

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Clinton Legacy: A First Draft

A Survey of Recent Articles

Use of the L-word was banned in the White House last year, lest any observer get the impression that the 42nd president of the United States was obsessed with his *legacy*. But as President Bill Clinton moved reluctantly toward the exit after two terms in office, journalists, scholars, and others began to appraise his eight-year performance. Clinton himself, not surprisingly, tried to give them a hand.

"I will leave the White House even more idealistic than when I entered it in terms of my belief about the capacity of our system and our people to change and to actually solve, or at least reduce, problems," he says in an "exit interview" in *Talk* (Dec. 2000–Jan. 2001). "We have turned around so many things."

Clinton's Exhibit A is, of course, the booming economy. He promised in 1992 to "focus like a laser beam" on the economy, and few deny his administration some credit for the ensuing prosperity. *American Prospect* (Aug. 28, 2000) coeditor Robert Kuttner notes that Clinton must share credit with Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, "and with fortunate timing. Thanks to information technology and the disinflation of the 1990s, these were likely to be good years." Even *National Review* (Nov. 20, 2000) senior editor Ramesh Ponnuru

concedes that "Clinton's economic record . . . is pretty good."

Clinton also promised in 1992 "to end welfare as we know it," and four years later, despite the opposition of liberals and most of his staff, he signed the welfare reform bill passed by the Republican Congress, ending the cash entitlement for poor mothers. Peter Edelman, a Department of Health and Human Services official and Clinton friend, quit over this and still believes it was wrong. But welfare specialist David Ellwood, of Harvard University, tells Washington correspondent Joe Klein in the *New Yorker* (Oct. 16 & 23, 2000) that "the results are much better than I expected." Not only have the welfare rolls been almost cut in half, but Clinton "did exactly what he said he was going to do: he made work pay. He did it incrementally, but the results have been dramatic." More than half of the poorest women are now in the work force.

Clinton's persistent efforts since 1994 "to force a reluctant Republican Congress to spend more money" on various social programs, "especially those that raised the income of the working poor," helped millions and constituted "the most admirable aspect" of his whole record in office, Klein believes. Head Start's budget grew from \$2.8 billion in 1993 to \$5.3 billion in 2000; child

care supports went from \$4.5 billion to \$9.3 billion; the earned income tax credit increased from \$12.4 billion to \$30.4 billion. In his 1997 balanced-budget agreement with the Republicans, Clinton won more than \$30 billion in new tax credits for higher education, effectively making the first two years of college a middle-class entitlement. This affected more people than the original GI Bill of Rights (which applied only to returning World War II veterans), Klein points out.

In foreign affairs, Clinton's modest record is the best one could have hoped for in a world without the defining issues of the Cold War, argues Stephen M. Walt, a professor of international affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, writing in *Foreign Affairs* (Mar.–Apr. 2000). Despite Clinton's idealistic rhetoric, his strategy has been "hegemony on the cheap, because that is the only strategy the American people are likely to support." But Richard N. Haass, director of foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution, charges that "Clinton inherited a world of unprecedented American advantage and opportunity and did little with it." He deserves credit for gaining congressional approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization, Haass writes in *Foreign Affairs* (May–June 2000), and his administration scored some advances in arms control, helped bring peace to Northern Ireland, and "brought some measure of stability—however fleeting or tenuous—to Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo." But Clinton leaves in foreign affairs not "a legacy" but "a void: no clear priorities, no consistency or thoroughness in the implementation of strategies, and no true commitment to building a domestic consensus in support of internationalism." He paid too little attention to foreign affairs—and too much to polls, Haass believes.

For all Clinton's "high swift intelligence, his impressive technical command of all the issues, [and] his genuine intellectual curiosity . . . he's not a fighter," comments historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in a *New York Times Book Review* (Nov. 26, 2000) interview. "He lacks self-discipline. He is some-

times too clever by half, and he dislikes making enemies. FDR said, 'Judge me by the enemies I have.' Bill Clinton, for all his intellectual and magnetic qualities, hates making enemies."

He has made some, nevertheless. Norman Podhoretz, editor at large of *Commentary*, despises Clinton as "a scoundrel and a perjurer and a disgrace to the office." Yet Podhoretz contends that Clinton's very defects of character enabled him to move the Democratic Party "in a healthier direction than it had been heading" for more than a quarter-century. (Others who applaud this move toward the center take a much more favorable view of Clinton, of course.) If Clinton had had any principles, Podhoretz argues in *National Review* (Sept. 13, 1999), "he would have been incapable of betraying the people and the ideas he was supposed to represent." His impeachment "forced even the intransigent McGovernites of his party, who had every reason to hate him, into mobilizing on his behalf for fear of the right-wing conspiracy they fantasied would succeed him."

Clinton claims in *Talk* that his impeachment was "just a political deal." But however history judges the Republican impeachment drive, Clinton's own ethical and legal misconduct in the White House is unlikely to be overlooked. Historians who ranked all U.S. presidents in a 1999 C-Span survey put Clinton dead last when it came to "moral authority." He ranked 21st overall, far below the usual greats and near-greats, and just four rungs above Richard Nixon, the only president forced to resign in disgrace.

"Self-inflicted wounds," however, were just one reason that the Clinton presidency did not rise "to great heights," George C. Edwards III, director of the Center for Presidential Studies at Texas A&M University, told *National Journal* (Jan. 1, 2000) correspondent Carl M. Cannon. Another reason was that the opposition party controlled the Congress after 1994, limiting his legislative ambitions. And a third reason was "the absence of a crisis." As Klein writes: "He was president in a placid time; he never had the opportunity to achieve greatness."