see the idealism . . . and I see some of the naive" of her generation.

As she told the University of Pennsylvania audience, "At 21, I did not fully appreciate the political and social constraints" of the world.

She appreciates those constraints now.

"It's a constant balancing act because it's very rare than anything ever goes according to some preordained plan," she said in the interview. "Our lives — politics, business, arts, just about everything — has the potential of being overtaken by circumstances beyond anyone's control or of running against obstacles that are there to be overcome."

Still, she wants to make sure that people know that life as first lady has been "very personally positive."



By Amy Sancetta, AP

COMMENCEMENT: Hillary Rodham Clinton urged University of Pennsylvania students Monday to 'find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences.' Racial tensions have divided the campus.

wants to see me or needs me, and he can be there for me in a very real way.

"It's been a very personally positive time even with having to go through my dad's death. It has been a wonderful time for us as a family."

As she travels the country to sell health-care reform, Clinton said she'll remember the college gradu-

ates she addressed this spring.

"It's so terrific to look at those faces," she said as she pulled away from the waving crowd after graduation. "I am just amazed. They are so filled with potential and possibilities. It always gets me pumped up."