

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-

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**"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.

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Not everyone agrees with his priorities. But Americans by and large know he is an activist who wants to use government as a lever for positive change. He was, we need to remember, supported by only 43% of those who voted on November 3, 1992. Democrats may nominally control both elected branches in Washington, D.C., but a certain amount of gridlock still exists—which is part of the reason that Clinton is lagging behind other recent presidents in this honeymoon period.

One-hundred days is merely a small fraction of a four-year term. Yet it is a convenient time to take the measure of any new president. Appropriate questions are these: How is he doing in the job of performing presidential duties? What are we learning about his leadership ability? What are his chief assets, and what are the liabilities and problems to be watched?

Policy Performance Thus Far

Clinton has acted on a whole host of matters that he had addressed in his campaign. It is true that he has backed away from some promises—and in some cases this was a wise call. Some campaign promises deserve, upon reflection, to be broken, and others need to be modified. His inauguration address was dignified and appropriately emphasized key values and signaled future initiatives. His “open house” at the White House the next day was effective and welcome symbolism.

Clinton became embroiled with the military ban against gays in his first days in the White House. He would have preferred to have launched his economic initiatives first—but they needed another month before they were ready. He was right, I believe, to stick with his basic campaign pledge to the gays in this instance. A sensible compromise that preserves the original intent should be ready by summer. On balance, the military will learn to adjust to the reality of gays and lesbians, just as the rest of society has gradually made these adjustments. Clinton will get credit for doing the right thing.

On February 17, Clinton put forward his budget plan and economic initiatives. His address was a political triumph. He put Republicans on the defensive. He signaled a serious concern about cutting the deficit. He appealed to moderate Perot supporters. He proposed necessary spending cuts and new taxes. Many people, this writer included, however, think it was an inadequate response to the deficit problem. Both more cuts and more taxes are needed. The debt will still grow, and the deficit will not be much reduced—at least that’s the way it now looks. Still, Clinton developed an appealing and po-

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litically achievable vision and was hell-bent on selling it to the country. The country liked his boldness, though they didn’t really understand the details. And, yes, most voters aren’t enthusiastic about paying higher taxes. Yet there was an unusually favorable response to trying something.

Clinton has finally put forward a modest campaign finance reform package. It is watered down from what he had talked about in the campaign, but he had to take into account—or at least he thought he did—the sentiment among congressional Democrats who wanted to retain large PAC contributions. Perot and his supporters are probably being handed an issue in this case.

It’s still too early to know what the Clinton health care initiatives will be. Yet it is plain that Bill and Hillary Clinton have listened to Americans. We want better access, and a health system that is

fair. Among state officials, there’s an especially strong demand for a system that doesn’t bankrupt the states. Something has to be done, and the Clintons are preparing a program. It will inevitably be controversial, since taxes, regulations, and restrictions are involved.

Health policy is the one area where Clinton has a chance to lead like FDR. Does he have the courage to embrace a major overhaul of the system? Does he have the ability to rally the Congress and the public in support of his program? These will be key questions that will test his presidency in its first year.

Clinton thus far has not mounted major anti-crime or anti-drug programs. Advisors are split on what needs to be done in these areas. A national service program will be announced later in the year, though it will be more modest than many people may have expected. Education and job training initiatives have been announced. A major speech on environmental policy changes has won praise.

Clinton’s early foreign policy decisions have generally been good. He has, to be sure, continued many of Bush’s policies—which has usually been the sensible course. Clinton, like Bush, is an internationalist. Like Bush, he supports the North American Free Trade Agreement. And, like Bush, he prefers using the United Nations as a peacekeeping agency wherever feasible. The two leaders had more in common on foreign policy than elsewhere. It was Bush’s preoccupation with foreign policy that Clinton criticized. That campaign strategy both helped defeat Bush and, at least initially, constrains Clinton. No matter how much Clinton may want to become involved in foreign policy matters, his 1992 blasts at Bush for neglecting domestic and economic matters limit his leeway to get heavily involved. His mandate, if he has one at all, is to improve the economy.

The Clinton-Yeltsin summit was well handled, by all accounts. Clinton has listened carefully to Richard Nixon’s ideas and has put together a reasonable package

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of aid for the Russian Federation. He deserves credit, too, for working with our allies on this. Critics fault him for doing both too much and too little. In fact, he has taken a sensible centrist stand on aid for Russia, calling for more than most Americans really want to give, but must give if we are to help bring stability to Russia and encourage her democratic and free-market inclinations.

Clinton as Leader

One of the marks of effective leadership is the ability to recruit talented people to serve as advisors and cabinet members. Clinton wins high marks for most of his appointments. Aspin, Bentsen, Christopher, Reno, Babbitt and Cisneros were splendid choices. Moreover, Clinton has kept his pledge to make the cabinet “more like America.” He has appointed more women to top posts than any other president and attracted more minorities as well—all the time insisting on high standards of competence. He has been cautious in filling some second and third tier positions. His people present this as a deliberate strategy: They want to avoid just appointing “old Washington hands,” or the conventional nominees. And, they want to make sure their appointees agree with Clinton’s program priorities. Personnel decisions really are policy decisions.

A key function of leadership is the ability to define, defend, and promote fundamental values. Clinton has shown this capacity. He has demonstrated it when he has fought intolerance and when he has tackled the health care system. He has also demonstrated it in educating Americans about our long-term responsibilities in Bosnia, in Russia, and in fashioning an effective trade alliance with our neighbors to the north and south.

To lead, a president has to be an effective communicator. Clinton has stumbled on a few occasions, but for the most part he has proved, as he did in the 1992 campaign, that he can sell his programs and answer the tough questions. He is superb at “town meetings.” He is

gaining effectiveness with the often surly White House press corps.

To lead, a president has to be an effective politician. Clinton is a savvy pro. He fully understands that governance and campaigning, or governance and politics, can’t be kept separate. Unlike Bush, Clinton knows he has to go to Congress and fashion a new coalition every month. He knows, too, that he has to educate and rally the public.

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But they have been spoiled by the Reagan-era slogans that we can have all kinds of progress without having to pay taxes for it. Clinton is a veteran compromiser. Now, if he is to prove he’s a leader, he will have to “swing from the heels” and “go to the mat” on more than a few issues.

Assets and Liabilities at Day 100

Clinton’s greatest assets are his intelligence, grasp of policy issues, political acumen, and flexibility. He has attracted an excellent cabinet. And he is a relentless learner.

Some presidents like Reagan enjoy politics and policy matters but dislike governing processes. Some have disdain for politics and are infatuated with process and committed only to a limited part of policy—as Bush was to foreign affairs. Bush was a process president. Carter was a policy president who disliked politics. In Bill Clinton we have a president who, at least at this point, cares

about all three of the key fields of presidential action—policy, politics, and process.

Clinton’s relations with his cabinet and staff are not entirely clear at this point. All presidents pledge to meet with and consult their cabinets and usually do so for about a year. It’s the same with presidents’ use of their vice presidents. Clinton, to his credit, has avoided creating a John Sununu problem—a too-strong chief-of-staff—in his White House, but he may be overreacting to that problem.

Here are several areas that bear close watching in the Clinton presidency. The president and his staff risk becoming workaholics. Fatigue prompts errors. The president and his wife must set the right example. Clinton is said to have temper problems as well. Insiders talk about Bill and Hillary skirmishes, and the president has bristled at reporters and aides on a few occasions. He will have to master his temper—especially in crises. Clinton will also have to cope with what might be called the worst of White House diseases—and this is the problem of overconfidence and hubris. All presidents are tempted to let their egos get out of hand. Clinton, in his early weeks, often talked about how he was going to be like FDR, and sometimes implied he was indeed the second coming (of FDR). He would be bold and persistent; he would experiment and experiment again until breakthroughs were achieved. Clinton needs to realize that he has to *earn* favorable comparisons to FDR; these cannot and should not be prematurely claimed.

Clinton also has to guard against wanting to do too much—an old problem for Democrats. He ran saying he was going to be a different kind of Democrat. But this is hard to do. He risks becoming like Carter, who too often looked like he had a hundred and one priorities, few of which succeeded because he was rarely able to focus the country on them. Reagan was far better at limiting his agenda. “Multi-missionitis” is a fatal Washington disability.

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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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