

## First Presidential Webcast, 'Online Town Hall With President William Jefferson Clinton,' Now Part of Clinton Presidential Library

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NEW YORK (PRWEB) September 19, 2005

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Produced and directed by Marc Scarpa, for the former Excite@Home network under the direction of the Democrat Leadership Council (DLC), the first presidential internet broadcast was billed as an "Online Town Hall Meeting" ushering in 'The New Politics of the Information Age'". The event showcased some of the latest Webcast technology of the time and provided a look at how local, state, and federal officials could use the Internet as a direct tool in shaping the dialogue between voters and politicians. The historical broadcast has been included in the permanent collection of the Clinton Presidential Library, which opened on November 18, 2004 in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The Clinton Town Hall chat enabled viewers to send in questions and watch the proceedings simultaneously. Billed as a 21st-century version of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats, the Clinton Town Hall event has stood the test of time, as a model for real-time political communication with voters and political constituents. Featuring the lofty title "Third Way Politics in the Information Age," during which the participants would "engage in an online discussion on the common values and priorities of progressive Third Way politics in the Information Age," the chat was held on a Monday evening, from 7:00-8:30 pm EST, and was accessible through Excite's Web site.

Clinton was joined by DLC leader Al From, who hosted the event at George Washington University. Remote feeds connected New Democrat leaders (some of them just recently-elected), including Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, then Lt. Governor of Maryland; Donald T. Cunningham, Jr., then mayor of Bethlehem, PA; Wisconsin State Rep. Antonio Riley; Ron Gonzales, then mayor of San Jose, and Jeanne Shaheen, then governor of New Hampshire.

Remote crews in Bethlehem, PA; San Jose, CA, and Annapolis, Maryland connected, respectively, Mayor Cunningham; Mayor Gonzales, along with Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen, and Lt. Governor Townsend all using IP-enabled technologies. No traditional broadcast technology was used in this event aside from cameras, lighting and microphones. The remote feeds were brought to George Washington University using web enabled audio conferencing technology and video streaming. There were an additional four cameras at the live shoot that enabled Scarpa to cut respectively between the President Clinton, Mr. From or remotely to any of the New Democrat leaders, all in real time via the internet.

Users at home were empowered to watch the "directors cut" of the live program or any of the remote feeds independently using Windows Media Player streaming technology while simultaneously submitting real-time questions to the president through a video-enabled chat room on the Excite@home network. Any Internet user could simply log on to the Webcast through their Web browser and participate at any time during the 90-minute live event. Further, the Internet broadcast was seen partially live on TV news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, NBC and others during the event as the networks reported on the story. This, in turn, encouraged more people to participate in the broadcast; as seeing it unfold on TV inspired them to go their computers and participate directly.

"This was a major production; you have to realize this was the first time a President had decided to communicate with the general public using a very early technology in order to do so, video over the Internet. In addition, there were several remotes (video feeds) to manage in conjunction with the main venue at George Washington University, which was loaded with Secret Service, his aides, a live studio audience and the world watching - all making for a very tense real-time event," said Scarpa. "Needless to say, this event was ahead of its time and with our very professional, experienced crew working behind the scenes, we together made it a success."

Shot using four studio cameras, six remote cameras and using eight microphones for the speakers, the Town Hall event was hosted brilliantly by DLC chairman Al From who relayed questions to Clinton from a chat room monitor, who responded on video. In many instances the President would point at this monitor to choose his own questions making for a fun and engaging experience for him as well. The web voice chat technology, which enabled participants to speak with others in separate chat rooms, had been part of Excite's Web portal for several months, ensuring robust performance.

"In many respects, the event was much easier to produce than some of the live online music concerts that I had directed in the late-'90s, including the Tibetan Freedom Concert series and Woodstock '99", said Scarpa, "but with this one we had several of the highest-profile public and private figures in the United States. Due to their visibility the success of this event aided in accelerating the Webcast genre as a legitimate medium"

The reaction to the broadcast was quite positive within political circles, which justified the Clinton administration's strong focus on promoting the Internet as a ubiquitous tool for public access to information and education. Not

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[Online Town Hall with President William Jefferson Clinton](#)

surprisingly, the Webcast made the most noise in Silicon Valley, where San Jose mayor Gonzales and Netscape founder Mark Andreessen were located.

Holly Page, vice president for strategy and innovation at the DLC, originally initiated the project with then Excite senior vice president of marketing Fred Siegel. They were thrilled to learn that the project had been preserved for the Clinton Library, "So much of the innovation via the Internet in the early and late 90's has been lost due to the nature of the medium. Its wonderful that the Library had the vision and foresight to preserve this important historical work, more museums and libraries around the world should also take a cue from their initiatives," said Page.

David E. Alsobrook, director of the Clinton Library, conveyed his enthusiasm for this piece of history in the museum through a written statement, "The 1999 online broadcast at George Washington University documents an historic demonstration of modern information technology in the service of progressive politics. More importantly, it provides a valuable visual record of President Clinton's long-standing commitment to technological innovation." He added, "I am confident that those researching the first president of the information age will find this contribution an invaluable resource."

"We are very pleased that the Clinton Presidential Library has selected the Town Hall chat for inclusion in its permanent collection," said Scarpa. "We hoped to capture what the near-term future would be for Internet broadcasting with it, and now that broadband penetration in the U.S. is at such a fast-growing pace, we believe that there will be an even brighter future for media communities."

Restoration was conducted personally by director Marc Scarpa at his digital broadcast facility with the financial support of Web pioneer Jeffrey Dachis (co-founder of Razorfish), who saw the work relevant to the overall historical arc of the Web itself. "With something like this, it's a no-brainer. The work that Marc had done in 1999 set the bar for the next generation of communication between a president and the general public, similar to that of the first televised broadcast of a president". He added, "With the timing of the Library opening and their ability to recognize the historical merits of this work, I was pleased and honored to be a part of this restoration. It's unfortunate that we do not see forward-thinking communications between government (Presidents) and the general public in today's political climate"

While the Clinton Town Hall chat was a singular event, it helped illuminate the Internet's role in the coming decade, in which political parties, political action groups, and candidates of all kinds could conduct meaningful communication, fundraising, and issue-shaping with their constituents. For elected officials, public Web sites are a mainstay of government today, and a means of maintaining a persistent face with the body politic.

For further information on the Clinton Town Hall online event or for copies of the work on DVD, please contact Chris Pfaff at c.pfaff @ att.net or 201-218-0262

About Clinton Library - <http://www.clintonfoundation.org/cpc-index.htm>

About DLC - <http://www.dlc.org>

About Marc Scarpa - <http://www.marcscarpa.org/timeline>

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