

PRESIDENTIAL BEGINNINGS: CLINTON AND HIS PREDECESSORS

TWO LEADING PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS ASSESS
THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

**"Down in the polls when
he should be up, Bill
Clinton appears in trouble."**

By James Ceaser

William Jefferson Clinton had the lowest public approval rating at the 100-day mark of any post-World War II president except Richard Milhous Nixon in 1973, the year of the Watergate revelations. And, of course, that was Nixon's second term, not the start of his first hundred days in office. Excluding this exceptional case, the average approval rating after the first 100 days of a term for the elected presidents from Harry Truman to George Bush was 65%. By contrast, Bill Clinton celebrated his own "centennial" hovering just above 50%.

Some might dismiss the fairness of such comparisons by claiming that Americans in years past were more respectful of the presidential office. If this is true, however, it would apply to the period *before* Vietnam and Watergate, and not to the years immediately after, when the presidency as an institution came under its most intense criticism. Yet the first two presidents elected after Watergate had approval ratings of 63% in 1977 (Jimmy Carter) and 67% in 1981 (Ronald Reagan). Others might contend that Clinton ran in a three-way race and began his presidency from a lower base of support. Yet Richard Nixon also faced two major opponents in 1968, and his approval at the 100-day point of his first term was 61%.

There is thus no escaping the fact that Bill Clinton sits, with no real excuses, at the bottom of the heap. Still, this distinction, dubious as it may be, should hardly be cause for panic, although jittery White House operatives were sufficiently alarmed to produce (at the taxpayers' expense) a glossy brochure on the "accomplishments of Bill Clinton's first hundred days." They should relax. If there is one thing that current presidential approval ratings do *not* tell us, it is what the president's approval ratings will be a year from now, not to mention three years from now. Anyone who has any doubts on this point need only check with George Bush, who climbed to the pinnacle of all modern presidents in approval ratings in early 1991, only to tumble in 1992. A president who lives by popularity, one is tempted to say, may die by it. The American people judge presidents at reelec-

continued on p. 4

**"Bill Clinton is doing far
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critics are saying."**

By Thomas E. Cronin

No one, as of yet, is nominating William Jefferson Clinton for the presidential hall of fame, or even celebrating him as an exceptional presidential leader. Yet his administration, if struggling, is still one of promise. Bill Clinton is doing better than most of his critics are saying.

We pick a president every four years, Adlai Stevenson used to say, and for the next four years we pick him apart. Clinton is being picked apart in most of the ritual 100-day assessments. There is plainly some justification for negative evaluations of Clinton. He has struggled on certain issues, such as Bosnia, the gay ban in the military, and the economic stimulus program. His inexperience as a national leader shows occasionally. He has raised expectations by promising more than he is likely to achieve on other matters—and he has confused voters about what taxes he is likely to call for to fund his health policy initiatives.

He has won passage from Congress on many measures, yet suffered some setbacks too. He has shot himself in the foot on at least a few occasions by careless use of words, or by his irritating style of pledging something only to hedge on it a few weeks later. All in all, his record is a mixed success—some progress through executive orders, several measures passed in Congress, a handful of excellent policy speeches, a successful summit with Yeltsin, good appointments—and yet the learning curve is steep.

A Bias for Action

The Clinton presidency is still one of hope for most Americans. Voters turned George Bush out of office because of his bias for caution, and because he was allergic to vision. Clinton has a bias for action. He wants to spur the economy. He wants to create a system of fair access and reasonable costs for health care. He wants better schools and a better environment, and he is calling for greater tolerance and social justice. He has pledged to change the welfare system, and he is decidedly pro-choice.

continued on p. 5

Ceaser/continued

tion time on the basis of an overall assessment of performance; the fact that a president may once have been highly popular, or unpopular, has no bearing on that assessment.

Warning Signs

Clinton's low rating does nevertheless come as a bit of a surprise. It definitely conflicts with the conventional wisdom in Washington as of the end of March. It held that after experiencing a bumpy first couple of weeks—the bumps consisting of the problems in selecting an attorney general and the mishandling of the issue of gays in the military—Bill Clinton hit his stride in February and emerged with one of the most impressive early performances of any post-war president. Clinton, so it was said, had wowed the public and overawed the Congress with a budget plan that carefully balanced his two euphemisms of *sacrifice* (taxes) and *investment* (spending). With Democratic majorities in both houses of the Congress, a universal desire to see an end to gridlock, and with public opinion behind him, he seemed to hold Washington in the palm of his hand. One expert after another spoke of a "Clinton juggernaut," and Clinton himself, seemingly convinced that he had mastered the domestic scene, confidently flew off to a summit with Boris Yeltsin, in full expectation that he would establish a reputation as a world statesman to go along with his domestic achievements.

Yet, as a famous poet once wrote, April is the cruelest month. In April, Clinton's juggernaut suddenly ground to a halt. Approaching his 100th day, Clinton found himself back in the trenches in Washington, stymied by a Republican filibuster on his stimulus package and plagued by a new series of problems and miscues, the most serious being an attempt to distance himself initially from his Attorney General's difficult decision to close in on the Koresh compound in Waco, Texas.

Of course, judging presidents after 100 days, which by now has become a journalistic ritual, is as silly as it is arbi-

trary. The 100-day period derives from Franklin Roosevelt's first term, when the nation faced the genuine crisis of the Depression, not the ordinary "crises" of which so many presidents since, Clinton among them, have liked to speak. If truth be told, Clinton's administration has barely gotten going—witness, for example, the number of key second-level positions that have yet to be filled—and the centerpiece of his domestic program, the promised national health care program, has yet to be formulated, let alone revealed.

Ceaser:

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Even a preliminary assessment of the new administration's performance is premature. Still, Clinton's own operatives are aware that at some point fairly soon—if not at the 100th day, then perhaps at the 200th—their president must "cash in" on one of the few political opportunities any president faces: strong popular backing early on. This backing results not only from the electoral mandate each president habitually proclaims, but also from a new president's happy position of being in no way responsible for any of the nation's long-term problems, all of which can be blamed on his predecessor. The worse the conditions, the better it is for a new president, which is why most new presidents—especially presidents from a new party—will try to make good economic news look bad (as Clinton has done), just as it is in a president's interest near the end of his term to make bad economic news look good. At some point in his first year, however, the responsibility for affairs is charged to the new president, at which point he is no longer *new*.

By the very character of our system of government, presidents are in a deficit situation of power in domestic leadership.

Far more is expected of them than they have the authority to enact. Few presidents, accordingly, can afford to allow an opportunity like early popular confidence to pass without gaining some benefits. Is Bill Clinton in danger of losing his momentum even before he has gotten going?

What, the Character Issue Again?

From the experience with our long and drawn out presidential nomination races, many analysts have concluded that Americans are scrupulous, almost to the point of obsession, about the question of good character. This is an exaggeration. As important as the character question may be to nomination races among non-incumbents (where the choice, after all, is among a number of roughly interchangeable individuals), in judging presidential performance, perfection of character is only one consideration among many. Americans have shown they can live with presidents whom they do not particularly like or admire. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon are cases in point. Although both of these men in their pride craved the public's devotion, neither ever got it. Still, both won landslide elections in which public approval had more to do with satisfaction with their performance than with any illusions about ideal character. But these two cases also point out a possible danger in such instances. When a president otherwise not admired or respected is perceived to be doing a poor job, the bottom can fall out.

Bill Clinton was elected in 1992, with many Americans harboring serious doubts about his character. One would have to go back to Richard Nixon to find a similar kind of mistrust. Neither man has been viewed by the American people as having an unimpeachable character, and Clinton is the first president since Nixon to be viewed by the American people mostly as a mere politician, without any added benefit of personal stature, strength of ideological belief, or probity of his personal life.

This *politician-only* aspect of their images has been captured in the negative

continued on p. 6

Ceaser/continued

labels with which each has been branded, initially by foes within their own parties: Tricky Dick and Slick Willie. These labels, while suggesting a similar problem, nevertheless point to some obvious differences. Thus Nixon, true to the image, was smallish in appearance and a bit sinister looking, always fighting a five o'clock shadow and a perspiring upper lip. Even to the casual observer, it was clear that he was ill at ease in mixing with others and courting the average citizen's favor. Clinton, by contrast, is big, cherubic-looking, and always grinning, even when he should not be. He never seems more at ease than when he is pressing the flesh and hugging one or another of his fellow citizens. Completing the contrast, Nixon was almost destroyed when someone asked whether anyone would want to buy a used car from him, whereas meeting Bill Clinton at a Mercedes or Lexus dealership would appear a perfectly natural occurrence.

Whatever the differences between the two men, however, Clinton like Nixon faces a high level of public distrust that transcends agreement or disagreement with his politics. This distrust emerged during the campaign, initially in response to the allegations of marital infidelities, but then—and far more importantly—in response to his explanations of draft avoidance and marijuana-smoking, as well as his constant shifts of campaign positions. Clinton began to be perceived as someone who preferred to evade certain personal issues and be too technical with the truth. He was attacked on these grounds during the primary campaign, first by Paul Tsongas as a *pander bear* (a soft and cuddly insult) and then more directly by Jerry Brown as *slick*.

Clinton parried these attacks. Appearing with his wife, known then as Hillary Clinton, on the television show *60 Minutes*, Clinton pulled off the greatest public mea culpa since Nixon's famous Checkers speech in 1952. Clinton paid a price in personal humiliation, as Nixon had done, for the continuation of his political career. Clinton's performance during the campaign earned him the moniker of the *Comeback Kid*—a label which, but

for the "kid" part, could have applied with equal if not greater justice to Richard Nixon.

Distrusting the Messenger

Yet a negative image of this sort, while it can be covered over or even temporarily forgotten at moments of triumph, is difficult to erase. And Clinton during his first hundred days has done nothing to erase it. By choice or circumstance, he has frequently engaged in just the kind of technical explanations that caused his problems in the first place. On

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his most important initiative to date—his budget package—Americans were asked in February whether they thought Clinton knew before the 1992 election "that the deficit was much larger than expected and would require more taxes on the middle class." By a two-to-one margin, the public responded that Clinton "really knew" and by an even larger margin that he "had not kept his campaign promise" to reduce the tax burden on the middle class [Gallup, February 18-19, 1993]. Even though the American people believed at the time that Clinton was being more honest than other presidents in describing the nation's problems, they were also convinced that he had been deliberately dishonest in presenting his position all along. They believed the message while distrusting the messenger.

There are certain things about Bill Clinton that the American public finds attractive. To begin with, there is Clinton's evident affability and charm. Although he lacks the aristocratic cool or charisma of JFK—no one, for example, is likely ever to refer to the Clinton White House as Camelot—he clearly has that magic

something that excites a crowd. And he has another quality that no one, not even his most inveterate foes, will deny him: Bill Clinton is smart. He is in conventional academic terms the smartest president since Jimmy Carter, no less at ease than Carter himself in demonstrating a firm, almost encyclopedic, grasp of any public policy issue. (Indeed, fearful of too close a perception of the similarities between these two men on this point, Clinton's handlers are constantly at pains, after praising his knowledge of details, to point out that Clinton never loses sight of the big picture). Still, there is a down side here, for as much as the American people recognize smartness, they do not overestimate its value. In Clinton's case, far from being saved by his smartness, it may just be that he is giving smartness a bad name. Over the last period of American history smartness has been associated with honesty, as in the personages of Jimmy Carter and Michael Dukakis. Smart persons would present options and be frank with the public, hoping that a true answer would persuade. Clinton was just as good, perhaps even better, than Carter and Dukakis in presenting his options, but doubts have grown about whether his displays of smartness are any more than efforts to impress and overawe.

President Clinton is admired—to the extent he is admired—as a politician. He has no claim like Jimmy Carter to an exemplary personal character, no claim like Ronald Reagan to fidelity to a core of beliefs, no claim like George Bush to a lengthy and distinguished life of service, including military heroism. Clinton's chance to win the respect of the American people lies with his becoming the ultimate performance machine—the *terminator* of the political world of the nineties. If he performs, whatever reservations people may have about his character will be put aside. But if he begins to falter, what will halt the slide?

Triumph of the Wonks

Inside the beltway, where a kind of cynicism still reigns supreme, concerns about character are not treated seriously,

continued on p. 33

Ceaser/continued

except as weapons of political warfare. In Washington, the administration is honored—at any rate by its own boosters—for mastering two key virtues: wonkism and telemarketing. And Bill Clinton himself is the master of both. He is the ultimate wonk and the ultimate teleschmooser.

Wonk is a new term that refers to an individual who delights in a knowledge of governmental policies and who is all but transfixed by the activities of evaluating, testing, and adjusting different potential schemes of government action. For the wonk, the art of governing is conceived not in terms of responding to crises and making “prudential” judgments, nor in terms of following a few clear political or constitutional principles, but rather in terms of figuring out proactive policies to deal with a foreseeable set of problems. If there is one word that appears to anchor all wonk discourse, it is surely that of “policy.” There must be a policy for everything, and human intelligence can devise one, from a technology policy to an industrial policy. Of course, this does not mean that there must be an active government program for every area—and it is on this point that wonks are apt to chide liberals. Wonks will evaluate every area and determine, on the basis of a policy, just how much active government is needed. But virtually nothing in principle is removed from the potential realm of wonk management, and the results in the end may be as much, if not more government, than liberals ever dreamed of.

Wonkism has produced its own rhetoric, which can't exactly be called poetry, though it is distinctive. It consists of marrying a strong active verb to a direct object in a way that previously would have seemed unnatural, if not grotesque. So we have “grow the economy,” “force the Spring,” “reinvent government,” and “adjust America.” These Clintonisms demonstrate the unbounded confidence and energy that is the wonk's trademark.

Wonks love technology, or more precisely a certain kind of technology. So while old technological projects like Star

Wars and the space station will be downsized, new ones like a national electronic computer highway and high-speed rail will be upsized. (Inside the White House, meanwhile, the sleek grey Mac powerbook computer is reportedly the weapon of choice among the young staffers.)

Notwithstanding its vaunted diversity in other respects, Clinton's Cabinet is almost entirely wonk, its members constantly preening with their policy analyses. (Lloyd Bensten, who dispenses wisdom, is one exception; Ron Brown, the

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consummate politician and dealer, another; and Janet Reno, selected only in desperation, a third). But the tone of the administration in this respect is clearly set by Bill Clinton himself, who plowed through and absorbed the whole United States federal budget in one month, only to impress his aides (and Boris Yeltsin) two weeks later by mastering the public finance problems of Russia.

The Ultimate in Telemarketing

The second virtue of the Clinton administration, again according to its partisans, is its adeptness at telemarketing, or “selling” in a modern media age. Selling used to be considered a bit vulgar, especially by smart people who enjoyed belittling Ronald Reagan and his ties to Hollywood. This prejudice is no more. Perhaps no president in American history has en-

joyed closer links to Hollywood or has so gushed in esteem for the many artists of that community. More to the point, the telemarketers of the Clinton administration apply the same kind of intelligence to the task of selling the administration as others in the administration are applying to the mastery of public policies. There is tremendous pride in the White House in the development of new communications technologies that previous administrations never understood. And if there is one point on which many of the President's followers show an acute sensitivity, it is denying any suggestion that it was Ross Perot, rather than Bill Clinton, who pioneered the “Larry King strategy” of working around the national press corps and developing a direct relationship to the American people.

Talking and impressing by talking—that is Bill Clinton's forte. Indeed, no one ever accused him of being reticent. At the end of six weeks, one study showed that he uttered about 1.7 words for every one word of George Bush—and, unlike Bush, Clinton had managed to put most of them into real sentences.

Clinton has developed his own preferred forums for communication. Although he finally managed a virtuoso performance of a public speech in his February 17 Budget Address (his previous tries at two Democratic conventions and at his inauguration were subpar), Clinton is clearly at his best in a setting in which he is seen going one-on-one in a direct give-and-take with others. It is in such settings that he conveys both mastery of the subject matter and depth of concern. In one version of this approach, Bill Clinton appears as the seminar leader at policy “summits,” as in Little Rock on the economy and in Portland on the environment. He functions here as a kind of one-man congressional committee, taking testimony and dropping hints of possible lines of action.

Yet it is clearly in another version of this approach, in the misnamed event known as the “town meeting,” that Bill Clinton really shines. (A town once meant

the place where people gathered locally to make local decisions, free from the glamour of national politics; now it means an occasion where a bunch of local-looking people are rounded up to serve as props for national show, the aim of which is to allow the President a chance to influence national opinion). Clinton showed his mastery of this forum in the Richmond debate, and he has continued using it since assuming the presidency. Long before he had met the national press in a genuine news conference, Clinton enlisted the dean of American newscasters, Peter Jennings, to lend his prestige to a "children's town meeting" at the White House, where Jennings at one point invited the group to ask questions about "Chelsea and Socks." (Socks, for those who may not know, is the family cat, who was so named, as Clinton carefully explained to his audience, "because he has white paws, he's a black cat with white paws").

The vaunted Washington press corps, lately known as the fourth branch of government, has been humbled by being forced to take a back seat to Larry King and citizen town meetings. For the time being, it has meekly accepted its position, perhaps because it has no choice, and perhaps because so many of its members sided with "change" in 1992. But like angry ghosts lurking about the capital, the members of the national press may just be waiting to settle a score with a President who has so disdained them.

In the End, Performance *Über Alles*

Neither character nor governing style will ultimately be the basis of the American public's judgment of Bill Clinton. Performance will. Unless a President is merely marking time, like George Bush, he will want to make sure that he has a clear program or direction by which he will be judged. Bill Clinton understood this fact even before he knew in which direction he planned to take the nation. He claimed "Change" as his mandate and then used the entire period from his election to February 17 to decide how to fulfill it. Politically speaking, the distinctiveness of this program is its claim to be a decisive break with "the past twelve years." Clinton wants to be as bold as Reagan. As Alexander Hamilton once wrote, "To reverse and undo what has been done by a predecessor is very often considered by a successor as the best proof he can give of his capacities."

Time alone will tell whether the President's programs will succeed, or perhaps even be enacted. For the short-term, however, Bill Clinton faces far more obstacles to his plans to "force the Spring" than he ever imagined. Down in the polls when he should be up, Bill Clinton appears in trouble. Some of his friends are even nearing despair. They should not be. For the man from Arkansas, there is always a place for Hope.

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Finally, Clinton is fast earning a reputation for backing away from earlier promises. This is acceptable when the promises, such as middle-class tax cuts, deserve to be broken. But the "Slick Willie" tag will stick if he is not more careful in selecting his causes. Every president backtracks occasionally, and every president has to be prepared to compromise artfully, especially when dealing with Congress. But a president has to use words carefully, make promises only after serious deliberation and strive for a reasonable amount of consistency. Otherwise, presidents develop a "trust-deficit," which can also be fatal.

Clinton's first 100 days have been a good start. Considering his election by just 43%, and the tough and often negative charges about his character that were repeatedly raised in the campaign, it's hardly surprising that he is not enjoying higher public approval ratings. But the positives of these early months outweigh the negatives. George Bush enjoyed high popularity for nearly three years, but his was, as George Will put it, "a pastel presidency." He never asked for much and he seldom tried to lead, save on an occasional foreign or military policy matter. Bush had virtually no achievements in his first 100 days.

Clinton is willing to call for change, to propose new directions. He appears generally willing to use his political capital to push for needed programs. It is, as of yet, too early to take his full measure. We will have to adjust to a new brand of activist leadership in the White House. It may take more than a hundred days, perhaps more than a year. But we only have one president at a time. Let's expect a lot from him, but simultaneously let's expect more from ourselves. That's, after all, what a constitutional democracy is all about.

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