

# Pardon the Ex-President

Bill Clinton spent his public life making a legacy and his legacy years making money. What trouble will he make for Hillary?

By Nicholas von Hoffman

BILL CLINTON fought so hard against becoming an ex-president in his trial in the Senate that he may not have thought about how an ex ought to behave when his time in office was up.

There are models he might have copied. He might have meditated on the post-White House years of John Quincy Adams, who left the presidency to become a congressman and such an unflinching champion of free speech and abolitionism that he was nicknamed "Old Man Eloquent." (Bill, on the other hand, is at risk of being remembered as Old Man Delinquent.)

Thanks to his intransigence, Adams achieved a post-White House unpopularity eclipsing that of Jimmy Carter, an ex-president who is able to irritate even those who are in wholehearted agreement with him. Carter is a man much admired for what he does even though, when he flashes that nasty sweet smile, he drives people nuts. Like Adams, an easy man to admire, a hard man to like. (With Bill, it's the other way around.)

Herbert Hoover's chief function, in the decade after his defeated attempt at re-election in 1932, was to be a football for the Democrats. But redemption came to Hoover when Harry Truman asked him to head an effort to devise a plan to reorganize the federal government. The Hoover Commission was as much of a success as anyone could have asked for, taking into account the inevitabilities of politics and the jackass factor in human events.

Former presidents can do great things or cause havoc. Theodore Roosevelt was a major wrecker of havoc. After leaving office he split the Republican Party in two, causing the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson. With the outbreak of World War I, the rip-snorting ex-prexy tramped back and forth across the country, denouncing Wilson as a poltroon for not joining the fray. Unlike today's politicians, TR paid for his bellicosity when he lost a son in the war he did so much to precipitate.

Some ex-presidents have been content to retire to their desks to write books, all but one of which are of interest to no one other than graduate students. Ulysses S. Grant's autobiography stands alone as a work of quality; Bill Clinton's, after a mixed reception, appears to have been relegated to the stack of rarely read former presidential effusions.

Like Clinton, Richard Nixon also left the White House in disgrace, but the latter spent his post-presidential years working to get back into good odor. Bill Clinton, who doesn't seem to have recognized the truly low opinion he was held in, not only by his political opponents but also by the yallerest of yaller-dog Democrats, has spent no time atoning. If you haven't sinned you are not in need of redemption.

Though he may sometimes look like the aging roué and disbarred lawyer he is, the smiling, toe-tapping Bill we see on TV acts as though he were in a perpet-

ual state of grace. In their post White House years, Wilson, Coolidge, Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon lived as though they had an obligation to conduct themselves so as to uphold the dignity of the office they had once held. Bill Clinton burst out of his eight years on Pennsylvania Avenue like a youth with a fresh college degree and a world-is-my-oyster attitude.

When, near the end of his term, Calvin Coolidge was offered dignified employment by Charlie Merrill of Merrill Lynch, he turned it down. Clinton apparently turns nothing down when the tincture of money passes his nostrils. It is as though he has sublimated his roaring libido into an unzipped drive for money.

Accurate figures are not available, but from information derived from Hillary Clinton's Senate disclosure forms, this couple, who left the White House in debt thanks to Bill's legal bills, is worth upwards of \$54 million. They are rich enough that Mrs. Clinton could write a check of \$5 million for her presidential campaign with the ease of someone sending in the monthly mortgage payment.

In the circles Bill Clinton moves in, his activities are difficult to trace, for his is a life of private jets, walled mansions, smoked windows, and deluxe hideouts whose existence is known only to the billionaires who own them and the body servants who maintain them. Nonetheless, here and there a muffled Clintonian footfall can be heard and a glimpse be

had of the ex-president pocketing the long green.

Clinton's *modus operandi* is that of the fixer, the commission man, the fee catcher who arranges introductions, often between people you would not bring home to meet mother. So we see the former president of the United States doing the bidding of InfoUSA's Vinod Gupta. InfoUSA is described as "a data-processing and marketing firm," which can mean a lot of things including, in InfoUSA's case, being accused of selling personal information to telemarketing companies who used it to bilk old people.

For whatever it is that Bill Clinton does for Mr. Gupta and his company, he has been paid millions, and the Clinton Foundation has also been the recipient of Guptatonian largesse. The whats, whos, and hows of many a private foundation are gauzed off from public view, and Mr. Clinton's is no exception, but charities have been known before to function as money-drops for politicians.

Whether the Clinton Foundation's assets are being used to make life easier for the Clintons, for political patronage purposes, or for legitimate charitable ones, neither the names of the donors nor the donors' motives are known. When the question has been put to Mrs. Clinton in the course of the campaign, she has answered that they are working on preparing the list. Why it should take months to compile a simple list of names is a puzzle unless you recall that it took years for Mrs. Clinton to produce the records of her activities at the Rose Law Firm.

In his capacity as a shill, Clinton caused a few heads to shake when it got out that in 2005 the skies above Kazakhstan were rent by William Jefferson Clinton's arrival in a private jet owned by yet another of his very rich friends, Frank Giustra. From the avail-

able evidence it appears the purpose of this trip was to open the way for Mr. Giustra to secure rights to mine uranium and, of course, to fight HIV/AIDS. The country is ruled by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a man who in a less sensitive age would have been described as an Oriental despot. But to grease the skids for the uranium concession, Clinton praised Nursultan in front of the worshipful local media for "opening up the social and political life of your country." Thanks to the globe-hopping Mr. Clinton, progress is evidently bursting out all over.

While working to advance the cause of humanity, the former president appears to have already or soon will add another \$20 million to his fortune via his association with Yucaipa Cos, a congeries of investment companies run by another dear friend, Ron Burkle. Yucaipa has periodically drawn embarrassing attention to itself as it has come out that it is connected with one Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the non-democratically elected ruler of Dubai.

The fact that Yucaipa bases itself in the tax-sheltering Cayman Islands and has gone into business with Xinhua Finance Media Ltd. has caused Clinton to back off a little from this particular honey pot, but the man from Hope is nothing if not brazen. He brags. Whether he used to brag in the old days about his romantic accomplishments I can't say, but he has found a way to brag about his money. When he is out stumping for his wife he denounces the Bush tax cuts by telling his audiences he has so much now that they are helping him but hurting the poor chumps he is talking to. Thus he gets to boast that he is rich while siding with the poor.

As he has grown older and richer, some of his charm has faded. He smiles less and wiggles his bony finger more. His temper flares in public as it didn't used to do, which may be the result of

living a kowtowed-to life or because of the ferocity of his desire to get his wife nominated. His passion for his mate's success has caused him to make impolitic remarks that someone with his enormous political skills ought not to make. But Bill is on the prowl, and the lust for the object of his desires or ambitions sometimes takes him over, as it has before.

The campaign he and his wife are waging is like no other. On some days it's unclear who the candidate might be. It could be Hillary being the precedent-shattering woman, or it could be Bill running for a third term. If elected, they have not spelled out who is going to be how much of a president.

Should it work out that his wife is elected, Bill Clinton will have come back to the place on Pennsylvania Avenue he may look on as his ancestral home. But he is not going to go through four years without pulling a sensational turn or two. He is too restless, too intelligent, too grabby a man and too ruled by his appetites to lay low for 48 consecutive months unless she can harness him to a treadmill in the basement.

Or maybe this description is wrong and we will have a president and ex-president living harmoniously in the White House, adhering to their proper roles, she governing with wisdom and magnanimity, he living like Eisenhower in the after years at Gettysburg Farm with dignity and a little golf.

But don't count on it. In his glory days, Bill Clinton was famous for saying I feel your pain. In his retirement, he is famous for being one. ■

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# Look Homeward

The identification of the Republican Party with conservative institutions has become so complete that establishment leaders react to candidates in the GOP

primaries as if the eventual Republican nominee were the *de facto* head of the movement as well.

As the repudiation of John McCain in the Kansas and Washington caucuses shows, conservative activists are angry that McCain, who is unacceptable to them on many counts (and even more so to antiwar conservatives), has become the presumptive nominee. This frustration stems in part from many conservatives' continued embrace of the sitting president and their strange impulse to anoint his successor as the leading representative of conservatism. Both before and after Mitt Romney's sudden withdrawal, many prominent movement figures were trying to declare him their leader in the same way that conservatives adopted another wealthy, moderate Republican as their standard-bearer in 2000. They fail to see that this is exactly how they enabled Mr. Bush to do so much damage to the reputation of conservatism and to the country.

Currently, the GOP coalition is much less "conservative" than it was ten years ago, yet today far more Republicans use the word to describe themselves. This does not represent the triumph of conservative principles so much as the dilution of the term. The name has become a marker and proof of some right to belong, but has consequently become much less significant. We are experiencing the confusion that inevitably follows the overuse of a term that empties it of all meaning.

McCain's critics fear a redefinition of conservatism once he is nominated, but this anxiety would be baseless if so many

of them had not for the last seven years contorted arguments of the traditional Right to defend Bush administration policies. For this reason, conservatives feel a certain relief that talk-radio hosts and pundits failed to rally support for Romney, as McCain's nomination shows the stark reality that party interests and constituencies are not necessarily theirs. It is doubtful that the concerns of conservatives and the GOP have ever coincided entirely, but because they have so diverged in recent years, conservatives need a different relationship with the party if they are to preserve the goods and institutions they want to defend.

If the movement is not going to be an appendage of the GOP in the future, its leaders will need to recognize that the outcome of the Republican nomination contest does not have to define the future of the movement. Its support for a given Republican administration should never be foreordained. That may yield some better results on policy, since it makes it harder for the party to take movement support or acquiescence for granted.

If conservatives allow their priorities to be dictated by transient political needs of the GOP, they will find themselves increasingly dissatisfied with the direction of their movement. They will also be unable to speak out credibly against Republican follies and failures. Without that independence, they will find themselves, as many do today, complicit in the errors of the party.

This political autonomy should not simply be a rhetorical or a scapegoating tactic when things go wrong. It must

rather be a consistent strategy of keeping a healthy distance from a party organization that may have certain common goals but also interests that do not always align. If such a path were taken, there would be much less anxiety every four years about the dangers of "redefining conservatism" for political ends. There would also be much less danger of allying conservatism with revolutionary and destructive policies out of some misguided sense of partisan solidarity.

An important step in the direction of independence would be moving conservative institutions away from Washington. As with every kind of decentralist approach, this would make conservative institutions more aware of different conditions around the country and reintroduce them to local and regional perspectives, as well as removing them to some degree from the influence of the party leadership. This reorganization would then also give greater incentives to pursue and defend actual political and economic decentralization. When movement institutions have no concrete interest in localism, they will acquiesce to centralist policies that are ostensibly pursued for "conservative ends" but actually subvert the natural affinities that are fundamental to realizing those goals.

If we remember that conservatism is a temperament, a disposition and a series of mental and cultural habits rather than a programmatic agenda, we will find that more lasting accomplishments are possible in our homes and neighborhoods than in conventional political activism. This does not mean abandoning political affairs or ignoring the distorting and corrupting effects of the concentration of power, which must still be combated. It does, however, require a significant reorientation—homeward. ■