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Interview: Rahm Emanuel, adviser to President Clinton, discusses the Ken Starr investigation and managed care

MR. RUSSERT: And we're back. Rahm Emanuel, welcome.

MR. EMANUEL: Good morning.

MR. RUSSERT: As you heard, I just reported that the suspect, Russell Weston, was seen outside the White House on Thursday and again on Friday. And according to senior law enforcement officials, after he was wounded, he was mumbling President Clinton's name.

MR. EMANUEL: Mm-hmm.

MR. RUSSERT: What do you know?

MR. EMANUEL: I mean, I know what you reported; I know what I've read in the paper. We've had--Chuck Ruff in the counsel's office has been briefed by Secret Service, and then I think there's been some information, but that's about--I think what the public has is the correct information as we know it right now.

MR. RUSSERT: Do you think incidents like this bolster the head of the Secret Service, Lou Merletti's, comments and attitudes that things like this can happen within moments and all the more reason why Secret Service agents have to keep in close proximity to the president at all times?

MR. EMANUEL: Tim, I think you and I have talked--I mean, both of us have family that are in the law enforcement community. I have an uncle who's a police officer in Chicago. And every morning those officers get up, they say goodbye to their family, and that could be the last time they see them. I think it would be inappropriate at this time to kind of look at the policy implications. I think there will be time for that, and plenty of people will have views about that and there should be a discussion about that. I think we're at a time now--I think the best thing we can do as a nation, as one family, is make sure that the families of those slain officers know that they have the prayers and the thoughts of the American people with them, regardless of what anybody's particular view of any policy

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sue related to this incident is.

MR. RUSSERT: In my conversation with Congressman Thomas, we talked about pressures to prevent this from happening again. One of the suggestions is a construction of a visitor's center on the east front of the Capitol, where people will be funneled into it, and enhanced security, a cost of \$135 million, a lot of discussion as to whether public funds should be used for the building of that visitor center. Would the Clinton administration look at funding such a visitor's center?

MR. EMANUEL: Well, we haven't discussed this yet at the White House. Obviously, this is something we're going to want to work with Congress. I wouldn't rule it out, obviously, at this point. That would be something proper. But I think in all those instances I don't want this to get ahead. That will be one of the things that will be looked at. I think what Mr. Lou Merletti has said in the past is something, obviously, people will think about and discuss. And we should have those discussions, particularly to this notion of a facility going into the House and Senate chambers that's outside. That's where the public flows. And if people think that's the correct thing to do for security purposes, obviously. We add our recommendation on Pennsylvania Avenue and immediately we acted on it for security purposes. So I think you have to take steps like that when people recommend, for security purposes.

MR. RUSSERT: You wouldn't have any objection to using public funding to build such a visitor's center?

MR. EMANUEL: You know, Tim, it's a fair question. I'm, obviously, not going to rule it out. I can't say yes or no at this point. You know, obviously, if security thinks it's important, it's something we're going to look for and look to.

MR. RUSSERT: And let me turn to the headlines of the day. Clinton Receives Order to Testify in Lewinsky Case. First Sitting President Subpoenaed to Appear at a U.S. Grand Jury. This president has made history.

MR. EMANUEL: So has Ken Starr, has made history. He's the first office of independent counsel that ever had two, as we know, ongoing investigations of its office. It has one with Michael Sheehan looking into it and it has another one by the D.C. Bar that we know about. They're looking into the conduct, both professional and ethical, of that office. And I'm--go ahead.

MR. RUSSERT: Will the president comply with the subpoena?

MR. EMANUEL: Well, first of all, don't know the nature of whether

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exists or not, but what we do know is that Mr. Kendall, the president's attorney, is working with the office of independent counsel to get them the information they need. And I also think it's important to know that, as you know, Tim, in the last four years, while this office has been going on and \$40 million has been spent, in fact, the president has found a way, with Mr. Kendall working with Mr. Starr, to get the information that the grand jury needs. Twice before he has testified.

MR. RUSSERT: So somewhere, somehow this president will testify under oath about the Monica Lewinsky situation?

MR. EMANUEL: David Kendall is instructed to work with Ken Starr to find a way to get the information that the grand jury needs. And we have done it in the past, and worked it out with the office of independent counsel over the last four years, as has Mrs. Clinton, I think, testified three times. So we have found a way to get the information the grand jury needs.

MR. RUSSERT: The president wants to testify under oath?

MR. EMANUEL: The president wants to get the information that the grand jury needs and has instructed Mr. Kendall to talk to Mr. Starr to do exactly that.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me talk about an issue of credibility. As you know, NBC News called you three times on Thursday and five times on Friday...

MR. EMANUEL: Right.

MR. RUSSERT: ...and asked specifically whether a subpoena had been issued based on information we had obtained. And eight times we were told, no. Did you mislead us or did the White House lawyers mislead you?

MR. EMANUEL: Tim, what I said is we don't comment. We don't issue subpoenas and we don't comment on them. I can't characterize whether we've ever got them or whether we've ever received them or what the content of them. I don't know to that fact.

MR. RUSSERT: But we specifically asked whether you received the subpoena, and you said, no.

MR. EMANUEL: Tim, no. What we did, I discussed with you and I said we don't comment on them. To my knowledge, I don't know if we've gotten it or not. I said exactly that to you.

MR. RUSSERT: Why then at 11:00 on a Friday night, after the

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pitol Hill shooting, did the White House kind of put out the word the subpoena had been received?

MR. EMANUEL: Now, Tim, I think what the White House said is what we've said with Jim Kennedy, what Michael McCurry said and what I have said here. We don't issue them, we don't comment on them.

MR. RUSSERT: So we can expect, in the very near future, the president to be under oath and answer questions from Ken Starr?

MR. EMANUEL: I think what you can expect is that Dave Kendall is now working with the office of independent counsel, Ken Starr, to find that information and to get--find out a way to get the information to the grand jury.

I'd like to make one other note, Tim. You know, August 5th will be four years of the anniversary of Ken Starr's appointment. Four years ago and about \$40-some odd million later, there has not been a single report by that office on the issue of Whitewater, on the issue of the travel office, on the issue of the files.

He is--the office of independent counsel under Ken Starr's leadership is incapable of writing a report that would clear the president or the first lady. And I want you to know August 5th, less than two weeks from now, is the anniversary of Ken Starr's appointment. I don't think any American ever thought four years ago that we would be at this situation or that office has stayed open and spent \$40 million, that we would not be able to come to a conclusion over a 24-year-old real estate deal, over whether, in fact, what happened with the travel office. And he is incapable of writing a report that would clear the president and the first lady.

And he has literally got one standing--what we do know it's one of the longest standing investigations, one of the most expensive investigations, one of the most intrusive investigations, including now has a unique distinction and hallmark that it's the only investigation that has two ongoing investigations into it.

MR. RUSSERT: Let me ask you about one other investigation. Charles Labella, who was appointed by Janet Reno to head up the Justice Department investigation into campaign contributions; Louis Freeh, the non-partisan director of the FBI--both of them have said unequivocally, there needs to be an independent counsel to look at campaign irregularities, both of Democrats and Republicans. Why won't the president support these two men?

MR. EMANUEL: The decision on the independent counsel is made on the law and the fact, and that's the way the attorney general's going to make her decision, and that's what she's going to

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. She's going to weigh everybody's opinion--she has said it publicly as recently as Thursday--that decision's based on the fact and the law.

MR. RUSSERT: But if the president wanted to pick up the phone and say, "Charles Labella, your hand-picked chief investigator, the director of the FBI, have found the grounds for an independent counsel. It is important that we clear up this mess, Madame Attorney General. Please, I'm imploring you, appoint an independent counsel"?

MR. EMANUEL: Well, I think, first of all, the attorney general makes this decision based on fact and law, Tim. She has shown before she's ready to make that call on the office of the independent counsel; surely, shown that many times before. And on this situation, she'll decide based on the fact and the law and not based on any public pressure from any quarter.

MR. RUSSERT: And joining me in questioning today is David Broder of The Washington Post. David.

MR. BRODER: Mr. Emanuel, the couple issues that actually affect people's lives, starting with the State of the Union address and, frequently, since then, the president has asked for legislation that would give patients in managed-care programs some rights.

MR. EMANUEL: Mm-hmm.

MR. BRODER: On Friday, the House passed a patients' bill of rights bill that guarantees payment for emergency-room services, ends the gag rule on doctors, gives women direct access to gynecologists, provides internal and external appeals process. Why is the president threatening to veto that bill?

MR. EMANUEL: Well, it's simple, David--is that the Gingrich bill falls far short of what the president seeks in the bipartisan Dingell-Ganske bill that represents Congressman Dingell, a Democrat, and Congressman Ganske, a Republican. It doesn't--it leaves millions of Americans out of coverage. It doesn't guarantee heart specialists and cancer specialists. It doesn't guarantee the continuity of care in case of--while you have a family doctor, that doctor's cut off from insurance, it doesn't guarantee that you get to continue with that doctor. It also doesn't end the bad practice of giving a bonus to doctors who deny care. And so it doesn't meet, I think, one of the most important principles guaranteed almost every American, a patients' bill of rights. Millions of Americans will be left out by that bill, and I don't think we should create second-class citizens when it comes to a patients' bill of rights. We should have coverage for everybody, not limited and discreet.

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Millions of Americans will be left out.

MR. BRODER: Accepting for the moment at least that it doesn't do everything that the administration would like, it does contain guarantees that are not now in the law. Many people think that the Democrats would rather have this as an issue for November than have a bill.

MR. EMANUEL: David, you've been here a long time in Washington. You've watched this for eight months. Let me just go over the history. Two years ago, the president's commission called for a patients' bill of rights. He announced it in his State of the Union. And in that eight months, he also signed an executive order guaranteeing 85 million Americans a patients' bill of rights who are under Medicare, Medicaid and federal health plans. And in those eight months, the leadership in the House and the Republican leadership called on the insurance industry to open up their wallets to help defeat this bill--any bill. And John Linder, the head of the Republican congressional campaign committee, recently said, "All we need is a vote on this to protect ourselves." Well, the goal here is not to protect the Republicans in the House; the goal here is to give a patients' bill of rights to Americans with health insurance.

MR. BRODER: We should note...

MR. EMANUEL: And this bill falls far short, and the Dingell-Ganske bill does accomplish the goals of every person getting a patients' bill of rights and should not limit that.

MR. BRODER: We should note just for the record that neither the president's commission nor the executive order contains provisions for an external lawsuit.

MR. EMANUEL: Right.

MR. BRODER: Let me ask about one other issue quickly.

MR. EMANUEL: Sure.

MR. BRODER: Tax cuts. Is there a tax cut that the president is willing to sign into law this year?

MR. EMANUEL: Well, two things. One is, you know that in his own budget, there is a tax cut for child care and there's a tax cut for retirement savings. What his principle is is that we must have Social Security first when it comes to the surplus and that we cannot have a tax cut that eats into the surplus that then postpones any Social Security reform, which is essential. And I think now we have a bipartisan agreement in the Senate. So he is for a tax cut. It's

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his budget. It's one that's paid for. It's child care and retirement as well as environmental tax cuts. On the issue of tax cut versus Social Security, the president's belief is, we should not dip into the surplus to pay for a tax cut. We need to basically preserve the surplus, in order, first, to fix Social Security. That's our first goal. Then we can look at that.

MR. BRODER: On Social Security, tomorrow, the president is in Albuquerque for another roundtable. Will he leave open the door to private savings accounts as part of the Social Security system, or is he going to close the door to that?

MR. EMANUEL: No, the whole commission and the whole one-year dialogue on Social Security is to, literally, A, focus on what the level of the problem is, what it needs to strengthen and preserve Social Security and see what other options are. He's not going to close off anything or limit anything or say, "This has to be part of it." That will be part of the dialogue.

I want to answer one other point and reaffirm something. When it comes to the debate about tax cuts and Social Security, this is in Congressional Daily, what a senior GOP aide said about the House Republicans. I think it's very telling. He said, and I read from "They need to realize," referring to the House Republicans, "that they are out of time, out of resources, out of credibility with the Senate. Because of their stupidity and ineptitude, there is no feasible way we can get a major tax cut through Congress before adjournment. The Senate aide said House leaders are embarked on an exercise that is futile. This is not some Mickey Rooney, let's put on a show, back-lot production." Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I couldn't have said it better.

MR. RUSSERT: That has to be the last word. Rahm Emanuel, thanks very much for joining us.

MR. EMANUEL: Thank you.

MR. RUSSERT: Coming next, for the Republicans, Don Nickles of Oklahoma; for the Democrats, Bob Kerrey of Nebraska. Then, former White House counsel Jack Quinn and former federal prosecutor Barbara Olson square off on Ken Starr versus Bill Clinton.

(Announcements)

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