NLWJC - Kagan
DPC - Box 071 - Folder-009

0-3 Conference - Press

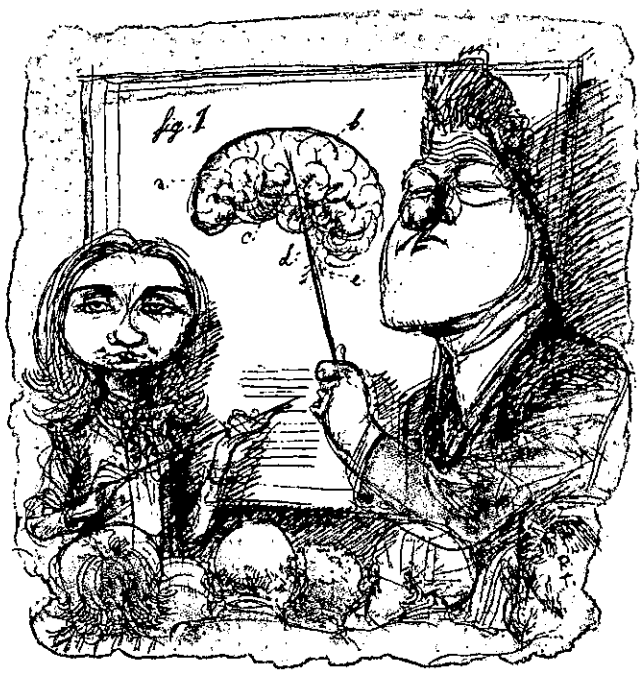
LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

CLINTONS ON THE BRAIN

Will this be their legacy?

BY JOE KLEIN

ON the morning of February 21st, Bill and Hillary Clinton visited a cheerful classroom at William Lloyd Garrison Elementary School, a few miles from the White House, and read "The Tortoise and the Hare" to a group of first graders, most of whom were African-American. The President and the First Lady each held a copy of the book, and took turns reading. As one read, the other would show the page to the students, who sat on the floor, clustered around them. Despite the tangle of cameras, cables, reporters, and Secret Service agents in the back of the room, there was an ease and grace in the Clintons' performance: it was clearly something they'd done before. When they finished the story, the First Lady asked, "What did you learn from this book?" And, rather than solicit an answer from one of the eager readers in the front of the class, she looked to the more reticent souls in the back.



Two provocative White House education initiatives—they are arguably "his" and "hers"—may set off a national ruckus.

"Some turtles run fast," one boy said.

The First Lady tried another boy. "Sometimes the tortoise wins," he said. There was an awkward silence. No one offered the obvious answer, and so the First Lady explained, "It's a lot like reading. If you do it slowly and carefully, and just keep at it, you can succeed, just like the tortoise did. You can win the race."

The moment was doubly poignant. The children were trying so hard and seemed so enthusiastic, but learning to read was going to be a struggle for more than a few of them. The Clintons were trying hard, too. Indeed, they have been very persistent about promoting their education initiative, which is supposed to be the policy centerpiece of their second term. After visiting the classroom, they went on to the school's auditorium and announced that Washington-area colleges had made a commitment to provide hundreds of reading mentors for the city's elementary schools. It was a direct and tangible—and undeniably worthy—result of steady Presidential exhortation. Since the Inauguration, the President and the First Lady have each been out at least once a week—she visiting schools and early-education programs, he addressing state legislatures about the need to join his campaign for national reading and math standards. On March 6th, Michigan's Governor John Engler, a Republican, pledged to do so, which was a significant victory for the President.

The intensity—and mutuality—of the Clintons' interest in this topic has only one precedent: their campaign for universal health-insurance coverage, in 1994. Obviously, this crusade isn't as risky. Few

RICHARD THOMPSON

Republicans have even bothered to attack the program as a White House "scheme" to "federalize" education policy. And the media's interest, which was never great, evaporated almost immediately after the plan was announced in the President's State of the Union Message—a consequence of scandal mania and the reflexive narcolepsy that results whenever the words "education" and "initiative" are uttered in tandem. On the evening of February 21st, the Clintons' school visit—and mentor announcement—didn't dent the network news: the big story that night was Kenneth Starr's decision not to quit as the Whitewater independent counsel.

In fact, there seems to be remarkably little interest in the political community about *anything* substantive that the President intends to do in his second term. An insidious assumption about priorities has begun to seep through official Washington: the rest of this spring will be about the campaign-finance scandals (and, perhaps, the congressional effort to balance the budget). But official Washington has rarely seemed more remote from the rest of the country. Bill Clinton is at the peak of his popularity—around sixty per cent, in most polls. He has repeatedly insisted that education is his top priority. "You can feel it whenever he talks privately about this stuff," an aide says. "This is it. This is his legacy." And so, perhaps, it deserves a closer look.

That requires some effort. Clinton undercut the admirable qualities of his education plan by presenting it as a laundry list of ten items stuffed into his State of the Union Message, which was delivered while much of the country was channel-surfing in search of the second O. J. Simpson verdict. He spent nearly half an hour on it, but it sounded stale—a campaign leftover, the items "bite-size" and poll-driven. The most expensive program, and the one closest to controversial, was his plan to give $36.1 billion in college-tuition tax benefits. The public loves this idea; few politicians with a pulse will vote against it. (Most education experts think it's a waste of money, since a greater percentage of Americans already attend college than young people in any other country do.) There were also the usual pleas for more money for Head Start and safe schools and "character education" and local school construction.

But embedded in the boilerplate were two substantive ideas that could cause a ruckus. They were, arguably, "his" and "hers" education initiatives—the President's and the First Lady's personal crusades. *His* was the proposal for rigorous national math and reading standards, which contained an impressive acronym familiar only to education experts: NAEP, for National Assessment of Educational Progress—a group of tests that have found startling numbers of American children to be subliterate and innumerate in recent years. *Hers* was barely mentioned in the speech, but it is at the heart of the "early learning" initiative and seems to be the education fetish of the moment in precincts as disparate as Washington and Hollywood: a fascination with new scientific research on the intellectual and emotional development of infants, which will lead, in April, to a meeting that aides have taken to calling, sometimes without even raising their eyebrows, "the White House Conference on the Brain."

A FEW hours after the President and the First Lady read "The Tortoise and the Hare," and a few blocks away, Colin Powell sat in a television studio made to look like a child's bedroom and read "Goodnight Moon" to his two-year-old grandson, Brian. He read wonderfully; Brian was pretty terrific, too, pointing to the kittens and snuggling against his grandfather. The director, Rob Reiner, and his wife, Michele Singer-Reiner, watched the scene on a video monitor and then glanced at each other with tears in their eyes. "I don't think we'll need a second take," Reiner said.

"Goodnight Moon" will be the final scene of an hour-long program about early-childhood development which ABC will broadcast on April 28th, around the time that the White House brain conference may take place. Both events coincide with a national "Early Childhood Public Engagement" campaign that is being coördinated this spring by a New York-based nonprofit group called the Families and Work Institute. A special edition of *Newsweek*, which will be available at newsstands for several weeks, will also be part of the effort. Reiner has been deeply involved with the campaign. His interest in the subject, he acknowledges—with a candor peculiar to the west side of Los Angeles—grew out of nine years of daily psychoanalysis. "I realized that what happened to me in the first three years of my life was absolutely critical, for good and not so good, to how I dealt with the world and relationships and my work," he said. "I began to think that other people should have this information, too. It's important for parents to know how important the first few years are."

Reiner's psychoanalysis coincided with a number of biochemical and behavioral studies that proved, with scientific precision, most everything your grandmother assumed to be true about child-rearing: that it's crucial for babies to be hugged, talked to, sung to, read to, and adored. Those who don't get the physical attention suffer; those who are abused or neglected can be physiologically damaged for life.

Another pilgrim who came early to this information was Hillary Rodham Clinton, who wrote about it in her book "It Takes a Village." Indeed, all questions about the brain conference are directed by the White House press office to the First Lady's staff. Few are answered: there is no guest list, and no agenda, and not even a specific date for the conference yet.

"The policy implications are absolutely clear," said Reiner, who has schooled himself in this subject—he recently addressed the National Governors' Association about it—and is working in loose conjunction with the White House. He rattled off a list of early-education programs that need to be funded. The First Lady cites more than a few programs in her book, too. And it's true that programs like Healthy Start, which offers child-care advice to poor mothers in some states, seem to have been very useful. But there is another policy "implication" that may prove disturbing for a great many two-wage-earner and single-parent families. The research is pretty clear: it's much better for an infant to have a parent—almost inevitably, a mother—at home for at least the first few years of the infant's life. "Most women go back to work before they want to," says Ellen Galinsky, the president of the Families and Work Institute and a crusader for better day care, who understands the limits of the possible. Her group has studied the effects of smaller group size and better training for day-care workers in Florida: only about twenty-six per cent of the child-care situations there were considered stimulating