



The Survivor:

Bill Clinton in the White House

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Publisher: Random House

Date of Publication: May 2005

ISBN: 0375508473

No. of Pages: 544

[Summary published by CapitolReader.com on October 6, 2005]

About The Author:

John F. Harris, a political reporter for the *Washington Post*, covered the Clinton presidency from 1995 through its conclusion in 2001. His balanced writing about the ups and downs of the administration earned him several prestigious awards, including the White House Correspondents' Association's Aldo Beckman Award and the Prize for Distinguished Reporting on the Presidency from the Gerald R. Ford Library. Harris is also a panelist on PBS's *Washington Week*.

General Overview:

America's 42nd president, William J. Clinton, possessed impressive strengths and many weaknesses. He is one of the most charismatic and enigmatic political figures of the last 50 years. In *The Survivor*, Harris appraises Clinton's background and aspirations to explain many of the President's frequent shifts in direction, including health care reform, welfare reform, his stance on terrorism and other foreign policy matters.

Despite Clinton's personal failings in office, even his detractors must recognize the remarkable statistics of his term: the lowest unemployment rate in modern times, the lowest inflation in 30 years, the highest home ownership in the country's history, dropping crime rates and reduced welfare roles. Clinton also balanced the budget and achieved a budget surplus. Harris follows Clinton from his first fumbling years in office to a relatively triumphant exit from office.

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Bells of Hope

Bill Clinton had been eyeing the White House since the time he was a young child and had set himself on the path to a political life. His humble beginnings in Arkansas grounded him as he later went on to meet President John F. Kennedy and study at Georgetown University, Oxford and Yale.

He married a brilliant young lawyer named Hillary Rodham and together they set out to conquer the political landscape, introducing the country to a New Democratic party. Clinton became the governor of Arkansas in 1978, lost his reelection campaign, but served again until defeating incumbent George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot for the White House in 1992.

During his presidential campaign, Clinton's lofty goals and idealism inspired him to promise a great many things to voters. However, just two weeks before inaugural day, Clinton sat down with his new economic team to receive a "budget tutorial." The meeting forced Clinton to "confront the contradictions in his own program": he had discussed the importance of deficit reduction, but closest to his heart was his proposal to cut middle-class taxes and "jolt" the economy with public works spending in education, child care subsidies and other domestic programs.

Clinton's economic advisors explained the challenges the new president already faced and first to go was the middle-class tax cut. This was a visible—and damaging—change of course, a pattern that was set early in Clinton's presidency, when his dreams and vision were thwarted by reality. One main reason this occurred was because Clinton's governing style encouraged and allowed dissenting voices, factions and thinkers to argue both sides of a topic. Clinton enjoyed discussing all aspects of a question, sometimes hesitating too long before making a call. However, he had an uncanny ability to "hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

Federal budget problems

Clinton was of two minds about the federal budget. He had major spending he wanted to propose for programs that he believed would help normal Americans and spur economic growth. However, the previous administrations had left the country deep in debt and a visit from Alan Greenspan revealed that, should things continue as they were going in early 1993, the economy would be in major trouble by 1996.

There were three major questions Clinton and his advisors had to confront in order to determine the financial direction of the country:

1. During the campaign, Clinton had vowed to cut the deficit in half within four years. How much deficit reduction did Clinton "need to propose in order to signal to Main Street and Wall Street alike that the new administration was serious about fiscal integrity? How much pain would be required" to keep his promise?
2. Another key component of Clinton's candidacy was his promise to lower middle-class taxes, but it quickly became "time to consider an anguishing new prospect—

the need to actually raise taxes.” Would taxes have to increase to support Clinton’s promised domestic policy and deficit reduction?

3. How realistic was it to propose major increases in federal spending while also balancing the budget?

These questions would be hard to answer even with his party’s support. However, Clinton’s relationship with many congressional Democrats was tenuous at best. It came right down to the wire when Clinton’s economic plan was passed 218 to 216 in the House of Representatives. Al Gore had to break a 50-50 senate tie to put Clinton’s plan into effect.

“Years later, the plan he had crafted, never mind the stumbles and clumsy improvisations along the way, was regarded by the nation’s financial elite as the essential catalyst to a decade of remarkable prosperity.”

Whitewater

Opponents of the Clinton White House—including both Republicans who hated Clinton’s liberalism and Democrats who decried some of his more conservative policies—decided to attack Clinton’s Achilles heel: his personal history.

Whitewater, a familiar name from the 1992 campaign, rose again out of Arkansas and began harassing the Clintons. The name came from a development of vacation homes along Arkansas’s White River. When Clinton was Attorney General of Arkansas, the Clintons borrowed money from James McDougal to make an investment in the project. Whitewater was a money-losing venture, but the Clintons maintained a professional relationship with McDougal, a shady character whose business dealings included loaning Savings and Loan funds to political figures. Hillary Rodham Clinton, while working at the Rose Law Firm, did legal work for McDougal, who was later tried for fraud (he won acquittal in 1990).

The big question on the minds of Clinton opponents was whether McDougal’s campaign contributions and other favors gained him at least a temporary legal safe house from scrutiny. Detractors claim that Governor Clinton and his wife “used their influence to curb the regulatory scrutiny that would have prevented or exposed McDougal’s” financial “flimflams.”

In the face of criticism over Whitewater, the Clintons had to decide whether to make a “voluntary disclosure of financial and legal records” for the *Washington Post*. Political advisors George Stephanopoulos and David Gergen were in favor of disclosure. However, the White House lawyers argued that nothing should be yielded without a fight.

The Clintons, in a decision that would haunt them for the next seven years, decided *not* to disclose.

Though independent counsel Ken Starr eventually found no signs of wrongdoing on the part of the Clintons, all the hearings and media attention dragged the President’s agenda down and veiled the truly honorable intentions he had.

Health Care

President Clinton and Hillary Clinton crafted a plan to “overhaul the nation’s health insurance and delivery system.” Key to the goal was universal coverage—every American would have health insurance. In his State of the Union address on January 25, 1994, Clinton made a “tactical error” by threatening that he would veto any legislation that did not guarantee every American private health insurance. This statement “limited the president’s flexibility to negotiate and compromise at the very moment he should have been expanding his room for maneuver.”

Ultimately, the Clinton’s health care plan is a “story of overreach”: both Clintons overestimated “the ability of smart people to bring a hugely complicated problem to heel.” Looking back, it’s hard to understand why Clinton, so intelligent and so well read, could have put forth such a confusing and complicated health care reform proposal. Part of the reason is that he was, quite simply, excessively ambitious, focusing on the “expensive ends” more than on a “realistic means for attaining them.” The health care bill Clinton presented to Congress was 1,342 pages long and quickly became a target for conservatives, who saw the proposed increase in government oversight as a move toward socialism.

Clinton’s lofty goals and his unwillingness to compromise were his downfall: Clinton had many opportunities to cut a deal to make incremental improvements to health care that would have improved the lives of millions of Americans, but he didn’t. And when he tried, it was too late. Months of hard speech and insistence that he wouldn’t budge had made Republicans (and some Democrats) angry enough that they made a judgment against compromising with Clinton on health care reform.

Paul Starr, an academic who worked on the White House health care team, wrote, “By putting his personal signature on health care reform, Clinton gave the Republicans an incentive to defeat and humiliate him.” Less than five weeks before the 1994 mid-term election, Clinton’s health care reform had failed miserably.

Disastrous Mid-term Elections

The months leading up to the mid-term elections of 1994 were rocky for the President. His primary legislative goal failed and voters were beginning to question Clinton’s leadership abilities.

Back in May, pollster Stan Greenberg wrote a memo that went only to Clinton and the first lady: “The administration, the Democrats in Congress and the party face a disaster in November unless we move urgently to change the mood of the country... The voters believe that Bill Clinton is struggling to handle the presidency and guide the country.” The memo went on to share the words voters most often chose to describe Clinton: “in over his head,” “indecisive,” and “immature.” The bullets aimed at Clinton over Whitewater were missing the target, but the country was uneasy with their young president, only two years into his tenure.

The mid-term rout was of “historic proportions:” Democrats were defeated on all levels of government. Democrats lost statehouses, including in New York, where Governor

Mario Cuomo was “dumped.” Democrats lost eight Senate seats as well as the Senate majority and lost 54 House seats, giving Republicans “control there for the first time in four decades.”

Though Clinton initially received the news with “equanimity,” his despair and passiveness through the winter were the result of the recognition that “the results [of the mid-term elections] were impossible to interpret except as a repudiation of the grand new design he had offered in his first two years.”

Clinton’s Foreign Policy

Media and the public alike viewed Clinton as a president solely focused on domestic issues, but this was not the case. Clinton was an internationalist and a “man of liberal purposes” who despised standing by and doing nothing while others suffered. The major international problems - in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia in particular - all begged the question, “How could a great power exert itself as a force for good in the world?” None of these places were direct security threats. Yet, could America stand by and watch as thousands were killed in Somalia and Bosnia, or watch desperate refugees float in the Caribbean trying to escape a dangerous regime?

Bosnia, in particular, was a quandary for Clinton. As NATO talks with Bosnian Serbs continued to go nowhere, the three years of killing escalated into even more horrifying atrocities. On July 6, 1995, Bosnian Serb forces entered a “United Nations safe area” and killed 8,000 men and boys. Some 23,000 women and children were carted away on trains. Clinton was appalled and couldn’t understand why his foreign policy advisors advocated doing nothing. The American public was not behind any American troop deployment, it was true, but thousands of people were dying. National Security Advisor Tony Lake led the charge with Clinton’s full support. Clinton knew that by getting intricately involved in the Bosnia problem, he was “risking [his] presidency.”

On August 30, Operation Deliberate Force was unleashed by NATO on Bosnian Serb forces surrounding Sarajevo. Clinton’s policy stood strong in the face of both international reservations and daunting political repercussions.

Seeds of disaster

The woman who is now internationally recognizable was only an intern when she first arrived at the White House in the summer of 1995. Monica S. Lewinsky was immediately attracted to the president and tried to catch his eye for some months. Lewinsky intuited that he was also interested, and she was right.

Had it not been for the government shutdown (because the Republican Congress was unwilling to pass Clinton’s budget proposal) of November 1995, the world might never have known anything at all about Monica Lewinsky. But the shutdown made the White House quiet—much of the staff was sent home for the holidays—and Clinton finally met Lewinsky face to face. She confessed her crush on the president and later on that night, Lewinsky performed oral sex on Clinton while he was on the phone with two members of Congress. The affair quickly took off, “at once exhilarating and pitiful.”

Clinton believed that he and Lewinsky were being “scrupulously clandestine.” He was wrong. The Secret Service officers working the White House gatehouse would make bets on how long Lewinsky would be in the White House on weekend visits. Some staffers pointedly tried to keep the young intern away from the Oval Office, but were unsuccessful.

The White House staff had also been unsuccessful at diffusing a sexual harassment case brought by Paula Jones. Jones alleged that then-governor Clinton had urged her to engage in sexual acts with him. Clinton’s lawyers had advised him to settle the civil case with Jones—several of the deals would not have required any admission of guilt on Clinton’s part—but the Clintons refused.

Then, in 1998, Lewinsky’s name showed up on the witness list for the Jones trial. Lewinsky’s story came out when agents for Ken Starr’s Whitewater prosecution “surrounded Monica Lewinsky as she arrived for a meeting with Linda Tripp [her confidante and betrayer].” They detained her and partially interrogated her, enough to discover her false affidavit stating that she had not had a relationship with the president.

The story quickly came out in *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* and Clinton had to tell his wife. Clinton then faced the nation with his now famous statement: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

The scandal escalated, as more evidence piled up and other women came forward with claims of inappropriate relationships with Clinton. Clinton finally had to tell the truth—to his wife, to the country, and to the independent counsel—but not before almost losing the presidency during an impeachment.

Re-election in 1996

If Monica Lewinsky’s name had become public in 1996 instead of 1998, it’s doubtful that Clinton would have won re-election. However, her name was still unknown and Clinton’s year leading up to the presidential 1996 election was moderately successful.

The public, however, remained ambivalent about Clinton. Two months before the presidential election of 1996, polls “showed that 56 percent did not believe he had high personal moral and ethical standards and 53 percent did not believe he was honest and trustworthy.” But the same poll showed him with a 14-point lead over Robert Dole, the Republican challenger. The result of the 1996 election was never much in question. Clinton won with 49 percent of the vote (a disappointment for Clinton, who had sincerely wanted to break the 50 percent mark), Dole received 41 percent and eight percent went to Ross Perot.

Surviving impeachment

Clinton thought that his legal problems with both Jones and Lewinsky were over when he received good news: federal judge Susan Webber Wright had dismissed Jones’ lawsuit, in which he lied about Monica Lewinsky. Clinton was ecstatic. However, Republicans and

Starr possessed enough zeal to follow through with an investigation of the president's lying, even though "the case that inspired his testimony was later judged to be without merit."

Even the Republican failings in mid-term elections of 1998 did not slow the inexorable tide of judgment against Clinton. In December, articles of impeachment accusing Clinton of obstructing justice and lying under oath "raced through the House Judiciary Committee on a party-line vote. Soon after, they did the same before the full House of Representatives on nearly party-line votes."

Clinton survived: he was acquitted on February 12, 1999. Both votes were far short of the required two-thirds majority necessary to force removal from office. Two days later, Clinton issued a one-minute statement in the Rose Garden. "Now that the Senate has fulfilled its constitutional responsibility," he said, "I want to say again to the American people how profoundly sorry I am for what I said and did to trigger these events and the great burden they have imposed on the Congress and on the American people."

Second life

In the "wake of his impeachment victory and the tumultuous thirteen months that had come before," Clinton was not able to sit back and rest. Instead, the administration had to respond to a crisis in Kosovo, a Serbian city of ethnic Albanians. For years, Slobodan Milosevic, "the strongman of Belgrade," had implicitly supported murders of the residents of Kosovo, hoping that he could regain control of the mostly autonomous city.

On January 27, 1999, just 12 days after the Senate opened arguments in Clinton's impeachment trial, Clinton "agreed to a vigorous strategy to push toward resolution of the Kosovo problem before it became a full-fledged crisis of ethnic cleansing." Talks with Milosovic failed when he refused to withdraw ground forces that were surrounding the city.

Clinton did not "equivocate, as in Bosnia, or avert his gaze, as in Rwanda:" on March 24, NATO began bombing Serb military targets. Failure was always a possibility, especially if American troops had to be put on the ground. The American public was sympathetic with the plight of the ethnic Albanians, but not so much so that they were willing to lose American troops in a war. But Clinton insisted that this was a moral imperative and that anything "short of victory was unacceptable."

Clinton's threat (along with Tony Blair, a key ally in Great Britain) to send up to 100,000 American troops to the Balkans convinced Milosovic that he should yield to international pressure. It was a victory for Clinton's administration.

As Clinton's years in office dwindled down to mere months, he "sprinted" for the finish line. Among Clinton's final projects in office:

- Talking regularly about the dangers of terrorism: the American public was enjoying an easy time of economic success and did not want to hear what Clinton had to say about possible trouble stirring in Afghanistan.

- Trying to put “poverty back on the agenda” by offering tax incentives to draw businesses into depressed areas.
- Holding a summit at Camp David with Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat and Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak. Though Clinton came amazingly close to brokering a deal regarding the creation of a Palestinian state and making a peace plan between the antagonistic factions, he ultimately failed. He would see his inability to solve the Middle East problem as his biggest failure in office.

Conclusion

There were many moments during Clinton’s years in the White House in which it looked as though he would never survive the current crisis. But Clinton made it through two terms, with credit for some of the country’s best economic years. Many people, detractors and supporters alike, said that Clinton had a gift for survival. He survived the crises of his presidency for three main reasons:

1. Clinton “assembled a competent policy record.” Though it wasn’t perfect, Clinton’s record showed that he made incremental changes for the good of the country. At the end of the Clinton years, “twenty-two million jobs had been created over eight years.” Teen pregnancy was down, the budget was in surplus and crime was down.
2. Clinton’s presidency was “anchored to an authentically populist spirit and was animated by a genuine connection” between himself and the common people. Even through his weaknesses and failings, the American public earnestly *liked* their president and wanted him to remain in office.
3. Clinton’s excesses were not only recognizable in his failings; they were also obvious in his successes. If he had a large appetite for women, he also had an immense work ethic. He worked well when he was on the defensive, as he was when the Republicans took the House and Senate in the 1994 mid-term elections. “The imperative of survival forced Clinton to limit his reach” and find compromise.

Clinton did not earn a place among the elite of truly “large” presidencies, but he did leave his mark on a decade. How will Bill Clinton be remembered? It is doubtful that we will truly know how history will view him for many years to come. Even then, when the textbooks are written, Clinton will remain, as he is now, an enigmatic, powerful and passionate figure.