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

First lady: On health care, hopes

White House life is 'very positive'

By Mimi Hall
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PHILADELPHIA — Figuring all eyes were on The Hair, Hillary Rodham Clinton offered her just-cut coiffure 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.

"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.

"I don't understand making judgments about anything that's happened in a minute-by-minute, day-to-day basis," she said. "If 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 14 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 naivete" 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 predetermined 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."