

tion with the country's direction and voting for president was very strong. In October 1992, just 15% of those who felt the country was on the wrong track said they would vote for George Bush the following month. In 1996, however, 39% of those unhappy with the country's direction say they would vote for Bill Clinton over either Bob Dole or Ross Perot. Even when the electorate is limited to those who believe the country is on the wrong track, incumbent Bill Clinton is tied for first!

This is possible because the Republican Congress is both unpopular and seen as very powerful. While 55% believe Clinton deserves reelection today, just 43% say this of the Republican Congress. And where Clinton's job approval ratings are in the mid-50s, those disapproving of the job Congress is doing has swelled to 68%. Because Clinton has the GOP Congress as his foil, we can no longer rule out a Clinton landslide (the fact that his opponent had been the senior member of the Republican Congressional leadership also helps).

Reelection is Highly Probable, But Not Inevitable

Can anything avert a Clinton vic-

tory? Of course. Clinton's reelection is highly probable, but not inevitable. Polls suggest that the nomination of Gen. Colin Powell as Dole's running mate makes the race significantly closer, although there is no precedent for a vice-presidential candidate having this much impact (count me as skeptical). In any event, a Dole-Powell ticket is considered extremely unlikely by most informed observers.

The other way the race could change is an external shock to the system. A major foreign policy reversal, or dramatic negative economic or social developments at home, could still shift the context of the election. Similarly, if new evidence emerges showing Bill or Hillary Clinton's guilt in the Whitewater affair, that could change the nature of the race. Since this election will ultimately be a referendum on Bill Clinton, the public will have to fundamentally change its assessment of his presidency for the current dynamic to change.

Conversely, the campaigns to which we all pay so much attention will probably have a limited impact. Bob Dole can retire from the Senate; he can talk about tax cuts or affirmative action; he can hire this or that strategist—it doesn't

really matter. The hard truth today is that Bob Dole is no longer the master of his own fate—he could run a perfect campaign, and still get trounced. This election is out of his control.

This fall, voters will of course see the television ads and watch the presidential debates. They will take one last hard look at Bill Clinton and Bob Dole (and perhaps Ross Perot) before making their final decision. But that doesn't mean they will have an open mind. The question they will be asking is not "which candidate should I support?", but rather "have these candidates given me any reason to change my mind?" Historically, the answer is almost always no.

Endnote: All data reported within this article without a particular source attribution are from the NBC/WSJ poll conducted by Hart-Teeter Research, May 10-14, 1996.



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The Coming Punishment of Bill Clinton

by David Hill

Presidential elections are a disconcerting anomaly in an era where the political "sciences" seem to be able to explain or even predict many important political events. But predicting presidential elections remains more of a roll of the dice than a dazzling empirical exercise. Why? It stems in largest part from what an empiricist would refer to as the "small n" problem. There simply haven't been enough presidential elections under enough varying conditions to develop a model that inspires much confidence.

Retrospective Voting

Despite this important caveat that should be invoked before advancing a hypothesis of what will happen in 1996, it

seems reasonable to propose that this election is likely to be decided by what political scientists have come to refer to as "retrospective voting." And furthermore, it seems reasonable to look very hard at the 1980 presidential election for a model of how this might transpire during the next six months. As in 1980, we may see the polls criss-cross and a late surge determine the winner.

The concept of retrospective voting, like most good theory, is simple and remarkably straightforward. One group of social scientists has explained it this way:

"An individual who votes against the incumbent because the incumbent failed, in the voter's opinion, to perform adequately is said to have cast a 'retrospective' vote. Retrospective voting is, in effect, a referendum on the incumbent. Either the president did well during the last four years and, therefore, should be returned to office, or he performed poorly and the 'rascal' should be 'thrown out'."¹

These same authors also cite the notion advanced by V.O. Key, Jr. that the voter may be a "rational god of vengeance and reward."

The Die is Already Cast

In 21 of the 25 presidential elections of this century, a president or vice-president has been running on his record. In the two most recent elections where a president lost, 1980 and 1992, researchers have concluded overwhelmingly that unfavorable perceptions of the incumbents' performances in office were crucial factors in voters' decisions to try something different.

When Bill Clinton goes to bed on the eve of the election he will have to toss and turn through the night deciding whether he's been to bless or to blame, whether his stocking will be filled with election day presents, or whether he'll find the public placed only a single lump of coal in his stocking. It will matter little what he has told voters he'll do in a second term, so the theory goes. And it matters little what Bob Dole says he'll do either. The die is already cast. Bill Clinton's record is already in the can. And he'll be judged on that record.

The reliance on a single theory such as retrospective voting to predict a presidential election obviously has its potential drawbacks. There are other extant theories that might be equally powerful, but they may or may not predict the same outcome. In this instance, there is one equally powerful thesis—the ongoing realignment of the electorate—that thankfully is consistent with my expectation that Clinton will be rejected by voters in November. The realignment approach suggests that this election is merely one additional step along a path that voters have taken toward rejecting the social welfare state set in motion by the Roosevelt Democrats and replacing it with the limited government of Reagan Republicans. Given that Clinton seems all too eager to be seen as a Roosevelt Democrat, and given that Bob Dole has offered explicitly to be Ronald Reagan ("if that's what we want"), then realignment points in the same direction for Bill Clinton as does retrospective voting.

But I see this election shaping up less as a choice between two philosophies and more as a referendum on one individual and his record in office. The fact that Dole will be Clinton's opponent strengthens my belief that this election will be more

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about retrospection than about philosophy. Bob Dole is, in fact, the perfect candidate to make Bill Clinton the issue. Dole has never been a polarizing individual. He inspires few strongly negative or rabidly positive feelings. His highest numbers are the neutral ones. Furthermore, throughout the Reagan and post-Reagan era, Dole has not been linked too closely with movement conservatism. In fact, the attacks on Dole in his own primary race this year were that his record has been, on balance, not conservative enough. Thus it will be hard to make Dole into a Newt Gingrich this fall, or for that matter, even into a Reagan in 1980. Dole does not represent a strong ideological contrast with the chameleon-like Clinton. No, Clinton must be judged on his own, not contrasted against Dole.

Examining the Double-Digit Lead

What is the Clinton record that portends his defeat? And how is it that he could lose when his popularity seems to have rebounded? Trial heat ballots in poll after poll taken this Spring suggest that Clinton has a double-digit lead over Dole. And for the first time in many months, polls find Clinton's approval ratings rising above 50%. All this looks like Clinton wears well his 1992 title of "Comeback Kid," but beneath the surface lie certain problems with these polls.

First, these polls sample all registered voters. As election day approaches and the pollsters narrow their samples to "likely voters," Clinton's recovery will start to wither. His base of support includes sizable numbers of voters who simply won't get out to vote.

Second, pollsters seldom find Clinton much above 50%, even in polls of all registered voters. Typically, Dole hovers in the high thirties to low forties while almost one in five voters is undecided. While many of the undecided voters simply won't turn out at the polls, those that do can be expected to vote overwhelmingly for the challenger. Pollsters never expect the incumbent to garner much of the undecided vote. Anyone who hasn't decided yet to vote for Clinton is unlikely to have an eleventh-hour conversion. At least that is the conventional wisdom. If it holds true, then the race is already much closer than a casual observer of polling data would suspect.

Finally, it's important to note that the energy or intensity surrounding Bill Clinton is on the negative side. Close observers of polls on Clinton are consistently impressed by his high negatives more than anything else. There seems to be about 40% of the electorate that is dedicated to the proposition that Bill and Hillary must be sent back to Arkansas. This intensity will be a factor in future polls as well as a factor in turnout on November 5.

Confounding Factors of Reelection

Before using retrospective voting theory to debunk the notion of Clinton's so-called rebound becoming tantamount to

reelection, let me point out four factors that are not directly related to Clinton's actual performance in specific policy arenas, but that still figure in retrospective judgments about his worthiness of a second term.

First, like Carter before him, Clinton will suffer from being a Southerner. Voters outside the South are initially taken with the pseudo-populist trappings of Southern governors who have raised political sleight-of-hand to high art. (Note: As a Southerner myself, I know this art well.) The feigned allegiance to populist goals causes non-Southerners to put aside all their prejudice against sons of the former Confederacy. But after a while, they see clearly that this populism is more style than substance and all the old stereotypes reemerge. Clinton may actually be worse off in this regard. The continuing saga of Whitewater and what it reveals about the Arkansas political milieu from which Clinton emerged, gives pause to principled Northern liberals and other Democrats. Like Carter, Clinton will also have to face abandonment by his regional base. The once Solid South has gone Republican and it won't return to Clinton simply as a gesture of regional solidarity. Only the single state of Arkansas offers Clinton such a hope.

Second, Clinton begins the campaign with a party base that is somewhat disillusioned with its leader in the White House. In 1980, Carter had to cope with complaints that he had been too cozy with the military and big business interests. Clinton has to fend off complaints that he's wavering on core constituency issues such as affirmative action and full rights for homosexuals. Large numbers of Democrats in 1996, as in 1980, feel that they have been sold down the river by their party's standard bearer. While it's doubtful that any of these groups crossed party lines in 1980 to vote for the Republican, nor is it likely that any will this year, the fact that they are unhappy saps a candidate's strength and weakens interest in getting out the vote among base Democrats.

Third, Clinton has no signature policy accomplishments. A 1994 poll for Times Mirror found that half of all Americans could not name a single major achievement of the Clinton administration. Clinton has no tax cut like Reagan and no Gulf War like Bush. He has even less to talk about than Jimmy Carter who could at least point to the creation of the Departments of Education and Energy, SALT II, the Camp David accords, trucking and banking deregulation, meaningful Social Security reforms, and the Panama Canal Treaty. Clinton's major initiative, health-care reform, blew up on him. And even his deficit reforms involve tax hikes that he even admits were too high. His support of the crime bill is clouded by his initial opposition to it and the ire among gun owners that the legislation created. Even his NAFTA success is obscured by that policy's roots in the Republican Party. And Clinton's foreign policy "victories" are still open to second guessing. To wit, Clinton's first round of TV commercials—usually a time reserved for an "accomplishments ad," are laced with claims of "stopping the Republicans" rather than having his own agenda. Someone might begin to think that it's Clinton, not Dole, who

is lacking a vision. This failure of the Clinton presidency to provide a signature accomplishment, at least in part, reinforces some of his problems with his party base mentioned above. He cannot point to much in the way of policy success that reinforces the belief that he helps their cause.

Fourth, Clinton faces a problem that Carter avoided—the third party or independent candidate challenge that hurts the Democrat nominee more than the Republican. It is almost a given that Ross Perot will once again make a run at the presidency. But this time his effect on the race is likely to be quite different from what occurred four years ago. In 1992, the Perot candidacy offered a "halfway house" to GOP voters who

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By totally abandoning his pledge to end welfare as we know it, Clinton is planting the seeds of his own defeat.

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were angry with George Bush. Many of these voters felt obliged to "punish" Bush for his actions on tax policy. But these fiscal conservatives couldn't bring themselves to vote for a Democrat like Clinton. So Perot was a natural alternative for them. In 1996, few if any core Republicans are so put out with Dole that they'll seek to punish him by voting for Perot. To be sure, some Buchanan voters may abandon Dole for Perot, but I'm betting they are a small group. This time it will be mostly Democrats who will abandon Clinton and their party in favor of Perot. While the total Perot vote is almost certain to be less than it was in 1992, it will most assuredly hurt Clinton more than Dole this time around.

Now, as to Clinton's actual performance in office, there are more analogies to Carter's situation in 1980.

President Carter (or at least his pollster Pat Caddell) raised the notion that there was then a "malaise" in the American spirit. Bill Clinton's 1996 updated characterization of this for the 90s might be that the nation is in a "funk." The numbers aren't pretty, either. For most of the Clinton presidency, less than a third of Americans have felt that things in the nation are "generally headed in the right direction." For the past twelve months, a majority (from 50% to 57%) of Americans responding to a regular NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll have said that "things are off on the wrong track."

What is interesting about these numbers is that they do not track the economy nor perceptions of Clinton's handling of the economy. Generally speaking, the economy is good, most measures of consumer confidence are reasonably robust, and even Clinton's numbers for handling the economy are acceptable for an incumbent seeking reelection. The influential Conference Board's index of consumer confidence reached a six-year high in April. In the last two NBC/*WSJ* polls, a majority of Americans said that they approve of Clinton's

handling of the economy. Given these results, and given the importance traditionally assigned to retrospective (or even prospective) economic evaluations of a president, how is it that Clinton's not an absolute shoe-in? Why would so many voters think we're not headed in the right direction?

Emerging Importance of Social and Moral Issues

The answer to this question may lie in the very steady-state condition of the economy that Bill Clinton so desperately wants to take credit for creating. Because the economy has been as good as it has for so long, perhaps voters have begun to focus on other matters in defining their own well being. Or perhaps there is a new age dawning when values and other moral, spiritual, and cultural considerations can weigh as heavily as economic ones. This notion is, of course, consistent with Abraham Maslow's well-known "hierarchy of need" theory. This thesis holds that mankind must first attend to temporal needs of food, sustenance, and preservation of society, but after accomplishing that man turns to higher order issues such as the cultural and moral. Our relative affluence may have allowed us to reach that higher level of consciousness as we approach the 1996 elections.

From a retrospective view, it is clear that we are much more worried about our lack of progress in the moral domain than in the economic arena. Poll results reported in the June/July 1995 edition of *Public Perspective* document this suspicion. Reporting the results of a 1995 Princeton Survey Research Associates survey for Times Mirror, the poll data indicated that voters see the nation making less progress on social issues (families staying together, low moral and ethical standards, welfare, drugs) than on issues that are more economic (cost of living, federal budget deficit, availability of good-paying jobs, unemployment). And an April 1996 *Los Angeles Times* poll found more than three-quarters of the nation dissatisfied with "moral values these days."

Democrat and political pundit Ben Wattenberg, while choosing to use the phrase "values issues" instead of moral issues, sums all this up nicely in his book, *Values Matter Most*.

"Here is my take on what's going on: I believe that the values situation in America has deteriorated. I believe that the government has played a big role in allowing values to erode. I think that values are our most potent issue. I know that values are our most important real issue...I suggest that whichever political party...is seen as best

“*It is then in the social and moral issue arenas, not the economic ones, that Bill Clinton will have the most difficult time defending his record sufficient to secure reelection.*”

understanding and dealing with the values issue—will be honored...at the polls in 1996 and, I bet, for a long time after that.”²

It is in the area of values that Bill Clinton enters a danger zone. If the American electorate votes retrospectively on Clinton's own ostensible values, or on his willingness to protect the majority of Americans' values, then he may be in trouble. As Wattenberg, concerned about Clinton's abandonment of the values issues, has concluded, "This man could be dangerous if given a second term with no checkrein."³

Consider the results of the May 1996 NBC/WSJ poll. When asked how confident they are of Clinton's honesty and truthfulness, almost four in 10 voters (38%) said they are "not confident." Barely half as many voters (20%) said the same about Dole. A Gallup poll taken shortly after the Whitewater verdict showed that 60% of Americans said

that Bill Clinton is hiding something about Whitewater. Clearly, Clinton challenges even the lowest expectations that voters have for politician behavior.

It is then in the social and (yes) moral issue arenas, not the economic ones, that Bill Clinton will have the most difficult time defending his record sufficient to secure reelection.

Clinton's problems started, of course, with his early executive order on gays in the military. Though Clinton has wavered at times on giving homosexuals all they demand, this first action was still a defining moment for a newly inaugurated president. A Gallup survey taken in January 1993 found that 53% felt that Clinton should not change military policy to allow gays to serve. Just 35% felt he should change the policy. It's doubtful that proponents of either point of view have changed their stripes in the ensuing years.

Then Clinton stumbled on the Lani Guinier appointment, foretelling many more embarrassing appointments from Joycelyn Elders to liberal activists like Donna Shalala and lesbian Roberta Achtenberg, the first openly homosexual cabinet officer ever to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Only lately are social conservatives starting to orchestrate a campaign to vilify Clinton's liberal appointees as federal judges and prosecutors. Unfortunately for Clinton, some of these appointees seem all too willing to engage the right and defend liberalism. This can do Clinton no good.

Similarly, Clinton's cozy relations with Hollywood and the entertainment elite cannot do him much good in an era where market forces are pushing technologists to create a device to reduce the violence and sex invading American households.

Then there was Clinton's ill-fated healthcare reform effort, his one attempt to enact a signature piece of landmark legislation. But it went, in just six months time, from having majority support to majority opposition. Letting his widely unpopular spouse, Hillary, lead the

charge caused as much furor as the proposals themselves. The whole debacle gave rise to a bumper-sticker that says it all, "Impeach the President and Her Husband."

Clinton also helped pass the crime bill (even though it was not his own legislation and he initially opposed some of its provisions), perhaps his closest brush with landmark legislation. The problem is that it is difficult for a president, or any leader, to get much credit for crime reduction. Crimes still occur regularly, even if at a lower rate, and they are intense experiences for the victims. These victims couldn't care less that others have avoided being victimized. They want to know why the system let them down. On the other hand, those who avoided victimization may not associate their good fortune with legislation. Unless a "crime bill cop" rescued them from some bad guys, it's all too easy to forget that someone in government might deserve credit. And intensity is a key factor here, too. Many of the gun owners of this country and their interest groups like the NRA were enraged by the President's crime bill on account of its gun control provisions. You won't find many persons who are intensely loyal to the President solely on account of his efforts to ban assault rifles, yet you can find voters who oppose him largely on those grounds. On balance, the crime bill will hurt Clinton when retrospective voting occurs.

Ending Welfare As We Know It

Other social issues are also creating traps for Clinton. Even during the period of Clinton's so-called recovery in 1996, he has vetoed a partial-birth abortion bill and a welfare reform plan that would have allowed Clinton to keep a major campaign promise, to "end welfare as we know it."

It is Clinton's failure on welfare reform that may ultimately be the key to his unraveling. It is at once symbolic of both the President's lack of trustworthiness (as George Stephanopoulos said, "The President has kept all the promises he intended to keep") and his unwillingness to grapple with the toughest, yet important issues of our day. Clinton's failure to grapple with welfare reforms is made to look even more cowardly when one considers all that the states are doing on this nettlesome issue. Because so many governors (even Democratic ones) are being so aggressive in welfare reform, voters are seeing that change and reform is possible. Yet Clinton seems unwilling to lead in this area. By totally abandoning his pledge to end welfare as we know it, he is planting the seeds of his own defeat.

When taken as a whole, what Clinton's record on key social issues seems to suggest is that he is satisfied with the status quo. He is unwilling to stand up to gays' demands for full "acceptance" by society. He is unrepentant in the face of evidence that judges he has appointed aren't tough on crime. He is unwilling to make welfare recipients more responsible for either their actions or their checks. On his watch, he seems to be saying, he bears no responsibility for the social issues.

Clinton's failures on these social issues are relevant to retrospective voting in 1996, too, because they seem to provide much of the energy that drives Clinton's always high negatives. Journalist Richard Reeves observes this in his latest treatment of Clinton, *Running in Place: How Bill Clinton Disappointed America*. Reeves has written:

"And the hatred (of Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton) is not because of the great events of his presidency, such as they are, but because of the great events of the recent past, particularly the 1960s—the anti-authoritarianism, the undigested revolutions, the attacks on great institutions from government to education to religion, the overthrow of patriotism and traditional American history. Bill and Hillary Clinton, the president and the first lady, symbolize the 1960s to many Americans; they symbolize the civil rights and feminism, sexual tolerance and abortion. For a lot of people, that's where America went wrong. And the Clintons were right there."⁴

Of course, it would be imprudent at this early date to say that retrospective voting on Clinton's moral failures is all that this election can and will turn on. The economy or the market could still go into the tank. Interest rates could soar or corporate layoffs rise. Clinton might still get nailed for his failure to pass middle-class tax cuts or work for a serious deficit-reduction plan. But the prospects for these possibilities seem remote as of this moment. The prospects, however, for a moral referendum seem almost certain.

And, a moral referendum doesn't necessarily mean that Clinton loses. The Republicans could blow it. Another "preachy" nominating convention like that of 1992 in Houston might drive off enough voters to blunt GOP prospects. Or Dole's ad makers might not find the formula to remind voters of Clinton's past failures in the moral arena and to motivate them to punish the President. But Dole and his team seem more than capable of avoiding these traps.

No, Bill Clinton seems destined to be punished by Key's rational gods of vengeance.

Endnotes:

¹ Paul Abramson, John Aldrich and David Rhode, *Change and Continuity in the 1980 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1982), pp. 141-142.

² Ben Wattenberg, *Values Matter Most* (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 10-11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

⁴ Richard Reeves, *Running in Place: How Bill Clinton Disappointed America* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews & McMeel, 1996) p. 78.



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